

Documents

The Calling of a Russian Monk

In RCL Vol. 2, No. 6, pp. 18-22, we printed a document, "On Taking Monastic Vows", from a samizdat book entitled A Short Description of the Pskov Monastery of the Caves (the Pskovo-Pechersky Monastery). The following letter from the author acts as an introduction to this book. We print it as an appendix to the article "Monasticism in the Soviet Union" (pp. 28-34).

REPLY TO A FRIEND'S LETTER

My dear, warmly remembered friend, you thank me for the service I did you, that is, that at your request I wrote down my recollections of taking monastic vows. Now you ask me to send you another short description of the Pskov Monastery of the Caves.

I fulfil your request with joy, for our present life is a time of sowing for the future life: the future life is the time of reaping; here we sow, but there we shall reap. The Lord leaves nothing without its reward; a kind word which we say for the good of a friend He will remember, and an affectionate glance of ours He will not forget. . . .

But before going on to a direct description of our holy cloister, I want to draw your pious attention to the essence of monasticism.

In Russia we have several monasteries for men and women, in which the light of the monastic spiritual victory (*podvig*) so dear to an Orthodox man burns and is never extinguished. Of the men's monasteries I will name the following for you: the Trinity Monastery of St. Sergius, the Monastery of the Assump-

tion at Pochaev, the Monastery of the Caves at Pskov, the Monastery of the Assumption at Zhirovitsy, the Monastery of the Assumption in Odessa, the Monastery of the Holy Spirit at Vilnius. The Russian monastery named after the great martyr Panteleimon on the holy mountain of Athos is under the spiritual jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Constantinople.

Of the women's convents I shall name the Pokrovsky and Florovsky Convents in Kiev, the Convent of the Assumption in Pühtitsa, the Convent of St. Nicholas in Mukachevo and the Trinity Convent in Korets in Rovno region. In the Holy Land there is the Russian Gornensky Convent.

Having dedicated their whole lives to the service of God, monks serve in the Russian Orthodox Church as an example of Christian virtue.

The isolated, silent, withdrawn God-centred life of a monk is valuable, rich and made joyful by many minutes of God's gracious illumination, knowledge of God and knowledge of self, constituting all his happiness on earth and a pledge of salvation and future bliss in heaven.

A monk is a son who has come to himself, for whom all the past, present and future have blended into one and turned into an endlessly long moment of the sweetest self-oblivion on the Father's breast. . . . The cry of his penitent prayer is still on his lips, but his heart - his heart has long ago heard the answer and has itself managed to answer with its own cry, a cry of joy at sinking into

the unfathomable abyss of God's total forgiveness and mercy! . . .

As a man ignorant of music cannot completely understand and enjoy its harmonious, delicate sounds, so a man who is ignorant of God, who denies religion, cannot understand the true meaning of monasticism. The elevated feelings of the ascetic who has found in his soul the Kingdom of Heaven and who bears the Living God within himself are beyond his comprehension. Music delights our ears and calls forth a noble feeling – a feeling of joy and enthusiasm, but religion, that is, the Spirit of God, by the rays of His blessing and love delights the whole of our being, calling forth indescribable rapture and tender emotion. Therefore this feeling is still greater, more exalted and more noble, and one should not show mere curiosity and trifle with religion. On the contrary, one should reach out after this noble feeling. When we pray, God's rays of blessing descend upon us, and not only our hearing but all our feelings are sanctified: sight, smell, taste, touch – a man's whole being, and then man himself is ennobled.

When you hear a moving song or speech you hold your breath, your heart stops beating and you stand as if transfixed, fearing the least rustle. This is precisely how, with breath held and heart stilled towards everything external, we must turn to God, who announces His presence in our hearts with the sweet words of the Spirit and with mellowed feelings.

How much colour and poetry, how much depth of feeling, what power of tender emotion is concealed in the hymns, canons and other canticles of the Church! And rituals and ceremonies. They are a whole ocean containing every kind of treasure, consolation and delight. Life with all its anxieties and yearnings is so empty and soulless without them.

In order to know God one needs neither wealth nor learning but one must be obedient and self-controlled, possess a humble spirit and love one's neighbour, and the Lord will love such a soul and will reveal Himself to it and teach it love and humility, and will give it all that is needful, so that it may find peace in God.

Although the very aim of monasti-

cism is the renewal by the Holy Spirit of the person who has become a monk, the Holy Fathers suggest that the way to this aim is by penitence and humility, by reaching the point of weeping for oneself, and praying in affliction, by revealing so much sinfulness in oneself that one's conscience will bear testimony that we are abject servants in need of mercy.

What makes monasticism difficult? It is not that all the pleasures and good things of the vain world are forbidden! Not that duty and the heart demand struggles so that one will not return to them, not retrace one's steps, not seek them out! Not that we renounce our will and bear what are sometimes very difficult acts of obedience! Not that we are sometimes forcibly obliged to observe the strictest chastity – this is not an easy victory over nature! Not that the vows we have taken – poverty, obedience and chastity, fasting, prayer and the strictest abstinence – which we constantly break – cry out in our consciences with agonizing reproaches! No, it is not all this which makes monasticism hard! . . . These are all results of another hard side of it! . . . It is hard because of the constant dissatisfaction in achieving its positive result – closer contact with the Lord and *the sense* of this contact, *the sensation of the Lord within oneself*! This is the lot of those who are perfect (once they have attained it, all the hardship of monasticism disappears for them): the sense of communion with the Lord, the assurance of being in His keeping, the bold consciousness of His protection, the power of goodwill – this is the life of a monk. Meanwhile he is not given a complete apprehension of this life; he is given a constant thirst for God, the search for Him, his life becomes a spiritual feat in finding Christ, not a feat of observing chastity and the other vows of monasticism. This is only a condition, but the aim is contact, conformity, merging with Christ so that every word, deed, thought, action may boldly be considered to be possible in Christ, not excluding Him and not offending the holy things of Christ. And *can this be achieved?* . . . It is this which makes hard the life of those who have renounced in the name of Christ every obstacle to the

gaining of Him! It is very useful, even necessary, for a monk, and indeed for every Christian, to approach the Holy Mysteries as often as possible – every week if one can, and every day for those who are able. If someone knows no other blessings than this then at least he can say this with the Apostle: “I seek so that I may find” my Lord! . . . I seek Him, and if I do not yet find Him clearly manifested, nonetheless at the end of my life He will suddenly shine forth, and when parting with the world which I leave for His sake He will shine forth as the longed-for deliverance from every heartache.

The true way to God is found in a sense of deep faith, of filial, most humble obeisance before the Lord, of complete, heartfelt contrition, repentance and the fulfilling of all the commandments, without any examination of good works and spiritual victories, and with constant glorification and thanksgiving to the Lord and a thirst for blessed communion with Him – the Only One. Sins and illnesses which occur will only deepen saving penitence and humility. Then men together with the psalmist will call out to God in joyful weeping: “Blessed am I for thou hast chastened me”.

A great and difficult (but necessary!) matter is to keep oneself in a state of habitual reverence, and in a strictly serious, piously tranquil, silent mood! This demands great efforts, introspection and self-control every minute, at every step, especially in relation to others. But on the other hand what satisfaction, peace and joy breathe in the face of a righteous man! To what a degree can it assimilate in itself and reflect in its features the boundless love, gentleness, mercy and other divine virtues, irradiating them in abundance to all around! How simple is this righteous man, how swift and reasonable in everything that is good and exalted! What invincible strength draws him everywhere where the Lord’s name is glorified, and where His grace summons! And how the hearts of all faithful men who are falling in the struggle with sin are drawn to him!

But what disappointment, in truth infernally wicked and agonizing, will befall those who will see at the very end of their lives that their life’s work is all

worthless, has led to nothing simple or good, and cannot now be turned into anything in the least useful. That is a sufficient source for eternal, terrible, infernal torments, which time will no longer heal because time will no longer be, but only fatal, implacable, silently cheerless, eternity . . .

That is something for every Christian to think over! And many will learn the truth . . .

Our life has two streams: life according to the impressions and laws of the external world and life according to the gifts and abilities of the inner world. This duality applies to everything else in our lives: we have, for example, two salvations – the external and the internal; two ways of repentance, two ways of virtue, two ways of sinfulness, two ways of sanctification, two ways of piety, two ways of mercy, two ways of seeing God, two ways of pleasing God. And the external does not predominate over the internal! May our life in Christ be hidden with Christ in God! May our external behaviour be defined by our internal flourishing in God and may it follow Him, flow naturally from Him and not anticipate Him . . .

It is difficult to find words which would explain the necessity of refining one’s inner state to the last possible degree in order that the depths of the soul may be revealed. How can words show the necessity for the combination in our souls of simultaneously abiding both in hell and in God? How do you explain that only under these conditions is the fullness of human life attained, and together with it that stability of a genuinely healthy soul which eliminates internal hesitations? Which of us does not know the painfulness of the change between spiritual “peaks” and “troughs”? When a man descends into the hell of internal struggle bearing God within himself, then he escapes hesitations and conflicts.

The merging of all three vows (obedience, chastity and poverty) into one whole creates conditions favourable to the attainment of the chief aim of a monk – absence of passion and pure prayer.

The Holy Fathers teach: “Neither pastors of churches nor monks must concern themselves with worldly matters,

but must imitate the Mother of God who in the Holy of Holies of the Temple day and night studied the law of the Lord and remained in prayer for the people."

"The worldly think that monks are a useless kind of person, but they are wrong to think this. They do not know that a monk prays for the whole world; they do not see his prayers and do not know how graciously the Lord receives them."

Monks conduct a great battle with

their passions and for this struggle the Lord regards them with favour while they are still living on earth; and they will be great in eternal life!

Now, my dear friend, I shall pass on to a description of our holy cloister. I shall try, with God's help, to open up before your eyes the gradual building of the Pskov Monastery of the Caves from the days of its founding, and the whole sequence of historical events, with a short description of the life of its builders.

Appeal for Fr. Romanyuk

Fr. Vasili Romanyuk, born 1925, was sentenced to ten years in labour camp, although innocent, when he was 19, and in 1959 he was rehabilitated. He then studied for the priesthood. At the beginning of 1972 he was arrested after he had signed a petition in defence of the Ukrainian historian Valentin Moroz. He was sentenced in July 1972. His hunger strike began last August, lasted about three months. The following appeal reached the West last November. According to the latest report his physical condition is critical. (See photographs.)

TO PEOPLE OF GOOD WILL IN ALL
COUNTRIES, TO BELIEVERS, TO
UKRAINIANS LIVING IN THE USSR
AND ABROAD
HELP SAVE THE LIFE OF
VASILI ROMANYUK!

Since 1972 Vasili Romanyuk, a priest of the village of Kosmach in the Ukraine, has languished in the most terrible of Soviet camps for political prisoners, the Mordovian Camp No. 1 (special regime). He was sentenced to ten years imprisonment essentially because he dared to sign a letter in defence of the Ukrainian historian, Valentin Moroz, at the time of his second arrest.

FROM 1 AUGUST VASILI ROMANYUK HAS BEEN ON HUNGER STRIKE, DEMANDING HIS RIGHT TO HAVE AND READ THE BIBLE. There is no prohibition against this either in Soviet law or in the Instructions which regulate life in the camps. But neither is there any spe-

cific permission, and the camp authorities have themselves decided to withhold the Holy Scriptures from believers.

One year ago a heroic five-month hunger strike aroused passionate concern for the fate of Valentin Moroz among many people throughout the world and particularly his fellow countrymen in the United States and Canada. We know about the demonstrations in defence of Moroz, the hunger strikes in solidarity, the inquiries put to Soviet officials and public figures, the many letters, telegrams and telephone calls to all responsible levels from the head of the prison to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. In this way Moroz was saved: medical attention throughout the hunger strike, a special diet during the period of recovery, an end to solitary confinement — only because of the unremitting attention of world public opinion.

Nothing is known about the state of Romanyuk's health, however he is still in the camp which means he has not been put in hospital. Only extensive and effective support can change his situation. HELP! LET ROMANYUK BE ALLOWED TO LIVE! LET HIM BE GIVEN THE BIBLE!

L. BOGORAZ
L. ALEKSEVA
YU. ORLOV

Romanyuk's address and also that of the camp commandant:

Mordovskaya ASSR or Moscow
p/o Sosnovka p/ya 5110/1
section Zh Kh 385/1 Zh Kh 385/1