

Interview with Barbara Mastrud

I was two months premature when I was born, so I was baptized what they call *in extremis* in Latin when I was four weeks old, because somebody who had a bad throat came to see this tiny baby. So, I know my parents had the local Lutheran pastor and his wife as my godparents and I was baptized privately. My godmother couldn't hold me because I was so little, and so she held me on a pillow, because she couldn't get her arms around me! So, that was it, and I was baptized on the 21st of July 1925, which was not four months but only four weeks after I was born, as I was born on the 23rd of June.

So I was brought up baptized in the Lutheran Church, and I went to a Sunday school when I was little, in a nursery. But my father withdrew us from church attendance when I was four and forbade us to go to church. His reason was, as he said, that he was an agnostic, he didn't believe any more. He was very upset, as he taught in a Sunday school, and he was teaching lessons in morality, that sort of thing, and was told by a young priest, newly trained – not the parish priest, the pastor, but a young assistant priest – that his lessons weren't Christian. So he said then “well, I quit”, and he never went back to church again. He wasn't even buried from a church, but he did go to church for my mother's funeral when she died. So, I was brought up as an agnostic, and as I was jealous of the children who went to the Sunday school, my father tried to tell me things about the Greek mythology, and different myths about virgin births... But in fact when I was twelve years old my father twice took me to church, and both times to a Greek Orthodox church, which was near to where we lived. The first time it was for a Baptism, and the second time for a wedding, because he had Greek friends. And the first time we went he said: “This is what a church should be like. If I was Greek, I would be Orthodox.”

When did you start singing?

Well, in fact, when I was a little girl, my family always sang. We used to go out – there wasn't any television or radio! – oh, no, there was radio, and we listened to the radio, and we listened to the concerts of the New York philharmonic, and the opera, the Metropolitan Opera, things like that. And my sister was training to be a singer, and we used to do a kind of soirées at home. But even before that my family used to go out for rides on the weekends, Bank Holidays, and often in the very hot summer, which was very hot in Chicago. So, when my father came back home from work, we'd go for a drive with the windows open, and we sang. My sister sang soprano, my mother sang alto, my brother sang tenor, my father sang base.

Makes you think of “The Sound of Music”!

(*laughs*) I was lucky! And from the time I was four years old I started singing with them, and I sang a descant above the soprano. And from that time I sang in choir or group singing. I didn't train as singer, although my sister had voice lessons and came close to becoming a concert singer. I met singers who came to our town with concerts, and I had a very musical family. When I went to high school, I went to join the junior choir, and was there for about a week, when the conductor said to me “I want you in the senior choir”, so I sang in the senior choir, entered competitions and everything. I first sang the *Cheruvimskyi pesn'* (the Cherubic Hymn) when I was 13 years old in English, and the words were “like a choir of angels...”! (*laughs and sings*) – and we won the competition, we sang it beautifully.

So I always sang, and I've never been a soloist, I've always been a choir member. I was born with what they call a perfect pitch, and it basically means that, for me, any melody exists in harmony, I cannot help reconstructing the entire harmony in my head when I sing. It's a blessing of course, but it can also be a curse, for example I simply cannot bear it when somebody sings out of tune, it's an almost physical torment for me. And it is true I couldn't live without music – I sometimes wake up singing, usually spiritual music. But not just that, I used to sing jazz, I loved to listen to Sinatra when he first came out...

Same age, when I was twelve years old, the local Lutheran pastor, a different one, said to my father that Barbara, that is me, was the age to read for the minister, which is what they call receiving intensive religious instruction prior to Confirmation in the Lutheran Church. And he knew my father, he understood my father quite well, and my father said: “No, no, Barbara wouldn't believe any of that stuff.” And pastor Simonson said: “I bet you five dollars!” and my father said “I take that bet!” So, he came home and said “Barbara, on Saturday you are going to this instruction class, you're going to read for the minister.” For two years! It was a two-year instruction class.

And I learned a lot of things, the pastor was a very fine man, who later on was sent by President Eisenhower to be the American ambassador to Ethiopia, and it was before the fall of Selassie. And he was there several years, he went during the first term of Eisenhower, and when Richard Nixon, who was the Vice President during the second term of Eisenhower, went on a visit and pastor Simonson told him he was wrong about some of his estimates, so he went back and said that Eisenhower should withdraw my friend pastor Simonson. And when pastor Simonson was withdrawn, the Christians living there lined the street and set up their wailing cry (*imitating the cry*), because they thought that

their hope was leaving. And I was told this by a man, who was a great theologian, Paul Varghese, of the Syrian Orthodox Church in South India, and he later was the Catholicos of that Church, he's dead now. So, it was a well-established story.

I had that instruction, but after I was confirmed, and I did accept Confirmation in the Lutheran Church, I was again forbidden to go to church. So, I didn't go until I finished university, and thought that I was old enough to make my own decisions about things. I went to study Speech Therapy; it was my father who decided that. I wanted to do Medicine, but he was quite authoritarian, so he said he wouldn't have his daughter do any subject where she would have to compete with men. But when I finished, I started to go to church on Sundays – I met a friend of mine from university once a month, and we would go to church, have lunch and go to watch a film or something, just, you know, to see each other, to keep in touch. And on the other Sundays I would go to church as well. It didn't come from nothing, of course, I guess I was a very religious child all along. I remember how I used to cover my head in my bed and say Hail Mary and Our Father in the evenings even as a small child.

And finally, that October I was confirmed in the Episcopalian Church, which is the Church of England in the United States. So, that was – oh dear, I can't remember the year now – it was on the feast of St Luke, the 18th or 19th of October. And I went to church regularly, and finally in 1954 I went into the convent to be an Anglican nun. It was called the Order of St Helena, in the New York state. I was there for a year as a novice, but then one of the sisters ran away in the middle of the night, and it distressed me a great deal. I thought, you know, oh I could never take vows, how could I say, when somebody that I admired so much could run away that way, how could I presume that I could take vows. I didn't realise that I had about four more years in which to make the decision! (*laughs*) I didn't, so I left and went back home. And I worked for a few months in the church office of a local parish.

And your father, how did he react to all this?

Well, it wasn't easy for him to accept, especially when I became a nun. I remember the first time I came home after I joined the monastery, he wouldn't speak to me. I'd go about my business in the house, and everything was pretty much as usual, but he'd never address me directly. Until one day I was in the kitchen and I heard him call me by name. He told me to come quickly, he was watching TV, and as I came I saw a scene from "The Untouchables", the episode where Al Capone is arrested. And as I watched, I remembered the scene, and I cried out "Dad, but we've been there!" And it was true, I was still a small child when it happened, we were in the car with my family when the gunfire started, we had to bend down. There were bodies all over the place, and it seems like a miracle we didn't get hurt. I remember that my parents hid all the newspapers for a week after that happened (I already used to read the newspapers), they were too afraid of traumatising me. Anyway, that's how we started speaking again.

Then I was advised by my parish priest, who said: "Why don't you go back and do a Masters Degree?" And I said: "This is exactly what I want to do but I don't have any money." So he told me all the options for earning money while you're studying. So I applied for a job, and I applied for admittance to do a Masters Degree in Linguistics at my university. I studied for two years, because I started with one job, and in the second term I got another job. First term I had the job of a dormitory counsellor, and that paid my board and room, and in the second term I got another job as a Department Assistant, and I taught some undergraduate courses at a night school campus of our university. And the third term I was taken on as the Faculty Assistant Lecturer of the university. So I ended up with three jobs and earned my way through. And my final term, after two years, I figured out that on paper I was working for 80 hours a week, apart from working on my thesis! On paper, because as the dormitory counsellor I had to be in my room and available for students to come if they needed me, but I was free to study, so it wasn't a demanding job. So, at the end of my Masters Degree I had enough money to be able to resettle.

I took a job in Connecticut a long way away, and I had the money for transportation, and to buy a car when I got there, and to rent a small flat, and so on. So, from all that, I had enough, but I realised, from all sort of... from the beginning of my second term, that I wanted to go back to the convent. But I felt I'd started on this, so I must finish it. I finished my course, and worked for 6 months, and then quit my job and went back to the convent. It was January of 1958, because I got my Masters Degree in June of 1957. Why did I leave? Well, I just wanted to be a nun, that was it. Also, because my community had a school in Kentucky, I taught there for a couple of years, and there I had a couple of speech therapy patients. Well, I just felt I could do so much more for the children I worked with in my job and everything, I could do so much more praying for them. I worked with very severely handicapped children, and children who were written off as having no hope. I just felt I could do more for them by praying at that time. And I had a real desire to live a deep monastic life without any external works, and in the Anglican Communion it was called 'an enclosed contemplative life', but in Orthodoxy it's just 'monastic life', because there aren't many communities in Orthodoxy who are engaged in external missionary work, and preaching, and things like that, as there are in the West.

But when I was an Anglican nun, I was very active in ecumenical endeavours. For instance, I organized services in the local community for what was called the Week of Prayer for the Christian Unity, which took place every January, and

in the course of this I always took a group of nuns to an Orthodox Liturgy and organized ecumenical services in the convent, and attended other ecumenical services.

Was is out of obedience, or did you want to do that yourself?

Well, I had the blessing to carry out this work, I was given the option, and the community always supported me in the work. And in the course of this I met some very influential people. For example, I met this person called Paul Varghese, and the time I met him I was at an ecumenical meeting, which was organized by a Roman Catholic Capuchin monk, who was chaplain at a boy's reformatory, and people came from far and wide to attend this, also very important people. The priest of a very important New York parish Corpus Christi Fr Ford was at this and, at the time of this particular meeting, Fr Alexander Schmemmann and Fr John Meyendorff who came from St Sergius at Paris were out in America to set up St Vladimir's theological college. And they lived very near Fr Ford's parish Corpus Christi, and the Schmemmann children went to the Corpus Christi school. And when Fr Alexander's son was asked in class, as he introduced himself, what his father did, he answered "My father is a priest"! Now, to say this to a group of Roman Catholic children! And it was explained to the children that Orthodox priests could be married and have children (*laughs*). It was a big thing.

I met Fr Alexander, not at this particular meeting, but at another one, and then I was talking to Paul Varghese, and Fr John Meyendorff was sitting across the table from us, so I met them, and a very important Roman Catholic writer Jacques Maritain, his wife Raissa. They were wonderful people, very open... they were quite elderly at that time. Also a very prominent Catholic woman was there, Dorothy Day, and that was a great privilege to meet her. I also had the great privilege, when I was still in Kentucky, to meet Thomas Merton. I went to visit him with a group of nuns in his monastery in Kentucky, when I was teaching at our school, and after we had a lovely lunch, and he came and met us and talked with us. And after that I took an English writer named Sybil Harton to meet him, and I corresponded with him. It was through Thomas Merton that I learned about hesychasm. I had been introduced by our confessor to the Jesus prayer quite early on in my life as a nun, so I was using this, and I read everything I could about Orthodox spirituality, but my sources were limited. I didn't have any access to the Greek patristics because the only thing available in English at the time was the Latin Fathers, and the Greek Fathers hadn't been translated. There was one book by St Gregory of Nyssa, but Fr Louis, Thomas Merton, gave me six books that he had done <translations?> out when he was a novice master! Six books, which included lots of writings of the Greek Fathers... He was a brilliant man, and he had done translations, but these translations hadn't been published, and this was the first time I learnt about hesychasm. There was St John Climacus, and St Gregory of Nyssa, various things that he wrote about and instructed his novices in, so I had the benefit of all these instructions as well.

What was he like?

(*laughs*) he was like... somebody once asked a little child... she was describing another friend of mine, who became an Episcopal bishop, and as she was describing him she said "he was like a saint – someone the sun shines through", because to her a saint was a stained glass window that the sun shines through. And Thomas Merton was like that. The love of God just flowed from him, like a living stream. He was a wonderful man. I remember once that I took this well-known English writer to meet him, and she was trying to tell him about the greatest thing he'd ever written, and he tried to tell her that this thing she was quoting in his writings was something he had quoted from somebody else. And he tried, and he tried, and finally he looked at me, and he lifted his hands, like saying "so be it", and then he said "Thank you very much" very graciously. Very humble. Very humble. And he never would show anyone up. He accepted and just behaved. He was very humble. And he was a very great man. I feel that one of my greatest privileges in life was to have met him.

But it was through him to that I have learned a great deal about Orthodoxy, and it was my desire for a more contemplative life that brought me, with my community's permission and blessing, to come to England to visit an enclosed contemplative convent here in Oxford. I came for a six months visit, and found that in fact this desire for a more monastic existence was dividing my community, because many sisters wanted a more active life without habit, living among the poor in the inner cities and things like that. And I just felt it was splitting the community. So I asked to undergo training for transfer, if that was decided to be best. And I was given that blessing.

And when I was in the convent here in Oxford, at one time I was secretary to the Superior, Mother Mary Clair, and then also to the warden of the community, because we always had a priest of the church, who was our contact with the church outside the convent, Fr Donald, who was a childhood friend of Bishop Kallistos. And they've known each other at the time when Donald was Senior Prefect at Westminster school, and Kallistos, who was still called Timothy Ware, was a junior boy. (*laughs*)

Fr Donald always arranged for us to have an Orthodox Liturgy once a year, and I was the choir-mistress in the convent, so I had to arrange for the choir to learn the hymns of the Liturgy, and different people came, like Dimitrii Ste-

panovich, who later became an academician in Belgrade and who did his doctorate here in Oxford, and the Liturgy was celebrated by various people. And Dimitrii Conomos, whom you know, came when he was 19 to do his doctorate from Australia, and he came once to do the practice with the nuns. So, when I came out of the convent on a leave of absence in 1974, the only people I knew in Oxford were the members of the Orthodox choir at the church on Canterbury Rd. I've been out of the convent for about ten days, and I was walking down the street having been shopping, and I saw Dimitrii Conomos! And I said "Jim!" and he said "Sister Bridgette! Why are you dressed like that?!" I was wearing what we called lay clothes. And I said I was on a leave of absence from the convent. So he said "well, come and sing with us" and invited me for dinner for the following Sunday. And the place where I was staying was also just two houses down from the house of Nicolas and Melitsa Zernov. And so I came to sing in the choir at Canterbury Road.

This leave of absence lasted for 18 months, from July 1974 until I was released from my vows in February 1976. And it so happened that Fr Kallistos acted as spiritual father to me during this time. It isn't easy to be a nun living in the world, you have problems that you would not in the convent. Say, if you are under vows you cannot go on a date with somebody, yet you might want to... Fr Kallistos agreed to help me through this time and come to the decision whether I wanted to go back to the convent at all. And as I was trained as a 'logoped', as they say in Russian, I immediately got a job as a speech therapist in the Oxfordshire Health Authority. So I had that, and I didn't retire until I was 65, when I had to, being a professional... So I did, and took up teaching English as a foreign language. But in 1976, as soon as I had been released from my vows, I took the letter that I had from the Archbishop of Canterbury, which showed that I was now free, and I came to Fr Kallistos with it, and said "Could I become Orthodox please?"

I didn't ask before I had been released from my vows. There had been some scandal, well, some gossip in the Church of England, because there were several nuns who had visited Orthodox monasteries and who then left their communities to become Orthodox. And I didn't want to cause any problems between my community and the Anglican Church at large. I didn't want to be the cause of gossip or scandal. So I asked for the release from my vows first.

[...]

Before, long before I even asked for leave of absence, I said to Fr Donald "If I wasn't too old, and a nun, I would be Orthodox, I would want to be Orthodox", and he said to me "join me in being the Orthodox Fifth Column in the Anglican Church" (*laughs*). And I did that for a while until I couldn't any more. Fr Kallistos was about to leave when I asked him, and he offered to receive me when he came back, but then he thought and said "How about Good Friday?" This was just in a few days, which was exactly what I wanted. Apparently, he was very impressed by my obedience, so this was probably why he didn't want to leave me like this, having left my community and not yet received as Orthodox, for such a long time. So, I was received into the Orthodox Church on the Great Friday 1976.