



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

ROAD TO EMMAUS

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THE LIGHTNESS OF BEING (ORTHODOX)

Road to Emmaus staff asked five Moscow Orthodox Christians to tell us their favorite stories.

I

I had served as an *altarnik* [altar attendant] at Holy Trinity Church in Moscow for several years when a woman came in one day after liturgy, her eyes swollen and red from crying. After talking in low tones with another woman in the back, she went to the table where we make out moleben and pannikhida lists. She wrote something hurriedly and came up to give me her paper for the priest. On it was only one name, “Lost Vasily [Basil].” She was middle-aged and I knew that this might be a grown son fighting in Chechnya, a drunkard husband, or even a lost child, so when the priest came out of the altar I told him about her. He looked around at her weeping behind us, and nodded. He prayed intently during the moleben, several times by name for “Lost Vasily,” and then said a special prayer at the end.

After the service, he went over to comfort the woman and asked her about the circumstances. She told him that Vasily was her cat, which had been missing for a week. “Your cat!” he exploded. “I served a moleben for a cat?! This is blasphemy — what were you thinking?!” A fresh round of tears began and she turned and left the church. We went to the altar to unvest, Father still grumbling, and as we descended the steps of the church, we saw her running from the corner, waving her hand to stop us. “Oh, Batiushka, thank God I caught you. Thank you so very much! When I got home, Vasily was on the step waiting for me.”

– Ioann Dimitriev

II

When I was in my early twenties, not long after *perestroika*, I worked for several years in a Moscow church selling candles and giving general information. I had to deal with different types of people, many of whom lacked even a basic Christian understanding. One day, a nicely dressed woman came in and asked me hurriedly if there were any Church feasts that week. I said, “No, there aren’t any major feasts this week.” She looked at me strangely and said, “Are you sure? Could you check again?” From her manner I could see that she was new to church life and I said, “You know, the church is open every day, and most mornings we have liturgy. You can come to pray whenever you like. You don’t have to wait for a feast.” The woman replied, “Oh, it isn’t that. I want to visit an “*extrasense*” [a new-age clairvoyant], but she won’t see anyone on Sundays or feastdays. She says those days are bad for her transmission.” I was taken aback and then said, “But you have a great problem — just look — *every* day is a feast day.” I pulled out the calendar and flipped through the pages, showing her the long daily listings of names. She was openly disappointed. “But this means it’s practically hopeless!” “Yes, it’s very risky — you could never count on a clear message ... Why don’t you try coming to services instead? The saints are all *extrasense*.” We began to talk and later she became a regular churchgoer.

– Sonia Borisovna

III

When I was in my third year at the university in the 1980’s one of the compulsory subjects was Scientific Atheism (which accompanied courses on Marxist Political Economy and the History of the Communist Party.) I had become Orthodox a year earlier and refused to read Lenin, Marx, or other Soviet propaganda. I felt it was a sin to even have such things in my mind. However, I assumed that I would get a satisfactory mark at the final exam, because, as each student entered the room, he was given three written questions from the course material, and in turn called up to answer the examiner orally in front of the class. One of the questions would be on the history of religion, and by answering that one well, I could hope for a low, but sat-

isfactory mark. The religious history question, however, turned out to be on Shintoism, the only religion I didn't know well. I told the examiner the little I could remember. "Well, not much, is it?" he said disdainfully. "You're obviously not very interested in religious subjects, perhaps atheism interests you more. Go on, answer the second question." This was on one of Lenin's monographs. "Lenin wrote the article in 1921..." I began bravely. "In 1897!" corrected the examiner sarcastically. Here my knowledge ended. There was silence. "The third question!" he said coldly.

The whole class listened, trying to stifle their laughter. I had many friends and was one of the top students in my year. The students knew that I wore a cross under my clothes and had spent my first year as a Christian trying to convert the entire student population.

My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. The third question even sounded like blasphemy. The examiner, understanding that I could not be expected to say anything of value noted, "You deserve a 2 — the lowest possible mark — but I will give you a 3.¹ What mark do you have in the History of the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union)? "A 3," I squeaked, happily. He looked at me sternly and asked, "Do you really think that your intellectual level will allow you to continue to study at our university?" In the background the students were shaking with silent laughter.

After everyone had answered their questions and the class was dismissed, the instructor left for a break before examining a second group. All the students in my group had brought books to secretly study with once they received their questions and were awaiting their turns. They had left the books under their desks so they wouldn't be seen carrying them out, and as they all had "5's" and I had a "3", they said, "It couldn't be any worse for you anyhow — please go collect our books." I went to gather the books — a huge pile that I had to steady with my chin. As I turned to leave the room, the professor unexpectedly appeared in the doorway. He looked at me and my great pile of forbidden textbooks, and a gleam of admiration for my surpassing stupidity glowed in his eyes as he stepped aside and allowed me to pass.

— Nina Timokhina

¹ A mark of "2" is equivalent to an American "D or F". If you receive one in a Russian university, you have two chances to re-pass the exam. If you cannot, you are expelled from the university. The instructor gave me a 3 because he didn't want to retest me.

IV

My mother was at a church once where a very kind and prayerful batiushka serves. One day, on the Nativity of the Mother of God, after liturgy he came out of the royal doors to give the sermon. It was obvious that he felt the feast deeply. He crossed himself and began... "The Most Holy Theotokos..." (his voice trembled) "...our Lady, the Mother of God." Tears stood in his eyes and began to run down his cheek. People in the church began sniffing. "...her holy parents, Joachim and Anna..." he continued, crying openly now. The people were weeping quietly. Batiushka tried to continue, but was unable. Tears were choking him. He made a hopeless gesture with his hands and retreated into the altar. The people sobbed aloud, and leaving the church, my mother heard two of his parishioners say that it was the best sermon they had ever heard.

— Sergei Laposhin

V

I was the first in my family to become Orthodox, and I tried with great vigour to make everyone around me conform to my new belief. My father, for example, a very simple man, could hardly enter a church, he was so cowed by the sight of a priest or even a woman praying in a kerchief. But my mother listened to my preaching, and we began reading morning prayers together. Even a few of my friends began going to church, and after some time I got a job working in the Valaam Podvoriye² bookstore, where I could put my fervent missionary energy to use.

One day, two girls who worked cleaning and selling candles in the lower church, came to me and said, "There is an elder sitting in the hall, a *podvizhnik*. He's like a pilgrim with a canvas shoulder bag, half-starved from fasting and his eyes look right into your soul. We are afraid that if he comes into the church, he will start talking about our sins." I said, "Did he say anything to you?" The girls said, "No, he just looked at us when we walked by, but he saw everything. One of the novices says he certainly must be an elder, that the abbot came in late last night, and why else would he have come but

² Podvoriye — an outpost of a country monastery located in a large city.

to meet him? Please hurry, so that when he comes into church we don't have to talk to him."

I did not want the elder to tell my sins either, but I was several years older than the girls and felt that I could not show any fear, so I said, "Alright, I will come when I can, but there is no one to relieve me right now." I quietly congratulated myself but I was also very curious — I had seen abbots and bishops, but never a *staretz*. The girls, however, soon found a monk who could replace me. I came out from behind the counter hesitantly, hoping that if I quickly repented of everything I could think of, the *staretz* would not feel it necessary to say my sins aloud. By the time I reached the bottom hall there was a terrible feeling in my stomach and my hands were clammy. I thought, "Well, at least if he tells me my sins or says that I must go be a nun, my soul will be saved." I opened the door a few centimeters to look at him before descending into the hall. There, sitting quietly on the bench was my old bearded father with a canvas bag containing my forgotten lunch, too shy to ask anyone where I was.

Afterwards the girls asked me, excitedly, "Did he talk to you about your sins?" I said, "Certainly. He is a wonderful father. He told me not to be so forgetful."

— Anna Maximova †