

Archbishop Luka, Surgeon and Scholar

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Communist ideology claims that religion contradicts science and is the enemy of all social and economic progress. This tenet, insistently repeated over 60 years, has entered the consciousness of Soviet man to such an extent that the very idea of a believing scientist or scholar appears to most people in the USSR to be ridiculous.

I am going to tell the story of a man who, for more than 40 years under the Soviet system, was not only a great scientist but openly demonstrated his religious faith. As a Doctor of Medical Science and Professor of Surgery, Valentin Feliksovich Voino-Yasenetsky (1877-1961) created a new branch of medicine – septic surgery. Three generations of doctors have learnt from his established classic *Essays on Septic Surgery* (1934, 1946, 1956). At the same time, from 1921 until his death in 1961, Professor Voino-Yasenetsky was a priest and then a bishop of the Russian Orthodox Church. As a monk and a bishop he bore the name of Luka.

The life of Archbishop Luka is surrounded by legend. While working on his biography, I heard from his contemporaries about 50 legends which had been created during the lifetime of Luka Voino-Yasenetsky. One such folk story, which, however, is based on a real episode, runs thus: “In Tambov the secretary of the regional committee of the Communist Party (Kuznetsov) had taken a dislike to the famous Professor-Bishop. Intending to scoff at him, he asked Luka: ‘You talk about the soul the whole time, but have you yourself ever seen a human soul?’ Bishop Luka answered: ‘I have never actually seen a soul, which is by its nature invisible. But as a surgeon and anatomist I have more than once uncovered a human brain and have likewise never there revealed either conscience or honour. But you will agree that one does sometimes come across these qualities in some people nevertheless . . .’” Stories were told about him, too, by surgeons and generals, by former inmates of Soviet prisons, and by those who had been wounded in the last war, by believing women from the towns of central Russia, by Moscow professors, by bishops, by fishermen from the River Yenisei and the Uzbeks from Tashkent. Their

stories as well as the many letters, sermons, medical works and reminiscences of Archbishop Luka, make it possible to recreate the complicated but attractive image of a Russian scientist and religious thinker.

Luka was tall and even as an old man, when I met him, he looked majestic. He had a deep voice and the large beautiful hands of a surgeon. The Voino-Yasenetskys were a princely Russian family, several generations of whom worked at the Polish and Lithuanian courts. In the 18th century however, the family became poor and had to adopt a simpler life-style. Luka's grandfather was a village miller and his father a pharmacist. While still a student at Kiev University at the turn of the 20th century, he declared to his friends that he was planning to become a "peasant doctor". Over the following 15 years until the Revolution he remained a country doctor and mainly looked after peasants.

In the country, without any kind of scientific guidance, Valentin Feliksovich completed his dissertation and became a doctor of medicine. His dissertation, published in 1915, was devoted to an important subject which was quite new in those days – local anaesthesia. As a doctor, Voino-Yasenetsky worked tirelessly without thinking of himself: in the hospital in the little town of Pereslavl-Zalessky, where he worked alone, he used to perform a thousand operations in one year. Sixty years later I asked the head doctor at that hospital about their surgical department. With pride the doctor answered that his hospital had ten surgeons, and that the total number of operations performed in 18 months amounted to one thousand.

In 1917 Professor Voino-Yasenetsky was working as the chief surgeon in Tashkent. In Central Asia during the Revolution people were seized and killed on the first shred of information, and twice Dr Voino-Yasenetsky was led out to be shot. But he was saved because amongst those who were annihilating the "bourgeoisie" there were people who had been cured by Dr Voino-Yasenetsky, and who knew his integrity and goodness. Then Voino-Yasentsky's young wife who had TB died from cold and hunger, and the professor, always quiet and absorbed in himself, became even more withdrawn. He worked whole days and nights without rest; he took in the sick, performed operations and lectured at the University. He often went hungry because on principle he would not accept any payment from his patients.

In 1921 he became a priest, but did not leave the hospital or the University. He was ordained at a time when many priests, unable to bear the humiliations inflicted by the Soviet authorities, were abandoning their churches and leaving the priesthood. He, however, began to give a series of lectures on pathology, dressed in a cassock and wearing a cross, and was not touched by the authorities because as a scientist and doctor he was highly respected. Then in 1923 he became a monk, taking the name of Luka, and at the request of Patriarch Tikhon became Bishop of

Turkestan and Tashkent. This was at a time when the Russian Orthodox Church was being torn apart by the Renovationist movement, or Living Church* which was dedicated to supporting Soviet power and thus became an officially approved substitute for the Patriarchal Orthodox Church. Bishop Luka was arrested only ten days after he became head of the diocese of Turkestan. But before his arrest he was able to preach several times to the faithful, and wrote a "Testament" in which "by the authority of the apostolic succession, given by our Lord Jesus Christ", he forbade all Orthodox believers to receive Renovationists or to pray with them. This "Testament" made an enormous impression on the people of Tashkent, and when a few months later Bishop Luka was sent into exile from Tashkent, the train taking him away could not move out of the station for a long time because hundreds of believers lay down on the track in front of the engine.

Bishop Luka was exiled twice to the Krasnoyarsk region of Eastern Siberia and once to the shores of the White Sea. But wherever he went he began to heal the sick and preach in the nearest church. If the churches were closed, he illegally unlocked them and continued his ministry as a bishop. He was then moved further north. I sailed 2,000 km from Krasnoyarsk to Turukhansk, which is on the Arctic Circle, and talked to people who had known Bishop Luka. He was remembered with great tenderness: he had been active as a surgeon; he had restored the sight of many; he had operated on patients with cancer, and had once saved a peasant from uremia, giving him a kidney transplant from a calf. The local peasants and fishermen remembered that in answer to the abuse of the Party leaders, the Professor-Bishop had said: "You'll take my cassock from my skin, only from my skin . . ." The simple people also remembered how the head of the local GPU (secret police) sent Luka from Turukhansk further north to the Arctic Ocean, without giving him warm clothing, and how the local inhabitants managed to collect some furs for him and thus saved his life.

After each period of exile, which lasted three to four years, Bishop Luka would return to Tashkent where his four children were being looked after. After a few years he would be arrested and exiled again. In May 1930 Bishop Luka was arrested on an alleged charge of incitement to murder, and in December 1937 he was arrested as a spy. Later in his reminiscences he wrote: "I asked them which country I had spied for, but they could give me no answer." After his arrest in 1937 he was subjected to a method of interrogation called the "conveyer". The interrogators took turns while Bishop Luka had to remain standing for 13 days and nights. Several times he lost consciousness and fell. They dragged him to the water tap, brought him round and made him stand again. His

* See "The Living Church 1922-1946" by Philip Walters, *RCL*, Vol. 6, No. 4, pp. 235-43. Ed.

health was badly damaged but he did not sign any false statements about his "espionage", and was sent once more to the Krasnoyarsk region.

Whenever he came out of prison, Bishop Luka at once took up his work as a scientist: he wrote notes about the most interesting events in medicine, he performed autopsies and read a great deal in German, French and English. Between his first and second exile Bishop Luka was able to publish the first edition of his book, *Essays on Septic Surgery*. He continued to work on his book over a period of ten years and put forward the idea of an All-Union Institute of Septic Surgery. None of his plans, however, materialized, because, as the People's Committee for Health of the USSR pointed out, the professor was also a bishop; were he to renounce his episcopal orders, all his difficulties would evaporate.

At the beginning of the Second World War Bishop Luka was in exile north of Krasnoyarsk. After hearing that the Germans had invaded the USSR, he asked Moscow to use him as a surgeon at the front. In a telegram addressed to Kalinin, President of the Central Executive Committee, he wrote that after the war he would be ready to return to the Krasnoyarsk region to complete his exile. In September 1941 a plane landed next to the village where Bishop Luka was living. The medical war authorities had flown to see the famous surgeon. In Krasnoyarsk, 5,000 kilometres from Moscow, trainloads of the wounded were already coming from the front and there were not enough doctors. So remaining an exile, Luka became the chief consultant surgeon of the huge Krasnoyarsk hospital with 10,000 beds.

Bishop Luka's letters from Krasnoyarsk during this period (1941-42) are full of hope and joy. He was doing about five or six major operations a day, not eating properly, dressing badly, but all this was nothing compared to the great happiness of his life: he had returned to major surgery. He healed the wounded and taught young doctors. In the spring of 1943 he became Archbishop of Krasnoyarsk. He was made a member of the first Synod of the Soviet era and invited to Moscow, where with the few bishops who remained after the purges he elected Patriarch Sergi.

In 1946 Stalin himself ordered the publication of the second edition of *Essays on Septic Surgery*, for which Bishop Luka won the highest scientific award – the Stalin Prize, First Class. During the war and after, Bishop Luka wrote a number of pro-Stalin articles in the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*, and in December 1949, on Stalin's birthday, he preached a sermon wholly devoted to the "wise" leader of the people. Unfortunately many, including Archbishop Luka of Krasnoyarsk, did not understand that the Party's short-lived "friendship" with the Church was promoted for political reasons by Stalin. In the middle '50s, however, Archbishop Luka changed his attitude: when Khrushchev launched his anti-religious campaign Archbishop Luka openly protested. As Archbishop of the Crimea and Simferopol, he preached a sermon on "Fear not, little flock",

in which he called on the faithful to be fearless in the face of the anti-religious campaign. He carried on this struggle for the Church, for man's right to freedom of conscience, until he died. His last protest about the oppression of the Church was sent from Simferopol to the Patriarch two weeks before his death.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of Archbishop Luka was his book *The Spirit, the Soul and the Body*.^{*} He began to write it in 1946 when his career was at its zenith, when his bust stood in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, and the *New York Times* printed his biography. This small book was finished in 1947 and was the first example of religious *samizdat*. As a natural scientist Archbishop Luka tried to prove in this work that man consists of a non-material spirit and soul as well as a body. Thus he repudiated the Marxist theory that human behaviour is determined by a man's material circumstances. It needed great courage to question a fundamental tenet of Party ideology in the Stalinist era. To refute Marx and Marx's Soviet successors, Archbishop Luka enlisted all the available literature in physics, chemistry, psychology, psychiatry and theology. He thought much about the threefold nature of man, consulted physicists, physiologists, and even sought the help of Academician Orlov, a pupil of the great Pavlov. Fortunately, this manuscript has been preserved until today, and I have seen a number of copies of it. One typescript is in the State Museum of the History of Religion in Leningrad, and although the book was not published, several Soviet philosophers have written dissertations refuting the ideas of its author from a Marxist position. [This manuscript has now been published in Brussels. See footnote. *Ed.*]

As a theologian, Archbishop Luka became famous for his sermons. Most often he preached on moral questions, but in his search for evidence he frequently turned to his experience as a doctor and scientist. Once during the Khrushchev anti-religious campaign he tried to deliver a series of sermons refuting atheism. The KGB immediately notified the Moscow Patriarchate and the sermons were stopped. Nevertheless in 1955 Archbishop Luka was made an honorary member of the Moscow Theological Academy on the strength of 12 typewritten volumes of his sermons.

The centenary in 1977 of Archbishop Luka's birth was marked by an article in the Moscow medical newspaper, *Meditsinskaya Gazeta*. The article mostly discussed his medical work and his work with the wounded during the war, and did not mention that he had been a member of the Russian Orthodox Church's hierarchy for 40 years. The *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* also devoted an article to Luka, but did not mention the arrests, imprisonment or exile which he endured because of his faith. The half-truths in both these publications are not accidental. Today, as

^{*} *Dukh, dusha i telo*, Foyer Oriental Chrétien, Brussels, 1978. See extracts in this issue of *RCL*, pp. 104-5 *Ed.*

during the past 60 years of Soviet rule, the press is not allowed to inform its readers that a great scientist and scholar was also a believer. Only in one place can a Soviet citizen read the truth about the late Archbishop. He was buried close to the church in the cemetery of Simferopol, and on the white marble cross above his grave are the words: "Archbishop Luka Voino-Yasenetsky, Doctor of Medical Science, Professor of Surgery."

Sermon by Archbishop Luka

This sermon was preached by Archbishop Luka on 27 April 1957 on the occasion of his 80th birthday. His words were recorded at the time and circulated in samizdat form. A copy reached the West and is now published for the first time in English.

I hope that what I am going to say will not seem like self-praise to you, for I say truly that I do not seek my own glory but the glory of Him who sent me.

In the book of Tobit we read these words: "A King's secret ought to be kept, but the works of God should be acknowledged publicly". It is of the great works of God, as manifested in my life, that I wish to tell you. I know that a great many people cannot understand how, once I had achieved fame as a scientist and had become quite well-known as a surgeon, I could then abandon surgery and science and become a preacher of Christ's Gospel.

Those who think in this way are profoundly mistaken in considering that science and religion are incompatible. This is quite untrue, for we know from the history of science that even many scientific geniuses like Galileo, Newton, Copernicus, Pasteur and our own great physiologist Pavlov, were deeply religious men. I know that there are also many believers among modern professors, who have asked me to give them my blessing.

We have not convinced those who condemn me for becoming a priest and bishop. Let us leave them be.

However, I must tell you that I myself find God's work in me to be something wonderful and beyond understanding, for in looking back on my past life, I see clearly how from my earliest years the Lord – unknown to me – was leading me to the priesthood, which I myself had never even contemplated, for I greatly loved surgery and was wholly devoted to it. It deeply satisfied my constant yearning to serve the poor and suffering, to relieve their sufferings and satisfy their needs by every means in my power.

I remember with amazement what happened 60 years ago, when I finished high school and received a certificate of secondary education, enclosed in a New Testament, from the headmaster at the graduation ceremony. I had read the New Testament before but now I read it once more, from beginning to end. I made a note of everything that made a strong impression on me. Nothing had a more striking effect on me than the words of the Lord Jesus Christ to his Apostles at the sight of a ripening cornfield:

The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few. Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest that he will send forth labourers into his harvest ... (Matt. 9:38)

My heart trembled at these words, and I cried out in my mind: "What, Lord, do you really have few labourers in your cornfield?" I remembered those words all my life.

... Many years went by. I received

the degree of Doctor of Medicine for my dissertation on "Local Anaesthesia", which was given a very high award. I became a district council doctor, healing the ailments of peasants and workers and finding deep satisfaction in this. A few more years went by, and I decided to write a much needed book on septic surgery. When I was writing the introduction, I was suddenly struck by a strange, persistent thought: "When this book is finished, it will bear the name of a bishop". Where did this idea come from? What was this? What bishop?

I repeat, I had never even thought of becoming a priest, or of reaching the rank of bishop. Nevertheless, a few years later that strange, vague thought had become reality. I intended to publish my book *Essays on Septic Surgery*, which later became quite well known, in two parts; when I had finished the first part I wrote on the title page: "Bishop Luka: Essays on Septic Surgery", for by then I was already a bishop.

And I became one quite unexpectedly, even for myself, in response to the clear call of God.

In Tashkent, where at that time I was the senior doctor and surgeon at the city hospital, a diocesan council was in progress, in which I also participated; I gave a long and fiery speech on a very important subject. At the end of the council meeting, Bishop Innokenty took me by the arm, led me out onto the pavement surrounding the cathedral and spoke of the deep impression my speech had made on him. Suddenly he stopped, looked me in the face and said: "Doctor, you should become a priest . . ." However far I had been from such a thought, I took this call to the priesthood from the lips of an Archbishop as a call from God and, without thinking it over for a minute, replied: "All right, Your Grace, I will".

The next Sunday I was ordained as a deacon, a week later I was ordained as a priest and became the most junior member of the cathedral clergy. I immediately developed a great vocation for preaching and organized discussions outside church services. And in disputes with atheists, I attacked them without mercy.

Two years and four months later, I became a bishop and it was already as

a bishop that the Lord led me to the distant town of Yeniseisk.

All the priests of this town, which boasted a number of churches, were already Renovationists and members of the Living Church, as were all the priests of Krasnoyarsk, the regional capital. So I had to hold the services in my flat, together with the three priests who accompanied me.

One day, when I went into the hall to begin the liturgy, I saw an elderly monk standing by the front door. Staring at me, he looked as if he had been struck dumb and did not even bow to me.

This was the reason: the Orthodox believers of Krasnoyarsk, not wanting to pray together with their unfaithful priests, had chosen this monk and had sent him to the town of Minusinsk, south of Krasnoyarsk, to be ordained a hiero-monk by the Orthodox bishop living there. However, some unknown force had directed him, not to the south but to Yeniseisk in the north, where I was living. He told me why he had been so dumbfounded at the sight of me: ten years ago, while I was still living in central Russia, he had had a dream. He had dreamt that an unknown bishop was ordaining him as a hiero-monk. On seeing me, he had recognized me as that bishop.

So ten years ago, when I was still only the surgeon of Pereslavl-Zalesky hospital, I was already counted as an archbishop in the eyes of God.

You see how unswervingly over these ten years the Lord God led me to serve Him as an archbishop during a difficult time for the Church.

The words of the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans have been fulfilled in me:

Those whom God fore-ordained, them he also chose to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren. Moreover, those whom He chose, He also called, and those whom He called, He also justified, and those whom He justified, He also glorified. (Rom. 9:29-30)

I could tell you more still of the wonderful guidance of God's hand in my life, but I think I have said enough for you to cry out with me "Glory to our God for ever and ever. Amen".