

# Social Media and the Unifying Truths of Our Tradition

## Interview with Sister Vassa Larin

*Note:* Sr. Dr. Vassa Larin is a tonsured Russian Orthodox nun and an academic. She specializes in Orthodox liturgics and has published a variety of scholarly articles as well as a monograph on the subject. To the wider Orthodox world, she is probably best known as host of the highly popular podcast, *Coffee with Sister Vassa*. Patricia Fann Bouteneff caught up with her between recordings of the show.

*To begin with, if you would, please walk us through how you found your callings as a monastic, as an academic, and as a social media practitioner.*

All three of these callings are a long story, really. I'll note in general terms that all three sort of became inevitable at different points in my life, because of circumstances both internal and external.

The monastic thing was something to which I was drawn already as a child, growing up in the very black-and-white world of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia during the 1970s and 80s. In that world, monasticism was the "real deal," while all other paths were sort of crooked or half-baked ways to God. I was very maximalist back then—like my dad—and wanted a "straight path" to God. That's the way I saw it.

My academic calling crept up on me almost from the beginning of my monastic life, despite my vision of monasticism. I had dropped out of college to enter a monastery at age 17. My parents were beside themselves, because I walked away from a full scholarship to Bryn Mawr after two years there. But when I found myself in a monastery with plenty of church services and physical work, I also found myself swallowing up any reading materials I could get my hands on, in the little

spare time we had. I studied everything from the history of the *typikon* and of the Church to volumes of the Church Fathers to various languages. This continued in Germany and in Jerusalem (how I ended up in various monastic communities is a separate story). My spiritual father, Archbishop Mark of Berlin and Germany, said to me at some point: "I don't know what to do with you. You just can't get enough of all this studying." But he did eventually send me to study Orthodox theology at the Orthodox Institute of Munich University, which is where I got my master's degree and, eventually, my doctorate.

It was after Fr. Robert Taft, SJ, offered to direct my doctoral work that my bishop agreed to let me go to Rome and study with Fr. Taft. His mentorship opened for me a whole new world of academic scholarship in a prayerful, ecclesiastical context. He taught me that it is, in fact, compatible for a monastic to be dedicated to study. I think this is not exactly true for the somewhat dualistic Palamite spirituality that I had embraced, which is very either/or about "this world" and "the world to come." But for Jesuit spirituality, any kind of ministry "in this world" is compatible with prayer and is indeed a useful service to one's Church, and I am grateful for benefiting from Jesuit wisdom in the area of my academic vocation.



Photos courtesy of  
*Coffee with Sister  
Vassa.*

I became a social media practitioner several years after getting my doctorate, and after teaching at the Catholic Theological Faculty of the University of Vienna for about four years. I was frustrated. After all, I had seen my studies as a “ministry” or service to my Church, but here I was writing and teaching mostly for students outside my Church, or for a narrow circle of liturgical scholars. This seemed inevitable, because there were no academic positions available in my Church for a woman teaching liturgy—not in my neck of the woods, anyway!

So, I had this idea, inspired by examples of online courses and videos made by professors at major universities, that I could perhaps do something like that. I also wanted the videos to be fun and a bit entertaining, inspired by late-night comedy such as *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. I thought: now there is an example of people with a message, reaching millions of people effectively, through comedy. I was, of course, also well aware of the bitterness in some of our church politics, and I thought Orthodoxy could use a smile every now and then. Eventually, after my contract ended with Vienna

University, I was able to make the online ministry a financially self-supporting, full-time job, with the help of several assistants. I’m happy to say more about that later.

***Your show, Coffee with Sister Vassa, has a large following in several social media genres: Facebook, video podcasts, and now an online comic strip. How would you describe the mission of Coffee with Sister Vassa?***

The mission of *Coffee with Sister Vassa* is to bring people together around the unifying truths of our tradition. This means, among other things, bridging the divide between monasticism and “the world.” I present myself as I am at this point in my life, living in an apartment in the center of a European city, and contemplating various persons and events of our church calendar in the midst of it. I also consciously insert my “crew”—a bunch of misfits from the street, with dubious backgrounds—to underline that neither Orthodox monasticism, nor Orthodoxy in general, exists in a bubble, non-conversant with “this world.” So that is our mission: we want to bring all of us—not just an elite, special circle—together.

*One of the few other video podcasters in the Orthodox sphere is Stephen Christoforou, who runs Be the Bee, a youth ministry for the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North America. What would you say are the points of contrast and similarity between Coffee with Sister Vassa and Be the Bee?*

I have great respect and even love, I must say, for Stephen Christoforou. We have made several videos together. As far as there is a contrast with what he does, I would say that, first of all, he targets a younger audience. Also, he is a bit more serious, and not infected with the sort of irreverence one can observe on my show! That is a question of style and character. At the same time, his videos are more upbeat and modern, with a faster pace. And practically speaking, he has the financial support of his church, with a salary, two paid secretaries, an office, and filming equipment. Hats off to the Archdiocese for providing Stephen with all that! In my case things are different, because my church does not support us. We have had to become financially self-supporting in order to keep our online ministry going.

When I made my first video—on Saint Mammias, a teenage saint—I had ob-

tained the blessing of my own bishop in Germany. But from the outset there was opposition to the video from the central administration of my church, the ROCOR [Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia]. That first video I made was initially posted on the ROCOR's official website, but then taken down. Metropolitan Hilarion, the First Hierarch of the ROCOR, ordered that the video be taken down after he was urged to do so by several of the ROCOR clergymen who called the video, among other things, "Roman Catholic singing-nun nonsense" (I was made privy to the email correspondence on the issue). So, ever since, there has been no mention of our videos on the ROCOR website, nor any support from my church. However, I would say that situation ended up being helpful, because we learned how to become self-supporting, creating an online gift shop (selling coffee mugs and other things) and monetizing our audio podcasts and video courses. This is how I pay my rent and three part-time assistants. I also think it's healthy for me to take personal responsibility for whatever I say, without anybody worrying about me speaking for "the Church."

*Although there are many Orthodox who create audio podcasts, why do you think so few make sustained video series as you have done?*

I can't speak for anyone else, but my best guess would be that it is much harder to make a well-edited video than to record an audio podcast. Our videos often involve many hours of editing, to insert pictures, texts, and music.

But here's another thing. You must also "perform" in a visual manner, which can be quite daunting. It is particularly daunting, I think, for an Orthodox woman—in the ROCOR, anyway,



where certain concepts of “humility” make the prospect of a woman performing distasteful. In any event, however, both for women and men, it takes courage to be one’s self, particularly visually (warts and all), in front of the potentially large Internet audience. Maybe this is too hard for some of us? It’s hard for me too at times, but most of the time I feel I have “given up” sufficiently as far as image goes, because I don’t have anything to lose, if you will. I don’t have a miter or any hierarchical rank to chase, as a woman. So—perhaps ironically—my female position liberates me from concerns about my image and its consequences.

*What comes across uniquely to an audience in this medium? What can you do through this medium that you can't do in writing?*

You yourself come across uniquely in this medium, as I mentioned above. And that is a good thing. Because we must—we absolutely must!—be ourselves when relating the Word of God today. The postmodern psyche has a very sharp radar for the inauthentic. And in general, I believe we are called in every generation to contextualize the received Word in our own lives, first internalizing it in our own context, and then “giving birth” to it in our world. This is why the Mother of God is traditionally perceived as an image of the Church—because she gives birth to the Word. And that’s what all of us are called to do, as Church: to give birth to the Word in our here and now. We can only do that as ourselves, and that is what we can do in a video, created by us. It is an art form, and it takes courage to find one’s own voice, as an artist.

*You also create effective Facebook posts that accompany your video series. What other social media are you*

*using, and why? Which of them has been most effective for your purposes?*

We use Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and the Russian social media platform vKontakte. We send out a daily newsletter via email to 2,300 subscribers. We also post online twice-weekly audio podcasts and video courses on patreon.com and udemy.com for paid subscribers. And then we have our website, with a weekly comic strip and daily reflection on Scripture. Our posts on the various social media are usually my daily reflections on brief passages from Scripture or the Byzantine Liturgy. The Russian posts are translations of the English ones by my Russian assistant, Anna.

These posts are effective, as far as I can see, on two levels. First of all, they help us contribute our two cents to the whole business of bringing people together around the truths of our tradition, and closer to living that tradition on a daily basis—not just on Sundays. I would say that Facebook and the daily email newsletter are the most effective in this regard—although I shouldn’t exaggerate. We only get around 80 to 100 “likes” on the daily posts on Facebook, and I’m not sure how many people actually read the email.

In practical terms, by keeping in daily contact with our followers via social media and email, we can invite them consistently to our monetized content, which enables us to stay afloat financially. So we offer the daily post or email for free, but we include, underneath the post or email, an invitation to the content that is for paid subscribers only. This strategy has helped us accumulate over 500 paid subscribers to our audio podcasts, and has secured a steady flow of purchases from our online gift shop, which, taken together, pay my monthly expenses.

*How do you manage your online and offline interaction with your “zillions”? How do you see the relationship between your output and their input?*

My assistants manage the inbox of our “contact” email address. They forward any questions addressed to me personally and I answer those. I also reply personally to questions on our two Facebook pages (my personal one and our *Coffee with Sister Vassa* page).

The personal questions can be excruciating, I must say, because people are willing to open up in very intimate ways to a nun across the ocean. I recently received an email from a Russian Orthodox woman in Siberia who is very much in love with a Muslim man and has received a marriage proposal from him, but isn’t sure this is the way to go. Non-drinking Russian Orthodox men are in short supply in her area. I have no idea, for now, what or how to reply.

My offline interaction with the zillions is limited, however, to my public talks during my travels. I don’t meet with anybody in Vienna, because we have too much work to do when I am here.

Concerning their input, I sometimes make an audio podcast on a topic raised by a listener or viewer in an email or comment to me online somewhere. But, as a rule, I create content on the basis of what interests me at the moment. I don’t spend much time anticipating what will be popular or



interesting to the zillions. I trust that what is interesting or relevant to me will be so for them as well, since I am a human being, living in the “today,” just as they are. I have to stay that way, being myself, which is always interesting and relevant, just as anyone else’s humanity is.

*Finally, what advice do you have for other Orthodox who might want to try their hand at building a social media following, even if only in a small way, for their parishes or dioceses?*

I hope that what I have said already will be sufficiently helpful to anyone endeavoring to spread the Word online. One thing I could add, perhaps, is: if you can’t take the heat, stay out of the kitchen. The so-called “Orthodox Internet” can be brutal. But it’s not about us, if we want to spread the Word. So just be yourself and share of yourself, staying close to Christ and his word, letting him get bigger, and yourself smaller, and you’ll be OK! ☼

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