



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

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A TEACHER'S WORK

I. Ripenings

You know very well by now, my dear readers, that there was someone named Elena in my life. Our paths first crossed, if you remember, as we harvested potatoes at a collective farm as incoming freshmen at Moscow State University. Then later under the patronage of N.I. Tolstoy and other professors. Her first notice of me, however, had been earlier, right after our entrance exams, as I stood anxiously reading the list of applicants admitted to the Philological Faculty.

Living in the newly discovered world of books, I did not encounter Elena with my heart until later, although we were in the same study group. However, the Kolmogorov Mathematics Boarding School, where I did my student teaching in 1982-83, was only a few minutes from her home, and one day she invited me for tea. She lived in a small flat in a “Khrushchyovka,” the tiny, poor-quality block flats built during Nikita Khrushchev’s times. Nonetheless, they were a welcome change to those who had previously lived in communal apartments with several families in one flat with a common kitchen and a single bathroom. Her building was in one of the “green districts,” filled with trees, parks, and gardens.

Elena lived with her parents and her grandmother. As I took off my coat and entered the tiny kitchen, everything looked dwarfish compared to my own high-ceilinged flat. As she served tea, Elena conversed with a sweet smile. She asked about my teaching and then spoke of her loving but strict father who put his whole heart into the education and upbringing of his only child. He was artistic, well-read, and could cite passages from many masterpieces of world literature, such as Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, by heart. Also, she told me, he had a watchful, distrustful attitude toward would-be suitors.

“Aha,” I thought, “this means that she has suitors.” “My father is a hunter and a very good shot,” she said smiling, as she glanced over to see what

Opposite: Artemy as a young teacher.

impression her words made. Then, she told me about his upbringing in a patriarchal Russian family. In his early years he had served as a bell-ringer in one of Moscow's churches, and now he was much admired by his relatives for his ability to make literally anything. Unaided, he had built a small summer house near the town of Golitsyno, and since his retirement he spent most of his time on this tiny plot of land caring for the bountiful garden and his orchard of apple and plum trees.

Elena set a large jar of amber-gold honey in front of me. "This is from my father's hives. Taste it, Artemy, you've never eaten such honey!" "Did the other suitors try it?" I wanted to ask sarcastically, but checked myself. Such a question would show who I thought myself to be in Elena's home.

Time went by. In late January, preoccupied with mid-winter exams, I left the humanities building one day and struggled down a short-cut, an alley lined with apple trees that led to the metro. On such a midwinter day even the trees looked sad, and the lime painted on their trunks to discourage insects had turned grey in the moist air. At that moment, I saw Elena walking hurriedly from the metro. She was wearing a dress with a hood, and from under the hood she looked up at me with her beautiful eyes. Usually lively and joyful, they were now filled with sorrow. As it turned out, her mother's close friend, Nina, had died a few hours before. In a voice filled with emotion, Elena told me how good and kind she had been.

- "Elena, can you imagine? Today is the feast-day of St. Nina, Equal-to-the-Apostles of Georgia. This means that your Nina has passed away on her nameday! It cannot be a coincidence."
- "Artemy, will you take me to a church and pray with me for her repose?" she asked unexpectedly.
- "Yes, of course! If you don't have to be somewhere else, let's go now."

Elena agreed. We went by metro to Park Kultury and then walked to the Church of St. Nicholas-in-Khamovniki. By chance, I had in my bag a small pre-revolutionary edition of a booklet entitled, "Consolation for Those Who Mourn Their Deceased," which I presented to Elena as a gift. She took it gratefully. The church was crowded and amidst a sea of burning candles we stood side by side praying quietly. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw

Opposite: St. Nicholas Church in Khamovnicheskay Sloboda, Park Kultury Metro, Moscow.





Elena make the sign of the cross over herself, and then self-consciously bow. A flush appeared on her face; she was deep in thought and prayer for the deceased Nina.

I was greatly impressed by the string of coincidences that had begun with our unexpected meeting and, indeed, it set the stage for our becoming closer friends. Seeing a deep interest awaken in Elena for the teachings of the Orthodox Church, I tried as hard as I could to help with her catechism. With her incisive mind and diligent reading, Elena grasped Orthodox ideas quickly. Some she disagreed with, while others she immediately accepted. I also gave her books by my favorite authors – St. John Chrysostom, St. Theophan the Recluse, and my handwritten extracts from St. Ignatius Brianchaninov's works that I was trying (secretly, of course) to apply in my own life as I practiced student teaching.

As her studies progressed, I hesitantly suggested that Elena meet my spiritual father Hieromonk Pavel (Lysak). She replied that she was a little nervous, but very interested. We had already visited Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra where we had been blessed to have a short talk with Igumen Benedict (Penkov), the future archimandrite and abbot of Optina Pustyn Monastery. Batiushka had welcomed us warmly, speaking mostly about prayer.

- “Believe me, my dears,” he said gently, “there is no greater joy than to return home after a busy day, light the lampada, and stand in front of the Lord with your prayer book open to the evening prayers. What sweetness echoes in one's heart! The soul quenches its thirst in the depth of such prayers, just as a bee takes nectar from flowers.

I very much liked our short conversation, which left a feeling of peace and lightness in my heart. On the train back to Moscow, Elena was quiet, focused on something inside herself. Finally, she asked with child-like simplicity: “I wonder why Fr. Benedict only spoke of morning and evening prayers? I have been praying unceasingly for some time now, as your St. Ignaty Brianchaninov wrote that we should.” I had nothing to say.

I will allow myself to digress from this story to say that after she finished her secondary French-language school, Elena had completed a course in office administration. She now generously offered to type my senior thesis. We worked for hours on end, I dictating the material, and she, in turn, listen-

Opposite: Elena Vladimirov on the day of her baptism.

ing intently while typing at an astonishing speed. It was my turn to fall into deep thought. With a business-like reasoning completely uncharacteristic of me, I thought about how useful her skill, efficiency, and intelligence would be in family life.

Finally, the day of the meeting with my spiritual father arrived, and Elena sat in front of him, thinking (as she told me afterwards) of some drawbacks of her personality that needed to be put right. As was often the case in those years, although they held to high moral standards, Elena's parents had not had their daughter baptized, so Batiushka spoke with her and two other university friends about the Sacrament of Holy Baptism and the promises they would make.

Elena agreed to be baptized and with her natural thoroughness, she prepared everything needed. When the day came, we gathered at the appointed place. As Fr. Pavel prepared to read the first prayers for the catechumens, he looked at me with a slight smile and asked, "So, Artemy, will you be her godfather?" I gulped, and managed to say: "As you bless, Batiushka." "Well, all right, then, we will do without you,"¹ he replied quietly, and continued reading. In a heightened state of expectation and prayer, Elena did not seem to have heard our exchange. Before the baptism, he confessed the three catechumens in turn, and I saw that my protégé had prepared a neatly written list of sins that was now in the priest's hands.

With the preparations over, the catechumens went inside the candlelit baptistery one by one to be immersed in the font. Their companions stood outside, waiting impatiently for the newly enlightened children of the Living God to emerge. Elena finally appeared, her face shining with happiness and purity. Clad in long white robes with lit candles in their hands, the newly baptized looked around themselves with bright eyes, feeling the grace-filled change.

It was dark by the time the sacrament finished and I saw Elena home. We took a bus and then walked along Slavyansky Boulevard, closely lined with poplar trees. It was a marvelous, peaceful May evening, and the air, filled with the fragrance of blossoming trees and flowers, was also filled with Christ's Pascha. We walked slowly without speaking, Elena smiling to herself and seeming, I thought, to be praying. Although I was reluctant to break the sacred silence, a decisive, life-changing resolve that had been ripening within me now urgently demanded expression. I stopped and said quietly,

¹ In the Orthodox Church, godparents cannot marry their own godchildren.

“Elena, I ask you to be my wife.” The future matushka looked at me, smiled, and did not refuse.

II. Sowing Seeds

When we are young, we enter our professional life with a naïve faith in our own strength, but we also have optimism and vigor: “To the madness of the brave we sing a song...”²

I was the same when I flew like a swift into the physics and mathematics school where I had done my student teaching and was now to begin my professional life as a teacher. Today, this preparatory school associated with Moscow State University and dedicated to the Soviet mathematician A. N. Kolmogorov still gathers young, gifted math and science students from all over Russia who, after graduation, will enroll in top universities. These young students of fourteen to sixteen live and study at the school.



Kolmogorov School of Math and Science, Moscow.

² “To the madness...”: A line from the poem “Song of the Falcon,” by the 20th-century Russian poet, Maxim Gorky.



In the fall of 1983, I was assigned to teach Russian language and literature. The students and I soon became close because, at twenty-two, I did not yet have grounds to lay claim to venerability. These students differed from their peers because their intellectual abilities were higher than average and, despite the natural characteristics of their age – playfulness, a readiness to laugh, and petulance – they were already capable of thinking deeply. Physics and mathematics were their chosen fields, so it was no wonder that many of them already pondered complex ideas and were forming their own world-views. Uncompromising discussions and arguments were the order of the day in both classes and dormitories.

Discipline was also to be mastered, and I experimented in balancing correction with reasoning, mercy, and humor. One night, as I entered the dormitory, I heard a student use a vile expression that involved the name of the evil one, a particularly offensive phrase in Russian.

- “What non-normative language do I hear within the walls of an elite educational institution dedicated to bringing up students engaged in intellectual pursuits?” I inquired with a certain degree of emotional intensity.
- “Artemy Vlade–e–e–mirovich! Welcome! We have found it in *The Soil Upturned* by Mikhail Sholokhov; it is part of our literature program,” the culprit responded quite reasonably.
- “Even if it is part of the program, one’s conscience cannot be programmed to swear. Swearing corrupts the soul!”
- “But who can prove that swearing is not good for listeners if they don’t understand any other language?”
- “You know, Mr. Philosopher, I am not holding a late-night debate, just because you doubt the obvious,” I replied with a metallic edge to my voice. “There is direct evidence of a verbal crime and should no repentance follow you are to undergo corporal punishment. Do you repent of the deed?”
- “No, I do not repent!” answered the disobedient one with a provocative laugh.

Opposite: Kolmogorov School students, early 1980s.

– “Are you ready to suffer the penalty for the crime committed”

– “From you – yes!”

– “So, get out of bed, my dear culprit, and switch on the light...”

The young man, short and nimble, approached me pretending to be a criminal led to the execution yard, accompanied by a chorus of loud laughter from the other beds.

– “Come here, please...”

Saying this, I stretched out my arm and seized the convict around the waist. Wriggling, he doubled up and hung with his head down, breaking into laughter. I blew on my hand noisily and affixed a resounding seal to the convict’s backside, announcing: “Whatever does not reach the mind through the medium of words will sometimes reach it by means of the teacher’s palm coming into contact with the least intellectual part of the student’s body!”

After the execution was over, I hugged the young man and asked forgiveness for going beyond a teacher’s authority. He seemed to have experienced only positive emotions and went to sleep feeling like a hero.

On the following day, rumors of the execution spread throughout the boarding school, and one administrator approached me, asking strictly:

– “Artemy Vladimirovich, are you sure that you have the right to apply measures of physical coercion to our students?”

I understood that the approach might be viewed rather seriously, and promised to be more careful in applying such methods.

After day’s classes were over, the boarding school turned to pressing worldly concerns. After dinner, the ever-hungry teenagers would obtain prized loaves of white bread from the canteen, eat the middle out, and then fill the inside with raspberry or cherry jam. The “vases” made of bread attracted everyone’s delighted attention and sometimes were even offered to favorite teachers.

Another variant was a large loaf pressed with a hot iron to make a big, well-grilled flatbread. Jam was poured over it and the cake was eaten by licking away the sweet juice that ran down the sides before proceeding to the middle. The process met few requirements for hygiene and aesthetics, but provided intense enjoyment for the participants.

I spent the evenings of my rotating 24-hour duty days in the dormitories, where we had tea and long talks that ended only at bedtime, for we teachers were allowed to “relinquish our position” only after the children had fallen asleep. As a Christian (secret, of course) I saw an open field before me, and the awareness of how susceptible to kind words, how trusting and open those youthful hearts were, filled my soul with deep feeling.



Kolmogorov future physicist.

Many responded to my quiet remarks about the gospel, but even among the young, characters vary and not all of the 1980s' schoolchildren were ready to accept words about God. I especially recall one of the senior students, a tall boy who passionately worked out, and for whom brains and muscles were the highest authority. The gospel sounded like a fairy-tale to him, and he said that its eyewitness accounts were nonsense. I could not understand why a Russian boy would be so defiant towards Christ and his teachings until I learned that he and his mother had suffered their entire lives from his ever-drunk, militia-man father, whose fists were the usual means of communi-

cation with his family. Before the poor teenager had learned to hit back in order to defend his mother, he had spent long nights hiding under the bed from the father's madness.

Once, I brought two kulich (our wonderful Russian sweet bread) for Pascha, wishing to secretly break the fast with the children. Forewarned of my plan, they had filled an electric kettle with onion peel and then boiled eggs in it to obtain the shells' vibrant red color. The feast was a great success! I addressed the children with the Paschal greeting, whispering "Christ is Risen!" and blessed the table.

Here were five or six of us conspirators celebrating Christ's Resurrection within the walls of a Soviet educational institution! I cut the kulich into big slices, inviting everyone to enjoy our improvised trapeza. At that very moment the door opened, and around the edge poked the head of a student who hated my references to spiritual subjects. I had been repeatedly warned that his father worked for the KGB, and now, surveying the scene, the boy asked suspiciously:

– "What are you doing here?"

– "Can't you see, we are celebrating Pascha! Don't be shy, come in, there is a seat for you as well..."

– "I am an atheist, I don't eat kulich," he said gloomily, his mouth watering.

– "Does that mean you only eat red, five-pointed sugar stars?"³ I responded to his profession of faith. "Don't act like a potato head, the kulich is so tasty!"

Saying this I drew a vacant chair from under the table for him. Again, he cast a hungry look over the scene, then overcame his narrow-mindedness and took the offered seat. The first piece of kulich did not remain in his hand long.

When he'd gulped it down, I said quietly:

– "Have a second helping, please."

So, by and by, an astonishing picture of human fate and fortune was being revealed to me. Students who had seen good examples and were warmed by

³ "Five-pointed sugar stars" refers to the five-pointed red star adopted as a symbol of Soviet Russia.

their parents' love were inclined to listen to spiritual words, while those who had seen the reverse shrugged their shoulders in disbelief or argued with anyone who tried to "sow seeds of wisdom, the good, and the eternal"⁴ in their young souls.

III. The Aftermath

Classic Russian literature is a treasure for teachers who care about their students' moral development. Despite the biased approach of the Soviet Ministry of Education in selecting what authors and books were to be studied, a wise teacher with a Christian mind could reveal the very special world of the 19th century. Pushkin, Lermontov, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Ostrovsky, Nekrasov, and Chekov all belonged to a great literary epoch, they all had Christian backgrounds, and their writings were saturated with authentic depictions of old Russia.

Thus, when I came to teach my ninth-grade schoolchildren in the boarding school, I felt myself extremely rich because I held in my hands a wealth of ideas and images taken from the treasure-house of Russian writers and poets. As I reread their books, my mind churned with ideas about how to bring my students closer to understanding the immortal human soul, and how to inspire these young people to search for the meaning of life and its spiritual anchor.

I remember that once, while preparing for a class on the play *The Storm* by Ostrovsky, I found myself angered by the textbook's assigned article on the play: *A Ray of Light in the Dark Kingdom*. According to the critic, the main character was backward because he only carried on with local single girls and had reproached a visitor to their town for pursuing a married woman named Katerina. In the critic's opinion, married women were also legitimate objects of attraction for men – all in the interest of the social upheaval that he hoped for. Anything that helped rock the centuries-old foundation of the "dark kingdom" – patriarchal Russia – was approved by the revolutionaries.

I could not teach the children such rubbish, so when I spoke to my ninth-graders about the main character's tragedy I explained to them about the sacrament of marriage (I myself had had a church wedding not long before). It was clear that once Katerina defiled her marriage vows, the sense of guilt and sin broke her spiritually.

4 "...sow seeds of wisdom...": Line from a poem by the 19th-century Russian writer, Nikolai Nekrasov.

“It is not that I’m afraid to die this very moment,” she says in horror, as the storm flashes and thunders. “What I fear is coming before God with my sins!” (As you understand, the word “God” in Soviet editions of these books began with a small letter “g”).

“Dear friends,” I said, addressing the students, “Please explain to me why even abbreviations like KGB or CPSU begin with capital letters, but the word ‘God’ begins with a small letter?” My clever students, including the unbaptized ones, came up with very different ideas on an issue so new to them.



Class lecture in the Kolmogorov School.

“Please note,” I said, “that as long as Katerina struggles against the temptation and her heart remains untouched by sin, she prays, calling out to the Father in Heaven, whom she knows as a living Person. But as soon as the dark kingdom, that is, the evil passion, overcomes her soul, the struggle is over. She is broken spiritually and now speaks only of an inevitable and impersonal fate. Unfaithful to herself, Katerina is miserable. Here is the mystery of her soul depicted by the author with psychological accuracy.

Breaking her vows, the poor young woman is turned into a plaything for dark forces and her passions are unworthy of being called love. To my mind, Katerina's sufferings came from the wholesomeness of her nature, brought up in a Christian worldview."

By no means did such classes pass unnoticed. The children were so excited, the conflict touched them so deeply that our discussions continued after the lesson. Some of them accepted my position, although the themes were new to them. Others rejected religious notions because not only was the word 'God' written with the small "g," but at that time most adults used the word as a kind of exclamation or expletive, without attention or reverence.

I remember one nice young girl came to me after a class on Chernyshevsky's novel *What Is to Be Done?* in which Lopakhin, a central character, gives up his wife to another man in order to subordinate his personal interests to those of the revolution – the two men's common goal. I had told my students that such behavior was low and mean and that Vera Pavlovna, the wife, had also lost touch with her conscience. I compared her to Ostrovsky's Katerina, who had suffered in her own soul after she committed adultery. This young girl looked at me with a kind of coquetry and said rather playfully:

– "Artemy Vladimirovich, I wonder why Katerina was so upset. She just needed to be clever and not tell everyone what had happened."

I was stunned at such calculation in so young a girl.

No books about spiritual life were allowed at school so I took lengthy notes at home as I read up on what the Russian Church fathers said about our literature. I substituted these notes in class for some of the coarser textbook commentaries, or gave them to trustworthy students to read. I particularly liked St. Ignatius Brianchaninov's letters. He was not yet canonized at this time but had very deep, beautifully written ideas about Pushkin, Gogol, and contemporary art and literature.

Those neatly handwritten notes were passed from hand to hand, and it is no wonder that they sometimes found an unreliable, or, to put it mildly, an unprepared reader. As we say, "You can't hide an eel in a sack," and it was inevitable that, sooner or later, my semi-conspiratorial activity would be discovered. Indeed, I was already carefully watched by the senior teacher in charge of student formation, an elderly man with traditional Soviet views who viewed me with distrust.

One day near the end of the academic year, I was unexpectedly invited to the principal's study. This was a surprise as we teachers seldom saw the principal. When I entered, Petr Andreievich was pacing back and forth, deep in thought. He offered me a chair and straightway asked:

- “Artemy Vladimirovich – tell me honestly – do you think that you can cope with the task of forming our young people in the spirit of Marxism and Leninism?”



Kolmogorov class, 1982.

I looked at a large portrait of Marx, Engels, and Lenin on the wall. Their heads, noses, and beards were turned sideways as they gazed into the bright Soviet future.

- “You see, Petr Andreievich, as a teacher I pursue more down-to-earth tasks.”
- “What exactly?” he asked in an abrupt, nervous manner.

- “As teachers, I believe that our main task is to pierce the three heads of the serpent with the trident of our pedagogical skills.”

Frightened, the principal glanced up at the portraits on the wall.

- “No, no!” I said, interrupting any further development of his thought. “What I mean is smoking, swearing, and fornication. If we adults unite in our efforts against these three immoral acts... (here, too late, I notice an ashtray full of cigarette stubs on his table) in order to help our students choose a right lifestyle with our own examples, I am sure that they will eventually mend their ways and become firm in the true worldview.”

Hearing this, he produced a dark blue, hardcover book with a golden cross and the title, *Theological Works*. I had yielded to the insistent pleas of some of the more trustworthy boys to give them some theology to read. It was the only religious book I had ever brought to school, and now, unknown to me, it had ended up in the principal’s study. It lay in front of me as absolute proof of the crime.

- “Artemy Vladimirovich, I think you understand what consequences await should you not leave our school at your own initiative?”
- “Yes, I understand quite well. “
- “So, we part in a friendly way, do we?”
- “Dear Petr Andreievich, this has indeed been a happy year for me. I believe that I have found my true vocation as a teacher.”
- “Yes, but you will have to pursue it in some other school.”

So quietly, without any great ado, I left the Kolmogorov School. Nevertheless, many of my upper-level students were baptized and later on had church weddings and Christian families. As a priest, I baptized their newborn children.

One of these former students told me, “Batiushka Artemy, do you know that Petr Andreievich, the principal who fired you, also left the boarding school the following year? Some say that it was God’s punishment; others say that he was promoted to a diplomatic position and sent to Madagascar.”

In the early 1990s, a former graduate of the school came to my church and with real regret confessed that he had been the cause of my dismissal. After he was catechized, we became close friends and now I owe him quite a lot as he later helped my family out of a very difficult situation.

IV. School No. 59

After leaving the Kolmogorov School for Physics and Mathematics I was fortunate to obtain a position at School No. 59 in Starokonyushenny Pereulok, considered to be one of the best schools in Moscow. Before the Revolution it was known as the Medvednikovskiy Gymnasium School, whose high standards of academics prepared its students to enter university, and even today the building retains its pre-revolutionary interior. Entering the lobby, one sees beautiful arches, broad marble stairs, and high ceilings. The spacious assembly hall is decorated with large plaster medallions, and according to school legend, the whitewashed walls still cover portraits of the last Russian Royal Family. As was the rule in all Soviet public institutions, a bronze statue of Lenin was also present. I remember the tense figure with its outstretched right arm, the index finger pointing upwards. In the 1980s, as Communist ideology gradually lost its thrust, mischievous boys sometimes hung school bags on the wretched finger, to the utmost indignation of the guardians of order.

One day, not long after I began working there, a pleasant-looking, white-haired old man entered the lobby. Addressing myself and several colleagues, he told us that he had once studied in the old gymnasium school. As he reminisced about his teachers, he gave a meek smile and showed us a vacant space under the staircase where refractory or negligent students had been disciplined with a rod. I could see that these memories were dear to him and, seventy years later, still warmed his soul. Those of us listening were fascinated.

Besides teaching Russian language and literature, I was assigned to after-school care for the youngest students, whom I helped with homework and then supervised as they played outdoors waiting for their parents to pick them up.

After-school care was headed by a middle-aged lady with a sonorous name – Genrietta Arkadijevna. On the first day, after giving me instructions, Gita Arkadijevna raised her finger and said sternly, with a penetrating look:

Opposite: School No. 59 in Starokonyushenny Pereulok.



“Artemy, take care and remember, there is no chance!” What a strange warning! And why was it addressed to me?

I nodded obediently and took myself off to the after-school yard where the first-graders met me with unconcealed curiosity that turned to delight at the prospect of having a young male teacher to share in their games.



Assembly Hall of School No. 59, the former Medvednikosvky Gymnasium School, where Artemy taught.

I have to admit that the other caregivers did not pay much attention to the children running about the yard. Seated on a wooden beam designed for physical training classes, the three ladies engaged in lively conversation and kept a distant eye on the children.

The children fastened upon me at once, “So, you are our new teacher? Will you play border-guards and bandits with us?”

When I gave my consent, the boys explained the rules to me. They all wanted to be bandits (let me remind you that these were the mid-eighties) and I turned out to be the border-guard whose task it was to prevent any

bandit from crossing the frontier. Please note that I was wearing my best (and only) suit, my wedding suit in fact: a beige velvet jacket, light-brown trousers, and brown shoes with polished toes. Naturally, after playing for half an hour I did indeed look like a guardian of the sacred borders of our motherland. No trace of the gloss was left. The women teachers watched me with interest, exchanging half-whispered comments on my extraordinary activity.

When the game was finally over and the children, tired but happy, were ready for their afternoon snack, a blue-eyed first-grader named Anastasia approached me. She had two white bows in her hair, as was the fashion for small girls at that time. While we played, she had sat by the fence looking over from time to time, and now, approaching timidly, she turned her small face up to me and asked, "Artemy Vladimirovich, can you please give me a riddle to solve?"

Seeing her innocent eyes, I gave a start of surprise. It was a revelation worthy of Pushkin: "The wondrous moment of our meeting / I well remember you appeared / Before me like a vision fleeting / An angel's beauty pure and clear."

"What riddle shall I offer you?" I asked the small angel facing me as I frantically searched the early stores of memory. As ill luck would have it, the only thing that came to mind was a verse about Lenin that dated back to earlier Soviet times, but I would not insult the innocent Nastyen'ka with such foolishness. A second passed, and another... Her eyes, blue as lakes, gazed at me steadily.

"Well, I do have a riddle, but please do not hurry to solve it. Listen first, then think carefully, and then answer." She nodded in agreement.

"Tell me, then: Who is it that has always been, is now, and always shall be?" (You can believe it or not, but in that period this phrase was a truism related to Lenin.) "But this is not all! Who created the earth and the sky, brought forth flowers and trees from the depths, and gave wings to birds? Who sees, hears, and loves us at this very moment? Who?"

Nastyen'ka fell to thinking and then looked at me again. "God?" she uttered, in a hardly audible whisper.

I looked around cautiously (there were not yet the slightest hints of change yet in the life of our officially atheist society) and I answered with a triumphant smile, "Exactly! But, Nastya, make sure that you are silent!" With these words I put my finger to my lips, and the first-grader nodded to show that she understood. May God allow us to meet again one day.

V. The Principal

As a young and relatively new teacher, I knew that I was quite fortunate to be invited to teach at the highly-regarded School No. 59.

The principal, Valentina Vasilievna, a dignified, stately woman, had welcomed me warmly, in an almost motherly manner: “You will be the only man among our teachers of literature. What was your salary at the boarding school? One hundred and forty? I will give you one hundred and forty-five with a few extra hours of work as an afterschool care teacher.”

I was to teach the fifth and sixth grades, a difficult age. One of my new colleagues, a young woman in a short skirt and lace-up boots, expressed her condolences as soon as she heard what grade I was teaching: “Accept my congratulations, they are all morons!” The phrase grated on my ear and I was sorry to hear her harsh characterization of the dozens of boys and girls who, I was sure, eagerly awaited me. As I entered the classroom, they met the new teacher with bright eyes and mischievous smiles.

“Good morning, children, I am your teacher of the Russian language and literature. My name is Artemy Vladimirovich. Artemy is Greek for ‘strong and healthy.’” I bent my right arm, lifted my fist, and pretended to feel the biceps under the velvet jacket sleeve. From the back of the room a freckled boy with an impish grin replied, “The teacher before you lost her voice... forever!”

As you might guess, dear readers, these engaging children took advantage of my starry-eyed kindness, and prepared to help themselves to a free ride “on my back.” While they loved their dedicated and warm-hearted teacher, they were not ready to respond with diligence, respect, or tact. However, things went well, even with the inevitable mistakes made by a young educator.

Leaving out many details, I will only share the story of my dramatic relations with the principal. Eventually the administration found out that I was not a member of the Young Communist League, which could not but make them suspect other irregularities. Then, one of the schoolchildren saw me enter the church in Obydensky Street, which was not far from our school. His terrified parents informed Valentina Vasilievna and the following day I was summoned to her office. Always so friendly, she now sat grey-faced at her desk. As I told her of my Christian beliefs, she asked me, her eyes becoming warmer: “Artemy, would you want to continue working in our school knowing that I would have to put my Party membership card on the table?”

I knew very well what she was saying. Valentina Vasilievna would have been forced to resign from the Communist Party and would lose both her position and profession if it became known that she had kept me on after learning of my beliefs. A tear appeared on her cheek and rolled down her face.

– “It would be very difficult, no doubt,” I said, embarrassed by her emotions.



School No. 59.

The conversation in the principal's room did not last long. The verdict was as follows: “Artemy, I respect you as a teacher, I honor you as a man, and I love you like a son, but as a Communist I cannot have you in my school.” These decisive words sealed my fate as a teacher of Russian language and literature. I listened in mute submission, bowed, and left the room.

But this was not the end: Now I will tell you how, many years later, I said a final farewell to Valentina Vasilievna. Having been a priest for over a decade, I was asked one day to go to the large cancer hospital on Kashirskoye

Highway where I was told that an old acquaintance wanted to see me. I could not place her name at first, but when I arrived at the ward, I suddenly recognized the patient. It was Valentina Vasilievna, grown old and thin from her grave illness.

I had never had any hard feelings towards her, as I understood all too well the constrained situation that school principals found themselves in under our harsh Soviet reality. But here in the hospital ward I found, not a dedicated Communist, but a woman in whose eyes shone motherly love!

That confession was the first and the last of her life. Then, God's servant Valentina received Holy Communion and lay back on her pillow with relief and contentment. I felt keenly our spiritual communion in the light of eternity. I gave her my parting blessing and left the ward carrying in my heart her tender smile, that of a sufferer filled with ineffable spiritual beauty. How marvelous it was that, in her last days, she had found the priest to whom she wanted to entrust her soul, having never forgotten how she had respected and loved him.

VI. The Special School

Now that I've jumped ahead a bit, dear readers, I will take a second leap into the future to tell you of another meeting of old friends.

A few years ago I was invited, as a priest, to visit a specialized private school for older children and young teenagers who found it difficult to socialize properly with their classmates and teachers. Because of their misbehavior they had left their public schools, but the teachers here had a reputation for being patient, firm, and kind in their interaction with the children.

I rang the bell at the front door of the school at the appointed time, and you can imagine my surprise when I saw that the person who opened the door, the principal herself, was none other than Gita Arkadievna who, twenty-five years earlier, had shook her finger at me saying, "There is no chance!" She had the same gold ring on the same short plump finger and the same authoritative expression.

She remembered me, of course, as her former after-school assistant, and greeted me with a kind smile. I expressed my joy at meeting her again, and when I asked how I could help, she asked that I do whatever I could as a priest to protect her teachers and students from trouble.

Opposite: Fr. Artemy, teaching as a young priest.



- “I will be glad to do so. Let us bless the classrooms with holy water!” I suggested.
- “Do anything you think necessary, Batiushka. We would also like you to talk to our children. They are different from other students, but good kids.”

I blessed the rooms and met all of the teachers, who greeted me with warm smiles as I entered their classrooms. The number of students in each class was small, and such individualized lessons were more effective than ordinary group classes.

About twenty children of different ages gathered in the hall. Some met me with curiosity, others with indifference. I never visit children without presents, of which the simplest are sweets or things like paper stickers with sayings by famous people. Knowing this, my parishioners keep me supplied.

That day I decided to hold a short academic competition, a very simple one. I would name a famous city and the children were to name the country it belonged to. Paris – France, London – England, etc. Every participant, no matter whether his answer was right or wrong, received a sticker and a brief interchange, such as: (*Handing him the sticker as a ticket...*) “Seryozha goes to ... a five-star hotel on the Indian Ocean for ten days, all included. You are welcome to bring your mom, your toothpaste, and an interesting book. Seryozha, who is your favorite author?”

In such a casual way, I managed to make each child’s acquaintance, combining jokes with serious questions. It was interesting for all of us. The children particularly enjoyed it when I spoke to them about their names – how each name contains many secrets and its meaning may serve as a guide to spiritual development, a key to one’s future life.

As we talked, I noticed a boy constantly trying to draw his friends’ attention away from the conversation. Coming up to him, I asked if he had any difficulties in his studies and if he wanted to overcome them with my help. He shyly admitted he had problems with mathematics.

- “Oh, how I understand you! When I was a little boy myself, I called it *mat-y-machekha*.”⁵ (Amusing in Russian, this brought a laugh.)

⁵ In Russian *matematika* is mathematics and *mat-y-machekha* is a flower – literally “mother-and-step-mother” as its leaves are hard on one side and soft on the other side.

“However, I have a wonderful means to help you. Would you like me to give you first aid?”

The boy was silent.

– “Say yes! Batiushka is offering you help!” his friends prompted eagerly.

Seeing the boy did not object, I said: “Attention please, a unique scientific experiment is taking place, previously unknown in the field of education!”

With these words I slowly covered the boy’s head down to his shoulders with the broad sleeve of my priest’s *riassa*.

– “Are you alright in there? You aren’t afraid, are you?”

He shook his head giggling.

– “Lord, send this nice boy the spirit of understanding of mathematics and teach him how not to get distracted in class. Amen.”

I lifted my sleeve and he gave me a mischievous smile.

– “So now you just have to look through the daily material and make a small effort to keep your attention in class. I am sure that God will help you.”

The other children, acknowledging the power of batiushka’s sleeve, began complaining of their own difficulties. Some found it hard to write properly in Russian, others had problems with foreign languages. The wonder-sleeve covered every head and the atmosphere became warm.

An hour passed unnoticed.

– “Well, friends, good things come in small packages. God willing, this is not the last time we will meet. It has been a pleasure for me to get to know you. If anyone wants, he or she may take a blessing for good health.”

I taught the children to fold their hands for a blessing and then blessed those who asked. Putting my hand on the heads of those too shy to approach and pinching the cheeks of the young ones, I said something humorous to make each of them smile.

Gita Arkadievna was happy.

- “Honestly, we didn’t think that you would be able to keep the children’s attention or even get their interest. These are very worldly children.”
- “It is your influence! I consider myself to be your disciple.”

Gita Arkadievna was pleased, and asked, “If it is not improper, may I offer you a cup of tea?” “How could it be improper? I would very much like to have tea, but unfortunately, I have another appointment.” (I was dreaming, not of a tiny cup of tea, but of a full-size beefsteak.) We said good bye.

Russia, my friends, is unique in that we feel such awe for priests that we consider them to be nearly celestial beings, having little in common with earthly needs and everyday affairs. This respect is in everyone, even the unbaptized Gita Arkadievna. So far unbaptized...

VII. What Shall I Do Now?

After leaving my first two schools, I was asked by the school board to visit the special state department in charge of the employment of young teachers.

Arriving at the appointed hour, I found the correct office, where I was greeted by a thin, neatly dressed, middle-aged woman. Clearly etched on her face was her readiness to sacrifice personal time for the sake of her social duty. After some brief remarks, she came straight to the heart of the matter: “Artemy Vladimirovich, do you understand that your religious convictions do not allow you to continue working in a Soviet school?”

- “What do my convictions have to do with teaching? I have the proper degrees, I am young with lots of energy, and I am willing to teach children Russian and literature.”
- “Can you tell me the theme of your senior thesis?”
- “The lives of early Russian grand princes.”
- “Well, you can see for yourself that you are a narrowly focused academic specialist, not a pedagogue. You had much better deal with ancient manuscripts in some special museum department than with schoolchildren!”

I immediately imagined having to daily descend into a chilly museum archive filled with manuscripts. The bolt bar would clank behind me and I would be left alone, locked in the cellar until lunch. The room would be musty and dimly lit, while outside there is light, children's voices, and happy laughter.

- “Your peculiarity, Artemy Vladimirovich, is your nonstandard thinking. We strongly recommend that you find academic work in philology.”

She gave me an amiable smile showing that the visit was over, but her words were a real shock for me. Was nonstandard thinking a crime? Should a teacher have a schematic matrix or an integral equation plotted in his head instead of brains? Communicating with children requires ingenuity, freshness of mind, and constant alertness so that the children are not bored. Should we use the “same comb” on all the children? After all, our great Russian writers were all seekers. They suffered through their own mistakes and painfully groped their way (as did the characters of their books) to the light of truth through the thickets of doubt.

But now... Never allowed to teach again! As I walked home from Old Arbat towards my beloved and familiar Ostozhenka Pereulok, noticing neither the people hurrying by nor the clamor of the huge city, I pondered the critical question: “What shall I do now?”

“Does Russia need me? No, it doesn't...” These bitter words, pronounced by one of Ivan Turgenev's characters, often came to mind over the next weeks. But as time passed, my soul told me something different, as if it already felt its high vocation hidden in the mist that shrouded the future.

I do not remember who suggested that I apply for the position of a security guard – one of the only positions I could get – in which I would work one round-the-clock day, followed by three days off. I managed to find a job like this at a cultural center for those employed in the state energy industry on the Raushskaya Embankment opposite the Kremlin walls. Mother told me that as a young woman she had attended painting classes there, and this somehow cheered me up.

During the day, the cultural center hosted Communist Party and Kom-somol Youth meetings. Sitting by the door in my booth I continually heard the speakers asking the same questions: “Who votes in favor? Who votes against? Who abstains?”



Location of the cultural center for the Soviet Energy Industry on the Raushskaya Embankment where Artemy worked as a guard.

How free I felt in this environment! During the day, I could sit in my guard booth praying or reading, but once evening came, young Komsomol members arrived at the center to dance to deafening music with glaring light shows. Hundreds of rhythmic feet beat against my temples and it was almost impossible to maintain a spirit of prayer in what seemed a vestibule of hades. By eleven o'clock the music came to an end. The building slowly emptied, with the tired musicians bringing up the rear, dragging their heavy instruments and boxes of equipment. Finally, silence reigned.

After the center closed, my job was to inspect it from the multi-level basement to the uppermost floor, switching off the lights in every room and locking the gated doors. It hadn't occurred to me that spending the night in a large empty building would be eerie.

On my first night, while descending to a basement floor with a flashlight, I discovered, to my great surprise, an enormous room with arched ceilings

and pillars that made me believe that there had once been a church here. So, this was where the deafening Komsomol discos were held!

My shift relief, a grim middle-aged man with several days' growth of stubble, came in the morning and informed me that even nights were not calm.

- “Someone walks back and forth in the foyer on the upper floor at night. It is impossible to fall asleep. This is what I use to defend myself.”

Saying this he bent down and produced an axe from behind the refrigerator!

- “Have you ever had to use it?”
- “I wish I knew who to use it against. I never go up there without the axe, although I never see anyone. Yet, always, I hear footsteps behind me or in front of me. I cannot bear it any longer and am thinking of quitting.”

I had my own explanation of what he heard, so I prepared thoroughly for my next workday. Once everyone left, I drew small crosses on all four walls of the lobby, singing prayers aloud to keep my spirits up. Then I sprinkled each room with holy water, including the foyer where dark energies lingered after the discos and the footsteps had been heard. I even sprinkled the old grand piano that, in the dark, looked like a leviathan. The second night was absolutely quiet. I curled up for a few short hours on my folding bed, alone in the building but sensing the invisible presence of God's angels.

Seeing me so complacent in the morning, my colleagues soon guessed that something unusual was going on, and began to ask me about the preceding nights. I only answered: “Thank God it was quiet,” but they guessed that I had a secret. Finally, one of them, a freelance artist and mountain-climber who had once had an out-of-body experience, spoke to me privately:

- “How do you protect yourself, Artemy?”
- “From whom?”
- “You know yourself. From spirits.”
- “As everyone else does – with prayer.”
- “Then are you a believer?”
- “Of course, or I wouldn't sleep well.”

- “Will you give me the prayer?”
- “I will if you need it. But remember, one must not curse after saying it or things will become even worse.”
- “You don’t curse at all, do you?”
- “I try to choose other words.”
- “Yes, it’s a serious matter.... So, will you give me this prayer?”
- “With pleasure!”

I copied out one of the evening prayers for him immediately, the one that begins, “Let God arise, and let His enemies be scattered, let them that hate Him flee from before His face.”

The mountain-climber took the sheet of paper with awe and put it into his shirt pocket. A few days later he approached me, clearly frightened:

- “Artemy, the prayer is gone.”
- “What do you mean by “gone?”
- “I have no idea. As if I never had it! Someone...” (he raised his index fingers to his head showing little horns) “...must have disliked it. I only read it once!”

I consoled him by promising to give him a prayer book, a rare thing in Russia in those times.

- “Are you going to enter the academy?”
- “What academy?”
- “The religious academy, of course.”

Now it was my turn to be shocked. I knew about the seminary and theological academy at St. Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra, but it had never occurred to me to consider entering it, so out of reach was its rarified existence in my mind. I wish now that my colleague could know how prophetic his words turned out to be.

VIII. The Academy

One day I sat in my guard booth at the cultural center immersed in a book by one of the Church Fathers. No longer teaching children, I read whenever my duties allowed so that, little by little, I might develop a Christian worldview. These venerable writers of past centuries often had clear, substantial writing styles and ideas filled with the spirit of the gospel.

On that particular day, the spacious lobby was filled to overflowing as people took their seats to hear a lecture by a psychologist popular among early 1980's intellectuals because of his ideas on family relationships, self-understanding, and the inner life. The audience was varied and, judging by their questions, many were beginning to look for a spiritual foundation.

I was surprised at the speaker's ability to put Christian content into scientific psychological terms so skillfully that the most stringent censor could not have accused him of spreading religious "propaganda" – still illegal at that time. The speaker was undoubtedly leading his audience toward an Orthodox understanding of life and this made a deep impression, as I had not yet recovered from the results of my own unfortunate attempts to enlighten my students.

Once the seminar finished it was time for lunch, but we guards were not allowed to leave our post for even a short break. To console me, my wife Elena, who worked nearby in the library of the Russian Academy of Natural Sciences, often came to visit with lunch neatly packed in small packages. I would have felt absolutely happy had my conscience not reproached me for living such a carefree life.

I was about to begin lunch in my booth, and had hardly finished saying the "Our Father" when I saw my old acquaintance, Andrey Kuraev, smiling at me through the lobby window with several university students in tow. Andrey had graduated from Moscow State University's Department of Philosophy and been baptized by Fr. Georgy Breev, one of the wisest and most respected priests in Moscow. I knew that he was thinking of serving the Church, but how on earth had he found me in my exiled confinement?

I had been here as a guard for six months already and could only guess that one of our common university friends had given away my secret. However, Moscow hospitality obliged me to throw open the door to my booth and welcome the future arch-arbiter of religious disputes and his guests. As we all drank tea from a miscellaneous assortment of cups, he and I conversed quietly.



Surprised by my explanation of the sudden change in my career, Andrey asked pensively, “Artemy, how long are you going to stay here? It’s good to serve God’s Church. Why don’t you go to see the rector of the Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Seminary and Theological Academy? Moscow’s religious schools need well-educated philologists no less than philosophers.” Then it came to light that Andrey had been working in the rector’s office for some time already. Such a prospect took my breath away! Could I just go to see the rector? “Of course! Go after work tomorrow! When you arrive, ask the receptionist to call his office and I will come down to meet you.”

Evening came, the building emptied, and my excitement rose. Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra! The Theological Academy! Each time I visited the lavra, my soul burst with love for this holy place, the heart of Russia! Even after I married, I sometimes thought of St. Sergius’ vision of an enormous flock of snow-white birds and the voice that promised him they would equal the number of his monk disciples. There was a sweet sorrow in knowing that I had taken another path to salvation, and so wouldn’t be numbered among them.

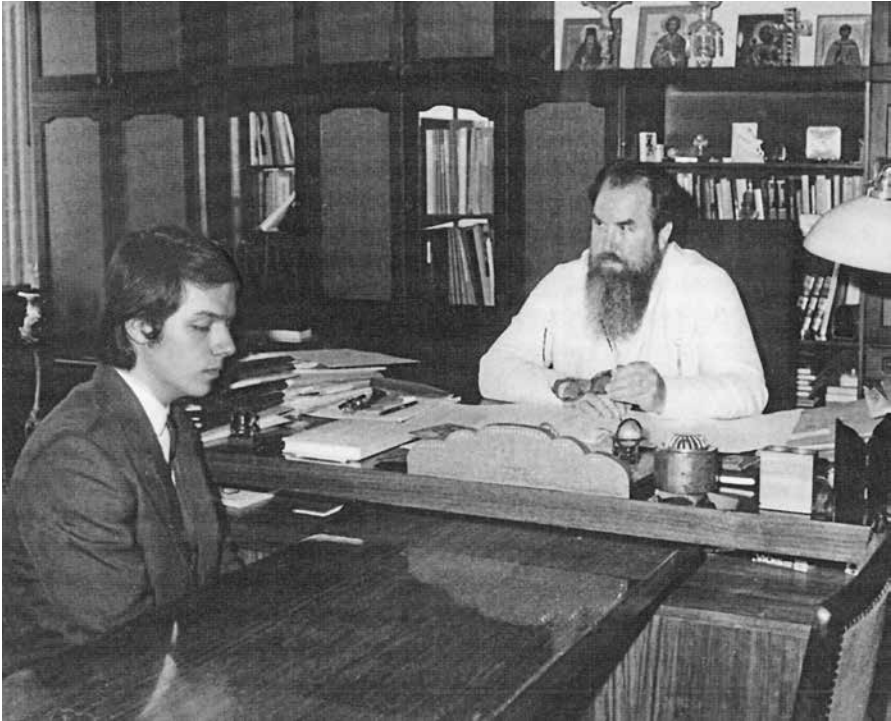
The following morning, I arrived in Zagorsk, the Soviet-era name for the town of Sergiyev Posad, and walked cheerfully through the winding streets towards the lavra. The brilliant domes of Dormition Cathedral and the upper tiers of the belfry were shrouded in autumn mist and I was filled with expectation. I hurried first to the church, as my train had arrived in time to allow me to venerate St. Sergius’ relics and to entrust my future to him.

As I approached the seminary buildings, I saw students hurrying to their classrooms with prayerful, concentrated expressions on their faces, like beings from another planet. I arrived at the reception hall and, to my surprise, Andrey soon appeared, wearing the black seminarian’s jacket. He gave me a warm smile and winked reassuringly through his thick-rimmed glasses.

– “Artemy, welcome! You will have to wait a bit because Vladika, the rector, is not yet in his study.” I took a seat and began to look around.

High ceilings, plaster molding, beautiful antique furniture, an old icon in a rich kiot – it all agreed with my idea of what this amazing institution would look like. There, in the rector’s study, Metropolitan Filaret of Moscow had once sat, and later the historian Vasily Klyuchevsky and even Fr. Pavel Florensky had visited!

Opposite: Church of the Dormition and the Holy Spring, Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra.



Artemy in the office of Vladika Alexander, rector of the Moscow Theological Academy at Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra.

Now I awaited my fate, as ruffled as a sparrow. Finally, Andrey approached and whispered:

– “Please come in. Go with God!”

Clad in a light-colored podryasnik, Archbishop Alexander of Dimitrov, the rector of the academy, sat behind a huge table, almost as wide as the wall. There was a heavy clock on the desk, along with an old-fashioned pen set, file trays with documents and a large Bible. On the wall above his head, a beautiful icon completed the scene. The rector was the image of a Russian *bogatyr*, with a florid countenance and a beard shot through with silver like an Assyrian king. He rose from his chair to bless me and after asking about my education and how long I had been in the Church, he inquired about my present job.

– “I am a departmental guard.”

– “What is your salary?”

I replied. He was silent for a moment and then said, “We need a guard for the academy building, seven days a week, 9 am to 5 pm, with the same salary. Do you agree?”

I looked at Vladika in astonishment; I did not know what to say. Going by train to the lavra every day at 6:00 am to spend eight hours here as a guard, and then back to Moscow?⁶ “Of course, it is God’s work,” I thought, “but what about the philology diploma and my two years’ experience as a teacher of Russian language and literature?” I was silent.

– “Perhaps you would like to think it over in the reception room?”

With these words the rector rose, and I understood that the visit was over. Perplexed, I left his study. I took a seat and Andrey came to me immediately.

– “So, Artemy, you were offered a job as a guard in the academy, weren’t you? Quickly accept it before the rector changes his mind. This is just a test. I was in the same situation.”

I believed him and nodded my consent.

– “That’s good. I will go tell Vladika that you have accepted the offer.”

So, this is how the doors of the Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra Seminary and Theological Academy opened and my many rewarding years of teaching there began.

IX. The New Job

As soon as I resigned from the guard job, I took my state employment book to the St. Sergius Theological Academy registrar. The book, quite new and with just three entries (that is, all of my previous jobs) contained identical notations: “Voluntary termination of employment.” The academy clerk who registered me in my new position looked at me questioningly as if trying to assess the character of a troublemaker who had been unable to keep a single job for more than a year. However, she didn’t ask any questions and there was no need to explain.

⁶ Traveling from one’s home in central Moscow to Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra by train takes about three hours – a six-hour round-trip.



Train stop on the way to Sergiev Posad, 1980s.

It was already autumn and frosty mornings were on the rise. I would get up very early in order to catch the seven o'clock train at Yaroslavsky Railway Station. Sometimes the loudspeaker which hung on a pole on the platform would inform us: "Comrades, the first, third, fifth and seventh carriages in the train to Aleksandrov do not have heating..." I then hurried to one of the even-numbered carriages but frequently discovered that they were unheated as well! On the hard, straight, wood-backed benches, I had to sit on the theological volumes that I had brought to study (Lord, forgive me!) and to turn my feet so that only the edges of the soles of my shoes touched the cold floor to avoid being frozen.

Eventually I became acquainted with the professors who also traveled to the academy by train. I was particularly glad to see priests and deacons – for example Fr. Valentin Asmus, who was a deacon at the time and taught Greek and Patrology.

Opposite: St. Sergius Lavra in winter.



Oh, how beautiful it is to walk to the lavra on a frosty winter day! You feel the temperature drop as you make your way from the station through the winding streets and down the long incline that leads to the monastery. Where Moscow streets are damp and covered with slush, here it is cold and dry.

If you have ever been in the academy garden beyond the old-style wrought-iron fence, you know that from here one can observe the life of the spiritual schools without getting in anyone's way. The paths are thoroughly cleared –



The Rector's Path.

one in fact is reserved for the rector himself, who walks there quite often in his winter riassa, sewn as thick as a coat with a fur collar. In his absence, sparrows and other creatures forage along the path for crumbs and, according to academy legend, the ambitious student who at dead of night manages to walk the rector's path undetected may hope to become a bishop someday.

On the grounds of the seminary and academy, snow-covered trees wait patiently for far-off spring. The morning sun leaves rose and golden hues on the snow, which in the evening deepen to shades of lilac. The even stroke

of the belfry clock completes the scene, making the monastery atmosphere unique and infinitely dear to its inhabitants.

I had been hired to watch over the dormitories, but in the end I did not spend even a single day as a guard. The wise rector knew how to transfer employees with university diplomas onto the instructors' track without raising questions from state authorities. For almost half a year my patron Andrey Kuraev and I corrected the students' Russian and Slavonic exercises, finding "fleas" – spelling and punctuation mistakes. Rarer were "roaches," more egregious flaws in content and style. The rector's trust was flattering as we (at least I) felt like ugly ducklings following, at a respectful distance, a flotilla of white swans – the venerable academy professors.

One assignment I was given in my first months at the lavra exceeded my ability. The vice-rector for academic work, Mikhail Stepanovich Ivanov, a reserved and detailed scholar, suggested that I write a book retelling the Gospels for young people, taking into account the unique ways in which they see the world. I remember borrowing my first book from the famous academy library, the Gospel of St. Luke as interpreted by Bishop Innocent (Borisov) of Kherson. The depth and beauty of the writing of this nineteenth-century genius of Russian church literature both delighted me and made me despair. I understood that I was not yet ready to follow in the wake of such giants.

Sometimes Andrey and I had to stay over, and then we slept in the academy dormitory. I would have dinner at the student dining hall, where I watched the future shepherds with interest. How different they all were! Some were merry young fellows, while others were serious-looking prayerful young men who seemed to me to be God's chosen.

It was in this period that I came to love the academy's Church of the Intercession of the Mother of God, whose incredible acoustics allowed a word uttered in a low voice at the back western wall to be clearly heard in the altar beyond the iconostasis. The richly detailed Old Russian-style paintings that cover the walls uplifted the heart with their scenes from the life of the Holy Virgin.

Have you ever heard, dear friends, the "Akathist of the Intercession of the Holy Theotokos" sung on Wednesday night in the academy church? If you are able to visit the lavra, I invite you to take part in this glorification of the Queen of Heaven. Even the hardest and most indifferent hearts cannot but respond to such beauty.

It is a well-known fact that the majority of those praying in our parish churches are women, therefore it was a rare delight to hear the three all-

male seminary and academy choirs singing in church: one in the balcony and one at each kliros close to the iconostasis, reminding me of Viking ships gliding through watery depths toward a quiet harbor. Finally, the service ends and people file out, but long afterwards I hear in my mind the refrain, *“Rejoice, our Joy, protect us from every ill by thy precious Veil.”*

My new job gave me an opportunity to confess more often, and for this I went to the Church of St. John the Baptist at the entrance to Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra. Sitting atop the monastery gate, its small domes glisten as they peal their joy over *“one sinner who repents.”*

After the presiding priest read the common prayers for confession and gave a short sermon about the major passions, the penitents proceeded to the galleries where the monastery confessors each wait beside an analogian with the cross and the Gospel.

What a blessing it was each week to bring your sins to confession without hurry, without one’s thoughts being tangled and pressed by surrounding crowds. Experienced priests will never interrupt you or make you hurry. Confessing without drama or fuss, you feel their prayerful and humble consideration as you enumerate and express sorrow for your sins, hearing over and over: *“God will forgive, may God forgive and help you.”* Finally, you receive the prayer of absolution and leave with a light heart for liturgy.

Cleansed of my sins and sanctified by Holy Communion, my soul regained its wings of grace. After the prayers of thanksgiving, I would leave Dormition Cathedral to wander about the lavra before work, remembering the mysterious white birds over St. Sergius’ cell, but now with joy rather than sorrow.

X. The Exam

For several months I was busy with my pleasant work that involved visiting the St. Sergius-Holy Trinity Lavra religious schools and assisting with the student’s classwork, until one day I was again invited to the office of the rector-bishop. This time Vladika Alexander was devoid of the official dryness he had shown the first day we met. He greeted me warmly, asked again about my university specialty, and then he told me that the lavra needed a teacher for three languages: Russian for seminarians, Church Slavonic for the choir directors’ school, and Old Slavonic in the theological academy.

- “Artemy Vladimirovich, do you have enough energy to undertake these duties?”

I gulped with astonishment thinking of the heavy responsibility involved, and murmured:

- “As you bless, Vladika.”
- “Then, go see the vice-rector of the academy and ask his advice. Do it now.”

I was stunned and amazed, feeling that it was a great honor to be given a chance to teach Russian and Slavonic to students of the religious schools. I left the bishop’s room thinking of my university advisor, Nikita Ilyich Tolstoy, who had once said: “Artemy, the theological academy needs well-educated philologists...” And, as you remember, Andrey Kuraev had also told me how unsuitable my job as a security guard was in light of my education. All would have been well if only I had felt prepared to take up such serious professional duties.

With such thoughts milling around in my head, I entered the vice-rector’s study. Sitting at the desk under the icons was Archimandrite Makary (Veretennikov), a learned scholar with a brilliant European education and a specialist in Old Russian culture. He looked up attentively as I entered.

In the old kiot behind him, I could see icons of my favorite saints: St. John the Theologian, St. Nicholas and St. Sergius of Radonezh. I was somehow sure that they would take an active, though unseen, part in our dialogue as they seemed to look down at the pitiful young suppliant with consideration and warmth. Batiushka’s handsome Russian-style face was framed with dark wavy hair and an imposing monastic beard.

- “I’m glad to meet you, Artemy Vladimirovich. Please take a seat. You are a graduate of Moscow State University, aren’t you?”
- “Y-yes.”
- “Let me ask you, what was the theme of your graduation paper?”
- “The lives of early Russian grand princes.”
- Who exactly?



- “St. Olga Equal-to-the-Apostles and Sts. Boris and Gleb.”
- “What collections did you use?”
- “Mostly the collection by Serebryansky, the pre-revolutionary specialist on hagiographic texts,” I said, becoming livelier.
- “Good, well then...,” the archimandrite ran a hand down his beard, as if
 - I hoped – nodding in consent: “Who do you consider to be the major figure of liturgical text correction in fourteenth-century Moscow?”
- “Perhaps Metropolitan Cyprian?”
- “Perhaps, perhaps... And do you by any chance remember what linguistic phenomenon the Serbian St. Cyprian, the would-be metropolitan of Moscow, is associated with?”

My mouth dried up here. I understood now that this exam would decide my fate – whether or not I was to become a teacher in the lavra’s religious schools. Unfortunately, I was always extremely nervous in exams and unable to properly search my disorderly stores of memory. Raising my eyes and heart to the holy God-pleasers, I answered at random:

- “The Second South Slavic influence?”

Father Makary again patted his imposing beard: “Oh, really?”

I could not understand if I had given the right answer or not, and now I implored the saints for help, a plea that filled me spiritually and physically, every muscle and nerve crying out, “Holy God-pleasers, help me!” I was praying with my back.

- “And what, in your opinion, is the most characteristic indicator of the Second South Slavic influence on Church Slavonic spelling?”

The inhabitants of Berlin surely shuddered less when they heard the approaching sound of Soviet artillery in 1945 than I did when this third “anti-tank charge” was fired at me. Somewhere from the depths of my being rose the phrase:

Opposite: Archimandrite Makary (Veretennikov), Russian church historian.

– “The disappearance of the *yuse Bolshoi* in writing.”⁷

Father Inspector gave a final touch to his wonderful beard, bowed his head slightly, and uttered in a dispassionate tone:

– “Thank you, do not let me keep you.”

Etiquette did not allow my asking him about the outcome of the interview, so with shaking hands, I closed the massive door behind me and rushed down the long corridor to the library. Breathlessly, I asked the librarian:

– “Can you please give me an Old Slavonic course-book?”

She handed me a government edition of the standard text for linguistic departments. I searched the index, found the part I needed, and eyed the passages keenly. From the two pages devoted to the theme, key phrases jumped out at me: Metropolitan Cyprian... Second South Slavic influence... disappearance of the *yuse Bolshoi*.

“Lord have mercy! Holy God-pleasers, thank you!” I closed the book, sank into an armchair and closed my eyes.

– “Do you feel ill? Can I help you?” asked the librarian.

– “No, thank you,” I answered, with a weary smile like a mother after delivering her child ...I felt incredibly light in body and soul.

I have no idea what impression Archimandrite Makary had of our interview or what he told the rector, but the following week I began teaching. It was the winter of 1985.

XI. The Seminarians

In the mid-1980s, Russian classes for the seminarians were held in rooms built onto the thick, high medieval fortification walls of the lavra. The rooms were extremely long and professors had to strain their voices so that those in the back could hear.

I came to class in my suit jacket to teach Russian to the seminarians, some of whom were older than me. A few had been in the army and they looked and sounded like real warriors.

⁷ “*Yuse Bolshoi*”: A letter representing the nasal sound “oh” in early Cyrillic alphabets.

- “Dear friends,” I addressed them good-naturedly, “You will need two large notebooks to accomplish our Russian lessons: one for notes on our work in class and the other for homework.”
- “Wha-a-t homework?” roared student Dmitry Sazonov, who would later become the magnificent director of our seminary choir. “Is it not enough that Church Slavonic has sucked us dry, and now there’s to be homework for Russian!” This straightforward remark was followed by the hearty laughter of the entire class.
- “Student Sazonov,” I countered, “You have a mistaken notion of our Mother Church’s sacred language. Don’t you recall the King and Prophet David saying: *“How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!”*”

In the silence that fell, I understood that the students were surprised to hear scripture quoted aloud in Church Slavonic by a secular teacher – a rare occurrence in those Soviet days. A few students shushed the protester and order was restored. As it happened, the mischievous Sazonov later became my most zealous defender.

As I began teaching at the lavra, I was surprised and even annoyed at the way the seminarians addressed me as “Batiushka,” forgetting that I was not a priest. In their polite manner one could see a feature common to all Orthodox Christian believers – a deep respect for those whom God has chosen to serve others, be it a priest, a doctor, a policeman, or a teacher.

Of particular interest to me were the spiritually-minded students whom one could recognize by their demeanor. Some of them so loved the lavra that they had joined the brotherhood as novices. Reserved, with small prayer ropes in their hands, they retained a spirit of prayer even in class.

I thanked the Lord for the opportunity to teach these young people, most of whom became priests and even bishops. I particularly remember the kind, intelligent eyes of one student who already had a degree in humanities. I tried not to annoy him by checking his work because I saw that he was always ready to answer in lectures, and indeed, he was quickly transferred to a higher class. He is today the much-respected Bishop Pankraty of Troitsk, the abbot of Russia’s Valaam Monastery of the Transfiguration, and even now, talking with him always gives me real spiritual joy. It was the same with the other seminarians who became monks. When I happen to meet them



now at the magnificent lavra church services, their sincere monastic smiles warm my heart.

However, life cannot always be smooth, and I also recall one student whose family name was Kochetov. [In Russian, “kochet” is a rooster]. This young man habitually clowned around and no attempts (though rare on my part) could calm his ruffled soul. He reminded me of the young game cock he was named after, a bird that shakes its crest as it rushes out of its shelter to intimidate a rival.

In December of 1985, I was unexpectedly summoned to “Officers’ Courses.” This was further training required of lieutenants – the rank that I had been awarded after completing the compulsory Soviet-era military reserve training at the university. These courses, however, coincided with Nativity celebrations and I shared the disturbing news with my class.

- “Brothers,” I said, “I firmly believe that if you make the sign of the cross over yourselves now, the Lord will deliver me from the obligation to drill on the parade ground over Christmas.”
- “God will help you, Artemy Vladimirovich! Do not doubt, we will pray,” the whole class replied in Church Slavonic.

Suddenly, a shrill voice spoke up:

- You should go serve, Artemy Vladimirovich. It’s not good to shirk one’s military duty.

Yes, it was a joke, but Kochetov’s remark was at once cut short by his classmates, and I did not respond to my “well-wisher’s” words.

- “Friends,” I said, as the lesson was over, “I haven’t a moment’s doubt that your prayer will help me...”

As the students filed by, Kochetov did not even turn his head in my direction.

A few days later, I arrived at the local military commissariat which oversaw the mobilization of reserve troops and took a seat facing the door of the recruiter’s room. As soon as I had finished reading the prayer following a kathisma of the Holy Psalter: “...that my enemies may not boast of my

Opposite: Bishop Pankraty (Zherdev) of Troitsk, Abbot of Valaam Monastery.

defeat, O Lord, nor say, “He has been delivered into our hands, he is given over to us....” the secretary called my name. I entered and saw a uniformed major bent over the table, writing rapidly. He did not look up. A secretary sitting at a table nearby continued typing. No one offered me a seat.



Young first-year Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra Seminary students.

- “Your last name,” the major said, still not looking at me.
- “You called it out yourself: Vladimirov.”
- “First name, patronymic, rank?”

I answered the questions.

- You graduated from Moscow State University, Philological Faculty.
What foreign languages did you study?
- “Church Slavonic,” I said.
- “What language did you say?”

– “Church Slavonic!”

The major tore his eyes from the document he was reading and stared at me. The secretary stopped typing and rested her fingers on the keyboard. Silence fell.

– “In our courses, we have English, German, French, Spanish, but we do not have Church Slavonic,” the major admitted in a surprisingly simple-hearted manner as he scanned me from head to foot. “What is your job, young man?”

I understood at once that attack was the best form of defense, so I squared my shoulders and replied: “I am employed at the academy!”

– “The academy?!” The major half rose from his chair.

At that moment I realized that I had touched on a sore point because every good commissioned officer dreamt of receiving a diploma from the military academy.

– “What academy?”

– “The Moscow Religious Academy,” I completed the self-identification.

There was a tense pause.

– “Artemy Vladimirovich,” the major addressed me in quite a different tone, now filled with respect. “We will surely not send you to the January courses.” Saying this, he crossed my name off of the list and then added in a low voice, “But I have a personal request. Can you light a candle for me?”

– “Of course, I will,” I assured him, though I could never have anticipated such a request. “What is your name?”

– “Victor,” he said.

“I will pray for you, for your family, and for your colleague,” I said, looking over at the secretary who was listening intently. As I left the stuffy room, I raised my eyes, feeling as if I could almost see the seminarians’ prayers streaming heavenward.

I then took a bus to St. Nicholas in Khamovniki, whose cupolas are like festive multi-colored turrets. I went into the church and lit two large candles: one for the major and his relatives, and the other for his secretary. The impossible had become a reality! I was free! The days of the Nativity celebrations, so special and close to my heart, awaited me!

Back in class after the holidays, I told my seminarians what had happened. They listened in silence and even Kochetov kept his peace.

XII. Off-Site Students

The regular seminary course was limited to a certain quota of full-time students each year, but because there were many priests who had been ordained in remote regions during difficult periods for the Church, we also offered off-site studies. This allowed them to read the required course texts and write papers in their distant monasteries and villages, and then travel to the lavra for final exams. I also took part in examining these students.

The work was pure grace, a remarkable chance to meet priests from all over Russia: igumens of monasteries, protopriests, younger parish clergy, and sometimes even respected archimandrites. Most of these Russian clergy are real heroes, selflessly toiling for the revival of our remote and distant regions. They build churches, baptize and teach, serve parishioners, and bring up their own children (usually more than two or three in priests' families). Beside this heavy burden, out of a desire for further theological education or at the request of their bishop, they had enrolled in the seminary or the academy.

For them, visiting the lavra was an outstanding event. They became acquainted with one another, venerated St. Sergius' miracle-working relics, and prepared for the exams that would take place over the following days. Inevitably, they all crammed until the last moment. With the many duties that burden priests, few had enough time to master Church subjects, make detailed notes on theological texts, or immerse themselves in advanced Russian and Slavonic courses.

It was a surprise to see these priests, usually so wise and important-looking, worrying over their exams as if they were back in secondary school. I remember the exam mornings, as more and more priests gradually filled the room. There were impressive priests – the honorable heads of parishes, their crosses decorated with jewels – as well as young beardless deacons. There were curly dark-haired fathers, like characters from Turgenev's and

Chekhov's books, not to mention venerable grey-beards whose appearance brought to mind the stories of Nikolai Leskov, so full of kind humor about the life of small-town nineteenth-century clergy. This was Russia in 1991-1992, coming back to life after decades of atheism!

However, I pitied the small-town and village priests when I saw their worry before exams. I knew of their unceasing financial difficulties and their everyday lives that were full of cares, and I wanted to encourage them and



Older students of the Laura's post-seminary Theological Academy.

make them happy, so I decided to use the exam as a pretext to turn our meeting into a feast of faith and love in Christ. In this respect I was perhaps a rather poor examiner, deserving to be condemned by the strict maxim, "Duty before friendship."

- "Dear Fathers and Brothers, I greet you with all my heart!" This was how I dared to address the off-site students, because by now I had been ordained a priest myself. "Allow me to thank all of you who have

gathered for the examination, trusting in God's mercy. Such hope never puts one to shame, does it?"

– “God save you, Father Artemy, may you too have mercy on us, and we will not forget you in our prayers to the Lord!” hummed a portly protodeacon with his splendid basso-profundo voice, attired in a light-colored *podryasnik* with the brightly embroidered cloth belt typical of Ukrainian clergy.



After the exam.

– “Dear Fathers,” I continued. “Are there any among you who would rather not be tortured, but already assess their own knowledge as satisfactory? If there are, they can put their grade down in their record-book and I will sign it as your sincere well-wisher.

Silence fell as the fathers discussed the offer in a whisper. Might the examiner be provoking them? I waited expectantly. Finally, a brave student in the back row made his way to my table through the crowd saying: “I have an all-

night vigil tonight, Father, and I must hurry. I'm not proud, I am fine with a brass medal instead of gold."⁸

- “What is your name?”
- “Priest Ioann Snegerev, Vladimir Diocese.”
- “This is good, Batiushka, your modesty deserves approval. But I'm afraid you may not be giving an altogether praiseworthy example to the rest of the students. Might you be assessing your knowledge a bit low? Will you please fill in the punctuation marks in the following sentence? I concentrate for a moment with my eyes closed, and then come up with the phrase: “Humility – the main condition for acquiring God's grace.”

Now, the priest looks at me anxiously and asks:

- “W-what am I to do?”
- “Think of the punctuation marks you would use in this sentence.”

I repeat the phrase. Batiushka blinks nervously at what seems such a simplistic question, makes the sign of the cross over himself and replies:

- “A period at the end of the sentence.”
- “Wonderful! And you were going to give yourself a three! Let's make it a four. What other punctuation mark is quite a must here?”

I pronounce the first word slowly: “Humility...” pause, and then continue, “...the main condition for acquiring God's grace.”

- “A dash?” Batiushka asks incredulously and draws a horizontal line in the air before himself.
- “Marvelous! Absolutely! Dear fathers, what mark does our brother from the Vladimir Diocese deserve?”
- “Not less than a four, maybe five!” hums the same protodeacon, expressing everyone's opinion.

⁸ “A brass medal instead of gold...”: Graduating seminary students receive medals upon graduation commensurate with their grades: brass for a satisfactory grade average, silver for very good, and gold as the highest distinction.

- “Oh no, no, Father Artemy, fives allow pride to creep into one’s mind,” responds Father Ioann shyly, smiling broadly. “A four is good enough for me. It is a great joy as it is...”

The fathers relax, I see smiles beaming through their beards and mustaches. Father Ioann departs, accepting congratulations as he heads for the door.

- “And now let us continue our exam, taking the list of students in order.”

At that moment, it occurred to me to preface each exam with a prayer that had just come to me:

- “Our Heavenly Father, Who knows all of our strengths and weaknesses, please open Thy embrace to Father _____ [the name of the next priest on the list], and give him wisdom for a good answer.”

Now, in both Slavonic and Russian, “Heavenly Father” is “*Otets Nebesny*” – literally, “Father Celestial.” So, with this newly-inspired idea, I looked at the batiushkas again, gave them a reassuring smile and began:

- “*Otets Nebesny...*”

Suddenly a hand rose in the second row and I heard an abrupt military-style: “Me!”

- “Is someone already eager to answer?”
- “You called my name. I am *Otets Nebesny* ...”

I admit it had been a long time since I had heard such loud and hearty laughter from our seminarians and it seized me as well. But believe it or not, there, halfway down the list, was the last name “*Nebesny*”!

- “Well, my dear Fathers, such an event has never before been recorded in world history! Think whatever you will, but I have no moral right to examine Father *Nebesny*. What, in your opinion, is the mark we should give him?”

– “Let us not make God angry, it’s a five, there is no other option!” –
my voluntary assistant, the protodeacon, passed the common verdict.

Blushing with embarrassment, Father Nebesny, who had suddenly become the focus of everyone’s attention, came up to my table, where I gladly put down the excellent mark in his record book.

Even now, almost thirty years later, I feel joy in my heart when I think of the priests I met at the exams and of our spiritual friendships.

I travel much now, pursuing my teaching and missionary tasks in the remotest areas of Russia, and very often I meet these former students in churches and monasteries. With their genuine Russian hospitality, they open their arms to give the warmest embraces, and at those moments I do understand what exams are for in this world... at least in religious schools.

XIII. Normandy

In the summer of 1995, Matushka Elena and I were invited to teach at *La Colonie Russe*, a Russian Orthodox church camp on France’s Atlantic shore in the restful town of Villers-sur-Mer. The region’s sunny wheat fields reminded me of my Russian childhood, and we marveled at how hard-working the local people were, for every family had turned their yards into beautiful orangeries, each presided over by a small statue of the Mother of God with the Infant Jesus.

The Russian Church in France owns two buildings in Villers-sur-Mer, both built out of a beautiful local stone. One was a house with rooms for the children and the other a small church dedicated to the Iveron Icon of the Mother of God. We quickly discovered that the church had been left unused from the previous summer, so the older children, Elena, and myself swept away the cobwebs and dust so that we could serve the following day. The icons on the iconostasis had been painted by Monk Gregory (Krug), who also did the holy images in the Parisian Russian Orthodox Church of the Three Hierarchs on Rue Petel. Although at first glance they seem naïve and child-like, on closer inspection you understand that they are very expressive without being sentimental. The faces, especially, radiate a warm spirituality, as if created in one spontaneous breath of prayer.

Our team of teachers was headed by Madame Luda, the founder and leader of this little Russian summer colony, who knew most of our children’s



Welcoming committee at French camp.

parents from when they themselves had come to the camp as young people. Luda was a strong, energetic Russian, a little over sixty, with fair, curly hair that she wore loose on her shoulders. Her penetrating and slightly unmusical voice could be heard from morning to night throughout the camp: waking the children each morning, instructing the cooks, leading prayers before breakfast, breakfast itself, the all-school assembly, classes and activities, play time outdoors, swimming in the ocean. All of this and much more was under her direction. For Matushka Elena and I, it was a good example of love for one's all-consuming work and how to serve children.

I rejoiced seeing these children of the Russian émigré community, who were unexpectedly and pleasantly well-behaved during church services. From the teenagers down to the smallest child, each one quieted down as they entered the church, and remained silent until the end. After lunch they sang old Russian Cossack songs under Luda's guidance, songs that we had never heard of in Russia.



Checking in.

But for me the biggest surprise was their moral purity. I did not hear a single bad word from any of them. With all of their liveliness even the teenagers struck me as being surprisingly innocent; their minds not yet invaded by worldly filth. Of course, these were the years before internet and mobile phones.

Now I need to confess my folly as a zealous youthful pastor. Because even the oldest children seemed altogether ignorant of the existence of the vices that Soviet newspapers had said infested Western society, I decided in my Russian-language church class (they were not supposed to speak French in the camp) to talk generally about sin and to hint at their possible shortcomings. The children listened, not without interest, and with great difficulty wrote down the Russian names of sins. Inexperienced as I was, I didn't know better than to try to explain, in a simple way, how adultery differs from fornication – which they dutifully numbered and listed in their notebooks along with the rest.

Madame Luda and one or two of the parents learned about the awkward topics we had discussed and I was asked to explain the advisability of such exercises. A hot feeling of shame overwhelmed me as I realized that I had done more harm than good. Why did I, a Moscow priest, need to enter that dark thicket if each of these young people had watchful parents to decide when and how to raise such topics with their child?

Later, I took the children's notebooks out of the classroom cabinet and carefully blotted out the words and notes in question. The letters of these previously unknown and misspelled words that had been crossed out and corrected by children's hands seemed to cry out to me that such notions of sin did not belong in such young minds. So well-protected were they that these young Parisians had not yet bidden farewell to their golden untroubled childhoods. I understood that I had learned a life lesson: "Do no harm!" is a maxim for teachers as well as for physicians.

There was one other notable event in Villers-sur-Mer. All of my books have been written outside of Russia in solitude during my annual leave, and this year I had been asked by several headmasters to write a coursebook for parents and teachers to use in their work with children. During my evening walks along the old beautiful streets of Villers-sur-Mer, ideas of how to begin came to mind and I returned to Russia having put my heart and soul into *The Textbook of Life* – an attempt to describe our lives from the womb to the afterlife that would embrace both the visible and invisible worlds. It was dedicated to my mother, and the night I finished it I laid it in front of the altar, wondering if the book might even outlive its author. Time will tell.

XIV. Archangel Gabriel

As I said, one of my great concerns as a young priest was learning how to speak with children – which I did by trial and error, developing methods to help my young students discern the presence of the spiritual world. I soon discovered that I could convey such ideas using everyday objects, at times with surprising results.

One such instance was a school gathering not long after I was ordained, at which I was to prepare my young listeners to celebrate the Annunciation. Some Church Fathers say that on this day the sun, the earth and sky, and every living thing glorifies the wonder of the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Most Pure Virgin and the Lord's incarnation in her womb.

On this day, as I spoke to a group of children of different ages about how the natural world takes part in our celebration, my eyes were drawn to a vase of flowers on the teacher's desk. They were roses, rather than the lilies usually seen in icons, but nevertheless, as I set the scene of the Annunciation, a simple script formed itself in my mind and I was gratified to see that not only the smallest students but even the inert senior grades were willing to hear more.

Describing the Virgin and her merciful heart, I turned to her icon from time to time to awaken the children to her presence, hoping that if I could inspire awe and love even the familiar school hall could become a temple.

- “Imagine the Mother of God sitting by her spinning wheel, pondering over what she has just read in the Scriptures about the coming Messiah, the Savior of the world... And then, the appearance of the Archangel Gabriel, his face shining with the light of heaven, his eyes ablaze with God's love, and the fragrant flower from paradise that he gives to the Most Holy Virgin, sealing her consent to become the Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ....”

Breaking off my monologue, I asked:

- “Is there anyone among us who could present this flower from paradise (I was now holding a white rose) to the Most Holy Virgin? Who wants to come down from heaven and give the gift to the Virgin?”

As I expected, the first-grade pupils, both boys and girls, immediately raised their hands. In front of me was a little girl in a snow-white dress with a ribbon in her hair, her eyes reflecting the reverence that I had tried to convey for the mysterious feast. I took her by the hand and, outside the door of the hall, handed her the rose with the words:

- You don't have to hurry, my angel! When I am back at my seat, quietly knock at the door and open it yourself. Then come up to the icon of the Mother of God, like the archangel did, and set the flower from paradise before the icon. Do you understand?

She nodded. Taking my seat by the table I said: “Lord, bless!”

The door opened and the young child slowly glided across the floor, holding the rose with one hand and making waving movements with the other, as



she imagined angels' wings would do. Hardly seeming to touch the floor, she approached the icon, spontaneously curtsied, and with a deep bow placed the flower in front of the Mother of God.

I caught my breath. At her single-minded offering, the Lord suddenly filled the room with an ineffable grace, a silent moment of eternity that touched each one of us. There was nothing at all for me to add.

XV. Former Students

Teaching infers a life-long connection, and truly I have often felt an unbreakable bond between students and myself.

Once, in the early years of my teaching career, I fell ill and was taken to the hospital. It was a warm October and the trees were covered with crowns of golden leaves. My dear wife Elena visited me daily, and I often watched from the window as she walked toward the hospital entrance with a bag of food for me in her arms.

Students from the Kolmogorov boarding school also came to see me. Young, cheerful, and always hungry, they devoured my wife's food in no time and then shared the latest school news with me. Later, they visited me at home (Elena's family flat, where we lived at that time, was two steps away from the boarding school). My mother-in-law, the kindest of women, willingly treated them to whatever God sent our way. Once I found some tasty jars of mixed vegetables in our local shop and, from then on, this simple dish became a kind of symbol of these home gatherings. Many of these children were eventually baptized Orthodox and some of them became very close to our family. Living in the noisy capital, in new surroundings far from their parents, they warmed themselves in our home and repaid our hospitality with a sincere attachment to my wife, my mother-in-law, and myself.

One of these young mathematicians later married a close friend of ours and they now live in Ireland. Their son, the student of an old and prestigious Dublin university, also has the gift for mathematics inherited from his father. Another student married a classmate and now they live outside Moscow in a big wooden Russian house with a large flock of children. A few years ago, they hosted a reunion of their classmates, my students, and I was also invited. Among them were the former boys and girls with whom I had held long night-time discussions at the boarding-school and with whom I

Opposite: Fr. Artemy with student.

celebrated Pascha behind tightly closed doors. Also present was a very nice elderly woman with bright eyes filled with spiritual joy who I recognized as the Soviet teacher Galina Vasilievna, who had mercifully taken me under her wing as a student teacher, allowing me to instruct her ninth grade. Galina Vasilievna had become deeply Orthodox and, as our meeting ended, asked me to bless her grandchildren through her.

Not all of my students have had a happy life though. No teacher can safeguard his charges against every mistake that might have drastic consequences, and some of “my children” are still struggling to disentangle these knots of contradiction. Some, in God’s unsearchable providence, have even passed away to eternity.

Among them was Igor Plisko, who was not officially my student although we often talked together in our free time. Short of stature but well-built, Igor was very reserved, preferring to listen rather than to speak, although he would ask questions that were important to him. I saw how deeply he pondered our conversations and I marveled at such complex thinking in one so young. Igor never forgot anything and would unexpectedly astonish me with a lengthy commentary on an aspect of spiritual life that we had discussed six months before.

Like a few other boys he had hand-copied the morning and evening prayers from the prayer-book, as well as other texts from Sunday service books, and I felt that these prayers were alive in Igor’s heart. My mother-in-law had a special love for Igor because of his modesty and refined manners. He was always glad to serve and I remember him rushing like a whirlwind to the nearest shop if we needed something, leaping over four or five steps as he ran downstairs.

He was also very interested in the books of the Old Testament, especially Ecclesiastes by King Solomon, and I was stunned to silence one day when he showed me his handwritten copy of the book with a parallel Latin translation.

– “Igor, do you read Latin?”

– “Well, I study it bit by bit,” he replied shyly, with his charming smile.

After my “exodus” from the boarding-school we continued to meet, though not as often, and he eventually entered the prestigious Physics and Technology Institute, succeeding academically with his quality work and quiet smile. His success he felt, was due to God’s help.

Time went by, and Igor married a pious girl as shy and humble as himself. They had a church wedding, but their happiness did not last long. This cold and cruel world took revenge on him for his clear mind and pure heart. Walking back from work along a country road at night, hooligans hit him over the head with a piece of heavy pipe and killed him.

Igor's funeral service was held in the Church of All Saints in Krasnoye Selo, where I now served. The coffin was brought the night before the funeral and Matushka and I met the grieving relatives to serve a panikhida by the light



Fr. Artemy with seminarians and a crowd at the lavra.

of a few candles. Igor lay there, silent as usual, his face astonishingly beautiful. So young, so handsome, with a faint smile; he seemed to be gazing at the icons through closed eyes. His face was so spiritual that it was difficult to believe he wasn't breathing.

But even more astonishing was Igor's young wife. I remember her even now, a head-scarf tied round her neck as they do in Russian villages, standing motionless by the coffin with a lighted candle. Deep in prayer, she was

oblivious of her surroundings. There was no hopeless grief in her eyes, only a living faith, humility, and love. I could see that God's grace was strengthening the young widow, and that He would not allow earthly despair to touch her soul. In the face of such beauty and consolation, I could hardly hold back my tears.

Among my students were a few who became priests. One of them, from the same elite boarding school, appeared rather simple, but was and still is, in fact, the personification of humility. Unlike Igor, who was curious, lively, and demanding in conversation, this future batiushka never dared approach me, although he was in my class daily.

After the boarding school, he also easily entered the Physics and Technology Institute. No one at that time knew of the hidden world of his soul: that besides his excellent academic work, he served as an altar boy in a church outside of Moscow. He must have been surprised to hear the senior priest, a friend of mine, suggest that he be ordained. He later met his future wife at my own parish – a slender girl with a subtle and vulnerable spirit who conscientiously fulfilled any task given her.

I watched as their relationship developed and was sincerely glad when they decided to marry. As it turned out, God gave them the gift of many children! A faithful helper to her husband, Matushka bears her cross as wife and mother with prayer and love. Batiushka is still the same as he was in boarding school, and I only hear from him when he calls to ask for prayers when his wife is about to give birth – and this, I believe, because she insists on it. Otherwise, he is still unable to cross the line between student and teacher.

I have always regretted not having given enough love and attention to some of my students, and I offer this as a small compensation to those who might read it, asking that they kindly forgive their former teacher. As for your names, they are always in my heart. ✦