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A RUSSIAN PRIEST: MY WORK WITH ENGLISH- SPEAKING CONVERTS

Part II

An Interview with Father Artemy Vladimirov

Father Artemy Vladimirov continues this three-part interview, speaking here on tradition, church canons, the state of Orthodoxy in Russia and the West, marriage, and eldership and spiritual direction.

RTE: You spoke in our last talk of having a warm heart and a light spirit, but many people abroad view Orthodoxy in Russia as simply an old and strict form of Christianity. Would you comment on this?

FR. ARTEMY: They say that when we take our first steps in Christianity, we have an experience of grace, but this experience is only the beginning. Our Lord gives His consolation although we are not worthy of it. He supports us in the measure that we can receive. But if you are persistent and struggle continuously, assisting yourself by means of repentance, there will come a

moment when you will reach a certain degree of chastity. Your heart will be cleansed by God. The second step of spiritual life is when we begin to know this grace with our mind—not with our intellect, but with our *dukh*, our spirit. When we meet grace we realize that God actually reveals Himself to our hearts, that we might speak to Him “face to face.” We experience grace not with our earthly feelings, but, as the Fathers say, with the inner sensibility of our mind.

What I mean to say is that when you understand what it is to be with God, to be a sinner visited by the Heavenly King; when you begin to know what it is to be a citizen of the heavenly Jerusalem and understand that this treasure is the invisible kingdom of Jesus Christ; when you feel and realize that God is closer to you than any material thing; then you will also understand that this kingdom requires the rejection of everything worldly. You cannot divide your heart into two parts. Either you belong to the visible world with its pleasures and delights, or you belong to another world, and you use the Cross to protect yourself from this visible world, so that you can be with God, and only God. This is the result of spiritual life when you exercise it as our Mother Church teaches us.

You will understand then that Orthodoxy is not strict, nor old. It is always new, always renewing. It gives you revelation. It is something that never dies. As St. Ignatius Brianchaninov says, “Christianity is poetry.” He means this in the spiritual sense of the word. For him, life in Christ is the utmost degree of inspiration. For him it is poetry, it is a delight that cannot be compared to anything. It is real joy, pleasure, but if you are to gain this treasure you are first to kiss the Cross, to press it to your heart. Many spiritual people who wanted to be with Christ, who feared to lose this inner treasure, were reckoned as hard, unsociable, impolite, because surely, the rules of *de bon ton* do not necessarily coincide with the inner laws of preserving grace in one’s heart. Saint David says, *I have refrained my feet from every evil way, that I might keep Thy word*. In Russian this sounds like, “I would rather be hard and severe, with the intent to be truthful.” However, the foremost virtue is love, and the closer you come to Christ, the more Christian love you must have. You may be very ascetic towards yourself, but you are to be soft and tender towards your neighbors. Real Christians are like St. Paul. He was like a nurse to his spiritual children, and he taught them with tears, every day for many years. He was gentle and silent with them. His spiritual portrait is very attractive, although he could also strike a wizard blind.

Of course, liberal Christians are more interested in literary questions, or in some ecumenical discussions. They are very swift to judge Russian Christianity... like Fr. Alexander Men, the predecessor of Russian ecumenism, who constantly claimed in his newspaper articles: “Christianity, the official Christianity of the Moscow Patriarchate, is full of scribes and Pharisees.” But the experience of Church history teaches us that it is dangerous to confuse the borders between the Church’s teaching and a worldly outlook.

RTE: In regard to Church teaching, could you speak a little about the place of the canons in our daily life? As converts we aren’t sure how to view them, and in the West they often seem as man’s laws that can be set aside at will, or reinterpreted according to modern conditions. How are we to think about this?

FR. ARTEMY: Some people think that canons are an easy thing, that they are moral precepts, like any earthly teaching. But this is not so. The canons are spiritual, they are very, very high and it is not an Orthodox tradition that everyone can give commentaries on the canons. To understand the canons and to live according to them is only possible when you are inside the Church and when you have the Holy Spirit in your heart. Therefore, it is a very spiritual thing, a very fine, thin line. We are to be very discreet when we deal with canons. We are not to imitate the Pharisees, who knew all the precepts and in a wicked manner combined the laws to pursue their perverse intentions.

The collection of canons is a moral light, like the beams of the sun, which help us to see properly, and we should abide by them so that we have God’s help in “solving our problems”—I believe that is a favorite expression in the West. Because life is very complex it is not an easy thing to understand what I should do in this or that situation. Canons are the beams of the sun, which help me to orient myself in this world. They show the direction, and it is an absurd thing to go against them, to boldly reject them by saying that they are old-fashioned, or that we can’t apply them in the twenty-first century. No, we should think and pray and ask wise people how we can follow these canons, and how they can help us.

For example, we have an ancient canon from the early Church that says that a Christian should not have a Jewish doctor. Centuries ago, Christians knew that there was a certain danger connected with a kabalistic perception of life. Now, this means that we are to be very discreet, very wise, and investigate the mood or orientation of this or that doctor before we approach him.

RTE: We would be hard put in the West today to find a Jewish doctor who has immersed himself in the Kabala, but we do often have health practitioners whose methods of healing are derived from “New Age” philosophies that are unacceptable for Christians. This would be the same kind of situation: to understand your physician’s philosophy of healing and how his beliefs affect his methods.

FR. ARTEMY: Yes. We also have canons that men should not wear women’s clothes, nor women, men’s clothes. One early reason for this was that during the Greek celebrations of the cult of Dionysios, there was a Hellenistic habit of men and women changing their clothes for those of the opposite gender; they put on masks and behaved very badly. It was simply paganism, and it is the psychology of pagans to not discern between male and female, to somehow diminish the difference. I think it is a hidden form of lust.

The present state of modern society is the consequence of apostasy. We have our own kind of paganism. Two or three hundred years ago, European and American society was mostly Christian, and Christianity made an impact on appearance, as well as on morals. Now everything has changed and we are the children of this century, our ideas are distorted by sin. Therefore, the task of a priest is to restore the normal approach to life, in its moral field first of all, and then in all the earthly aspects.

But I think that all of these external things are connected to our inner state. If you have the inner state of an Orthodox Christian, you won’t feel the need to be modern, and if, for example, you are a woman and your head is uncovered or you are wearing trousers in church, you will find yourself uncomfortable. If you are a man wearing an earring, you know that you have stepped out of the stream of tradition, and you eventually will feel that you have gone against God’s grace by adopting these fashions. It will be the prompting of your own conscience to have a traditional appearance, the imperative of your soul. This inner awareness will not come about on the first day that you are a Christian, but if you attend church and live a church-life you will change.

RTE: Many people in the West see Russian Orthodoxy as very patriarchal. For instance, Christians here are often very obedient to their spiritual fathers and seek advice even in the small details of their lives...

FR. ARTEMY: Yes, it is a fact. “Oh Batiushka, can I take your blessing to clean my teeth?” (*laughter*) “Please, surely, for all your life...and don’t approach me with this question again.”

RTE: To people from the West this seems limiting.

FR. ARTEMY: Not only limiting but silly, to an infantile degree.

RTE: But even when it is applied seriously and for good reason, westerners tend to see this as giving up their free will. The Church Fathers teach that cutting off one’s own will is the cornerstone of Christian practice, but how can converts adopt their freedom-loving way of thought to this concept of obedience to a spiritual father without becoming unthinking?

FR. ARTEMY: If you have a clever spiritual father he will try to correct any meticulousness, or pettiness, because it is a distortion, certainly. But the other thing is that we priests should understand who we are. It was only St. Macarius the Great who had the gift of seeing your soul, with your desires and needs and whims, who was able to discern every drop of water that you needed. If you are not Macarius the Great you should be very, very careful with this realm of control. If you imagine that this is the correct way of spiritual care—a strict manner of communicating with *your* spiritual children, “No, you won’t go to that monastery. You will stay here.” “No, you will not go as a pilgrim to Jerusalem, it is not useful.” When batiushkas imagine that they understand this delicate realm of spiritual government and guidance, they will certainly bear misunderstanding, confusion, rebellion, constant upset, regret, despair...and, (*smiling*) their children may even beat them.

But now we shall speak about the middle way. If your spiritual father lives in Christ, tries to pray, battles with his thoughts, struggles to acquire the virtues, certainly he may be given a word of warning, of admonishment for you. If he tries to be useful he will certainly feel some trends in your inner development. He may rebuke, but nevertheless he understands that God is that Divine Person who leads you, and that only God knows you in detail, knows you perfectly, and completely understands your heart. Priests very often cannot understand what you feel, the intent of your words, because it is difficult to express yourself precisely. We think we express our thoughts clearly, but it is not always so. However, if Batiushka tries to stand in the presence of God, he will surely be given a word for you. St. Tikhon of Zadonsk says,

“Love will find the word.” But priests shouldn’t be too fond of ruling. Jesus Christ says, *If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.* It is the atmosphere of spiritual freedom that works. We shouldn’t be too intense or use pressure.

The key is this: the more spiritual freedom a priest has in his heart, and the more his child in Christ feels an atmosphere of freedom, the more ready he will be to be obedient. You should not insistently push pious contents into his heart. The heart is the realm of freedom. If you want to be a good spiritual father then, as Jesus Christ says, *take up your cross and follow Me.* The impression that a priest produces when he himself follows Christ, if he is assiduous in following Christ, is a joyful thing to see. And people will respond, “Yes, yes, I understand. I will do everything.”

RTE: Have you noticed any difference in the understanding of Orthodoxy between westerners and Russians? I don’t mean theological or historical knowledge, but those fine shades of comprehension that shape and color the soul.

FR. ARTEMY: You will come across few real Russian people in Russia today. We are not truly Russians because we have no real church culture. Russia is the country of the Russian Orthodox Church. Russian people are Church Russians. But we are only the remnants of the Russian people. We are not so Russian, unfortunately, because our Russian folk were dispersed, destroyed, killed, annihilated, forcibly mixed with other peoples. Nevertheless, Russia is alive.

It is difficult therefore to speak about Russian people now. We are all invalids here, but it is Jesus Christ who chooses invalids to put the world to shame. Still, it is rare to come across something authentic, something characteristic of the life of the traditional Church. We are all pupils, slowly moving forward in a crowd. Unfortunately, our old people die and now a new generation, with new tastes and notions, has arisen. But certainly, here in Russia we have holy places, and together with books, these holy places give life. The ancient monasteries, holy springs, the cemeteries, the saints’ relics... Optina Pustyn, for example, is alive. And the spirit of those great, great elders is also alive.

In Russia it is easy to rid ourselves of the spirit of worldliness, but it remains for us to try to pray attentively and not to despair because of our con-

stant faults—to give one’s heart to our Lord and the Mother of God; to run to them, and to find there the golden mean between communicating with people and keeping a distance. We are to keep a part of our life totally unknown to anyone, completely hidden. This should be your authentic spiritual life, a vast realm that will bring you happiness, a realm that you can enter by means of repentance and attentive prayer, by not judging other people, and by cleansing your soul.

RTE: You have been abroad, to Poland, France, Greece, and Jerusalem. Are there differences that you have noticed in the way that Orthodox Christians in these countries live and worship, from what you are used to in Russia?

FR. ARTEMY: It is a very hard thing for me to pray outside of Russia. In some of the Greek churches I saw, people appeared to be emotional and restless. They didn’t seem to be filled with awe, or to be standing in the presence of God. It is impossible here in Russia that a priest would take off his spectacles and lay them on the altar, or his prayerbook—or casually sit in the altar with his legs crossed. Believers would be ready to call him an atheist.

RTE: You saw this in Greek churches?

FR. ARTEMY: (*smiling*) I didn’t say that I saw it... but in this respect our liturgical tradition in Russia is very high, it is a heritage. Unfortunately, we are not worthy of this heritage and we transgress many of our own traditions... But certainly, when I was in France it was a torture for me to confess people, to confess adults. Of course, children are children, but the adults were very difficult.

RTE: Why was it difficult?

FR. ARTEMY: These were Russian Orthodox ladies who accompanied the children to an Orthodox summer camp, but they had no idea of salvation; no prayer rules, no preparation for Holy Communion. Their children, it seemed to me, will not be able to hold the candle of piety as their grandmothers and grandfathers of the first Russian emigration did. They won’t be able to preserve the flame. The moment Muscovites entered the churches in France they were immediately known and detected because of their respectful attitudes.

It is a paradox, but it is the most difficult thing in the world for Orthodox people in Paris not to break their fasts. It is an ordeal for them. “Batiush-

ka, French cheeses are just too tempting.” I visited their *supermarche*, and found everything for eternal fasting—even products which have the appearance of dairy, made of vegetables. Everything, all kinds of grains, vegetables, fruit—but for them it is, “Oh, I am so sorry, but I have a piece of cutlet in my mouth.”

The degree of liberalism is not only astonishing but frightful. For example, some Orthodox priests in France consider it *de mauvais ton* [bad taste] to mention abstaining from Holy Communion during women’s “critical days.” It is *de mauvais ton* to even speak of it. There is nothing forbidden, there are no limits, everything is allowed... but if you as a priest don’t know the tradition, if you aren’t within the tradition, if you do not have a spiritual father who not only knows something about this, but understands the spiritual sense of this or that church law, you will never learn how to teach people.

For example, it occasionally happens that a bride and groom come to have a church marriage, when suddenly she finds herself in her “critical days.” A white dress, guests have gathered, limousines are waiting to carry them to their banquet, a thousand dollars has already been paid. She approaches you and says, “Batiushka, forgive me please, but suddenly this morning I understood that *je suis indisposee* [I am indisposed].” What to do? It is not an easy situation. What am I to say to her mother, to her father, to friends? I have had this happen.

RTE: What did you do?

FR. ARTEMY: I knew the young couple well, and when she came to the church with everything prepared for the wedding, she told me that just two hours before she had realized that it was not the proper time. As a priest I was in a difficult situation, I didn’t know what to do and I began to pray. We decided to do the betrothal with a solemn sermon, so that with God’s help I could create an atmosphere of congratulations. Then I told the many guests that, due to special circumstances, with great mutual pleasure we would meet back at the church in seven days to perform the sacrament. The young couple had their wedding banquet, and remained as friends for one more week.

RTE: So, you decided that it was permissible to do the betrothal in that situation?

FR. ARTEMY: Yes, the situation required an immediate decision, and although I admit that it was not quite the canonical solution, still, the betrothal is

the prelude to the wedding, and these preliminary prayers can be separated from the sacrament for many months. Pious fathers have said that, in such an untimely situation, if a priest dares to raise his hands and pray for the Holy Spirit to come down and visit the couple's hearts in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit won't descend. It was St. Ignatius Brianchaninov who, in his own time, said that the presence of the Holy Spirit was disappearing from the lives of Orthodox Christians because of the neglect of Church canons. They were being violated by almost everyone in Russia because of human innovation and tampering with Church rules inspired by the Holy Spirit.

RTE: And this is still going on?

FR. ARTEMY: Nowadays, when I think about modern church life, certainly here in Russia but perhaps everywhere, I see that the attention of Church administrators, the main points in Church documents, are focused on *material* concerns: the construction of new churches, questions connected with church education, church finances, the external behavior and appearance of priests—but very seldom do they take up questions about the purity of belief. The attention of many is directed to external things. For example, when they make a judgement on behaviour, the heaviest punishments are for those who have sinned against church finances, church wealth, but when they deal with moral indiscretions or heresies, the result is not profound.

This is evidence that the domain of Spirit remains in the shadows—but when you read the writings of the Holy Fathers, when you investigate the church life of previous ages, you will see that people contested and argued... their pain was not over material things, but over the right understanding of the Holy Scriptures or the explanation of difficult liturgical texts. They lived by the invisible, but now we are living in the visible world; therefore, these things seem unimportant to us. If you don't feel God in your heart, if you are neglecting the canons, how can you orient yourself correctly in these questions? As a priest, you have done everything proper outwardly for the couple you are marrying: you raised your hands, you pronounced the prayers, they made a bow, you gave them rings, you gave them wine, you congratulated them. Everything in the marriage service is there, but we are blind. We think that everything is all right, but our predecessors were more discerning and their sight was more acute. Although we cannot be like the Fathers of the past, we are to revere them and we are to be true to their prescriptions.

There is a tradition that when St. Basil the Great raised his hands while appealing to the Holy Spirit and pronouncing the words of the consecration, the wings of the golden dove above the altar (perhaps it was a lampada) began to wave, touched by an invisible force. St. Basil saw the light and activity of another world. One day, however, he appealed once, and then twice, but the dove remained immobile. He thought, “What is it?” He didn’t find anything in himself that was amiss, but then he noticed that one of the deacons, instead of contemplating eternity, was gazing at the pretty face of a worshipper. This was why he invented the iconostasis.

So, it is not an easy thing to explain something like this to those who are allowed everything and who “know their rights.” I feel that one of the most serious problems in Russia, also, is the easy accessibility of the Holy Eucharist. Everyone is allowed to partake because of our superficial approach concerning confession. For example, almost no one now thinks of the consequences of receiving Holy Communion without having had a Church marriage except those priests who are faithful to Church laws. We shouldn’t underestimate the gravity of the words of St. Paul: *many are ill and some of you die* because people do not consider whether they are worthy of receiving Holy Communion or not.

RTE: So you are talking about baptized Orthodox Christians who have not been married in church but are receiving Holy Communion?

FR. ARTEMY: Yes, it is not an easy thing, if a person is accustomed to freely receiving. I confess that I am not officially cold with these people because this is our common state in Russia. Under the Soviets, people were too frightened to marry in church. They didn’t know anything, their lives had been formed without the influence of the Church, and when they come to the Church now, they find that the state of their marriage is unsatisfactory. Certainly they should repent, and they should engage in a podvig of prayer to soften the heart of their spouse, so that he or she will agree to baptism and a church wedding. Some old and wise priests have witnessed in their pastoral practice that if the Orthodox person confesses and abstains from Holy Communion until the situation is rectified, and the priest and this person pray together and wait, God’s grace will completely change the atmosphere in the family.

RTE: Is this a widespread problem in Russia?

FR. ARTEMY: Yes, it is. One of the Christian prophets, St. Nilus the Myrrh-gusher, predicted that there will come a time when people won't recognize Church marriage, and now, in Russia, the majority of the population, and very often even baptized people, reckon the state marriage, with an official stamp in your passport, as a valid union. If people do not seem to be obviously troubled, they may not be questioned by the priest when they first come to church and may just begin receiving Holy Communion. Without any instruction, they may not even realize that the situation requires correction.

But let us think: Is everything all right, or is this a real problem that we are to ponder over? Every person who has had a Church marriage knows for sure that this is a gift bestowed by the Heavenly Father. It is a state of inner instruction, of inspiration. As with St. Job, you feel the breathing of the Holy Spirit in your nostrils, and you know that your wife is mystically your rib, a part of your nature, and that it is the Holy Trinity that has united you to each other and to God Himself. You know from your own experience that everything in your matrimonial life, if it corresponds to the laws of nature and the Holy Gospel, is sanctified. Coarse passions do not harm the souls and bodies of Orthodox spouses who recognize themselves as the instruments of God's will. Therefore, they approach the Holy Chalice with pure consciences. They are encouraged by the Holy Spirit, they have wings of prayer and love behind them. It is their guardian angel who takes them by the hand and accompanies them to the chalice. They are permeated with light even before they partake of the precious particle because the Holy Spirit has visited them and rests upon them for eternity in their souls and bodies.

Is this true, I would ask our Orthodox readers, in the case of a civil marriage? Who made them husband and wife? Who allowed them to practice their matrimonial life? Are they enlightened with grace? Is everything alright with them in regard to the commandments of purity? Are they innocent in their hearts? Are they really the instruments of God's creative will?

I would like to put this question before our Christian readers who don't see any problem with this subject. Wise priests witness from their own experience that the echoes of this wrong practice will inevitably sound in the life of Christians who don't make an effort to change the situation, to repent their sins, to do their best to become real spouses. I understand the reasoning of those priests who invite these Christians often for confession, who instruct them very carefully, who give some prayer rules, who pray with them for a

change of heart if one of the couple does not yet desire a Church marriage. These priests don't hurry to give them the Chalice, but help carry the burden of repentance, waiting for a change in the situation.

It goes without saying that in all grave circumstances, such as before surgery, before giving birth, or if his life is in danger, every Orthodox Christian is to take Holy Communion irrespective of his previous life or the status of his church marriage. The only condition is repentance. Experienced senior priests also remind us younger clergy of the words of St. Paul from Corinthians I, where he says, *“For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep.”* St. Paul is saying here that people become ill and even die from receiving unworthily; they are judged by our Lord in this life, so that they will not be judged in the eternal life. We are to be interested, not in the outward manifestations of church life, but in spiritual fruit. And this is a question: do we receive spiritual fruit from partaking of Holy Communion when we are not yet ready? God gives each of us a chance to prepare ourselves not only to partake outwardly, but to sanctify our hearts and bring forth real fruit.

RTE: In America people don't have obligatory civil marriages like in Russia and much of Europe. We can marry either in a civil ceremony or with a church service, but most choose a church service. What we do have is intermarriage between Orthodox and non-Orthodox. It is not uncommon for Orthodox priests to approve of this arrangement, but in many cases it seems to lead to a lessened commitment to the Church on the part of the Orthodox spouse. What can you say about this?

FR. ARTEMY: After Peter the Great there was a new practice like this in Russia. On the condition that your children were to be brought up Orthodox, you could marry other Christians, but, of course, this is a violation of the canons of the Church. How can the Holy Spirit sanctify one's heart if it is not reconciled with God? Certainly, it is not in accord with Church tradition to marry a Christian who does not believe properly in the Holy Trinity, in the reality of the Body and Blood of Christ, who does not believe in the holy sacraments, in the Mother of God, in the saints—not to mention those who do not even believe in the divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our pious ancestors used to say that if a priest had awe in his heart, he would never dare to raise

his hand to marry this couple. He couldn't even bless a person in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit unless he was ready to absorb the authentic teaching, was open to spiritual truth.

I happen to know couples like this in Russia, and I know that the ruinous consequences are always obvious. Every tree is known by its fruit, and the children, especially, will suffer. It is almost impossible to form their souls correctly when one parent is not Orthodox. How are we to marry people when they cannot approach the Holy Chalice together? How can we believe that it is a marriage sanctified by the Lord if we cannot approach the Chalice?

So, if a priest is not indifferent towards his parishioners, and stands in awe before the sacraments, if he takes part in the couple's spiritual life, prays with them, consoles them, encourages them, confesses them, but is not too hasty to give Holy Communion, the atmosphere of mutual confidence and prayer will bear ripe fruit. Hearts become softened, stubborn characters become mild and obedient and sooner or later we approach Church marriage.

Certainly, all of these meditations should be considered as the *personal practice* of individual priests concerning *their own spiritual children*, or of people who come to pray together with these priests, seeking the sanctification of their union. But we also know that in the Moscow Patriarchate, there is an official policy, adopted by the patriarch, by which every baptized Orthodox Christian is admitted to the Holy Chalice irrespective of the status of his or her marriage, based on the patriarchate's recognition of civil marriage. This approach is the prerogative of a bishop. A parish priest is not to oppose this ruling and he is to inform those coming to him that this is now the general practice. In my opinion, he is also to enlighten his parishioners as to the canons, and to offer to help them think about how to improve their situation; this is their personal decision. I believe that when we speak of civil marriage and its official acknowledgement by the Church, we recognize that this couple shares in the rights and duties of marriage, and that in all official and state circumstances they should be treated as a real family. This, however, has nothing in common with the sanctification of the Holy Spirit. We should discern both the jurisdictional side of the matter and the heavenly one. It is interesting that in modern Greece, Church authorities do not recognize the validity of a civil marriage for Orthodox Christians.

It is a fact that when we begin to pray and wait, longing for the Holy Spirit and the sanctification of our family, God gives us what we pray for. It is His

word, *Seek ye first the kingdom of God... and all these things shall be added unto you.* But you are to have faith, and love for God and your spouse.

RTE: How long do people usually have to wait until their husband or wife is ready?

FR. ARTEMY: A year, a year and a half, two years. But, let us compare this one or two years with ancient canons, which don't permit you to have Holy Communion for ten years. This is a very difficult thing to explain to people who don't want to pray, to repent, who don't believe in the Church, but they want to have everything their own way. For them it is very difficult to read about this. They are ready to call this craziness. "What is the problem, why on earth should he make us wait? We are Christians."

It is true that a priest may be too strict, and say something like, "You can come back to church when you are ready to have a Church marriage, but until then I don't want to see you." This is not the way to treat people. You as a priest are to carry this burden, to be more than attentive towards that person who is now aware of his or her sin of living with a spouse without a church marriage.

RTE: As I understand, if a couple who were married before in another church or in a civil service are baptized Orthodox at the same time, they don't have to be remarried in the Church.

FR. ARTEMY: Yes, their previous marriage is valid through the grace of their mutual baptism. Still, it is psychologically a very good thing for them to pronounce vows before the face of Christ and to consciously adopt the grace of an Orthodox marriage. Certainly, the field of their matrimonial relations is sanctified by their mutual baptism in the Orthodox Church, but it is very helpful for them to have a Church marriage as well.

Often, it is women who first come back to the Church, who find themselves in the position of wanting a Church marriage while their husbands are still indifferent. This neglected spiritual wilderness will begin to change when, with God's help, you make yourself a sacrifice of love towards your husband, but not by giving ultimatums. As St. Peter says in his first epistle, you wives are to acquire your husbands for Christ without words, through your pure life: *...that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives; while they behold your chaste con-*

versation coupled with fear. We usually have two trends in our modern parish life. Some priests, monks mostly, sometimes say, “Don’t live with him. If he is bold and stubborn, and won’t marry in church, let him sleep on the balcony!” But the result of this could be the ruin of the family. This is impossible, and not justified in any way. But the opposite approach, the liberal one is, “Yes, here we are at the beginning of the third millenium, where anything is possible.”

The words of St. Paul must be understood correctly, *the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife.* And again, *the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband.* This refers to the following situation: if my wife and I marry when we are unbelievers and are *not yet baptized*, and then I become a believer—although I am baptized, she does not yet want to become Christian. In this situation, what concerns our mutual life as husband and wife is sanctified, and the children also, but her soul is not yet sanctified. My baptism only sanctifies the field of our physical life.

RTE: This is if only one of them is baptized after their marriage? And that baptized person may receive Holy Communion, even if the other isn’t Orthodox?

FR. ARTEMY: Yes. But it is not so if we were baptized beforehand, and later married outside the Church.

I am also sure that only Christians nowadays follow the law of nature in their marriage. Most couples who are devoid of the grace of Church marriage have a pagan understanding of life and commit grave sins in their marital life. For example, we know from the rule of St. Basil the Great, inserted after the Confession Prayers in our priest’s Trebnik, that a woman who used herbs to prevent conception was to be punished like a murderer, which meant that after she repented she was to abstain from Holy Communion for many years. Sins against pregnancy were considered to be in the genre of murder by ancient Church teachers of morality, whose rules were then adopted as canons regulating the moral life of Christians. In light of these canons we understand that much of what happens in the matrimonial life of modern people is pure perversion. All kinds of contraception, and even the attitude that pregnancy can be chosen or not, transforms the shrine of Church marriage into a den of lust. Therefore, the Church is more than wise when she asserts that you can approach the Holy Chalice only in the state of sanctity. This means that either you are under the holy grace of Church marriage or that you live like a monk.

These penitential canons for using contraception are not now exercised literally because people are very feeble and do not have the inner force to repent like Christians of the fourth century. But on the other hand, these rules were never revoked. This means that a modern priest is to coordinate his pastoral practice with these instructions of the Holy Fathers. When, as a priest, I want to weigh the gravity of this or that sin, with the aim of persuading a sinner to repent, I am to remember all these rules, and give their essence, so that the repenting Christian will understand the gravity of this or that sin and the seriousness of the spiritual situation. So, when I read that the Holy Fathers say in the canons that a person is to repent as a murderer for her sin against pregnancy, I understand the seriousness of using modern contraceptives, these pills and devices. It is the spirit of murder and nothing else. Does it change anything if all of mankind uses them? We know that hell begins on the surface of this earth, and if I want to help save souls, I am to give a diagnosis and indicate the way to spiritual light. If a priest looks superficially on these sins, and lets those committing them have Holy Communion, does he fulfill the will of God? Is he a spiritual doctor, or is he a conformist to modern values who disorients his flock and shows them the broad way, not leading to paradise?

RTE: And your actual pastoral care of these women is milder than the penalties St. Basil recommends?

FR. ARTEMY: Certainly, milder. They are simply to quit with these things. As long as they have a sin against their soul and body, against pregnancy, against the Life-giving Spirit, how can they approach the Chalice, which is given for the remission of sins? If you don't want to repent of your sins, what do we have to speak about?

Also, I don't want to go into detail about this, but if the husband insists and uses something against pregnancy, but his wife is against it and doesn't use anything herself, the responsibility for the sin will be on his soul. She certainly is to confess, but she is pure, because our God judges according to intention.

My main point is that the experience of a priest who confesses people confirms the wisdom of Church canons, because modern life, devoid of the Holy Spirit and the Orthodox view of marriage, is a nightmare. No serious priest can close his eyes and invite his parishioners to the Chalice before

they correct their lives, and understand the difference between what is right and what is wrong. They must know how to fulfill the commandments of our Lord concerning marriage. St. Paul says, *Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.* Modern couples who don't pray to Jesus Christ, who don't think about their sanctification, have a union that is not alive, but dead, because of the lust that permeates and distorts every sphere of life.

While I am not a theoretician who ponders on the problem of Church marriage, as a confessor I know the difference between a Church couple who bears the cross of fidelity to Christ consciously, and the sons of this world, who pursue filthy pleasures that they consider to be normal. It is not our task here to go into detail, but there is a sharp line of demarcation between those righteous people who believe in Christ and fulfill His commandments, and unbelievers who insist on behaving as they wish, without admitting any restrictions coinciding with the laws of nature or the Holy Gospel. The difference is that of night and day. It is very difficult to explain this in a theoretical argument with a theologian who does not know the real condition of human hearts, who does not know the consequences of superficially approaching Holy Communion. As St. Paul says, people do become ill, and some can even die.

At the height of Christian philosophy, marriage is a podvig. Why, otherwise, does the couple wear crowns with crosses on their heads? Why does the Church sing "Holy Martyrs..." when they go around the analogian with the icon? A real marriage, in which the husband and wife abide by the commandments of God and the rules of the Church, is a martyrdom.

RTE: How do we (particularly young people) know if an inclination or a desire to pursue marriage or monasticism is a real calling from God or is only a passing desire, perhaps something that doesn't really fit our soul. We don't want to make decisions out of pride and vanity or impulsiveness, nor do we want to ignore an inclination of the heart that may be a sign from God.

FR. ARTEMY: In regards to the calling of monasticism or marriage, they say that you should observe your heart and try to understand—is this a real need to find your other half, or do you have a sense of inner freedom? Perhaps you know what it is to have wings at your back? You are either to feel yourself obliged by the circumstances of your inner life to seek for marriage, or, if you feel yourself to be a bird with outstretched wings (not constantly, cer-

tainly, but from time to time), and are certain that there is an invisible world that you are designed for, you may embrace the path of a monk. If you understand the inner world of your own heart, and know for sure that God is showing you the way, you won't commit a sin against your constitution. Otherwise, you may make a great mistake, and will later cry bitterly over the loss of your calling. We should test ourselves and find inner affirmation for the one path or the other.

When we speak of God's calling, God's leading hand, we are to be patient and attentive, we must know how to wait. We should be constant, and not rush to change our decisions. When we stand before God in our heart, having first cleansed ourselves of sin and prayed for inner enlightenment, feeling that we are ready to respond when He calls us, certainly God won't leave us alone. He will show us the way and will help us to take the first steps. He will give us everything that He has planned for us when we try to be worthy of His calling.

RTE: There are Orthodox Christians in America and Europe, and many more here in Russia, who either can't find an Orthodox spouse or who don't feel called to marry, but neither are they inclined towards monasticism. Isn't there a third way of life, that of someone who lives a devout Orthodox life in the world, or who has a special talent such as being a physician or teacher? Others (particularly in Russia) have old parents or sick family members to look after. Also, some people may not feel they have a special calling, but just don't fit into the categories of "married" or "monastic." Can you speak a little about this, and how it works out in people's lives?

FR. ARTEMY: Now, when everything is so difficult, and, as St. Tikhon of Zadonsk and St. Ignatius Brianchaninov say, "hypocrisy is everywhere," one shouldn't just seek a monastery because of a fiasco in his matrimonial hopes. Our life is now a little like the life of the Roman Christians of the second or third century, when there were no great monastic centers like in later centuries, but there were many people burning with real piety to please God and to fulfill His commandments in hostile and aggressive surroundings. Of course, nowadays, we meet a great number of young people, usually young women, who have not been fortunate, or because of the circumstances of their lives have no possibility to find a husband or a monastery; they live like the first Christians—unmarried and preserving their virginity. Or, perhaps a person

has even had some unhappy experiences outside of marriage, but having repented of his or her sins and mistakes, is now permeated with God's Spirit. These people want to live a chaste life, but perhaps they do not want to say farewell to their parish or to their confessor—they also may live a devoted, pious life in the city. Now in Russia we have books like "Monastery in the World" by Fr. Valentine Sventinsky, who lived in the years preceding and right after the Revolution; he was one of the most interesting writers of the century.

In Moscow and St. Petersburg now, many laymen read monastic books, are well-instructed in the writings of the Holy Fathers, and their inner constitutions are very close to those of monastic novices. But to live like this, the most important thing is to have a good confessor and an atmosphere of spiritual family. It is not so odd that these pious people can live in noisy cities with numerous temptations and places of corruption, if they have a Christian parish that has both inner strength and provides grace-filled protection, that can afford us (as we pray in our *ectenias*) "a quiet and peaceful life, in all piety and purity."

Now, as our world becomes older and it is more and more impossible to occupy a neutral position—when people tend to live either like swine or like swans—it is quite natural to have this third way of pleasing God. This is particularly so because of the lack of matrimonial virtues in our society. Men are often unable to be the heads of families, and we see the diminishing of quite natural and basic human qualities: responsibility, inner honesty, the understanding of the necessity to support your family, the duty to earn your daily bread, the sense of being a head who does not bring harm to the body, spiritual nobility. Instead, there is a great readiness for the vices of drinking, drug use, cruelty, and corruption. Therefore, many priests who feel themselves more or less responsible for their spiritual daughters, don't dare to recommend that they look for a husband. Perhaps they are not future nuns, but it is obvious that many of them will not be able to sustain the sufferings that await them in an impulsive marriage. In many cases the sharks already lie in wait; their jaws are open to swallow these too-courageous young swimmers. So, if a priest has compassion for his youthful parishioners, he won't be too quick to push them into marriage.

Certainly, life goes on, and Christian marriages take place. People do find one another in this world, but in many cases, despite successive attempts to find her other half, a young woman won't succeed. One can't explain why:

she may be young and clever, she may have a profession and not be poverty-stricken, everything is fine with her—but still she is unable to succeed in her desire to become a Christian wife. Certainly, if she were not a Christian there would be no problem, but she doesn't want to be the wife of a non-Christian—it would be a pagan union, with all of the consequences of abortion, perversion, and of lightless inner battles. For many people now it is a problem to find a kindred soul, and although these young unmarried women are frequently upset or a little exasperated, they don't really know the sufferings of pious wives who have joined their lives to drunkards or corrupt men. Their pain is almost nothing in comparison with the tears of an unhappy mother whose children see the drunk face of their father day after day—not a father, but a cruel ghost. Orthodox priests are to explain all these things so that people know that if they marry, even a devout Orthodox spouse, they will be martyrs. To live according to the commandments, to take on the spiritual reality of the crowns of marriage, you are to renounce sin.

Certainly also, we have some occupations that require sacrifice. As we say, “Art requires victims,” and not just art, but anything to which we fully dedicate ourselves, such as medicine, science, teaching, sports. To excel in these areas, we are often called to be ascetics.

RTE: Are there other traditional practices that you feel need to be recovered in the contemporary Church?

FR. ARTEMY: Yes, and some of the most important have to do with the priesthood. No one will argue that the personality of a priest is central when we talk about the spiritual revival of our times. I very much like the statement of St. John of Kronstadt, who says, “If all the priests were what they should be, demons would have nothing to do in our towns.” This means that Christ's grace acts primarily through the priest's heart, mouth and hands. The priests' hearts are the precious vessels chosen for sanctifying this world. The history of the ecumenical Church teaches us, by vivid examples, that the greatest positive changes in the moral state of people were dependent on God's servants being bright candles. Some of these enlighteners were St. Athanasius the Great; the noble Cappadocians, St. Gregory the Theologian, St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory of Nyssa; and St. John Chrysostom. It is through the grace-filled vessels of the human heart that God acts in history. Even in our contemporary life, this is a fact. A good priest gathers people, and parish life

becomes more alive and bright. A negligent priest, who has no will for prayer, or has an overly-formal approach to people, scatters souls. If we don't have at least a few righteous priests among the hundreds that serve, church life will finally remind us of a desert devoid of any green plant or fragrant flower, just sand, sand, and sand, a realm of spiritual barrenness.

Glory to God, Whose providence is so rich that even priests who have no fire of devotion cannot prevent Jesus Christ from saving other souls. We are taught that the validity of the sacraments is not dependent on the moral state of the cleric. Nevertheless, we do not judge pious Orthodox people who travel many hundreds of kilometers to visit a church in order to meet with a zealous priest where they can see the word justified by an immaculate life and meet a spiritual doctor truly interested in the healing of their souls. Therefore, our Church, our Mother, has a rule to ordain only those candidates for the priesthood who have remained pure after baptism. The Church insists on this; this is a firm requirement.

A priest is a person who is drawn into invisible battle. If you confess or baptize a person, you are exorcising demons. This is not a joke. They are not imaginary personages, they are quite real, and if the vessel of your nature has wounds, even if they are healed through repentance, scars remain and the demons will hunt you. Their temptations may be more than you can bear. Therefore our falls as priests are much more serious than those of lay-people. It is a very serious thing.

An Orthodox priest is also to have been the husband of only one wife after his baptism. He is not to have been married twice. (Although, if an unbaptized person had several marriages even before his baptism, and later felt called to the priesthood, he can be ordained.) It is also an obstacle if his wife has had a previous marriage after her baptism, or has ever had a child that is not his. (This last case presents some practical difficulties, perhaps because of potential problems with a former husband.) But if she was married but had no child, and was later baptized, she is considered pure. However, even if he is clean like the sun, but she has had a mortal fall after her baptism, according to the canons he will not be ordained. We may ask why this rule is so hard. The answer is that the nature of the priesthood is so high that there can be nothing dishonorable, nothing that diminishes its glory. A husband and wife are one flesh, and like one vessel, they share what they have, physically and spiritually. The husband would almost certainly be influenced by the wounds of his wife's past, as well as she by his.

Practice also shows that, in most cases, the result of the violation of canons will eventually bear sad fruit. Certainly, we know that in the 19th century, priests were often ordained before they reached the canonical age of thirty. For example, St. John of Kronstadt was ordained when he was 26 or 27 years old. It is the bishop who is responsible for this, and his decision is valid—his main interest is the profit or necessity of the Church. However, we must remember that, in general, candidates in the 19th century were pure, they had no moral obstacles, they were well-instructed and prepared by seminaries, and they were surrounded by pious experienced priests who could give them a good example. As young priests they were not obliged to confess people, and generally, times were milder. At the end of the 20th century, however, we observe a sorrowful picture. When these youngsters, priests or hieromonks of nineteen, twenty, twenty-one, are thrown into parish life and have no foundation, no spiritual experience, are not even grown-up yet in their psychology, they simply cannot solve the questions and problems that people reveal to them. Also, they can be easily deceived and influenced by corrupt, wicked people. They have no defenses against pride and vanity, and are obliged to wage a severe battle against their own flesh. Too often, the forces of the enemy prevail over their own resources. And what of young priests, who do not know real Orthodox Christianity and are easily corrupted by false teachings, liberal trends, even heresies? This problem can become a real wound in the body of the Church. For me it is a most painful subject, for having no guarantees of my own defenses, I watch with fear and horror, the tragedies of some of the young priests I know. I always try to pray when I hear of their sorrows and falls.

Certainly I am not a bishop, or able to judge episcopal decisions, but as a priest who wants to be sober, I see that young batiushkas must be treated by their church elders with care and delicacy, just as are young monks and newly-born Christians. Young priests need instruction, they are not self-sufficient. Books are not enough for them. The brutal sea of earthly life will almost inevitably drown them unless they have experienced confessors with grey hair. But this is a problem now; where do we have priests of vast experience who are witnesses of both this and earlier ages? Even now in Russia, one of the most precious of God's gifts is to have a spiritual instructor who will pass on the inheritance of our traditions. I think that abroad, in other countries, it must be even more difficult.

RTE: Obviously, we must pray for our young priests who carry such burdens. Could you say something now about the fruit of abiding by these canons? What can a Christian expect in his spiritual life if he tries to be faithful to the Church's laws?

FR. ARTEMY: One of the main virtues of an Orthodox Christian is to be true to God, faithful to His commandments. St. Paul says it is a special charity to be found faithful. It is faithful servants who are given the Holy Spirit, as the Holy Apostles said to the Pharisees. The fruit of abiding by canons is the inner freedom that is the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is the enlightenment of one's mind; the broadening of one's heart; the spirit of peace and discernment; the virtue of love—which make you the richest man in the world. It goes without saying that the highest spiritual gift is the discernment of spirits, which helps you to understand and solve earthly difficulties and which makes you a real citizen of the heavenly Motherland. If you have this gift, no one will be able to judge you except those who have also gained the Holy Spirit, while you will be able to understand everyone because of the creativity of the Holy Spirit, Who abides in your heart. I'm quick to add that I cannot witness to these spiritual treasures by my own experience, but I know for certain that they exist.

RTE: A lot of people reading this may say, "But, I don't even know what the canons are." Do you think they should try to read the canons themselves? They often seem to be easily misinterpreted.

FR. ARTEMY: We have said that the canons can be compared with an inner light, which helps you to understand everything properly. As a pious mother with children, you may not happen to know many canons—in this case you are like a child with a pure heart, who does not know the precepts of God in detail, but feels things aright through its own purity. However, when we are talking about priests and people who serve in the Church, whose lives are involved in making decisions that must coincide with Church tradition, they are to know the Church's teaching. Certainly, if a spiritual father is quite liberal and lives in an atmosphere of not submitting his life to the canons, the spirit of his children will suffer. These are the main things for us; faithfulness to the Church and to the Holy Chalice.

RTE: What should theologically uneducated people do if they sense that their

priest is not acting in accord with the canons? Knowing their own lack and sin, they don't want to be critical or self-righteous.

FR. ARTEMY: We should remember the instruction of St. Ignatius Brianchaninov who requires us to compare every word of a clergyman with the scriptures and oral tradition. An Orthodox Christian has a duty to adopt only that teaching which is the word of tradition, which does not violate the commandments of the Spirit. We are sheep, but we are not asses. We are not to be the blind led by the blind. We are sheep of Jesus Christ, Who is the Way, the Truth and the Life, and we should not become slaves of men. We shouldn't harm our souls by believing in a lie. It is Christ Who is our Redeemer, it is His blood that has purified us of sin, therefore we have a duty to save our souls and to keep clear of any falsehood.

We shouldn't esteem a man so strongly as to transgress the Lord's commandments or the Church commandments for His sake. It is a very easy thing to damage your soul by being misled by a priest. My love for the priesthood is not to make me a slave of man. The moment I realize that the advice of even the most esteemed and praised priest does not coincide with the Lord's word, I am not to pay it any more attention. St. Ignatius says we are only to adopt that advice which agrees with the Church's commandments. He insists on correct relations with the priests—who are not now prophets, who are not *startsi*, who are not Egyptian desert abbas who can foresee our future—but whose duty is to teach and preach through the grace of the priesthood without weakening the tradition with fallen human opinion. It is not an earthly sympathy that connects me with my priest, but our mutual trust in God and the Church. All of the holy Fathers advise us to run from a priest who pleases our passions, and tries to tie me to himself rather than Christ.

RTE: You just said that there are no *startsi* [elders] now. But generally in Russia people feel that there are a few: Father Kyrill at the Lavra and the recently reposed Father Ioann Krestiankin. They are respected by everyone.

FR. ARTEMY: Yes, but we are to listen to what they say of themselves. Father Kyrill said, "We are not *startsi* [elders], we are *stariki* [old men]. Don't compare us with the Optina *startsi*. We are old men, not *startsi*."

RTE: But even the later Optina Elders said that about their predecessors. They said, "We are nothing compared to Elder Moses or Elder Ambrose."

FR. ARTEMY: When Father Kyrill says, “I am nothing” it means that there is a difference between Starets Nektary of Optina and our venerable spiritual fathers of today. The difference may be, as one hieromonk wrote in an article, “Modern *startsi* may be pious people whose life is very holy, but the question is, do they have the gift of instruction?” You may be an extremely holy man but not have the gift of instructing people. I have a pious suspicion that because of our unworthiness, Our Lord, the Holy Spirit, now conceals Himself and His instruction. His vessels are unable to share what they have in their hearts. It is the difference between what you have in your heart and what you have on your lips. What can you do for this person who believes in you? You may understand the mysteries of the Heavenly Kingdom in your heart, but at the same time be unable to say three words, unable to persuade, because of the state of heart of those people who question you—who, perhaps, are not ready to cleanse their hearts with real repentance. Many people are interested in spiritual life, but not many of them are ready to crucify themselves upon the Cross.

Certainly, the elders know what to say to a person, but now people are mostly unable to hear the words of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, their spiritual lips cannot utter as in the past. “Our age is an age of silence,” said St. Nektary of Optina. Fr. Nicholas Vorobyov, who was very close to the Optina Elders, also said, “Repentance is all that is left to us.”

The Holy Fathers were enlightened, and they were constantly and consciously in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Our pious spiritual fathers certainly have something, but perhaps not so outwardly. In comparing different ages, even at the beginning and the end of this century, we realize that we Christians are much weaker. We are like invalids and now the task of modern confessors is to give the soul into the hands of God; to pray for him, and to give him over to God’s Providence. This is the best they can do.

RTE: But modern confessors, and you yourself, obviously give direction to people when God puts words of guidance into your heart.

FR. ARTEMY: Certainly, but truly spiritually enlightened people, real elders, could help a person get rid of this or that passion by just being in their presence, through the grace of their souls. Their souls would act as a channel of grace—as, for instance, when St. Seraphim prayed and Motovilov recognized the presence of the Holy Spirit. But today a spiritual child is to be directed

to God with his mind and heart, to be very attentive and obedient, and to understand that it is God and the Mother of God who lead you. Your spiritual father is to become smaller and smaller, and God is to become larger and larger. Then you can partake of the spiritual gifts of your confessor.

RTE: Sometimes, sincere new converts seem to get rather caught up in the inner workings of their souls, taking everything seriously, and making spiritual life rather complex. Of course, diligence and sobriety are important virtues, our salvation is a serious matter, and superficiality is too often a western vice, but I once heard someone say that we are to have awe towards God and a sense of humor towards ourselves. What do you think of this?

FR. ARTEMY: Salvation is something that is beyond our weak human forces, and not all of it depends on us. Therefore, hope is an essential part of our podvig and the best path to hope is to feel yourself as a child. Our Heavenly Father does not require very much from His children. When you try to rely completely upon Him, you will rejoice feeling His support and help, and you won't be too solemn when considering your own soul because it is God Who saves us. He only awaits our constant appeal to Him.

When our Lord says that we must become like children to enter the kingdom of heaven, this means that we are *really* to be child-like: joyful, modest, hopeful, radiant with love, not weighed down or grimly burdened, because it is not by our merit that we have the grace of our Lord, but by His mercy. We are unworthy, but nevertheless grace is present. We are to be serious in only one aspect; how to preserve this grace, how not to lose it. Once you know this, your heart is to be as light as a feather.

The demons are very serious in their attempt to ruin us, and we should oppose them by the spirit of *blagosushestvovanie*: by being calm and radiant, hopeful and peaceful, content and grateful in our inner feelings of total dependence on God. As He is the Most Wise, the Most Loving and Strong, who can hinder you from saving your soul? No one. Just as we are to be tolerant towards others' errors and shortcomings, we are also to be patient with ourselves. We are not to require too much from ourselves. We should know our possibilities and be sure that we are not omnipotent. We are weak; the only thing we can really do is to *want* to be saved, and to pray to God. St. David says, *It is God Who corrects the steps of man*. Therefore, St. Seraphim directs, "when you have eaten too much, don't add a graver sin to the former

one. Don't execute your soul for that fall, but be meek, and say, "It is good for me that You have humbled my soul."

It is very important for a modern Christian to become a physician of his own soul, and in the Psalter you will find many examples of curing and treating your soul, such as *Why art thou cast down, O my soul? And why art thou disquieted in me? Hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance.* It is a very wise thing to know how to laugh at yourself, and in some very grave cases, we shouldn't be too solemn, but should know how to laugh to relieve the tension of our soul, so that it won't be broken by our seriousness and grief. All of the saints of the last times, like Elders Ambrose and Nektary of Optina, certainly cured and caressed exhausted souls with their radiant smiles and peaceful manner of consoling people. The demons' intention is to make a person aspire to impossible heights, so that he does not value his real place and forgets to be grateful to God. In this constant seeking for a higher place you can become the slave of pride, which St. John of the Ladder says, "raises you up to heaven and dashes you to the abyss." It is a sign of spiritual maturity to have this peaceful humor. It has nothing in common with earthly irony, or cynical boldness, but is the manifestation of inner spiritual treasure hidden deeply in a pious praying heart. As our Lord says, *out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.*

RTE: What is the difference between counseling and spiritual direction? In the West, the two are often viewed as the same thing.

FR. ARTEMY: Sometimes when people think about prayer, particularly the Jesus prayer, they think that there is a special technique, they search for a particular method, but they don't want to understand that prayer is the life of your heart. Living in Christ is certainly much deeper than rational thinking: it is not just the passive accordance of one's mind with God-revealed truths. The inner life of one's heart in Christ means that your soul is influenced by God's grace, and if this occurs you will certainly begin to understand the psychological and spiritual problems of your neighbor—not with your mind, but with your heart. A priest who prays for a person will be supported by God, and his words won't be devoid of spiritual force. They will be permeated with an inner, peaceful, God-given energy that comes into contact with the needy soul. This contact is not primarily through the mind; it isn't the solution of a mathematical task, as if someone has offered you a clever method to find the missing element to the equation. No. The great majority of our earthly

misunderstandings and difficulties of an ethical or moral nature are much deeper than that, and require not just rational analyses or quotes from the Bible or the Church Fathers.

People coming to a priest need to be encouraged, consoled, enlightened, and delivered from doubt. They seek reconciliation with the circumstances of their lives. They are looking for an inner spiritual injection, not a mental solution of their enigmas. And how can you give this injection if your vessel is empty? When the injured vessel comes into contact with the whole—the priest and the Church—it is God who produces the miracle of healing. It is He who has given us the sacrament of the priesthood, of confession, and it is He who acts. The priest is like the vessel of the widow who received the Prophet Elijah into her house; Elijah filled the vessel with oil and it never diminished. This was against all physical laws, but it was God's presence acting in this world. This vessel is the priesthood. It is not human ability or talent, but it is through the priest and the penitent's belief in the presence of Christ, that His Spirit produces things that cannot come about rationally.

RTE: Fr. Artemy, in our talk thus far you've given a very broad range of answers. On one hand you are very careful in following traditional church practices, some might even call you strict. On the other hand you allow your own spiritual children a remarkable freedom of spirit. How do you reconcile these two extremes?

FR. ARTEMY: When people prepare bread they first take wheat and thresh it. It is a hard thing, but the fruit of such labor is soft, fresh bread. We have a very good spiritual proverb in Russia: "Turn the mill of humility and you will be like soft white bread." Imagine a spring that finds an outlet from the earth. Water hidden in the earth is under pressure, but when it finds an opening it leaps up in a fountain that sparkles in the sun. We Christians are to carry the death of Christ in our hearts in order to have the Life-giving Spirit of the Heavenly Father. Therefore, there is no contradiction between spiritual freedom and the harshness of the canons, which are the fences guarding us from lions and tigers, passions and demons. The fruit of this inner cross is interior freedom and spiritual joy. You *will* find yourself happy. The canons only seem severe to people who don't love Christ. If we love Christ then we understand that we must trust, that we should give ourselves to Him with all of our heart. When the virtues become part of your nature they stop being a burden and bring you joy and freedom. ✦