

Documents

An Early Soviet Saint

Some Orthodox spiritual classics of the 20th century which, in the USSR, circulate in samizdat, are beginning now to reach the West. One such typescript, carefully bound and illustrated on the first page with a typewritten cross, has now been translated and is to be published by Mowbrays in the near future. The book is called An Early Soviet Saint: The Life of Father Zachariah. Jane Ellis, a staff-member at Keston College, is the translator.

Fr. Zachariah felt called to the monastic life at an early age. His father, however, wished him to marry. Nevertheless, Zachariah with great difficulty obtained permission to stay at the White Shores Monastery. But first he had to consult the elder (starets) Ambrose at the famous Optina Pustyn Monastery.

The last day of his stay in the hostel arrived, and he felt sorrowful because he would have to leave Optina without seeing Fr. Ambrose. Zachariah stood through the early and late liturgies, praying fervently. The monks noticed him, called him into the refectory and gave him food and drink, but his sadness did not pass away.

Returning to the hostel he took his bag to pack it and depart, but first he took out of it the icon of Our Lady of Kazan, his mother's bequest. He looked at the most pure face of the Ever-Virgin Mary and burst into tears, saying: "Mother of God, was it not you who accompanied me, was it not you who told me that I would visit Fr. Ambrose, and yet I am departing and I have not

seen him." Burning tears flooded the icon and fell onto the ground like rain.

Suddenly the Mother of God came to life and stepped out of the icon, like a maiden of indescribable beauty, looked at Zachariah and said: "Follow me". She set off so quickly that Zachariah could scarcely catch up with her. On the way he met Fr. Pimen. This elder lived a very strict life and allowed no one to approach him. The Mother of God pointed her hand to Zachariah and said: "Pimen, give him your blessing". He blessed him at once. At last they went out behind a fence. It was clear that the Mother of God was leading Zachariah to Fr. Ambrose. There were the holy gates. The Mother of God halted and announced: "Women: are not allowed to enter here, but you go now to Fr. Ambrose, he will receive you." And the holy Guide vanished.

Zachariah felt encouraged and went boldly toward the hut in which the elder lived.

Fr. Ambrose came out into the doorway himself and called Zachariah in. He received him as though he had been waiting for him for a long time. He led him into a separate room, sat him on a small divan and had a nice, affectionate, heart-to-heart talk with him. The whole of the young novice's life was an open book to the elder. Before Zachariah could open his mouth, Fr. Ambrose had already begun to speak: "Well now, my dear, so your mother has died? Listen to me, abandon your bride, do not marry, but enter the monastery. Don't think about your father now, he will let you go himself, he will not hinder you in

your intention of becoming a monk. You did well in coming here. You see that on my wall are written down your four sins. Repent of them, go down to White Shores and prepare there by fasting. Remember that in the Kingdom of Heaven a green oak has been planted for you."

This truly great elder spoke with Zachariah of much more that was edifying and good for the soul. Then he blessed him and let him go. Zachariah picked up his bag and set off on his return journey.

"First I will call in at White Shores," he thought, "and prepare there by fasting, as Fr. Ambrose instructed. Indeed I do have four sins on my conscience; how did he guess them? Then I'll go to my father for my documents and return to the monastery to take up permanent residence there."

After his arrival at White Shores he fasted and almost at once fell ill, so gravely that he was sent to the hospital in Bryansk. His father was informed that his son was near to death. He came to Bryansk and was startled by Zachariah's state of health. Every day the old man went to church to pray for his Zachariah, but nonetheless his son did not recover; all the time the young novice grew worse and worse. Three months had already passed by and he was still between life and death. He would not take the medicines he was offered, but only prayed diligently to the Mother of God. At last the doctors refused to treat him and wrote to White Shores: "Your monk has already been lying here for three months, and this is no almshouse, but he refuses to be treated, and only says: 'I don't believe in your medicines, the Mother of God will come and heal me,' - what kind of talk is this, what kind of capriciousness? He is so ill that he will certainly die, but with his character we cannot help him, so we beg you to take your monk back."

The following answer arrived from White Shores: "We have no need of such a novice, we are banishing him from the monastery."

Then Zachariah besought the Mother of God: "Queen of Heaven, you alone are my Protectress, help me, heal me . . ."

Then he had a dream. The Most Pure Ever-Virgin Mary came to him, touched

his head with her hand and said: "You will live, you will be a monk, you will live with me". The Ever-Virgin began to leave him. Before her a fence opened, she went through into a wonderful garden and the fence closed once more.

Suddenly Zachariah felt a strong desire to go, to follow, to fly after her. But how? He could not go through the wall. "Oh, I would like to be a sparrow and fly after her," and in an instant he turned into a bee and flew in her wake. Next Zachariah saw in his dream that he had reached the fence in the form of a sparrow and there in the garden he saw the Mother of God in her wonderful beauty and the Saviour himself as a little boy and a throng of angels, girded with many-coloured, criss-crossing ribbons. He heard a voice: "No one may enter here unless Our Lady will receive him". The angels were all in wonderful, coloured, heavenly clothes and were all planting trees. Suddenly Zachariah heard the voice of the Queen of Heaven: "Plant a tree in his name too". As soon as Our Lady had pronounced these words, the angels said among themselves: "He is accepted among us". Zachariah was unspeakably overjoyed and fell off the fence straight into the garden in the form of a sparrow, and there he stayed.

This remarkable dream produced a wonderfully powerful effect on the young, ailing novice. He fell into deep thought. Towards morning he had another dream. The abbot Israel, who had accepted him at White Shores and afterwards died, seemed to come to him and say: "You have spent long enough in bed, get up".

In the morning, to everyone's surprise, he woke up completely well. In the town he had a drink of tea for the first time during his entire illness, and went off to White Shores. He had a very unfriendly reception there, but all the same they let him stay. In all he lived there for one year, from 1870 to 1871.

On this occasion, having returned from Bryansk, Zachariah felt weak, and his health was not properly restored. All the same he went through his duties: he watched over the calves, painted buildings, covered the church roofs with paint. The abbot in the monastery then was Fr. Joseph, who tried by every means to send him home, but Zachariah did not give way and begged him to be

allowed to stay there. (Extract from Chapter I)

Eventually Zachariah was accepted as a novice at the Holy Trinity Monastery of St. Sergius at Zagorsk. Here he was severely tested, both physically and spiritually. Gradually he grew in stature and was endowed with the spiritual gifts of a starets (elder). After the 1917 Revolution the Monastery at Zagorsk was closed: Fr. Zachariah had to leave and was offered a home in the flat of a spiritual daughter.

The elder's love for St. Sergius, as I have already written, was especially deep; it was as though he lived by his thoughts and desires, penetrating to the depths of the saint's heart.

The elder did not wish to be separated from the place where his beloved saint had performed his great spiritual feat, but the saint himself said to him: "I shall go away, and you will go away too, Zachariah," and he showed him the flat where he would settle after the dispersal of the Monastery.

The elder asked: "What about the relics?" To this St. Sergius replied: "My spirit will depart, but my relics will remain to be desecrated".

Little by little, Fr. Zachariah resigned himself to this.

All the brothers were evicted, and he remained alone, according to the words of Fr. Barnabas.

Several men arrived from the administration and began to demand that the elder should abandon his cell immediately. "Get out of the monastery." "No, I will not go now," said the elder. "We'll throw you out, what is all this?" they shouted angrily at him.

The elder took a cross and outlined, or rather enclosed, his room with it, saying: "Go on and try then, dare to cross this line which I have drawn around my cell, just try it and at once you will drop dead".

"What kind of an old man is this?" the new arrivals began to say in embarrassment. The power of the elder's words was so great that not one of them dared to cross the line beyond which Fr. Zachariah had forbidden them to pass. It was really very strange; armed, healthy young men were filled with fear and said: "Let us leave this old man, he will go away by himself". They stood

there for a while and then dispersed.

The elder prayed for everyone until the last minute, begging the Lord to forgive all those who had broken the commandment of God.

He asked for blessing for all the brothers who had dispersed to private flats. Once again he begged the Saint that when it pleased the Queen of Heaven, she might open her monastery so that many monks could be saved there. He remembered the vision of St. Sergius, who one day saw a flock of birds, and it was revealed to him that his disciples would increase so greatly that it would be difficult to count them.

At last Fr. Zachariah's time came too, and he was the last to leave the Holy Trinity Monastery of the Saint and God-bearer, our Fr. Sergius, abbot of Radonezh. When the Holy Trinity Monastery of St. Sergius was closed, the superior of the monastery turned to the elder in great sorrow with the question: "Where am I to settle now?"

The elder felt sorry for the superior and said: "Go where the Saint gave me his blessing for you to go, it will be a good place for you. I will follow my nose".

Fr. Zachariah went to Moscow. He arrived at the Sukharev tower, near which there was a chapel. The monk who was on duty in the chapel asked him: "Where are you from, old man of God?" "From a destroyed hermitage," was the humble reply. "Stay with us for the night." "No," replied the elder, "I am afraid that you will all be arrested," and he went away. And in fact that night everyone in the chapel was arrested.

The elder, however, moved to the Serbsky daughter church of the monastery: to his spiritual son, Fr. Seraphim B. At that time E. G. P. was staying as a guest of Fr. Seraphim. When she learnt that the elder had nowhere to live, she invited him to her house.

So it was that our long-suffering exile travelled to Tver region. The Savvinsky daughter church in the yard of their flat was not yet closed, and the elder sometimes officiated there.

After a little while the people sensed the grace that dwelt in the elder and began to come to him in his cell. But by no means all of them were admitted to him by the lady of the house. In the church, however, the crowd jostled

round him, and he consoled, encouraged and drove out demons.

A grief-stricken person had only to talk to the elder for a few minutes and suddenly all his depression and grief would vanish, and tranquillity would be established in his heart; his mind saw God, and such a good, childishly clear and pure feeling came over his heart, as it does on Easter night to a happy child, surrounded by the love of all those near and dear to him, a child who has not tasted grief, who has not known passions and sins. The elder seemed to resurrect and renew the soul that turned to him.

It is impossible to describe the elder's prescience. He saw far ahead into the life of every man. He foretold the imminent death of some people, while to others, like a tender, solicitous mother, he said nothing, but prepared them to pass into eternity.

More than once we heard these words from the elder: "Sometimes I say something I didn't at all expect to say, which surprises me. I have yielded my lips, my heart and my soul to our Saviour and Lord Jesus Christ, and I say and do what he inspires. I do not possess my own words or my own will". (Extract from Chapter IV)

Unofficial Religious Seminar

Young people in the Soviet Union are craving for a religious faith. To satisfy this hunger a small group of young believers began to meet to study the Christian faith. The fate of the participants is described by Alexander Ogorodnikov in a letter to Dr. Philip Potter, General Secretary of the WCC. This is printed below together with a covering letter from some well-known Soviet Christians.

Dear Mr. Potter,

We beg you to give attention to a routine fact of the suppression of religious freedom in the USSR.

These facts are set forth in detail in a letter addressed to you by Alexander Ogorodnikov, who is well known to us as a sincere and zealous Christian and organizer of a Christian seminar.

This document testifies to the deep craving which young people in our country have for religion, for religious education and for building their lives on religious principles.

At the same time, the conversion of young people to faith in God, and especially their striving towards living forms of Christian community, meet with an intolerant attitude and provoke repressive measures on the part of the authorities. Matters have reached the point where psychiatrists diagnose a living religious faith as mental illness.

Evidence of this is the tragic fate of one of the participants in the young people's seminar, Alexander Argentov, a completely mentally healthy person,

who has been forcibly placed in a psychiatric hospital (no. 14, ul. Bekhtereva 15; the doctor treating him is S. M. Degtyarev).

We have no doubt that the religious revival in our country cannot be halted by repressions of any kind. At the same time, we hope that the unanimity and energetic action of the world Christian community will help this revival to proceed with the fewest possible sacrifices.

Moscow, 29 July 1976.

FR. GLEB YAKUNIN
HIERO-DEACON VARSONOFI
KHAIBULIN
YEVGENI BARABANOV
VIKTOR KAPITANCHUK
LEV REGELSON
TATYANA KHODOROVICH
IGOR KHOKHLUSHKIN

* * * *

Dear Mr. Potter,

Extraordinary circumstances compel me to turn to you, and in your person, to the world Christian community. It is a question of the violent actions of the authorities, who are trying to stifle our religious freedom.

I am 26 years old. Three years ago I turned to God and became an Orthodox Christian. My friends made their way along the same path to the Church. Dissatisfied with the mere "performance of a religious cult", having no opportunity