



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

# ROAD TO EMMAUS

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# UNIVERSITY YEARS

(1978-1983)

Recalling his years as a philology student at Moscow State University under the inspiration of memorable educators, Protopriest Artemy Vladimirov describes his growth as an Orthodox Christian, his youthful attempts to negotiate the unbelieving Soviet system, and the friendships, inspiration, and search for a spiritual father that would lead him to adulthood.

## Picking Potatoes

Russian readers will know that “picking potatoes” was a student activity organized during the Soviet period to help state-owned collective farms gather in the harvest. All Russian college and university students were obliged to take part each September, and the new philologists were no exception; we too were recruited.<sup>1</sup>

Our Moscow State University potato-picking base camp was on a collective farm near the old Russian town of Mozhaysk. In the fall of 1978 we had hardly recovered our senses after the summer’s grueling admission exams when we arrived in Mozhaysk, both exhausted and elated to be brand-new university students. We were placed in simple barrack-like dormitories for migrant workers. There were separate small houses for the girls, while the fellows lived in dorms and spontaneously fell into two groups: the so-called *Rabfak*,<sup>2</sup> healthy, strong young men with an army background and all of the accompanying habits; and the rest of us, yesterday’s schoolboys.

We worked in the fields picking up potatoes left lying on the ground after the mechanical harvester had passed through. The work was not exhausting and we could dispose of our evening hours as we wished, so we quickly found new fellow students with similar interests, many of whom became dear friends. We partook of the joys of a life that was not altogether that of adults, yet no longer the helplessness of childhood.

Constitutionally, and because of my intense spiritual search at the time, I preferred to avoid the noisy, relaxed gatherings. At seventeen, my heart had awakened to the beauty of the world and I would rise before the wakeup call to go down to the river to swim. Then, I stood on the riverbank for a few minutes, saying the first short morning prayers from the prayer book. I tried to read the rest in snatches throughout the day, but in those first moments at the river after dawn, our Heavenly Father was especially close.

But I must confess that other things at the collective farm did not always look as beautiful. Having stepped onto the path of living faith, I discovered,

<sup>1</sup> Philology is the study of language emphasizing the history and evolution of written texts, focusing on languages no longer spoken such as Sanskrit, Hebrew, Ancient Greek, Latin, Old Norse, Old High German, Old Russian, and Old Slavonic. The field of Linguistics studies the components of modern spoken languages and how language is acquired and used.

<sup>2</sup> *Rabfak*: Short for *rabochik facultet* students, that is, young men who had been admitted to the university on privileged terms after serving two years in the Soviet Army.

*Opposite: University student Artemy Vladimirov.*

to my sad surprise, the passions that I had acquired in my teen years. One of these was gluttony, the banal overeating that seems natural to a growing teenager. As well brought-up as we were, we still lacked the skill of rejecting subtler forms of self-love, and the habit of snatching bits of food at the slightest urge had turned into a sticky passion. Despite a certain poetic touch to my nature, I had become a pitiful slave to this spontaneous imp and my struggle against it dragged on for years.

As is often the case with young Christians who do not have spiritual guidance, I decided to act according to the principle of maximum resistance. To my comrades-in-arms' great surprise I began to refuse to eat either soup or the main course (meat, as a rule) at our main midday meal, making do with apple compote. The girls found out about my morning excursions to the river, and seeing my "asceticism" they responded in one of two ways: the ironic smile of "he's a freak" or the "unusual boy" side-long glances of hidden interest. If they had only known what my self-imposed rejection of warm food ended in! Famished from a day's work, in the evening I would fall upon an entire loaf of rye bread, and swallow it without hardly chewing, washing it down with water or tea. Seeing the passion take this new form, I became more and more desperate as the sense of sin bore down on my inexperienced soul.

Nevertheless, I had brought an old Psalter in Church Slavonic from Moscow and its verses, not all of them familiar, began to have an amazing effect. Every word seemed filled with grace. Although I did not yet know how to extract its deep spiritual meaning, as soon as I began reading, silence entered my soul and my mind became clear. It took no effort at all to memorize some of the psalms and I mentally recited them as I worked in the fields. It was the same with morning and evening prayers: their words remained in my mind for a few years until I grew cold and began neglecting the prayer rule. Later, I resumed the readings, but try as I might, I could not learn the familiar texts by heart again.

Another scene. One evening, tired after the workday, we returned wet and cold to our dorms. The experienced *Rabfak* guys suggested gathering in their hut "to warm our bones." Our philological girls willingly agreed and soon we were all seated on spring beds in the *Rabfak* hut, so old that it must have witnessed the first years of the heroic five-year plans,<sup>3</sup> when the entire coun-

3 Ed. Note: Five-year plans: Economic goals of industrialization and farm collectivization drawn up by Stalin to be accomplished in five-year periods beginning in 1928 – thus, the humorous reference to the age of the spring beds.

try followed the common rhythm of “new socialist life.” One of the veterans produced a bottle of vodka from the sleeve of his tarpaulin coat, caressed the bottle lovingly, and then poured it into our enameled mugs. Because so many of us were attending the evening “seminar,” everyone got just a little.

“To those who are there...,” uttered our leader, meaningfully but incomprehensibly. He gave everyone a misty look and emptied the mug into his mouth. The rest followed suit. I could smell the unpleasantly sweet odor of vodka in my own cup, a drink that I haven’t learned to like even now. At that time, I was unacquainted with its taste, so I tried it with the tip of my tongue before taking a sip. This brought a sarcastic response from the Army students, but among the ironic smiles of the ladies was the inquisitive look of a certain Elena, who would later become my spouse. I did not notice her then, as I was too embarrassed by my naivety and the awkwardness of my first taste of our strong national drink, but Elena saw my confusion. A dozen years later she told me that, for her, there had been a compelling sweetness to the scene.

I also want to relate a story of other worldliness from that autumn. One day while sorting potatoes, I began a conversation with a young lady from a distant Russian province who had succeeded in passing the entrance exams for Moscow State University, to the great joy of all of her relatives. The girl told me that not long before, not knowing Moscow at all, she had come out of Kropotkinskaya Metro Station and was stunned by the view of the magnificent cathedral with its five golden domes right across from the exit. Its immense white marble exterior seemed to fill the entire space within her line of vision, as if witnessing to God’s might!

The girl was in a hurry to get to an address on nearby Gogolevsky Boulevard and decided that she would take a good look at the cathedral next time. Afterwards, she asked her friends in the Philology Faculty about the cathedral, but they looked puzzled and no one could tell her anything. Moreover, when she returned some weeks later to Kropotkinskaya Metro to have a closer look at the marvelous building, the cathedral *was no longer there!*

The following day a professor told her that Christ the Savior Cathedral, the largest church in all of Russia, had indeed stood there, but that it had been blown up in 1931 by Lazar Kaganovich and his comrades on Stalin’s instruction. After several failed attempts to build an atheist hall with a colossal statue of Lenin on the swampy site, the government had given up and instead made a strange warm-water swimming pool where the foundation of the church had rested, one of the largest pools in the world. (The cathedral



*Christ the Saviour Cathedral. End of the 19th century.*

itself was only rebuilt a decade after this student's vision, at the breakup of the Soviet Union, and consecrated in 2000.)

Finally, I would like to recount my experience of confession in the Church of Prophet Elijah in the town of Mozhaysk, where I traveled on a free Sunday morning from the camp. This was only my second confession, and as I stepped over the threshold of the church, I saw an old priest standing next to an analogian holding the cross and the Gospel. He looked like one of the great elders of the past and, in my mind, was surely endowed with spiritual power as he performed his heroic ministry among the village *babushki*.

Something drew me to confess to him, and seeing that I was the only young man among the elderly women in head scarves, he called me up and asked in a penetrating tone that everyone could hear what sins burdened my soul. I named the sins timidly, including some quite shameful ones, and shut my eyes tightly with fear. He then gave a pastoral lesson that everyone could hear, declaring that a Christian should not do such things. I was overwhelmed and did not know if I should stay or run, so hurt was I by the old priest. Nevertheless, he did not forbid me to take Holy Communion.

My wounded pride was one thing, but by God's mercy I have since then never again committed the sin confessed to the village priest. Although I had confessed once before in Moscow, this was the first time in my life to take

Holy Communion, and God had allowed me to come to his life-giving sacrament not in a Moscow cathedral shining with gold and silver but in a simple village church on the outskirts of Mozhaysk.

Many years later, I was told that the wise old priest, who was much loved by his parishioners, was wickedly murdered with his elderly matushka by robbers who were after his jeweled priest's cross. Memory Eternal to the suffering Russian village pastor, Protopriest Boris!

## Classical Philologists

If philologists are heaven-dwellers, the snow-covered Olympian peaks belong to the “classicists,” those whose love of ancient and classical Greek and Latin bring these dead languages and their cultures to life for others, while they themselves are enlivened by their ability to read the Holy Fathers in the original. I regret now that I wasn't enough aware of these rarified heights to apply to the Classical Philology Faculty. Mine was the humbler and more “practical” department of Russian Language and Literature.

However, if one wants to learn the classic and patristic Greek language, he can open a Greek textbook and simply begin to study. I know a professor at the St. Sergius Lavra Theological Academy, now Russia's leading patrologist, who pursued this very method. In his twenties, he worked as a freight train driver, and on and off his job he copied the endless forms of Greek verbs, studying them intently. “Nothing is impossible to a willing mind,” as they say, and now every enlightened Russian Christian reads this professor's translations of the Desert Fathers, as well as his landmark critique of the “newly discovered” writings of St. Isaac the Syrian, laying to rest the modern idea that he was a Nestorian.

### *Asa Tahoe-Godi*

The glory of ancient culture was most strikingly revealed to me by the lectures of Asa Alibekovna Tahoe-Godi. This professor's genius at presenting the classical heritage sprang from her own deep resources. A woman of encyclopedic learning and a brilliant speaker, she never buried herself in a book, as was often the case with lecturers, but looked at each of us in turn as she conveyed her deep love for the classics – which even in the 1970's was an obscure branch of philology for us young people. With her sonorous voice, Asa Alibekovna initiated us into the mystery of Ancient Greek tragedy,

explaining that the word “tragedy” was related to the Greek word for “goat” (*tragos*). She went on to passionately relate the sufferings of the sacrificial animals who resisted their lot, just as mythic heroes rebelled against the destinies dictated by the ancient Fates who considered neither the honor, freedom, nor desires of mortal men.

Her first unexpected question still sounds in my memory: “Do you know, my dears, what Ancient Greek philosophy begins with?” She looked at us solemnly, row by row, in the cavernous lecture hall, and when none of us ventured to break the deep silence, she continued, “I will answer the question myself... Imagine a noble citizen of an Ancient Greek polis clad in his tunic



*Professors A.F. Losev and Asa Alibekovna Tahoe-Godi.*

and cloak, ascending the Areopagus by night... the site of Ancient Athens’ supreme council (guardian of the law and ultimate appellate and dispenser of justice) and where the Apostle Paul would later deliver his remarkable discourse. Now, like our distinguished Hellene, look at the black velvet of the southern sky with its glittering diamonds: Cassiopeia, Cygnus, and Scorpio. Contemplate the Milky Way, its galaxies hymning their silent anthem to the glory of the universe. So, what does Greek philosophy begin with, dear students? It begins with an interjection of both admiration and amazement:



“Ah-h-h!” Asa Alibekovna pronounced this drawn-out “Ah!” so richly and powerfully that we could not but, openmouthed, follow her gaze upwards.

*Alexei Fedorovich Losev*

Later, I would read philosophical works by her close colleague, A.F. Losev, the outstanding Russian philosopher and thinker. Filled with the joyful energy of a young Christian encyclopedist, in his 1930 *The Dialectic of Myth*, Losev had already dealt a crushing blow to the banal anti-academic philosophy of materialism that had been used as a springboard for Bolshevik and Soviet militancy. Losev counterposed true dialectics to the obscurant atheistic materialism that justified force against those who thought differently. I still remember the joy I felt in reading Losev’s early works in which he says that a true dialectic affirms the existence of the unseen, and though acknowledging the temporary and changing world, it also postulates eternity. His precise and expressive language enlightened and healed my soul, poisoned by the Marxism that still contaminates those educated under its yoke. In contrast, the classical philology students amazed me with their broad and generous natures and their seeming immunity from the influence of official ideology.

As you can tell, I was in awe of the classical philologists, but as elite as they were, we were all brought down to the same level by our collective potato harvesting near Mozhaysk. Another memory from one of those bright afternoons: the setting autumn sun illumines a seemingly endless field. Uneven clay ridges strewn with potatoes left by the harvester stretch out before two young men in lively conversation as they gather them into sacks. These would-be philosophers in their high clay-smeared boots and jackets dark with autumn rain are, unknown even to themselves, the future heads of two Moscow churches: your servant Protopriest Artemy Vladimirov and Protopriest Maxim Kozlov.

A little younger than me, Maxim had enrolled in classical philology with his spiritual father’s blessing, and after graduation he planned to study at the St. Sergius Lavra Theological Academy. And what were we talking about that day? About Berdyaev, the muddled religious thinker yet brilliant philosopher who had condemned the hollow-hearted modern ideas of progress. And of Fr. Pavel Florensky and his *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* which contains so much that is deeply subjective and not altogether provable. Such discussion filled us with satisfaction and deep content.



*L to R: Fr. Maxim Kozlov and Fr. Artemy Vladimirov in later years.*

To this day, I can recognize classical philologists at first sight. As a rule, they are people of refined intellect with a pronounced taste for what is truly cultured. Their speech marks them out as lovers of the beautiful, without any trace of the vulgarity so common nowadays. “Classicists” are the least aggressive of people and even appear somewhat helpless when pitted against the rough and insolent world. Some mock them, but others like myself have a deep respect for these keepers of civilizations. Neither pretentious nor condescending, they eagerly share their treasure when they find a worthy and serious listener.

## Educators and Enlighteners

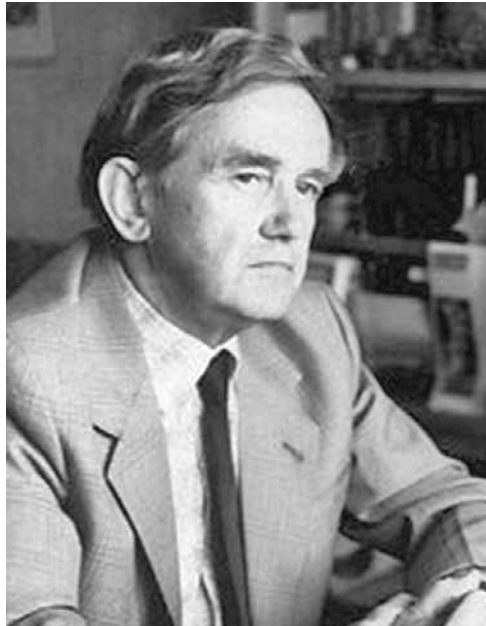
People spoke of the Philological Faculty as Christian even in the Soviet times, and in spite of the watchful eye of official ideology, how could it be otherwise? The thorough and unhurried study of philology helps the reader see that the pre-eternal Word reigns over everyone and everything.

Professors who found in themselves this living and acting Word did not hide it from the students who were looking for crumbs of truth everywhere. Even those not consciously searching were sensitive to its voice.

*Andrei Cheslavovich Kozarzhevsky*

One herald of such redemptive truth and beauty was Andrei Cheslavovich Kozarzhevsky, a prominent classical philologist and a Christian. He loved old Moscow and knew the history of every street and by-way. He remembered its churches, both destroyed and those still standing, and shared this knowledge with his students. His every word and gesture radiated good will, sound judgment, and mature knowledge.

I happened to attend one of the lectures of this elderly, energetic man, who I had heard was showing slides of old Byzantine frescoes and icons. He himself carefully set each transparency into the projector and commented on the photo with the expressive voice of an old intellectual Muscovite professor whose words bore a quality of spiritual enlightenment.



*Andrei Cheslavovich Kozarzhevsky.*

At one point he drew our attention to a skillfully painted fresco high up on the inside surface of a dome that could not be seen from below. “And who do you think...,” he asked, his voice suddenly excited, “...the iconographer created this masterpiece for? He painted it without neglecting the slightest detail required by the artistic canons, while knowing full well that no

one on earth would ever appreciate his meticulous work.” The question did not demand an outward answer, but in spite of my chaotic worldview, my heart responded with the mysterious word “God,” and I felt a joy that I did not yet understand.

The great merit of messengers such as Kozarzhevsky was their encyclopedic knowledge. Often, we contemporary preachers tie ourselves into knots trying to deliver our message but remain popularizers at best. At worst, we are propagandists pressing the audience so hard that it does not dare believe

us. But how good and simple were these guardians of tradition, pure and honest Russians revealing Christ's truth to young people through the greatness of the culture they were passing on.

*Vyacheslav Adrianovich Grikhin*

The first "fisher of men" who entangled my soul in the net of the Holy Gospel was the quiet and modest Vyacheslav Andrianovich Grikhin, a well-known specialist in Old Russian literature whose seminars were discovered by my future spouse, Elena, a first-year student of the Russian Philological Faculty<sup>4</sup>.



*Vyacheslav Andrianovich Grikhin.*

One day Elena brought me to one of the professor's lectures. Before us stood a large middle-aged man with flaccid cheeks and dark circles under his eyes from the heart ailment that would prematurely end his life. It wasn't his features, but his rich baritone voice and unique intonation that allowed his audience to guess his inner meanings. Vyacheslav Andrianovich spoke about Old Russian literature "so fervently, so gently"<sup>5</sup> that his commitment to Orthodox Christianity could not be veiled by his neutral and academic lecture style.

Then something altogether unusual happened that caught me completely unawares and pushed me into the radical choice of Russian philology as my vocation. Vyacheslav Andrianovich said: "And now I am going to recite the so-called Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, the statement of faith for every Old Russian chronicler." Deliberately, with deep concentration, he began to recite:

<sup>4</sup> In Europe, a faculty is a division within a university or college comprising one subject area or a group of related subjects.

<sup>5</sup> "...so fervently, so gently...": Words from the well-known poem "I Loved You" by Alexander Pushkin.

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty....  
 And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God....  
 And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life....

I came to my senses only after he uttered, “Amen.”

As the seminar continued with explanations on the medieval understanding of the categories of time and space, I again and again repeated under my breath the Slavonic words, “I believe.”<sup>6</sup> It was because of this phrase that I fled from my beloved English studies in the Romano-Germanic Faculty. This was an inexplicable decision to most of my friends and professors, but my soul craved spiritual light and I knew that I had to grasp this phenomenon that was the essence, the core of language.

My ransom was a dozen ‘tails’ – unfulfilled program requirements or make-up exams in subjects I had to pass in order to be admitted to the new department. Yesterday’s favorite of the English Faculty had descended from the Romano-Germanic heights to slave away in the lowlands of Russian dialectology, exhausting himself in battle with the hypothetical Proto-Slavic language. From that moment on, I found my way by trial and error to the light of a Christian worldview *per aspera ad astra*.<sup>7</sup>

### *Mikhail Viktorovich Panov*

Let me also say a few words here about a third professor, Mikhail Viktorovich Panov, a specialist in Russian phonetics and the creator of a remarkable phonetic system that was astonishing in its clarity and simplicity. In addition, Panov was regarded as an unmatched expert in Russian poetry.

If present, you would have witnessed the expectant enthusiasm that reigned in the small classroom where Mikhail Viktorovich taught. Chairs were fitted into all possible and impossible bits of free space and, at every class, the floor in front of the lecturer was filled with a battery of substantially-sized recording devices. People sat, stood, and during especially crowded lectures, listened through the half-open door. One would think that it was the opening night of Shakespeare’s immortal *Hamlet*.

6 Trans. Note: The Old Russian/Slavonic words for the English “I believe” is “I confess,” and differs from modern Russian, the Slavonic being quite awe-inspiring. This was the language used from the 10th-15th centuries by East Slavs in Kievan Rus’, thus the mention of historical chronicles.

7 *Per aspera ad astra*: Well-known Latin phrase meaning, “From hardships to the stars.”



*Mikhail Viktorovich Panov.*

Grey-haired, with a noble head, lively eyes, and unhurried manner, Mikhail Viktorovich spoke slowly, deliberating over each word. And how he spoke! Quoting by heart Alexander Blok, Boris Pasternak, Osip Mandelstam, and Nikolay Gumilev, he drew attention to the uniqueness of each poet. Refraining from the usual practice of dissecting masterpieces into isolated units to be coldly analyzed, he conveyed the essence of each poem as subtly as the creators of the verses themselves. Such precise images and delicate speech melodies were not always transparent in meaning, but his contemplations allowed us to understand that the hidden inner world of the human soul was to be approached with awe.

After his lectures, I did not want to see people being rude to each other, and even our usual student slang sounded discordant. I knew nothing of Mikhail Viktorovich's attitude toward the faith, but many years later as I recall his bright, intelligent, kindly face, and hear his voice, my heart feels light.

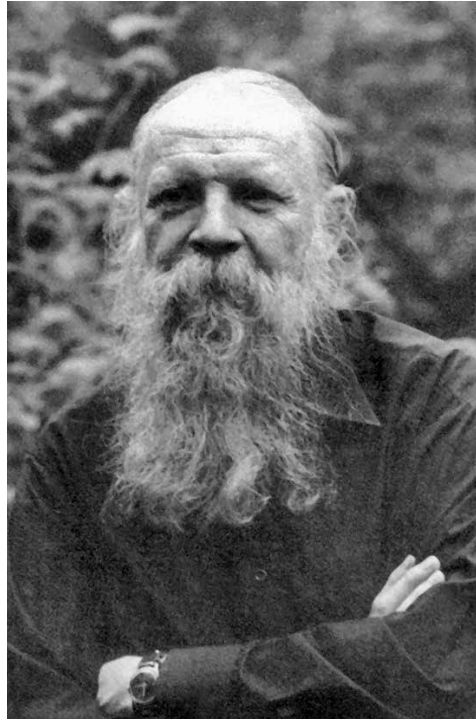
## Nikita Ilyich Tolstoy

After transferring from the Romano-Germanic Faculty of Moscow State University, where I had intensively studied English for a year, to the Faculty of Russian Language and Literature, I was privileged to become acquainted with an extraordinary person.

Nikita Ilyich could be recognized from afar. Tall, faultlessly tailored, with a long pre-revolutionary-looking professorial beard, he was noted for the open and unfailingly benevolent expression of his face. Now as a priest, I can almost certainly tell by a person's eyes if he or she is an Orthodox Christian. Those enlightened by God's grace have a special warmth that cannot

be mistaken for anything else, and when a cultured moral upbringing is combined with knowledge and wisdom, the person quite simply looks beautiful. Age, complemented by modesty, adds perfection, and the resulting charm, no longer mixed with the carnal or sensual, captures and softens people's hearts.

Nikita Ilyich Tolstoy was a professor of philology, head of the Ethno-Linguistics and Folklore Department of the Institute of Slavic and Balkan Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and a member of many academies worldwide. Because of his prestigious position, he was not required to spend all of his time in the halls of the university, but



*Professor Nikita Ilyich Tolstoy.*

when he did appear, our attention was drawn to him and him alone. We loved him for his magnanimity as a professor, and his noble ways inspired as much awe in our eyes as we would have felt for his direct forebear, the well-known count.<sup>8</sup> He treated us with amazing delicacy and respect, seeing in each student a unique personality, and I repeatedly found myself cheered and freed from my undergraduate inferiority after even a few minutes of conversation with this living vestige of the late empire.

Here he walked along the corridor, passing serenely through the jostling crowds of students. Long hair, blue jeans, and stretched-out pullovers had just come into common use; coats and bags were casually thrown over shoulders. The corridors echoed with chaotic noise and the slamming of doors... but the space around the count remained free and undisturbed, for we bashful tugs preferred to give a wide berth to the venerable multi-deck passenger ship.

<sup>8</sup> Count Lev (Leo) Nikolayevich Tolstoy, Russian author of *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, etc. 1828-1910.

Nikita Ilyich leans on an antique mahogany cane and wears a heavy family ring on his finger that in earlier times would have been used to seal documents. This grandeur, however, is coupled with a bright look that cloaks everyone with such sincere amiability that it calls for reciprocal openness. The count bows courteously to people he hardly knows, saying kind words to each of them. Even the girls in our department who have been caught up in the new wave of “moral freedom,” are entranced, and with his simple respect he helps restore their understanding of a woman’s dignity. His kindness is legendary.

Two girls approach him. Obviously embarrassed, they nudge each other to go first.

- “Can I serve you in any way, my dears?” he asks, gazing kindly at them. They are holding their student record-books in their hands, but so embarrassed that they don’t know where to look.
- We apologize, Nikita Ilyich, we are from your seminar. We weren’t able to come for the test in time and the door was closed. (This was a serious deviation of school discipline.)
- May I first ask your names?

With these words he bends in a most delicate manner, taking each girl’s hand in his own and kisses it. Then he asks which part of the exam they would like to answer today. After two or three additional questions he opens each girl’s book and credits them with a good mark for the exam, continuing on his way as if strolling down Nevsky Prospect. Behind him, the overjoyed students cannot believe their good fortune.

How could we not help loving such a unique and unrepeatable man! Almost legendary stories were told about Nikita Ilych in the department (even in his own lifetime) and it was also known that he did not drink vodka during Lent. In this way, the very notion of keeping Lent was introduced to students raised under an atheistic regime.

I still treasure the single visit I paid him at his home on Bolshaya Ordynka, near the church that enshrines the icon of the Mother of God, Joy of All Who Sorrow. I was impressed by the spacious high-ceilinged rooms and book-lined walls with volumes in every European language. Nikita Ilyich was seated in one armchair with me in another, and a bronze bust of Leo Tolstoy off to the side. I recall thinking how greatly the great writer’s gloomy look contrasted with his descendant’s gracious joy.



This stage of my life was rather difficult as I was just entering the Church and, typically as a new convert, given to extremes. I still lacked the harmony and vision of the golden mean that a Christian is to follow, and now I was questioning the validity of my academic studies. Visiting my professor in his comfortable home that day, I was miserably confused, but Nikita Ilyich patiently and carefully helped me, “Artemy, take heart and believe me: St. Sergius Theological Academy needs well-educated philologists.”

He said this with a sweet persuasiveness that would have been more appropriate to a grandmother cherishing her grandson than a famous academician counseling a confused student. I could not have imagined then that in 1986, only six years later, his words would prove prophetic when I was invited to teach Russian and Old Slavonic at the Orthodox seminary near Moscow!

Nikita Ilyich even played matchmaker for my future matushka and me – many times cautiously hinting that we two “philological chicks,” needed to get to know one another. Later, when our studies were almost finished, we heeded his advice.

With his great and sincere openness, Nikita Ilyich told me about his youthful years in the city of Belgrade, which received the first wave of Russian emigres after the revolution. As a boy, Nikita had met Metropolitan Antony (Khrapovitsky), who led the Russian Church community abroad. Metropolitan Antony took tender care of this gifted descendant of a family that he knew well and once showed Nikita a precious bishop’s panagia, given to him as a present from the future Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia, Sergei (Stragorodsky). On the back side of the panagia was an engraved dedication from the one Russian hierarch in the Soviet Union to the other in the diaspora: *Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out...*

Separated by national borders, living in countries politically hostile to one another, the wise hierarchs secretly prayed for each other, believing that the present calamity would pass and with God’s help the Russian Church would regain its canonical unity.

Nikita Ilyich passed away peacefully in 1996, and I am convinced that even in earlier difficult decades, his example and presence helped convert many students to Orthodoxy without the slightest compulsion on his part.

For me, the Humanities School seems empty now despite the milling crowds of professors and students. But at times, surely, the corridors must still echo to the footsteps of this knight of Russian Slavacists, treading the

hall with his fine walking stick, the Tolstoy family ring upon his finger, and his face bright with his charming, unforgettable smile.

## The Summer Olympics

For several years before the 1980 Olympic games were held in Moscow, numerous sports sites were constructed. Not long before the athletes and foreign delegations began to arrive, Russian militia were gathered to maintain order, and anyone who was not legally registered as living in Moscow was to leave the city.

Moscow State University students were also recruited to provide various services to the Olympic participants and tourists, and we student philologists were given the prestigious and “dangerous” task of interpreting for the many foreign delegations. To prepare, we were told to study booklets in various languages with questions about Russian society and their prescribed answers, in case we had to explain such things to bothersome foreigners.

But this was not all. One day the telephone rang and a harsh unpleasant voice ordered me to come to a particular address in connection with my work at the Olympics. When I arrived, I was ushered into the presence of a large young man with an unhealthy complexion. Unusually for an official, he wore neither jacket nor tie, and because of the summer heat he had unbut-



*Krylatskoe Canoeing and Rowing Basin, 1980 Olympics.*

toned his shirt. He looked at me intently, produced a bottle of Coke [a symbol of the capitalist West] and shoved it across the table towards me. It slid so quickly that I just managed to catch it.

Expecting an unpleasant sequel, I felt my shoulders tense, and indeed, this comrade from the office [a Russian euphemism for the KGB] launched into a lecture about bourgeois philosophy contradicting the true interests of the people.

“Foreign comrades – who are not comrades to us at all – want to grab the common pie that we have baked and divide it among themselves. The Motherland’s committed citizens must stand against such intentions and not allow foreign birds of prey to seize our national assets. Young people and adults need to unite in opposing the threat, and students assisting with the Olympics are to be particularly vigilant because we cannot rule out subversive activity. One should not be naïve; many spies are likely to come as tourists to identify our nation’s strengths and weaknesses. As soon as we see such operatives, we must report them to our superiors, and at the end of every working day we are to provide a description of all such suspicious-looking persons and their actions.”

I listened anxiously because he obviously meant that we translators should act as informers. Noticing my lack of enthusiasm (I think I was neither the first nor the last student he was to mobilize that day), he concluded by saying that our socialist motherland needed such well-coordinated services. Was I unwilling to aid my country in this way?

- No, I am ready to serve my motherland, and if I see a threat, I will certainly let the Olympic authorities know,” I said, trying to sound as reliable as possible.
- “Well, that’s good,” and he added, dismissing me: “Remember, even a simple pen may contain explosives.”

Thank God, the conversation was finally over, and he had not asked me to sign any kind of pledge. I had been quite nervous because I knew from what Granny told us that one must by no means sign anything.

We student philologists were sent to the Krylatskoye District of Moscow where the rowing and canoeing competitions would be held. For days before the competitions began, those of us on duty sat in the empty grandstands. I spent this time reading, praying with the prayer-book, and answering ques-

tions my student friends asked about church life. But had I known the fall my untamed passions had in store for me I would have kept silent!

The struggle against gluttony that I had been waging for several years had not become easier, and I decided, literally, to run away from it. Every evening, I put on my sneakers and went jogging down to the embankment and then on to Luzhniki Stadium, calling on God to give peace to my disorderly soul. Combining physical exercise with prayer gave some relief, but not for long. As soon as I relaxed, the bad habit overcame me again.

Once, after the competitions began, I again overate. My soul immediately became heavy and lost the spirit of prayer, as if its wings had been clipped. I reached the Olympic site that day with a bowed head and numb soul. One of my duties was to meet foreign guests and see them to their seats in the grandstand. On this particular day, I saw two anxious-looking ladies approach, one younger and the other older. I asked in English how I could help them, to which they abruptly answered in Russian,



*Artemy Vladimirov, Olympic Translator Pass, 1980.*

pronouncing their “r’s” in the French manner, “No. We are from Israel, from Israel! We will find our own way per-r-r-fectly!” Their annoyance somehow stunned me as I had not given them any reason for it.

Noticing the interaction, an official from “the office” came up to me. Surprised to see the cord of the cross I was wearing on my neck he asked scornfully:

- “Are you a believer? What is this – a cross?” I started. Troubled and depressed, I asked in a frightened and lost voice:
- “Am I not to wear it?”
- “Well, no, do wear it if you want to,” he sneered, and stepped away from me.

The world became dark before my eyes. How could I have forgotten about professing my faith, the very backbone of my life? I left the stadium, drag-

ging my feet to the metro station while returning over and over in my mind to the moment of faint-heartedness that I had brought upon myself by over-eating. I felt that God's light had surely abandoned me. I tried to say all of the prayers I knew, mixing up the words and having to begin again. Finally, I was left with, "Lord, forgive me! God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" Suddenly, I sensed the presence of the Savior and felt warmed. I knew that He was healing my heart and gratitude filled my whole being. The following day I confessed the faint-heartedness. As he absolved me, the priest asked me to be spiritually vigilant.

Later, my wise spiritual father also comforted me, saying that time would put things in their proper place. And so, it did. In the following years, I defended my faith many times.

After two weeks, the Olympic games were over and we went back to our everyday routine, but I always remember those days, and how, by and by, with frequent confession and Holy Communion, the passions became lighter as my soul learned to master them.

## The Soul Militia

Those I term the "Soul Militia" were guardians of public order whose duties included establishing the purity of Marxist-Leninist teaching among the Moscow State University student masses; "the only true doctrine, given once and for all and not subject to any revision." It was a philosophy that our poor compatriots, young and old, from Moscow to the most remote areas of the Soviet Union, were expected to hammer away at, especially in such a politically important school as Moscow State University.

The outward limitations and ideological blinders still seemed fixed in the late 1970s, despite the fact that the intellectual ferment among thinking students had gone too far to be stopped. I find it impossible to describe how my soul, enlightened by God's grace (or at least calling itself Christian), recoiled from of these ideological lies which I felt as deeply as a personal insult.

Can you imagine that the library refused to lend the Bible to us philologists, who studied the whole corpus of world literature?! They referred to some decree, issued by no one knew who, that the Book of Books could only be read by fourth-year philosophers! Presumably, they were the only ones ideologically grounded enough to brush acquaintance with God's commandments because they had been so thoroughly immersed in Marx's three-volume *Das Kapital*.

As a first-year student, I was forced to attend seminars on the history of the Communist Party. Each time I prayed hard to endure the ordeal, which was taught by a middle-aged woman of few words with a severe, yet strangely inexpressive, countenance. I always sat in the back row, eagerly awaiting the end of the lecture.

At seventeen, I could listen to the history of the Bolshevist movement with a sort of calmness, but when our dispassionate lecturer, whom I will call Miss Y., spoke of the development of the so-called “new man,” who had barely bade farewell to his monkey ancestors, I was seized by such inward indignation that I shifted restlessly in my chair in an effort not to groan aloud or break into acid remarks.

The times were still tough and the Soviet man’s habitual “prudence,” inherent in my genes, suppressed the accumulating energy of protest. But one day, my long-suffering cup overflowed. As she speculated on the moral code of the author of communism (whose “ethical” elements had been insolently stolen from the gospel and turned on their heads), I could bear the lies no longer. I told myself, “I will now silently recite the ‘Our Father,’ making the sign of the cross over myself without paying any attention to what happens around me.” “Lord,” I added, secretly calling upon the Most High: “Make me invisible to Miss Y. because anything is possible for You. I will close my eyes



*Typical 1980s classroom at Moscow State University.*

so that I'm not tempted by my weak faith, and I will not open them until I have finished the prayer and made the last sign of the cross." What a young nitwit I was to be laying down terms for the Lord!

After the inner monologue was over, I closed my eyes and felt myself completely protected, as if in an armor-plated room. Making the first sign of the cross in the slow and deliberate "Old Orthodox" manner I slowly gained courage – after all, nothing awful had happened. Crossing myself again, I slowly put my three folded fingers to my forehead, abdomen, and shoulders while whispering the Lord's prayer with my lips. The cross filled me with inner strength and I decided to slightly open my right eye and observe the position of the ideological contestant. What I saw was mind-numbing. She was staring at me in silent horror!

An experienced eye would have recognized the whole gamut of her emotions: from the confusion and bewilderment of someone who does not know what to do next, to anxiety about her position as a professor of Marxist ideology, who had cultivated such exotic fruit in her party garden. Further, she was obviously disturbed by my mental state, which seemed to demand the immediate intervention of two large male keepers with a straitjacket. But strange as it might seem, the professor did not say a word to me. As for myself, I decided to pull off my cloak of invisibility and at least try to take some part in the seminar now drawing to a close. And so, there were no repercussions. The Lord's condescension to my green ignorance surely saved me from further trials, and not a single representative of the administration ever raised any questions related to my religious beliefs.

This was surely God's providence. Certainly, I wouldn't have been arrested if I had confessed my Christianity, but neither would I have been able to continue at the university. Faith was a subject you were to conceal; it was the property of your heart, your personal belief.

Over the remaining years of study, I also crossed myself at lectures read by otherwise intelligent and capable professors when the ideas they put forward seemed somewhat blasphemous. This was in order to protect myself, as I was extremely sensitive to the psychological dissonance in which I lived. This behavior caused some of my fellow students to think of me as an informer, whose inappropriate actions were seen as an ingenious way of unmasking classmates with Orthodox views. Only the absolutely naïve expressions on my face (alternately alarmed and blissfully dreamy) laid that sophisticated theory to rest.

Let me also include in the list of our official soul militia the so-called “scientific atheism” professor. He was quite well-known, and his name was on everyone’s lips; I will call him Comrade X. Believers among the students spoke of his extraordinary insight and uncanny ability to pull the soul out of those he suspected of disloyalty toward the “atheist religion.” A small man who habitually wore a crimson-red jacket and gesticulated with jerky movements, I never recall him smiling; his expression was more often sarcastic and disdainful, particularly when he read us lengthy passages from Soviet atheist textbooks on the psychology of believers.

As the exam drew near, I became more and more worried. Passing the course was compulsory and the situation was aggravated by my inner turmoil, unbalanced at that time by the peaceful disposition proper to a Christian. My herculean task was to answer the questions without acting against my conscience or in any way denying the faith. The tension mounted, but as often happens, fear has a hundred eyes. Comrade X turned out to be less terrifying than our imaginations suggested.

Standing by his table at the oral exam I noticed that his gaze was fixed on something infinitely distant above my head. I lowered my eyes and began answering the random questions I had been assigned. The first was about the ways of “salvation” in Buddhism. As for the additional questions X asked me, these were about the state of religion once the Communist ideal would be achieved. I developed the theme inertly and as a result was given a passing satisfactory mark, which was adequate but untypical of my exam book.

A few years passed, and my friend Maxim Kozlov and I graduated and both later became teachers and priests at Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Academy. It was 1988, the period of *glasnost*, and our country was experiencing a rise in faith as it prepared to celebrate the most outstanding event of its history, the 1000th anniversary of its baptism.

Throughout those memorable summers, we teachers of the academy took part in meeting delegations from all over Russia and abroad. One evening, as Fr. Maxim and I strolled on the academy grounds sharing our impressions of the day’s encounters, he drew my attention to a group of people centered round a short man in a red jacket. Addressing the group, he pointed his right hand towards the church, then slashed the air with an abrupt downward movement.

“Comrade X?!” I exclaimed in astonishment, looking at Fr. Maxim. He seconded my guess, and we edged toward the excursion group. “Welcome to



our academy,” I greeted the distinguished guests amiably. “Do you recognize us, Comrade X? We were among your most diligent students from the MSU Philological Faculty. We did our best not to miss your lectures and are very thankful for the firm moral impulse you gave us, by which we ourselves now teach at the St. Sergius Theological Academy as ordained priests.”

Trying unsuccessfully to remember our family names, Comrade X gave us a perplexed look. His atheist colleagues were at a loss whether to smile or to express condolences to their respected colleague. Comrade X remained silent, not knowing what to say, and perhaps there was no need to say anything. As in earlier years, his eyes gazed over our heads to where the past, present, and future blurred together into unfathomable distance.

## The Cavalry Charge

We know that children can inherit bad traits from their parents, and if this is true in relation to destructive things, how much more so in regard to good ones?

My mother studied at the prestigious Moscow Energy Engineering Institute, taught at the institute after graduation, and met her future husband there. She was active in social outreach, and of course she was a member of the institute’s Young Komsomol League, whose department leaders laid great hopes on her. So, imagine what happened when, in 1956, she had her first-born, my brother Andrey. Young and beautiful, she suddenly appeared one day on the threshold of the Komsomol bureau office, and without any preamble laid her membership card on the table!<sup>9</sup>

- “H-how should we understand this, Marina Pavlovna? Do you disagree with the general line of our party? D-do you take exception to anything within the Marxist ideology?”

Her cheeks flushing with perfect health, her face shining with the light of maternity, dazzlingly beautiful, she said firmly, smiling:

- “I’ve never thought of such things, but I have given birth to a son. Please understand – *I have become a mother.*” She sighed peacefully and smiled again looking somewhere inside herself...

<sup>9</sup> Ed. Note: Komsomol membership was a given for almost all Soviet-era Russian youth. Promoting individual morality, sports, cultural programs, political clubs, and volunteer labor for Party-approved social projects, Komsomol ideology included loyalty to Marxist ideals and the anti-religious rhetoric that Artemy objected to. “Laying your card on the table” meant giving up one’s membership, thus calling attention to non-conformist views and jeopardizing opportunities for advanced university study and employment.

Stunned with the “absurdity” of her words, seemingly devoid of any logic, the party leader did not know what to say, and finally asked:

– “Are you not afraid of becoming enmeshed in diapers?”

– “No, that is just the thing I am not afraid of...,” mother replied cheerfully.

Remembering this family story and now becoming a practicing Christian, I felt my own Komsomol membership as a burden to my soul. Until now my relationship with Komsomol had been favorable and my prospects were bright. Already in the first year of university I had been elected to lead our



*Main administration building, MSU.*

department’s sports club (without my knowledge, as no one thought it necessary to ask my consent).

As my faith strengthened, however, my conscience began to reproach me for even being a formal member, as one of Komsomol’s goals was to fight against “religious prejudice,” that is, belief in God. But how to leave the atheist organization?

You can imagine the extent of my youthful defiance: I was ready to go to war – to publicly profess my faith and oppose the entire system. Wiser people, however, advised me to choose the more moderate path of trying to quietly withdraw my documents from the Komsomol offices and thus gain my freedom.

In order to do this, I first had to make my way to the Philological Faculty’s Komsomol office to claim my local membership card. My heart pounding, I prayed to the Mother of God, not knowing what consequences such a “cavalry charge” might have. But, according to popular songs sung throughout Russia at the time, “A coward does not play hockey...” and “Seas are conquered by the brave....”

Do you believe in miracles, friends? I do. Can you imagine? I opened the door with trembling hands and at first glance realized that... there was no

one in the room! Even better, the box of membership cards had been left sitting openly on the table. Rifling through it, I quickly discovered that mine was one of the first! Grabbing the card, I ran out of the room with indescribable joy in my heart.

But the most difficult part was yet to come. I had to go to the university's central administration, the thirty-six-floor Stalin building – that is, into the very den of Komsomol. No such easy success could be expected here and I needed a plausible story to justify the withdrawal of my official documents.

Arriving at the site of the combat operation, I saw only a pale fragile girl who looked questioningly at me.

– “Good day, I am a student of the Philology Faculty.... Due to certain family circumstances, I have to transfer to LGU. [An abbreviation for Leningrad State University.]

– So, you will be registered there? And you want to have your card?

– Yes, the card is exactly what I want. I have to take my name off of the register here because I am now a student of ... LGU! [In Russian, LGU (pronounced “Lgoo”) is a homophone for “I am lying.”]

The charming girl found my document and handed it over to me.

Having invoked the literal truth (Lord, forgive me!) – I dashed out into the open air in a state of exaltation. As the tension drained away and relief swept over me, I almost sang aloud to the Mother of God in the public square.

## Falling in Love

Most of us are quite familiar with the subject of falling in love, and we smile as we look back at our own early experiences, but teenagers in love always see it their own way. Gardens indeed blossom in their hearts, but this also leads some young people to the loss of virginity outside of a God-given marriage. In our own country we have mostly set aside the tradition of bringing up young people in the spirit of virtue and, nowadays, our overly-experienced teenagers consider being in love a ridiculous anachronism, a remnant of the past not worth discussing. They have deprived themselves of romantic love and are prematurely tired of living: drained physically and morally, they have become old people in young bodies.

But some teenagers falling in love receive wings and, working on themselves, begin to rise above the dullness of everyday reality. They are filled

with energy and a sense of purpose. This is particularly true when young people struggle not to trespass the Church's moral boundaries because they know that family life is a gift of God and worth fighting for, and that if they fight successfully against the weakness of the flesh, they will come to their wedding with a clear conscience and joyful heart.

Some Russian authors of the past wrote about being in love as a morbid condition that interferes with spiritual progress. What did they mean? They believed it to be dangerous because of the involuntary idealization of the object of love, which makes one forget God and think that we can do without His life-giving grace. The heart is focused on the one mortal without whom it seems impossible to survive even for a moment. Losing this inner balance, the young person also loses discernment and begins to make rash decisions that he will bitterly regret.

Once, as a first-year university student, I went to our local polyclinic to obtain a medical document of some kind. I had a volume of *The Brothers Karamazov* with me, and on that beautiful autumn day I was quite pleased with the thought that in my blue jeans and brown beret I might be taken for an artist. As I waited in the hallway reading the novel, I raised my eyes in time to see a girl with a modest, serious, and nice-looking face glancing over at me. Suddenly, an official voice called my name to receive my document, but when I returned, she had gone. I put on my coat and left.

The polyclinic was situated in one of the by-ways leading from Ostozhenka Street to the Moscow River embankment, and as I left, I saw ahead the slender figure of the girl who had drawn my attention. She was walking slowly and I soon caught up with her. I greeted her politely and asked: "Is everything alright with you?" She nodded. Her name was... (I shall call her Natalia) .... and at sixteen she was preparing for entrance exams to one of the science faculties of Moscow State University. I had just passed through the Scylla and Charybdis of university exams so we had much to share. We hardly noticed how we reached her house, but before we said good-bye, we agreed to meet again.

By and by we became good friends and, as you may guess, we fell in love. At least, I did. I'm glad to say that the feeling was noble and pure, or at least I saw it as such. No unworthy thoughts tempted my inexperienced heart that was ready to swear everlasting faithfulness.

In time, I met Natalia's well-educated and cultured parents, who welcomed me hospitably to their home, and I found common ground with her

biologist father who spoke English and had read Shakespeare in the original. When he suggested that I take a look at his precious one-volume pre-revolutionary edition of the great playwright's works, there could have been no better means of forging our acquaintance. I was already dreaming of Natalia as my bride and everything would have been perfect had it not been for our young ages and an incomprehensible reserve on her part towards me.

Nevertheless, we kept meeting, and many times in confession I spoke of my sincere and decisive wish to pledge myself to Natalia who, to my regret, had turned out to be unbaptized. Father Peter sighed and said sympathetically: "Artemy, dear, do not be in a hurry; you will lose your spiritual fervor." I was upset by his words.

Months went by, and as my feelings grew, so did my desire to settle down (at eighteen!). Sometimes Natalia and I walked in the park, usually in silence, but I could not rid myself of the feeling that there was a wall between us. I scrutinized her sweet, lightly-freckled face and each time I saw a sadness that I did not understand. She seemed to lack the vigor of youth and she had also taken up smoking, which I regretted so much that I made prostrations morning and evening, begging the Lord and the Mother of God to save her from this silly habit.

Finally, I understood that I no longer had the strength to endure the uncertainty of our relations and I told her, "Love is a feeling that cannot force or oppress the loved one. If there is something that prevents you casting your lot with me, tell me. I will accept it as God's will. There's only one thing I ask: that you be open with me."

N. raised her beautiful sad eyes at me and replied in an odd voice:

- Not today. On Sunday...
- Where shall we meet?
- By the fountain at Metro Arbatskaya.

It so happened that on the following Saturday I went to visit some relatives at their dacha at Sokolova Pustyn, not far from Moscow, where my brothers and I had spent our summers as children. We cherished unforgettable memories of this place, and I loved it dearly.

I arrived in the nearby town of Stupin by train, then squeezed into a bus filled with dacha-dwellers that soon brought me to Sokolova Pustyn. Filled with excitement, I walked along the main street that I had not visited for some

years. Situated on a picturesque bank of the Oka river, it was a favored dacha village for many Muscovites, especially the artistic community. Strangely, I was never able to find the house that my relatives were renting that summer and finally gave up. Preoccupied with the conversation that was to take place the following day, I decided to cover the long distance to Stupin on foot through the pine forest instead of waiting for the bus.

That night was the first in my life when no one would be waiting up or expecting me. The relatives at the dacha surely thought that I had changed my mind, and my parents in Moscow believed that I was spending the night with relatives. Instead, I spent the night in the forest calling to God incessantly: "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner!" I had no fear of the woods, but the dread of being abandoned and cast away on the following day made me pray fervently. I wandered in the forest, praying until dawn, when I felt God so near that I knew He had heard my lamentations.

I arrived in Moscow by an early train and was at Arbatskaya at the appointed time. Surprisingly, I was calm and peaceful. My soul seemed to have gained strength after my "all-night vigil" and I felt God's protecting hand.

I spotted Natalia at once. She was seated by the fountain smoking, nervously it seemed, and I went over to greet her. She responded with a nod, but found it hard to begin the conversation.

- Natalia, I beg you, tell me just how it is. I will understand, believe me.
- Artemy, I ought to have told you long ago. A year and a half ago I became close with a family friend, a post-graduate student in my department and we... well, I am living with him like a spouse.... we have had everything that happens between a man and a woman."

The silence settled. "But why didn't you tell me before?" "I couldn't," she replied, as she threw the smoking cigarette butt onto the asphalt. I don't quite remember my parting words, but I know it was a sincere wish: "Be happy; forgive me; farewell."

It seemed to me then that my soul was torn in half and an unbearable heaviness pressed me to the earth. Thank God that I knew enough to pray, for the sorrow rose from my heart again and again as I called on Him for release from the misery of my loss.

Only many years later did I see those events as the Lord's ineffable mercy rather than a cruel blow. It is true that "big things are seen from a distance": What would have happened if this meeting had taken a positive turn and

she had agreed to marry me? One thing is clear: I could have never become a priest of the Living God, which is the essence and meaning of my life, and you, my audience, who are so dear to me now, would never have read these lines.

## Orphanhood

I am sure that everyone who seeks God and wants to please him at one point or another becomes aware of being a spiritual orphan. One cannot help but need a spiritual father, whose strong shoulders we can lean on as we begin our journey to salvation. My readers might have guessed that my university studies were somewhat neglected because of my extreme exertions to fully enter the Church. At the time, I didn't have anyone to give me advice, and those who tried needed guidance themselves.

How many bumps, how many mistakes (and sometimes serious ones) we make with our "home-made piety," so distant from understanding the proper measure and timing for spiritual endeavors! One thing is certain, however. The sleepless eye of Providence keeps vigil over all of our speculations, our chaotic weaving from side to side, the fruitless self-scrutiny, and our not altogether sober-minded moments of "fiery delight." Instead, we should seek God with a guileless, mild, child-like heart, instead of hiding from Him in the thickets of our weak and newly-sprouted faith...

One day, upset by some problem at the university, I absent-mindedly missed my own Kropotkinskaya Metro Station and got out at Prospekt Marksa [now Okhotny Ryad]. Preoccupied, I just went where my feet carried



*Icon of the Mother of God "In Search of the Lost."*

me until I found myself a block away at the Church of the Resurrection on Nezhdanovoi (now Bryusov) Street. It must have been a special saint's day as the church was full of people buying candles to light in front of the feast-day icon. To get away from the fuss, I moved further in towards the altar.

As I came close to the solea, I raised my eyes, frozen to the spot. Gazing at me from a large beautifully-decorated kiot was the Most Holy Virgin, "In Search of the Lost," painted in the Italian style with uncovered hair. I couldn't tear my gaze away from the face of the Mother of God, her bright eyes filled with mercy and love, and the longer I stood in front of the holy image the warmer my heart felt. I had no idea where the warmth came from, but as I made my way out of church, I discovered to my great surprise that not a single trace of the sorrow and confusion that had so recently oppressed my soul remained. The healing was so obvious that I returned to the church to make sure that the miracle-working icon was imprinted in my memory.

As months went by and my belief in the guidance of the Mother of God strengthened, I had no doubt that sooner or later she would lead me to my spiritual father. As it turned out, I only reentered that church a decade later as a deacon in July 1987, when I was sent there for training by the Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra Theological Academy. Seeing the dear image again, an overwhelming feeling of gratitude rose up within me, so unexpected that I forgot to make the sign of the cross.

## A Lesson Learned

Since awakening to the faith, I had become a dedicated parishioner of the Church of St. Elijah on 2nd-Obydensky Pereulok near my home, and many times I had asked different priests there to be my spiritual guide, but they shied away, answering wisely: "You should just pray, Artemy..." Perhaps this was a reaction to my nervous lack of maturity, for I constantly requested confession as more and more childish and youthful sins turned up in my memory and the fathers must have found me irritating. As the saying goes, "Just like a dirty sponge – the more you moisten it, the more dirt comes out."

With my meticulous straining at gnats (not to mention the camels) the priests helplessly and humbly inclined their heads, because they knew that it was easier to listen to it all than to see my unhappy countenance again and again. Reward them, O Lord, give them eternal repose in Your Kingdom, for their unseen daily work, which was not at all easy!



I think I was not the only one who treated them in such a manner. Sophisticated Moscow parishioners who manage to lose their way among the thickets of opinions, moods, and confusion, are a singular spiritual cohort compared to the calm, simple people living far from big cities.

I vividly remember new converts chasing poor priests on Holy Saturday, neophytes who urgently felt they had to cleanse their conscience right before the Lord's Pascha. Tired elderly protopriests with sprinkling brushes in their hands and *epitrachelions* wet with holy water hurried back and forth from the parish annex building to the churchyard to bless the incessant parade of Paschal food baskets. The day was joyful but so busy! As a final touch, add a weedy student pitifully begging for a chance to disclose his sinful thoughts.

"Hold on, wait five minutes," said batiushka good-naturedly, waving the annoying parish 'fly' away. He knew only too well that just before the evening service, the same episode would be repeated. Finding a moment to spare, batiushka listened to the brief confession recorded in microscopic letters on a dingy bus ticket, and replied: "God will forgive! God will forgive!" Then he finished with the prayer of absolution over the penitent's head, already swelling with new sinful thoughts. The priest crossed him and rushed back to the tables in the yard to bless a new batch of *kulich*.

There were other times, however, when I felt my "orphanhood" even more tangibly. Once, after I had just delivered a particularly long confession (the patient priest knew it was easier not to interrupt me before I had read aloud the entire list of sins I held in my hand), he said:

– "Is this all, Artyomushka?"



*Church of the Prophet Elijah.*

- “Thank you, this is all... for today.”
- “Get on your knees, I will say the prayer of absolution over you.” Then, he said sweetly and peacefully as he was in a good mood, “...you are a spiritual person.”

Kneeling under the *epitrachelion* with my head humbly bent as I waited for him to say the prayer, his unexpected comment pierced my heart with the thought: “If batiushka says this, it cannot be spiritual, and he himself must be inexperienced!” With such a criminal thought, I felt I could not receive absolution, so I moaned aloud under the heavy brocaded epitrachelion:

- “Father, allow me to confess one more thought!”
- “What thought?”
- “Batiushka, the thought is telling me that you are... inexperienced.”

Father interrupted the prayer, lifted the epitrachelion and, beside himself with anger at my utter ingratitude (he had inadvertently identified me with the thought), shouted:

- “How dare you, you simpleton! I’ve graduated from the theological academy, and now you are saying that I’m inexperienced! Off with you, I don’t want to see you again!”

Stunned by the awful turn of events I rolled down off the solea like a whip top. Like a beaten dog I dragged myself to the counter where my habitual comforter, Anna Nikolayevna, was selling candles. But she, dear soul, just turned the knife in my open wound:

- “May the Lord be with you, Artyomushka, don’t ever do that! You shouldn’t tell priests all your thoughts nowadays. He can anathematize you for this, God forbid, or worse!”

Hearing of the impending anathema and excommunication, I completely lost heart. In my imagination, I saw Count Leo Tolstoy’s terrible fate as my own – his grave in Yasnaya Polyana without a cross, without Christ<sup>10</sup>.... but thank God, the misunderstanding was resolved rather quickly with Anna

<sup>10</sup> Because the renowned Russian author Lev Tolstoy publicly renounced his membership in the Russian Orthodox Church, explicitly rejecting its rituals and sacraments, and later proclaiming that he only accepted Christ as a prophet, he could not be buried with an Orthodox funeral or in consecrated ground at his death in 1910.

Nikolayevna's wise help. She advised me to beg the enraged priest's forgiveness by falling down at his feet and imploring: "Do not hold it as a grievance, holy father, but forgive me, an empty-headed student!"

The priest, who was incapable of being angry and taking offence for too long, forgave me. We embraced and kissed each other and the conflict was settled. Since then, I have understood what was to be confessed and what was not, and I never stopped praying to God for a spiritual father.

## Humanity and the Priesthood

Here is another interesting episode from those times. Once, when I came to take up my work in the church as a night guard, I learned that Protopriests Alexander Egorov and Sergiy Borzdyko were going to spend the night in the parish annex. Father Sergiy was particularly ascetic, and his voice, from the very depths of his heart, was warm with prayer. His behavior was very modest, and it seemed that he had been humbled by illness and solitude.

Late in the evening, the *batiushkas* asked me to make tea and set the table in the parish building. It was the first time I had served God's priests, so taking cups, saucers, a sugar bowl, and some biscuits out of the cupboard, I felt exalted. They, in turn, were so involved in their discussion that they paid little attention to me. Father Alexander opened a cabinet door and produced a cut-glass bottle filled with home-made fruit liqueur. They had tea, and I went on performing my duties.

When I returned to see if they needed anything else, their voices sounded much louder: Fr. Sergiy was fervently insisting on something to Fr. Alexander, and then began reproaching himself. I didn't dare intrude with the hot kettle into such a confidential interchange, but before I could withdraw, I heard him mutter angrily: "What a piece of rubbish I am, except for my priesthood!" This sudden exclamation expressed the complex theological idea with such astonishing precision that I nearly dropped the kettle. Many times since, I have gone back in my mind to those confessional words by sweet Fr. Sergiy, who taught me to distinguish between the grace of priesthood and the humanity common to us all.

I was not destined to "cleave to" St. Elijah's priests, but I will always be grateful to them for their warm and lovingly pastoral attitude. I believe that one obtains a spiritual father only if a priest generously opens his heart to feed the spiritual child and that there should be an inner similarity between

the two. As they become close, they will feel a consonance of their hearts and a spiritual kinship. This is a mystery inexplicable in words but easily perceived in practical spiritual life. Saint Theophan the Recluse said that, despite the spiritual scantiness of our times, God will sooner or later give a wise and guileless spiritual guide to a Christian who sincerely prays for this.

In the meantime, I continued my spiritual wanderings and forgot my woes and tribulations only at Sunday liturgy when, after receiving Holy Communion I felt like an infant, calm and secure in its mother's arms.

One Sunday in spring, after having received the Lord's Most Pure Body and Blood, I had enough time to go pray to my favorite saint in front of his miracle-working icon at St. Nicholas Church in Khamovniki. I stood through the evening vigil attentively and then went home in a peaceful state of mind. Paschal celebrations were already over, but in the darkness I could smell the fresh spring grass and puddles filled with rainwater. Sparrows chirruped and the evening air was warm as I made my way to the bus stop. Suddenly, I thought: "What if I get ready for Holy Communion again tomorrow?" Despite its newness and impossibility, this thought filled my heart with such grace that I stopped still. Everything around and inside me seemed to light up, and for a moment, the true meaning of life in Christ opened to me. I went to sleep in this incomprehensible and excited state, and in the morning my good intention was fulfilled.

## Night Watch

This is the story of a struggle I once went through in my student years.

I had continued working as a night guard at St. Elijah's, and one evening as I reported to Anna Nikolayevna, the elderly woman in charge of the practical running of the church, she greeted me with her usual friendly smile and said: "They have brought a deceased man for a funeral and you will have to stay the night with him here." I didn't pay much attention to her words at the time.

When the evening service was over, I watched closely as people left. Anna Nikolayevna had worked in churches like ours for over thirty years, and would admonish us student guards: "My dears, you must stay alert! Our times are hard, and people no longer fear God. They say that not long ago, a burglar hid under an analogion and stayed there, like in a tiny house. As soon as everyone left, the wretch crawled out and robbed the church! So,

keep your eyes open and move the analogions.<sup>11</sup> Someone – God forbid! – could be crouching underneath! Anything can happen nowadays.” After such an exhortation, we diligently checked every nook and cranny.

For some reason, I was on duty that evening alone. In the left aisle, the coffin of the reposed man was placed on an oak bench before the side altar of Sts. Peter and Paul. The lid had been left standing separately near the entrance, and from where I stood, I could see the deceased’s face covered with a small shroud, the white burial cloth with an image of the crucified Savior. As a rule, funeral services are held in the morning after liturgy, but some people, like this man’s family, would bring their deceased relative’s body to church on the eve of the funeral.

Anna Nikolayevna finished her innumerable chores and, having prepared the bread, wine, and clean towels for liturgy, was about to depart to her little room in the belfry where she spent the night before a morning service. As she turned to go, she half-closed her small, kind eyes and purred reassuringly, “Good night, Tyomochka, God be with you! Don’t be afraid, this one is good....” Bowing in a monastic manner, she scurried up the steep steps to her tower room.

Somehow, her parting words about the deceased man being reliable and well-disposed towards me sparked a flicker of anxiety in my heart. I must admit, friends, that I was not yet very brave, although I did know what courage was and, as I assured myself, it is not being unafraid that counts, but overcoming fear with reason.

I finished my duties and began reading the evening prayers, reminding myself that I was not alone. Certainly not. The Mother of God was there and the saints, their faces lit by the flickering church-lamps. Dragging the folding bed to the center aisle, I prepared for sleep uneasily because of the weighty responsibility entrusted to me.

Now, recall that articles made of wood dry out over the years, and when they do, they will crack if there is a draught or even a small fluctuation in temperature. Wooden kiots, benches, church counters: all of these older furnishings make cracking sounds... as will coffins that are sometimes hastily knocked together out of poorly-fitting planks.

<sup>11</sup> Analogion: a wooden reader’s stand – usually free-standing and sometimes covered with floor-length covers. More elaborate analogions, especially for choirs to gather around, have a storage cabinet under the revolving book stand. This is slightly humorous, as analogions are usually much too small to hide a grown man, so perhaps Anna Nikolayevna’s fears are a little naïve. Yet, church robberies did occur, and for this reason churches employed night guards.

I crossed myself, bowed to my favorite icon – the Mother of God of Kazan – and stood before the bed to repeat the prayer that Orthodox say before going to sleep: “Into Thy hands, O Lord Jesus Christ, my God, I commend my spirit. Do Thou bless me, have mercy on me, and grant me eternal life. Amen.”



Side altar, Church of the Prophet Elijah on 2nd-Obydensky Lane.

Following the wise advice that we find in the evening prayers, I made the sign of the cross in each of the four directions and laid down but, as you might have guessed, sleep eluded me. Even though I had covered myself with an ancient down quilt, my ears (which seemed to have unaccountably grown as enormous as an elephant’s) unfailingly detected every suspicious sound.

Cr-r-ack! Cr-r-ack! I froze in horror, then quickly turned over to bury my face in the pillow, hoping that this would silence the cavernous space around me. Not at all! The infernal cracking began again, now twice as loud. Blood-chilling episodes from *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka* by Nikolai Gogol stirred my imagination, each scene more horrible than the last.

It was not by chance that Gogol

not only later repented of having written the book, but solemnly disowned it! I write this lightly and humorously now, but at that moment, not only my undershirt but everything, including my pullover, was soaked with cold sweat.

Cr-r-ack! Cr-r-ack! In my mind I saw the deceased, whatever his good qualities, slowly sitting up in his coffin to stretch himself after the long hours of immobility. Now he was hoisting his legs over the edge of the coffin – first one leg, and then the other – carefully, so as not to fall. Terror swept over me, and if other sounds had followed, or anything resembling footsteps, I am quite sure that I would not be sitting here now writing about my youth.

I dug my teeth into the pillow. Not for the whole world would I have gotten up to check the aisle where the “good” deceased man lay. Plunging into prayer with all of my mind, heart, soul, and body, I called out to the Mother of God: “Help me! Protect me!” and then, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner!” Slowly, the fear subsided until I was able to unclench the pillow and turn towards the distant icon of the Kazan Mother of God, illumined by its small red lampada.

But now again: Cr-r-ack! Cr-r-ack! Cr-r-ack! Starting up as if struck by an electric bolt, I vividly imagined the dead man making his way down the aisle; approaching with silent steps, his upraised hand ready to run icy fingers down my spine – his attempt at a kind and peaceful greeting. Stifling an urge to scream aloud, I groaned: “Mother of God, Most Pure, Most Holy Virgin, protect me and have mercy on me! O Lord, surround me with the power of Thy holy and life-giving Cross!”

Slowly the paroxysm of deadening fear abated, and I understood that the Merciful Lord would not allow anything bad to happen, especially here in His own temple. Night began to fade; the battle against fear and spiritual wickedness in high places had been won and the terrors of childhood vanquished. Just before dawn, I fell into an exhausted sleep.

At six o’clock I jumped out of bed, awakened by the alarm as a faint morning light crept through the latticed windows. I washed my face, pushed open the wrought-



*Anna Nikolayevna of Prophet Elijah Church.*

iron door, and began lighting the church-lamps. My heavenly friends gazed benevolently at me from the icons: St. Nicholas, the merciful protector of orphans and widows; St. Tryphon the Martyr on his white horse, the defender of Christians in their struggle against fallen spirits; and St. Seraphim whose

face was filled with Paschal love. Gone were the fears of the night. The face of the Mother of God of Kazan, lit with an inner spiritual joy, seemed almost to smile at the rumped teenage sparrow just beginning his Christian life.

Then arrived dear Anna Nikolayevna:

- How was it, Artyomushka? Was it alright? Has it been a quiet night?
- Thank God, Matushka. Nothing special happened.
- Good! I suppose you’ll be running to your studies? No chance to get a bit of sleep at home?
- God willing, I’ll rest for an hour or two, if you will let me go.
- Go, Artyomushka, God be with you!

I walked the short distance home with a light heart. How amazing everything was! My soul was alive with the otherworldly warmth that had accumulated through the tempestuous night, and my body, almost weightless, breathed thanksgiving to my heavenly protectors for the light of day.

## The Kitchen

No one will be surprised if I say that some of the most interesting things in our lives in Moscow happen in the kitchen, but it has not always been like this. There were times when the majority of Russians did not live confined to tiny flats in large cities, more like beehives than human dwellings, and even nowadays there are Muscovites with spacious rooms where they receive their guests amidst indoor gardens, exotic fish tanks, and beautifully designed billiard tables. Not everyone is this up-to-date, though, so the old Russian saying, “It’s a bit tight, but alright if we don’t fight,” is still useful.

I must admit that our family of five did not have grounds for complaint. We had exchanged our small three-room flat near Metro Profsoyuznaya for a high-ceilinged four-room former communal apartment in 2nd-Obydensky Pereulok. The apartment felt like something out of an older time and despite its neglected state, we teenagers loved it.

Years went by and we grew up. In the late 1970s, after we had found our way to the Church of St. Elijah, our large kitchen became a meeting place. It was a rare evening when there were no guests, usually friends of us brothers who dropped in for a “cup of tea” after the evening service as is habitual among Orthodox. Later, choir rehearsals were held in our apartment as well,



for our older brother Andrei had taken up church singing in earnest. Our hospitable home was quiet only at night.

*Anatoly Kharlamov*

Even now I cherish the memory of these unique and irreplaceable people. The first was Anatoly Kharlamov, known to us as Monya. He and Andrei had been friends at the Moscow Institute of Engineering and Physics. Monya would come into the kitchen unobtrusively, a handsome young man with warmly expressive eyes, whose sweet smile and natural modesty always made him a welcome guest. He would sip his tea from a saucer for ten, twenty, thirty minutes without feeling awkward over the long silence. His quiet temper and unhurried, thoughtful speech differed from that of his mother who also visited us – a lively, gracious lady fond of downhill skiing who doted on her son.



*Anatoly (Monya) Kharlamov.*

The story of Monya's conversion was remarkable. Having grown up among scientifically-minded intellectuals, Anatoly had never been to church. His interests had nothing in common with Christianity, and

his life appeared destined to unfold like that of any Soviet physicist, whose routines of work, order, and earthly happiness had been formed by previous Soviet generations. Yet, how much possibility lies hidden in an immortal human soul, known only to its Creator?

Once, Monya was looking through a pile of old cast-off things stored at a relative's summer dacha. Clever with his hands, he regularly restored broken or unwanted objects and brought them back to life. Suddenly, he saw a white plaster relief sculpture of the Savior wearing the crown of thorns. No one had any idea of how it happened to be there, or who it had belonged to.

Monya put the unusual piece on a table in the center of the room and walked around scrutinizing it from different angles. Because it was covered with dust, he felt prompted to moisten a cloth and carefully wipe the figure clean. He sat again to observe it in silence. A few minutes passed, and then... “That is how I came to believe in the Lord. I wiped the sculpture off, set it back on the table, looked at it for ten minutes – and came to believe, I don’t know how. Glory be to the Lord, for everything, and may He forgive us sinners!

With these words he poured steaming water into the teapot and fell back into his usual detached silence.

*Mikhail Seleznyov*

Very much like Monya was Mikhail (Misha) Seleznyov, whose soul had the same peaceful and mild disposition. An extremely intelligent postgraduate student of philology, he knew several ancient languages and many modern ones. He was one of those people who don’t speak unless they are spoken



*Mikhail (Misha) Seleznyov (left).*

to, but once you ask a question you realize how learned, fascinating and companionable they are. He also involved us in reading the Psalter – a group of twenty Orthodox Christians who divided the kathismas among themselves so that the whole Psalter was read through daily with prayers for the health of the living and the repose of deceased relatives and friends.

Once, we all went over to our apartment on Pascha after the all-night service. Here again I failed to cope with my habit of over-eating and indulged in too many pieces of the delicious kulich that mother had baked with my grandmother’s recipe. Immediately, the radiant lightness and my Paschal joy began to melt away. Again and

again, I was stepping on the same rake! A little downcast, I bade good night to our friends, and went to bed while they stayed talking in the kitchen. I awoke a few hours later at ten in the morning, not quite happy. Misha was already in the kitchen, his bearded face bright with happiness. He rose to greet me, holding out his arms to give me a brotherly hug and kissed me three times as is the Paschal tradition:

- “Christ is risen, Artemy!”
- “Truly He is risen!” I replied, looking with interest at the table where mother’s kulichi lay left over from the night feast.
- “Would you like to read the kathismas together?” he asked warm-heartedly, looking like an angel of philology who had never known defeat against the imp of overeating.

I rejected the offer under a plausible pretext. It surprised me that Mikhail was so fresh and full of spiritual vigor, and that after a night without sleep he was eager to plunge right into the long prayers. I could not help but see the difference between my own earthbound condition and his winged soul.

### *Boris and Yakov Kogan*

Now I have to mention another pair of twins (I believe them to be known to all of Orthodox Moscow) who were baptized in their student years and are now respected archimandrites of the Archbishopric of Sinai. Their names then were Boris (Borya) and Yakov (Yasha) Kogan. Inseparable, as true twins often are, they always appeared unexpectedly and seemed to possess some remarkable dynamic of centrifugal motion and inexhaustible energy. It must have been due to this extraordinary agility that their names were united in one word for everyday reference – we called them “Borya-Yasha,” using the singular form of the noun and the plural form of the verb to describe their actions.

They were always on the run, just dropping in for five or ten minutes, and always in the know about church events. I was amazed at their vast network of friends and spiritual connections. They seemed to be acquainted with every single priest capable of spiritual guidance, and not only did they know such priests and monks, but had visited them and witnessed interesting events related to their pastoring.

Having shared their stock of news and left their gifts, usually newly-published *samizdat* Orthodox literature,<sup>12</sup> Borya-Yasha would pick up their bags and rush off.

Once my brother Andrei visited the Caucasus Mountains with Boris and Yasha, where they met Schemanun Agapia, an elderly hermitess who lived in a secret place high in the mountains that was difficult to reach. She received the guests with love and, in the simplicity of her childlike soul, told them much about herself. Blessed by a bishop to live as a hermit, she read the entire Divine Office out loud each day until this typicon was pushed out of her heart by the Jesus prayer.

- “Matushka, are you afraid of devils?” the Muscovites asked.
- “No, not of devils, my dears, because they themselves fear the Cross. But I’m afraid of people; they do not even recognize the Cross.”

And indeed, both the militia and criminals could penetrate into the quiet world of the anchorites and do whatever they wished, knowing full well that they would not be punished.



Her fear was not unfounded: a few years later we heard that this innocent elderly nun had been arrested and taken to the militia station in the center of Sukhumi (Georgia), where she died of a beating by militiamen because her passport had expired.

But now, as they found themselves in front of her cell, Borya-Yasha, eager to help the holy woman, tore out a gigantic nettle bush that had grown onto the pathway in front of her door. On the following day she told

Boris (Borya) and Yakov (Yasha) Kogan, early 1980s.

<sup>12</sup> *Samizdat* literature: Literally, “self-published.” This was literature, often religious, that was censored or otherwise forbidden publication during the Soviet era. Printed secretly by individuals or small groups, it was distributed hand to hand.

them that she loved nettle soup, but because nettles were not native to the area, she had prayed to God for a long time to send her such a consolation. Then, a miracle had happened – this nettle bush had sprouted next to her door. Years later, Borya-Yasha, made wise now by troubles and tribulations, shared with us the prayer of an unknown elder: “Lord, keep me from shoving in where I’m not invited.”

We listened to this and other stories told by eyewitnesses in our hospitable kitchen. It was a most remarkable time, a period of exhilarating spiritual growth and young people imbued with love for Christ, each bringing to the Church his own mite of spiritual effort and prayer.

## Pastoral Meetings

The church contacts of my brother Andrei and I were not limited to St. Elijah’s priests. As with everyone who attended church in Moscow, the number of people you met accumulated rapidly and such priests as Fr. Vladimir Vorobyov and Father Dimitry Smirnov, whom I will speak of a bit later, were just beginning their ministry in Moscow.

Certainly, by the early 1980s we could freely attend church. There was no outward persecution or control of church-going, yet much was still forbidden, such as the distribution of Orthodox publications or holding classes and discussion groups. Even sermons were, by law, limited to matters of ritual. There were also, rarely, priests such as Fr. Dmitry Dudko, who was actively persecuted for his direct manner of preaching. He had a Russian soul, and now in his sixties, was tired of the lies. He had no fear and refused to compromise. He gathered young people together for meetings at church and in his home, a very courageous act. His evening talks were neither political nor directed against the government, but he was brave enough to call things by their real names and quite open in his criticism of the atheist system. In turn, the authorities not only watched him, but raided his home, sometimes arresting him and confiscating the internal passports of the young people who gathered there.

### *The Church at Vasknarva*

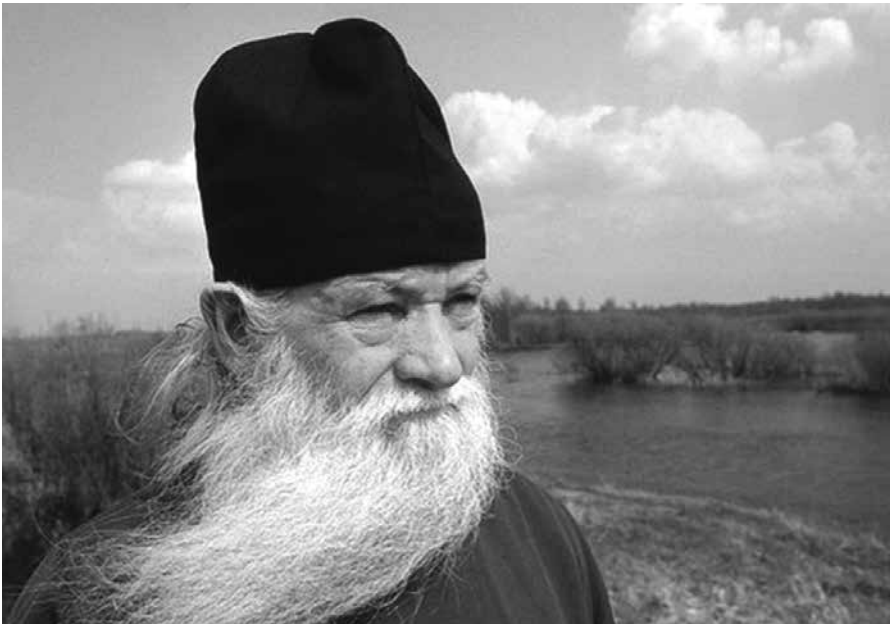
After I found my church, I didn’t look for any other spiritual refuge, nor had I yet been to a monastery. One summer day, my brother Andrei told me of his

plans to visit a priest named Father Vasily Borin who served in Vasknarva, a village near the Estonian border, and I decided to go along.

By this time, my twin Dmitri had embarked on his musical studies at the Moscow State Tchaikovsky Conservatory and was not yet drawn to the regular church life that Andrei and I had adopted. Although the religious repression of previous decades had relaxed somewhat, it was still not easy for a Soviet man to find his way to faith.

This was vacation time for students, and we inexperienced pilgrims were accompanied by a young man well-versed in Orthodoxy named Valery Kir-eye, now a priest at the Pokrov Church in Krasnoye Selo. On the train, he told us of the life of St. Mark of Athens, whose word was so powerful that upon repeating to another ascetic the Lord's words that faith can move mountains, a nearby mountain moved towards the sea. "This, of course, is a later addition," Valery commented. "As educated people, we understand that much time has passed since the life was written; copyists may have added something to embellish the story." We talked for a long while and then slept.

When we arrived in Vasknarva we found a spacious church that had been destroyed half a century earlier, and a commonplace-looking older priest giving a sermon charged with astonishing inner strength. This was Fr. Vas-



*Fr. Vasily Borin.*

ily. The attentive crowd around him included a number of young people who had come to help this hospitable batiushka restore the church. That evening they were to attend an “*otchitka*,” a traditional rite of exorcism read over those suffering from evil spirits. We did not know anything about this, although Father Vasily’s fame as a preacher and church builder (rarely managed in Soviet times) had already spread beyond Estonia. He preached without restraint, addressing the listeners as if they were relatives and freely passing from one idea to another.

We found a place in a corner, and as we settled down to listen to the priest’s living word, we suddenly heard: “Well, some learned people here think that the lives of the ancient saints have been embellished with later insertions – for instance, that a large rock could not have been moved by the prayers of St. Mark of Athens.” We exchanged bewildered looks. Our Valery was especially stunned; his jaw dropped and his eyes opened in surprise.

The same evening, I attended the unfamiliar *otchitka*. I can only say that it made me absolutely aware of the terrible war that fallen spirits wage against human souls, and the awful torment of those under the influence of such dark forces. What I had read about possession in the Gospels now acquired tangible meaning. I was horrified to see the ordinary faces of people who, a minute before, had stood quietly, distort unnaturally and spit out unthinkable curses with truly demonic spite. I deeply understood that obscene swearing is a form of demonic captivity, even if the person who swears does not believe that such spirits exist.

Busy with his construction, Father Vasily did not have time to talk to us. Nevertheless, the few days we spent in his community were an unforgettable spiritual school that revealed the priesthood as an immense force, provided that the priest dedicates himself to this heavenly ministry in the spirit of truth and love.

Another small but telling event disclosed the meaning of obedience in spiritual life. One day, before leaving to buy construction materials, batiushka gave out last-minute instructions to the pilgrim workers. For some reason, he forbade a certain middle-aged woman to take part: “Read the prayer-book, and pray! Don’t get under the builders’ feet!” he said in his commanding tone and (as I thought then) truck-stop manner. Then, he got into the car, blessed the road in front of him and left.

As he drove away, the work began. Some pilgrims mixed concrete, others of us passed bricks, and those who were skilled as bricklayers cemented

them in. Suddenly we heard a scream. We turned in time to see the woman whom Fr. Vasily had forbade to work crying and flaying the air. Perhaps too embarrassed to be idle, she had put some concrete powder into a mixer when, out of nowhere, a wasp appeared and chose her nose as a landing ground. Unaware of its role in fulfilling God's wise will, the wicked insect stung her quite suddenly and in a few moments her nose had swelled to a remarkable size. This incident inspired even more respect for Fr. Vasily.

We had already heard that during the war batiushka had several times been taken captive by the Nazis, and in captivity had observed Church order



Church of St. Elijah in Varsknaava.

by refusing to work on Sundays and feast days. Each time he managed a daring escape from the Nazi camps and, after the war, already middle-aged, he graduated from the seminary in Leningrad. Metropolitan Alexy (Ridiger) of Tallinn and Estonia, our future Patriarch Alexy II, loved Fr. Vasily very much. Knowing his talent as a builder, the Metropolitan blessed him to construct churches – an almost impossible task in these years.

In the Soviet Union, priests were not only denied permission to construct churches, but even baptistries or parish centers to house church offices, parish kitchens, and children's Sunday school classes. Nor were priests

themselves the heads of their parishes. The real administrative heads were *starostas* or church wardens who, although not directly appointed by the government, very often reported secretly to the civil authorities and represented their interests. Further, every parish in the Soviet Union was obliged to donate to the "Peace Fund," a governmental organization whose obscure purpose was a mystery. We did not know where the money went, yet this sys-



tematic robbing of the Church continued until the end of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s.

### *Pühtitsa Dormition Convent*

On our way home from Vasknarva we visited the Pühtitsa Dormition Convent, also in Estonia, which amazed us with its beauty and neatness; it looked like paradise and it was. We had been advised to seek the advice of Archimandrite Hermogenes, the convent's confessor and a spiritual guide of great authority. When we met, I understood that he was a strict and "otherworldly" elder. Without smiling, he asked what prayers I read.

- "Morning and evening prayers, Batiushka," I replied.
- "If you want to move forward, say one hundred prayers to your guardian angel every day, one hundred to your name saint, and fifty to the Holy Theotokos," he said in a deep, firm bass. Then he blessed me and let me go.

I felt dizzy just hearing about the hundreds of prayers that I knew I wouldn't be able to do in a week, to say nothing of one day. His words rampaged through my throbbing head – a simple student to whom the Church had just opened its welcoming arms. Later, I understood that he had meant something like the short phrases that one uses on a prayer rope, but at the time, I had not yet heard of a prayer rope and I had no idea of how to put his advice into practice.

### *Zhirovitsky Monastery in Belarus*

Another remarkable pilgrimage was to the famous Zhirovitsky Monastery in Belarus, and I still recall the love and hospitality shown by the fathers and brothers to us Moscow pilgrims. Our first meeting was with the elderly monk Fr. Mitrophan, who was always at his post at the candle counter welcoming those who came into the church. He looked at me inquisitively when I arrived early in the morning, then raising his index finger, asked: "Up there is paradise, and down there (pointing downward) is hell. Can you feel the difference?" That was all. He didn't say anything else, but at that moment spiritual space became tangible, and the world seemed almost transparent, permeated with invisible reality.

Eventually we were put under the care of the reserved Hieromonk Vlasy, a slim, athletic, black-haired man, handsome in his monastic garb, whose calmness and prayerful concentration remain imprinted in my memory. He showed us to our cell, then took us for a walk. We saw the huge apple orchard, their kitchen garden with ripening cucumbers and tomatoes, and a sedge-covered pond abounding in carp.

Next, he suggested visiting the holy spring where the miracle-working icon of the Mother of God of Zhirovitsky had first appeared. We plunged into the spring and returned refreshed and calm. When Fr. Vlasy offered to make wooden walking sticks for our mushroom-picking trip on the following day, we followed him into the hazelnut grove. As he took out a knife to cut off a supple tree branch, a dark thought flashed through my mind, “What if he stabs us with the knife...?”

– “Don’t be afraid, I’m not like that,” Father Vlasy said, raising his deep eyes, and then went on working as if nothing had happened.



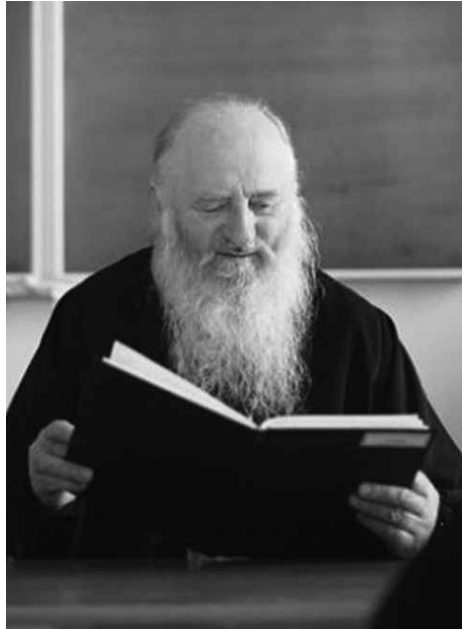
Fr. Mitrophan, Zhirovitsy Monastery.

I did not feel like asking what he meant, and Andrei, of course, did not understand anything, but I still remember this.

Here was also Father Stefan (Korzun), the *blagochenie* who ordered the daily life of the monastery. Tall, with kind eyes and a shy smile, he was so hospitable and took such a liking to me that he even invited me to his cell on the third or fourth day of our visit, where I glued myself to his bookcase filled with works by the holy fathers. If I had had five bars of gold, I would have immediately exchanged them for his five volumes of *The Philokalia*. Father Stefan gave me tea with raspberry jam and at the end of our conversation unassumingly suggested that I become his spiritual child. At a loss, I didn’t know what to say and he never raised the topic again.

I should also mention Hierodeacon Benedict (Khodchenkov), whose powerful, manly voice filled the huge cathedral. It seemed to me that if I had seen Archangel Michael throw proud Lucifer down from heaven, he would have had the same voice as Father Benedict, whose severe appearance was offset by warm kindness towards us two brothers. In fact, I thought, he reminded me of Chingachgook, the chief of the Mohicans and my favorite boyhood literary character.<sup>13</sup> His regular features and resolute chin seemed carved out of granite, and I attempted to hide from his piercing eyes behind a studied indifference.

I hardly ever saw Fr. Benedict smile, although he was open to conversation. “If you want to be blessed, don’t marry,” he shot at me unexpectedly one day – an appeal which I did not justify, as the next time I came, it was with my church-wed spouse. Another time, as if incidentally, he remarked, “He who wants to cleanse his mind from the poison of misunderstanding should read all ten volumes by St. John Chrysostom,” thus leading us to these texts of spiritual rehabilitation for contemporary intellectuals. In preparing us for



*Fr. Stefan (Korzun), Zhirovitsky Monastery.*

Holy Communion, Fr. Benedict advised us not to go to the trapeznaya for dinner. Instead he brought us a pot of hot unpeeled boiled potatoes without salt, oil, or bread. He dropped the cast-iron pot on the table and seeing my bewildered face, said dryly: “Not much, is it?” Not receiving an answer, he departed with a monastic bow.

Before we left, Fr. Benedict advised us to visit a certain priest in Moscow to whom we could entrust our souls. Back home, I went to the address he had given, but when I knocked, a sleepy young man opened the door and said that the priest was away. He gave me no hope of a future meeting and thus another year passed.

<sup>13</sup> Chingachgook: Mohican chief in James Fennimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*.

## It's Him!

One night after our travels, while venerating the icons after the evening service in our nearby Church of St. Elijah, Andrei called to me from the church door: "Come, Artemy, receive batiushka's blessing!" On the steps I saw my brother talking to an unknown priest in a full-length winter coat. Batiushka had a full thick beard flecked with grey and a surprisingly bright face with broad Russian features. His wise eyes radiated joy:

– "Come, come. Do you want a blessing? Then fold your hands," he said lightheartedly, with a joyful smile.

In his manner, I felt the power of love as I'd never experienced it before... "Yes, like this, and here now: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." Batiushka blessed me firmly, touching my forehead, waist, and shoulders with his folded fingers. "Now, kiss the hand. You are Artemy, right?"

As I kissed his warm hand and raised my eyes, my heart beat so rapidly that it seemed to fly out of my chest with joy. I recognized him with my spirit, it was *him*, my long-awaited spiritual father, the only one in the world, and he had found me himself!

## The Abyss

Darkness reigns when the Divine light dwelling in simple, guileless, and peaceful hearts grows dim. But why do we fall prey to such darkness of soul that makes us enemies even to ourselves?

Young people coming to Christ nowadays often remain dependent on moods and emotions that they think are spiritual but are actually dictated by habits from their life in the world. This, my dear readers, is not the proper way, and it isn't good for us. I say this from my own experience.

At a certain point of my youth, and with a generous share of vanity and self-pity, I managed to misapply the Holy Fathers' teaching on repentance to my overwrought prayer life – to my great detriment. Understanding and applying ascetic practice requires an inner balance, and this discretion grows with age and years spent in church. It teaches us to determine our own measure, to gauge our spiritual condition, and to coordinate the Holy Fathers' teachings with our age, situation, and temperament. But too often a

young person wants to “fly heavenwards” while he is still up to his ears in the swamp of his passions, all the while believing that he is experiencing grace-filled enlightenment.

I came to Church with the same background: youthful sincerity and enthusiasm, along with the disadvantages natural to my age. You may recall that my first father confessors mentioned a “spirituality” that they saw in me. Years later, I understood that they weren’t just trying to humor or console me. They were sincere, but what they saw was simply the ardent desire of an eighteen-year-old to be with God, a boy with a life-long craving for God’s grace because he had been deprived of it. Nothing more.

So, I had hardly found a God-given spiritual father and opened my heart to him when something happened that I could not have imagined in my worst nightmare. At the time I could only express it as being “abandoned by grace,” although I couldn’t have been more wrong. Only later did I discover from St. John Climacus that, having found a real spiritual guide, the novice may find that his previously misunderstood and overwrought asceticism collapses. False virtues and “spiritual” feelings desert him, and he is left with the knowledge of how poor he really is. In such cases, the young monastic must stand fast in obedience so that he can take his first real steps in humility. If he manages to do this, he will find his emptiness filled with God’s Holy Spirit.

I felt that there was something wrong with me and having learned, at least, to view the frequent ups and downs of my own moods with suspicion, I went with my brother Andrei to pray at Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra. The sight of its majestic walls and heavenly blue domes had always inspired awe, but now I was so distressed and unhappy that I could barely raise my eyes. As we entered the monastery, a huge flock of crows rose indignantly out of the tree-tops, drowning the voices of pilgrims and tourists with their harsh, grating cries. They might have even been protesting my own gloomy despondency, but I didn’t care for their opinions. Altogether lost, I stood next to St. Sergius’ relics in Holy Trinity Cathedral unable to attend to the akathist or even marvel, as I had many times before, at the miraculous ancient iconostasis.

I should say here that the icon of the Savior’s face in the bottom tier shines with astonishing joy. The Lord in the icon seems to be saying to his disciples: “Rejoice and take heart for I have overcome the world,” but I could not respond even to this divine and gentle invitation. My heart was a yawning emptiness. I knew that, unchecked, it would grow even worse, but I had no strength to resist the despair that had struck out of nowhere.

My brother, knowing nothing of my hidden gloomy mood, maintained his habitual placid manner, humming church hymns on our way back to Moscow. The following morning was even worse. Dark thoughts plowed through my helpless soul. Listening to their murmurs with horror, I felt that I was being buried alive. It felt as if I had crossed a fatal line that separated the kingdom of light where my mother, brothers and Christian friends lived, into a realm of almost palpable darkness and cast-off spirits. I numbered myself among the lost.

Such hopelessness is impossible to understand for those who have not been through it. There is nothing worse than despair; its infernal fire devours the soul night and day. In the hour of prayer, it presents God as an enraged Judge who has turned his eyes away from the sinner now crushed with the awareness of innumerable failings. Attempting to dull the pain and suffocating thoughts, I threw myself upon food to numb myself with eating and then fell into a heavy slumber. I could hardly drag myself out of bed in the morning, nor could I read the prayer book, although I sometimes forced myself to stand in front of the once much-loved icon corner. Even in those rare brief moments it seemed as if flames of infernal fire licked my heels.

I locked myself in my room, where obsessive fears tortured me. Now, even going out filled me with dread. In the crowded subway, I had such terrible thoughts about the rushing, oncoming train that, distrusting myself, I would step back from the edge of the platform. Suicidal thoughts of evidently demonic origin gnawed at my soul when I happened to cross the Moscow River by the Bolshoi Kamenny Bridge.

Once, absorbed in such dark thoughts, I had just entered a metro train when, all of a sudden, I saw my spiritual father, the same priest who had so unexpectedly appeared in my life, get in at the other end of the car and take a seat. He looked so bright among the other passengers whose faces were clouded with earthly cares, but as soon as I saw him, I dashed out of the carriage, wrenching the closing doors open with my hands. My heart pounded frantically. What was this? Surely, his presence was God's grace in action, but I had forgotten the fear of God and the sense of his presence. Like Adam, I was hiding from God in the bush.... but glory to God who led me back into his loving hands a few months later.

Now, however, days and weeks went by as my foolish pride left me angry towards batiushka. In spite of his attention, I could not believe that he really wanted to understand me or to see how serious my situation was. After con-

fession he would let me go with the words: “Cheer yourself up, pray and rejoice!” To me this sounded like pure mockery. How could I rejoice when I was dying over and over again, every single day?

“Rejoice in the fact that you are an Orthodox Christian, that you bear a small cross on your chest, and that the sun shines over you. Give thanks to God for everything. Humble yourself under the Lord’s hand and He will raise you up in due time.”

One day in church, overcome by my feelings, I shouted hysterically, “Batiushka, will the Lord give me back His grace? Will He save me on the day of Judgement?” “He will, He will, don’t despair!” Batiushka patted me on the back soothingly and gave me his fatherly blessing while the people standing around us stared in alarm, but as soon as I started for home, the black despair settled again, as if to utterly choke me off from church life.

I won’t tire you with further descriptions of this joyless and deranged condition which lasted over a year. I will only add that the church and its services no longer attracted me; I received Holy Communion rarely, and then only as an obedience to my spiritual father. I spent long hours in my room reading saints’ lives to escape from the oppressive thoughts.

The only respite from this torture was that each time fierce despair made things unbearable, my mother’s image would appear before my mind’s eye, with her bright loving gaze protecting me like a shield from the jaws of the serpent ready to devour his victim. And perhaps it was this that inspired me one evening to go to a Lenten service at the Church of St. Elijah and to kneel before the icon of the Mother of God of Kazan. “Mother of God! O Holy Theotokos! You see what has happened to me, what a terrible state I am in. I can bear it no longer. I’ve no strength to go on. Look at your helpless child...” The words stumbled out hesitantly at first, and then more and more urgently: “O Holy Virgin, you alone can lead me out of this darkness. I entrust myself to you, with all my heart, mind, body and soul, Most Good and Pure Mother!”

These and other prayers emerged from my battered heart, and when they ceased, I rose to leave.

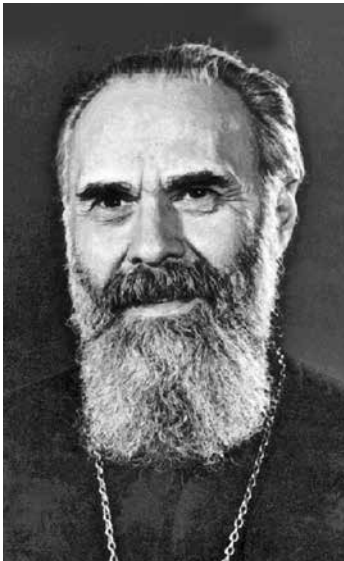
Suddenly, I felt a flame in my innermost being, a small island of peace... a gleam of assurance that the queen of heaven and earth had heard my prayer and would save me from this fiery abyss. I walked home crying, wiping away the flood of tears with my sleeve. My soul could not yet believe what was happening, but gratitude streamed down my face.

## The Shepherds

You have realized by now that contact with Orthodox pastors meant very much to us university students, and this chapter is about several Moscow priests that we were particularly drawn to.

### *Metropolitan Anthony Bloom*

First, let me say a few words about Metropolitan Anthony (Bloom) of Sourozh who shepherded the Moscow Patriarchal parish in London and was later exarch of Western Europe. His sincerity and openness amazed everyone who happened to meet him, read his books, or listen to his sermons. He was very different from those of us living under the Soviet regime because within Russia we all had to be diplomats, hiding from the world inside a shell



*Met. Anthony of Sourozh.*

of “prudence,” so as not to compromise ourselves or others. Although some Orthodox felt that Metropolitan Anthony’s writings were not always strictly traditional, everyone agreed that he was a fascinating man with a loving heart.

Once, in my first years as a Christian, I was told that the metropolitan was coming to Moscow and would serve liturgy in Khamovniki. I hadn’t read many of his books (which could not yet be published in Russia), but on the appointed day I hastened to the colorful toy-like St. Nicholas Church near the Park Kultury metro station. Despite the fact that it was a regular work day, to my surprise the church was filled with young people. I do not remember what the sermon was

about (following the harsh Soviet rules it may have been just some welcoming words addressed to the parishioners and those who had received Holy Communion), but my soul still cherishes an experience more compelling than any sermon – hearing the words of the Eucharistic Canon pronounced by Vladika Anthony.



As he intoned the liturgy, I thought that I had never before heard such a noble voice, nor felt the kind of love that filled the church that day. Watching from a distance, my open heart soaked up Vladika's prayer and the love of Christ that his soul breathed out to us. I do not think I even listened to the prayer itself, but simply took in the incomparable sweetness that his words carried.

Years later, long after my ordination, I was blessed to meet Metropolitan Anthony in London. By this time he had grown so weak and ill that he seldom left his cell next to the Church of the Dormition in Ennismore Gardens. Vladika looked small and altogether inconspicuous, but his eyes! The moment we met I immediately recognized them, the same eyes I had seen burning with divine love twenty years before in Moscow.

### *Three Priests*

In the late 1970s three prominent priests of a new breed were just beginning their activity in Moscow: Frs. Vladimir Vorobyov, Dimitry Smirnov, and Arkady Shatov, and I watched with great interest as they served, confessed and preached. The three priests and their families were in close contact, forming a "Triple Alliance," and they later officially registered their rapidly growing ministries as the Brotherhood of the All-Merciful Savior.

Although each had his own strong personality, they were also noted for some common features: simplicity in communicating with people, an informal creative approach to the holy work they were doing, and outstandingly, they used any chance to enlighten people inside or outside the church. All of this was rather dangerous because the strict supervision by the state officials in charge of religious practice included directives for Moscow priests to remain quiet and not to proselytize.

### *Fr. Arkady Shatov*

I remember the tiny remote village where Fr. Arkady Shatov served in a church so poorly heated that he had to wear woolen *valenki* inside. Muscovites, however, braved the cold and traveled to the village by train, where he welcomed each traveler warmly. Once in confession, I recall complaining to him of the sticky sin of gluttony. After unburdening myself he said quite reasonably: "Overeating is only half the trouble. What is really bad is the fact

that you judge people. Take pains, Artemy, to eradicate this most harmful habit.” Those words have been a remedy for my entire life.

Once, after Holy Communion, Batiushka took such a long time over the moleben and panikhida, that I became angry at him in my heart. (Lord, forgive me!) Afterwards, we had lunch in his cozy warm cottage where his amiable Matushka Sophia put out big pots of soup and bowls of steaming boiled potatoes, fragrant with butter. Those of us who had fasted from the night before were now wild with hunger, and while shoveling down the village “grace” I wondered how Fr. Arkady could talk to us so tirelessly while hardly noticing his own plate. “Here he is, not at all addicted to food,” I thought, “and in the meantime I cast greedy glances at the potatoes, hoping for another helping.”

*Fr. Dimitry Smirnov*

As for Fr. Dimitry Smirnov, my mother, brother and I visited him in Altufyevo where he served in the village’s small Church of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. Against the background of the church, Batiushka looked like a true Russian bogatyr, a medieval knight. In those days, he had a beard



(L. to R.) Frs. Arkady Shatov and Vladimir Vorobyov.

and long golden hair that framed his masculine face. The military belt that outlined his strong build, and the boots he wore under his *rason*, made him seem a true “spiritual officer.” Batiushka’s sermons were (and still are) pronounced simply, with everyday phrases and expression. What counted however, was not their form but the contents. His habit of pondering over a subject as if he were talking to himself and letting other people into his thoughts, made his sermons pointed and incisive and drew many people to him.

In one particular sermon, he said that the Lord loves us very much and for this love He poured out all of His blood for each of us. “However, we love Him so little,” he continued, “that our feelings during prayer or read-

ing the Gospels do not mean anything. For example, one calls his neighbor bad names, or does not want to wash the dishes saying it's women's work (one's wife's or mother's), or cannot quit smoking. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to see that such love for God is not worth a hill of beans. So, my beloved brothers and sisters, let us repent, confess, receive Holy Communion, and put things right by and by. Perhaps good will come from this and we will know God's love and inherit His Kingdom. He who loves people and tries to please them for the Lord's sake is truly in Christ and in God's Kingdom. Amen!"

These simple words filled my heart with joy. It was so easy and clear: pray, repent, work, receive Holy Communion, and never despair because the Lord has come to us and founded the Church on His blood. If we are in the Church, Christ is in us and no evil forces will harm or overcome us.

Father Dimitry not only preached, he also patiently and diligently listened to our confessions. We particularly loved waiting for confession late in the evening after the Saturday vigil, when no one was in a hurry. You might stand there for hours listening to the canons read by an elderly woman at the kliros, while awaiting your turn.

That day, I was last in line to confess. It was about midnight and Batiushka looked tired but was still attentively fulfilling his duty. He listened to my petty sins, but said nothing as he covered my head with the *epitrachelion* and said the prayer of absolution. I took his blessing, bowed and left the church with the lightness and joy familiar to many Orthodox people after confession, "I'm receiving Communion tomorrow!" But as I hastened to the bus stop, I remembered Fr. Dimitry's word that night to a few regular parishioners gathered in church: "Do not think that the authorities will leave us alone to peacefully enjoy our parish life, our liturgies and confessions. Do not relax, keep your eyes open!"



*Fr. Dimitry Smirnov, early 1980s.*

“Why does he speak so confidently about the authorities?” I mused. “How does he know their cunning plans? They haven’t shared their intentions with him, have they? Or have they? Some priests have been forced to cooperate and inform on people. Is this Fr. Dimitry, also? Who can guarantee he doesn’t work for the KGB?”



*Church of Elevation of the Holy Cross, Altufyevo.*

give.” Luckily, the church was still open, and the poor victim had just taken off his vestments and was closing the altar.

- “What is it, Artemy, have you forgotten something?” he asked quietly.
- “Batiushka, forgive me, I need to confess one more thought.”
- “What? A thought? Go ahead. I’ll put on the epitachelion, and we will hear your thought.”

Here my mind froze with sheer horror. What awful thoughts I had come to, what shameless suppositions! This poor priest serves the vigil and then listens to confessions until after midnight, not sparing himself, and I, completely unworthy, accept such terrible thoughts about him! My soul, which had been pacified by confession, was now goaded into distressing confusion: “What am I to do now? Go home and endure the torment all night or run back to the church and ‘finish off’ this kind man by disclosing this disgusting thought?” I knew very well how it might end. “However,” I speculated, trotting back to the church, “Fr. Dimitry is ‘our’ priest and he will bear my thought and forgive.”

He came up to the analogion where the cross and the Gospel still lay.

- “I’m listening,” the priest said bending over me.
- “Forgive me, batiushka, I accepted the thought that you, as some priests do, work for the KGB.”

Having thrown up my poison, I hung my head. Father Dimitry half-opened his sleepy eyes, straightened, and uttered in surprise: “You really are something else!” and absolved me without any further discussion.

He blessed me again and I bowed to him, unable to look him in the eye. As I hurried away, I promised myself that from that day forward I would attend to my thoughts and never again allow them to drag me into such whirlpools of suspicion. The bus did not take long to come, and it was the last one.

*Fr. Vladimir Vorobyov*

Finally, I must mention Fr. Vladimir Vorobyov, who was ten years older than Fr. Arkady and Fr. Dimitry. He had finished a doctorate in physics and mathematics some years before entering the St. Sergius Theological Academy and of the three priests had been ordained first.

Father Vladimir was very good to our family. Not only did he bring Holy Communion to our dying grandfather, but later, at the Church of St. Nicholas in Preobrazhenka, he served my wife her first Communion and then helped her to come more fully into the Church. Although he had a very large parish, Mother and I had several times asked him to come serve Holy Communion to a sick friend, and he never refused.

Someone told me that batiushka had bound himself with an unusual promise: to never refuse anyone who asked him



*Protopriest Vladimir Vorobyov.*

for help. Even if this is not exactly the case, he has always been like this, giving all of himself to his flock. In him, I saw a real Russian batiushka whose priestly work was a daily grace-filled *podvig*. Love directed his words and deeds, making him focused, considerate, and patient in confession, joyful in serving liturgy, and prayerful as he served Holy Communion to his parishioners. There was always a keen attentiveness apparent in his movements, expression, and particularly in his eyes.

It was then that a most important truth was revealed to me – that the priesthood is a vocation through which God pours all of his love into a human soul! And this means that there is no one on earth happier than a priest. ✦

