

# THE LADDER OF DIVINE ASCENT

## SAINT JOHN CLIMACUS

In the sixth century, a monk living in the Egyptian desert by the name of John a book outlining the spiritual life. In the centuries which have passed, this book, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, has become a mainstay of Orthodox spirituality. In fact as Bishop KALLISTOS points out, "with the exception of the Bible and the service books, there is no work in Eastern Christianity that has been studied, copied, and translated more often than *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*."

Saint John based his entire book on the image of a ladder stretching from earth to heaven. His ladder has thirty rungs, one for each year of the hidden life of Christ. These thirty rungs, or steps, can be broken down into the following pattern:

- I. The break with the World: Renunciation, Detachment, Exile
- II. The practice of the Virtues (the Active Life)
  - A. The fundamental Virtues: Obedience, Penitence, Remembrance of Death, Sorrow
  - B. The Struggle against the Passions
    1. Nonphysical Passions: Anger, Malice, Slander, Talkativeness, Falsehoods, Deception.
    2. Physical Passions: Gluttony, Lust
    3. Nonphysical Passions: Insensitivity, Fear, Vain glory, Pride
- III. Union with God (the Contemplative Life): Stillness, Prayer, Dispassion, Love.

### *The Layman's Ladder*

St John's ladder has been part of the formation of Orthodox monastics since it was first written. Even today, each Lent it is read in its entirety in Orthodox monasteries throughout the world. It would be wrong if we thought this book is only for monastics; it is not. It is equally important for non monastics Orthodox Christians to study its contents and to apply its teachings to our own lives. To attain the heavenly kingdom, it is necessary for each Orthodox Christian to ascend the same rungs of the Ladder. But the way in which we live out our spirituality will differ according to our calling and responsibilities.