

# Father Alexander Men

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Father Alexander Men is well known in 'Moscow, but not in the West. He is still young, not yet 40. After studying at a forestry institute in Siberia, he realized that a profession as a graduate in forestry was not for him. He was a believer, a man of great faith – and had been so since childhood. He was brought up in a believing family and his uncle was a priest. The call to the priesthood came to him when he realized that missionary work in the Soviet Union was his unquestionable duty. So he entered the seminary at Zagorsk. He excelled in his studies and graduated in the early 1960s. After ordination he was sent to serve in the village of Tarasovka, 40 kilometres from Moscow, on the way to Zagorsk. All his parishioners quickly came to love the young priest for his kindness, his gentleness and his desire to help people in all he did and said. He had the ability to strike up a relationship with everyone. He is one of the most erudite people in Moscow, but he never parades it; with simple people he talks about things which are close to their hearts and which they understand – a rare quality among modern Russian intellectuals.

Gradually Father Alexander became known in Moscow itself. People started coming to his services from there. He is particularly loved by young people, by the new generation of young Russians, who continue to seek the truth as they did in the past. Many have seen through the communist ideology. They look to the universities for help, join neo-Marxist groups, get involved in the Democratic Movement. They write, argue, demonstrate, go into prisons and labour camps. Some go into the churches and some find faith. In the mid '60s many young people became believers, partly thanks to people like Father Alexander.

The KGB too became interested in his activities, warning him to stop his pastoral work among the young. Father Alexander refused. So the KGB adopted different tactics: they began secretly to force him out of his church. In 1970 he was forced to move to another church in the town of Pushkino.

Until September 1968, Father Alexander used to hold open house every Tuesday in the village of Semkhoz, five kilometres from Zagorsk. These were his *jours fixes*. I have already written about the *jours fixes* which took place in the flat of the well-known church publicist, Levitin-Krasnov (see *RCL* No. 2, 1974). Such a custom became widespread amongst eminent Soviet intellectuals in the late '60s. In the early '60s people were

able to meet where they wanted and talk more or less as they liked, even on Mayakovsky square. Then the authorities banned open gatherings. As a result people began to meet in their homes. Thus the custom of *jours fixes* was born. But when the authorities adopted their present repressive policy, most of the Soviet intelligentsia, apart from the dare-devils in the Democratic Movement, became afraid of expressing their opinions openly in conversation and so the need for *jours fixes* suddenly declined.

But in 1967 *jours fixes* were a universal phenomenon. Many people in Moscow were busy every day of the week – Mondays at one place, Tuesdays at Father Alexander's, Wednesdays at Levitin's, Thursdays at Grigorenko's, and so on. On one day alone, you had to choose between three *jours fixes*.

The suburban train brought Father Alexander's guests to his home. Having first assembled in Moscow, at Yaroslavsky station, they would get into the fast Alexandrovsk train (departure : 3.15 p.m.) and would travel together to Semkhoz station. The journey took a long time, about two hours. So the *jour fixe* began on the train. Most of Father Alexander's friends knew each other, but if someone was a stranger he would be introduced during the journey. Most of the guests were believers. Some would exchange information on new *samizdat*, while others, who had received something of this type from their friends, would huddle in a corner and read non-stop until they reached Semkhoz. Those unrestrained Moscow discussions would begin right on the Yaroslavsky station, continue at Father Alexander's house, and occasionally end late in the evening in the train returning to Moscow. Father Alexander's acquaintances were all erudite people, so the discussions were of a most serious nature. Among those who came to his house were the talented Moscow poet and translator Donna Tolya Zhigalov, the distinguished artist Yuri Titov and his wife Lena Stroeva, and even the outstanding Soviet philosopher and expert on the East, Grigori Pomerants.

Father Alexander would meet his guests in the garden outside his house, he would bless them, and together they would all go up to his verandah where they spent the evening. Father Alexander could answer any question on the humanities : on poetry, literature, philology, art, modern politics, and of course on philosophy – religious philosophy. Some of his friends would talk, drink tea and listen to Father Alexander, while others immediately made for his library. This is one of the largest private collections of philosophical and religious books. He has a mass of old books representing the Russian religious renaissance of the early 20th century – Berdyaev, Bulgakov, Shestov, Florensky. There is a complete collection of the works of Vladimir Solovyov. There is a Paris edition of Bergson in

Russian, a complete collection of Teilhard de Chardin, a pile of religious books written in Russian and produced in the West, and an almost complete collection of the books published by "Vie Avec Dieu" in Brussels. The KGB has hovered over this "anti-Soviet" literature for a long time. Occasionally they search Father Alexander's house, but so far at least they have not taken anything away. He gladly lends his books to all who want to read them. They are often passed from hand to hand and circulate throughout Moscow the whole year before they return to their owner.

Father Alexander is in no way a political dissenter. He is not a Levitin-Krasnov, not a Sergi Zheludkov (the priest from Pskov), nor even another Gleb Yakunin, the Moscow priest. He sympathizes with political speeches, but does not like those religious writers who take part in the struggle for human rights. Yet he, like them, takes risks: not many would dare to be a prominent religious theoretician and, in addition, carry out missionary work amongst young people in Soviet conditions. He reminds one rather of Father Vsevolod Shpiller, priest at the church of St. Nicholas in Moscow. He is an armchair academic in the full sense of the word. Learning is his whole life. He and his closest friends do much to make modern western philosophical thought accessible to readers in the Soviet Union. They translate many books into Russian – for example the works of Teilhard de Chardin and Dr. Zernov's book about the Russian religious renaissance. He is a talented researcher on the Old Testament. Recently he graduated from the Moscow Theological Academy with a higher degree on religion in Ancient Babylon.

Father Alexander adores children. He has three of his own, all of them are "Pioneers", but they are also Christians. "I do not restrict them" he says; "If they want to be in the Pioneers, then let them. When they are a little older they will understand for themselves what's what . . ." Many believing parents in the USSR wonder how to bring up their children as Christians and where to obtain religious books for them, since no one has preserved the old editions. Father Alexander has written an illustrated book for young children which is still being avidly read in Moscow. It begins with illustrations: a table – the caption asks who made the table. The following illustration shows a man, with the answer underneath: the carpenter made it. The next is a house: who made the house? Answer – the builder. In the next is a stream, a forest, sky, sun and clouds – but who made these? The answer is God.

After the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, Father Alexander's *jours fixes* only lasted for one more week. When I asked him why, he answered: "They have turned my house into a political club. They talk about nothing but politics, and I don't want this." He supports the theory

(widespread amongst religious people in the Soviet Union) that any political activity, even the struggle for human rights, is a senseless waste of time. Other things are more important. The inner world of man must first be changed; then the external world will change as a natural consequence. For many years there have been long arguments between the supporters of Levitin and those of Father Alexander. I myself have frequently had to argue with Father Alexander's supporters. To me Father Alexander and Levitin are both right: both the inner and the external lives of men must be changed. For the promotion of man's inner freedom external freedom is necessary. It is impossible to act with one's hands tied together, so political freedoms are necessary.

Although the two sides continue to argue, they remain on good terms. We (i.e. Dubrov and others from Levitin's circle) often used to meet young people from Father Alexander's circle. We would gather in somebody's flat and pray together. Recently (Levitin was still in prison at the time) we used to meet on Sunday. We would lock the door and draw the curtains. We would pray, then bring out the Gospels, read the Epistles, a little at a time, and discuss each verse. At each knock on the door we would shudder and quickly hide the Gospels, for should they be confiscated in a search they cannot be replaced. This is the Russian Orthodox Church underground. Where in such a situation is the religious freedom guaranteed in the Soviet Constitution? Yet this Church is alive. Every year it brings more and more young people to Christ.

*Christmas, 1973*

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“One must believe in God not on the strength of tradition, not from fear of death, not ‘just in case’, not because someone says so and something frightens one, not on the basis of humanitarian principles, not so as to be saved, and not for the sake of originality. One must believe for the simple reason that God – is.”  
(Andrei Sinyavsky *Thoughts Unaware*)