



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

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# MATURE FRUIT AND BRIGHT FAITH

## Spiritual Fathers in Contemporary Orthodoxy

Father Artemy Vladimirov, protopriest of the Church of All Saints in Moscow, Russia, has been interviewed in previous issues of *Road to Emmaus*, including *My Work with English-Speaking Converts* and *Souls in Motion: The Spiritual Life of Teenagers*. He rejoins us in this issue to explore Orthodox spiritual direction.

RTE: Father Artemy, it's good to have you back with us again. Will you begin by speaking about the place of spiritual direction and, in particular, the role of the confessor or spiritual father in the life of an Orthodox Christian?

FR. ARTEMY: Each Christian in his everyday life is to have a spiritual goal – the acquisition of heavenly grace – but none of us can manage this lofty task by himself. We are not meant to live like an abandoned child without help, or like the prodigal son, to wander in the shadows of a “far country.” We are to turn our faces towards the heavenly Jerusalem and take the opportunity to share our inner experience with other pious Christians, usually experienced priests who have matured in their ascetic effort to acquire such gifts of the Holy Spirit as humility, purity, spiritual discernment and love.

Every Orthodox priest ordained by a bishop is endowed with the priesthood of Christ, with His heavenly power, and with the spiritual responsibility to instruct and to minister, but this requires something very definite from the priest. It does not mean that he can say or do anything he likes, according to his own reason and will. A priest is to manifest the tradition of the Church and his spiritual activities are to coincide with the holy canons. Before ordination, each of us takes an oath not to violate any canons or ecumenical Church coun-

cils. Our ministry cannot be self-willed; we are to express God's will, which is very clearly stated in Holy Scripture and Tradition.

My point is that an Orthodox priest is firmly bound. He is tied to Orthodox doctrine and is not allowed to change or distort anything. Over the past decades we have seen some well-known Orthodox Church leaders in Europe, America, and Russia instruct many new Orthodox Christians, but when you study their sermons and visit their churches, you understand that they are too daring or overly tolerant. A priest or bishop cannot allow his flock to do just as he or they wish. He cannot violate the holy canons, and if he does, he harms the souls of his parishioners.

An Orthodox priest receives a commission at his ordination to instruct and guide, to feed and console people and certainly, every Christian soul needs spiritual direction so that he or she can confess regularly and receive Christ's blessing on their endeavors. It is impossible for an Orthodox Christian to be completely independent and to have no inner need to consult with a priest. This cannot be seen as normal.

Of course, we have the Holy Gospel and Epistles and the written teachings and example of the Holy Fathers of the Church, and an experienced Orthodox Christian, whose spiritual father has already reposed, may walk the path of spiritual life without consulting a priest regularly. This is because his heart and mind are already imprinted with the advice, rules, and habits that he was taught. He sees this road clearly, as it was laid down by his spiritual father, and he is experienced enough to feed his soul on this memory. This mode of spiritual life is possible for a wise and experienced Christian, but even if he has an entire library of the Holy Fathers in his memory, he still needs to confess and receive Holy Communion. He cannot remain isolated.

But when we speak of those who have recently converted, it is necessary to have a good confessor. The holy fathers of all times say that you are to have someone to be obedient to. You are to listen to those who are more experienced. It is impossible to live without guidance. Even an old priest who is practically worshipped by his parishioners is to have a spiritual father; if not he will be deceived by his own ego, by conceit, and by demons. God has instituted this – that one person is to be instructed by another person, not by an angel – and this is more necessary now than at any previous time.

RTE: Some converts, having read the lives of St. Silouan of Mt. Athos or St. Matrona of Moscow might ask, "Does this person need to be a priest? Why

not a pious layman, an 'elder' or 'eldress'? Isn't this emphasis on the priesthood a form of clericalism?"

FR. ARTEMY: Certainly, we remember the maxim of the Holy Gospel that the Spirit breathes where it wills. There are many such mysteries and miracles, and Our Lord is not accountable to us for His divine activity. In the history of the Church, we know of many examples of people who were not ordained, but were vessels of grace with the necessary spiritual or moral authority to care for other Christians. However, if we want to be sober and discerning, we are not to take this to extremes.

Of course, we can have spiritual conversation with pious people, with trusted friends whose words and deeds are alive with Christian virtue, but in modern European Orthodox countries like Greece, Romania, Albania, certainly in Russia, and also in Orthodox parishes and monasteries in America, we see that it is mostly priests whose natural qualities have been enriched by grace and the responsibility of their ordination, who are deeply experienced in confession and in praying for people, that become a living treasure for novices and newly-born Christians. It would be total fantasy to go seeking for a "starets" in the forest or countryside, and naïve to trust in the off-hand advice of simple people who, in our time, are often poisoned with the passion of instructing and exposing sin, although no one has asked them to do so. It is safer to communicate with a sincere and prayerful priest, who can share with us the treasure of his experience.

RTE: In a large Orthodox city like Moscow, it is rather easy to find a good confessor, but what if you live in a region or country where Orthodox churches are rare?

FR. ARTEMY: The West is now over-equipped with computers, but in terms of Orthodox guidance, it is often like a spiritual desert. Certainly, an Orthodox person is to work very hard so as to instruct himself, to master the realm of Church tradition, to carefully study ascetic books, not only the ancient fathers like St. John of the Ladder and Abba Dorotheos of Gaza, but also the traditional Greek and Russian writers of the 19th century, particularly the letters of the Optina elders, the diaries of St. John of Kronstadt and the writings of St. Theophan the Recluse. There are also well-known modern books such as the letters of Fr. Nikon Vorobyov: *Repentance is Still Left to Us* (which I hope will be translated into English), and writings such as

*Christ is In Our Midst*, the letters of the wise, peaceful, and sober Fr. John of Valamo.

It is also important to seek spiritual guidance by reading works from different centuries, so that you can understand the timeless, universal principles of Church tradition, not just modern ways of thinking and expression. This will help you to understand your spiritual needs in regard to confession and Holy Communion, the daily labor of prayer, and the skills needed to keep your heart free of evil thoughts, images, and feelings. This is Orthodox asceticism. When you begin to understand this realm of spiritual life, you will also understand what one's relationship to a contemporary priest should be, and with such a foundation, you are more or less guaranteed not to have serious misunderstandings in your spiritual relations with your pastor.

RTE: What are the most common mistakes, particularly for new converts?

FR. ARTEMY: The first is to exaggerate his spiritual abilities, and imagine him to be a clairvoyant elder who knows everything about you. This is a great pitfall because here we transfer the Lord's perfection, ascribing it to a mere man, even if he is a priest. This is a spiritual distortion that manifests its bad fruit as soon as you realize the distance between your imagination and reality. Your first enthusiasm, your eagerness to catch every word, every look, every gesture, will be changed into deep frustration, disappointment, bitterness, and even aggression against your idol, and the priest won't be to blame for this, unless he has encouraged this cultish idea.

This period of looking at spiritual life through rose-colored glasses is almost inevitable for new converts, both men and women. A priest who is simply performing his holy service in the altar is too often considered a saint because of his garments, his beard, his appearance, his personality. We need to warn new converts and those who visit our churches to avoid this spiritual illness, which can be compared with a teenager falling in love. Reality is distorted by adoration.

Certainly, in Russia we often find this atmosphere of extreme religious reverence towards priests particularly from women – a result, perhaps, of our thousand-year tradition. Greek Christians sometimes also have this excessive attitude. Of course, they are correct in speaking of the value of obedience to a *geronda*, but we are to understand that the ecclesiastical word *geronda* (which is translated loosely in the West as “elder” and by insinuation, “clairvoyant elder”) can mean a variety of things. In Greece,

*geronda* is often used to address any respected monk, regardless of rank or spiritual gifts. Likewise, nuns are often addressed as *gerondissa*. This does not mean that your *geronda* is a saint. We do not believe that he is infallible, that he is a flawless vessel of the Holy Spirit, that his words are anointed with heavenly wisdom, or that he is our Moses who has already climbed to the summit of Mt. Sinai and has spoken with God face to face. No! Certainly, as a priest, he is an icon of Christ, and yes, through his priesthood he may be endowed with certain spiritual gifts, but he is not necessarily a “miracle-working” or “myrrh-gushing” icon.

When we kiss a painted icon, we don't venerate the wooden vessel, we esteem Christ. With icons of saints, it is the power of Christ acting through the saint that we venerate, and it is the same with the priesthood. We accept that our priest has his own sins and imperfections, faults and weaknesses, as does every man born of his mother, and we are not to judge him. He is there to judge us, to assist us on the way to salvation. We are to cover his imperfections with our condescending love, with faith that God will give him the right thing to say to us, if we approach him as an icon bearing the priesthood of Christ.

RTE: In returning to what you said about reading classic spiritual texts, sometimes beginners in the spiritual life find books of spiritual direction to be rather confusing, particularly when the guidance was originally given to someone who might have had a problem similar to your own.

FR. ARTEMY: Certainly, we priests and our sheep are to understand the distinction between literary spiritual instruction and the contemporary guidance of fellow-Christians. In his book, *Christ is in Our Midst*, Fr. John of Valamo says that a true confessor is to take into consideration the many details of your life, such as your age, gender, education, your moral development, how long you have been in the Church, your spiritual capabilities, your manner of life. Then, he is to weigh your heart with the help of God's grace. It is neither wise nor sensible to identify this or that guidance from a book with the real circumstances of your own life. The setting, the spiritual atmosphere, and the people involved are quite different. Written guidance should be used as a general contemplation without drawing too close of a parallel between this or that situation. Also, it is important to avoid being hasty or impulsive in making decisions or taking advice. St. Dimitry of Rostov says that the will of God is recognized by a Christian who has learned

to wait and pray, and it will be revealed by circumstances, by the inner understanding of your own heart, or perhaps by a person who will help you to solve your problem.

RTE: Another problem in reading these texts is that, after finding inspiration in the writings of 19th-century Optina elders or in St. Seraphim of Sarov, an inexperienced Christian often ends with a strong desire for someone to guide him in the same way. The recent wave of enthusiastic books about 20th-century Greek spiritual fathers has also fanned this flame.



Photo courtesy Fr. Alexis Kharlamov

FR. ARTEMY: We are not to identify modern confessors with spiritual fathers of the 19th or early 20th century. These heroes of spiritual literature were only allowed to confess people after half a life-time of working on their own souls, when they finally began to bear mature fruit. They had real humility, purity of heart, and inner peace. They were tempered by sorrow and grief. They had become shining candles, giving a bright warm flame; they were not green wet kindling, smoking and smoldering with their own passions.

Modern Christians are to be sober and careful not to have fantastic ideas concerning their own confessors. Priests are to be considered as elder brothers, like officers advancing in front of their troops. They are engaged in the same struggle as you are, and are not as different as you may imagine.

RTE: Isn't it true that Russian people feel that there are a few spiritual fathers of elder status, such as Father Kyrill at Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra and the recently reposed Father Ioann Krestiankin of Pskov Caves Monastery? They have been universally respected here for decades.

FR. ARTEMY: Yes, but we are to listen to what they say of themselves. Father Kyrill says, "We are not *startsi*" [elders], we are *stariki* [old men]. Don't compare us with the Optina *startsi*, we are old men, not *startsi*." I have also found this idea in the writings and letters of Father Paisius of the Holy Mountain.

RTE: Although even the later Optina Elders said about their predecessors, "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 Elder Ambrose or Elder Nektary of Optina and our venerable spiritual fathers of today. The early Church fathers, desert fathers, and these famous 19th-century elders were enlightened, and they were constantly and consciously in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Our pious spiritual fathers of today certainly have something, but perhaps not so outwardly. In comparing different ages, even the beginning and the end of this past century, we realize that we Christians are much weaker. We are like invalids. The task of a modern confessor 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 most he can do.

I have a pious suspicion that because of our unworthiness, Our Lord, the Holy Spirit, now conceals Himself and His instruction. Many people are interested in spiritual life, but not many are ready to crucify themselves upon the Cross. St. Nektary of Optina says, "Our age is an age of silence," and Fr. Nicholas Vorobyov, who was very close to the Optina Elders adds, "Repentance is all that is left to us."

But certainly this is a general speculation. As a believing Christian, I know that the gifts of the Holy Spirit reside in the Church, and I certainly accept that even in our own days there can be secret, hidden vessels of the Holy

Spirit, because Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and His grace is given to everyone who has the resolve to fulfill His commandments.

RTE: Thank you. Considering our times, what do you think are the most important characteristics for a confessor?

FR. ARTEMY: The main requirement for a modern confessor is that he lives according to God's commandments and the Church rules. He is to have a good moral reputation, which is not a simple thing now. It is very important that he keep himself clear of any mortal sins, first of all concerning the seventh Commandment. If he is a monk, he is to be as pure as the sun. If he is married, he is to be a faithful husband with no romantic stories in his biography, either now or in past years, and he is to be chaste in his practice of confession. The name of Christ is not to be abused by non-believers because of his violation of God's law. This is the most important requirement, and the other is a reverent attitude towards the services. He is not to be mercenary, serving only for a salary. He is to be a pious minister, for whom the service of God is his life and his inspiration. He is not only to perform rituals, he is to love the Church. This is a very important criterion in searching for a trustworthy spiritual father. If a priest's manner of serving is negligent, superficial, or hasty, if he is bored with services and his goal is always to close the church and rush away as quickly as possible, I can confess before him, but to ask advice of such a person would be a strange thing. When we have a toothache we look for a good, competent dentist, who won't be too ready just to pull the tooth. We try to find a professional, an artist who loves his work, who cares about his patients, who gives you his heart.

RTE: Not only lay-people, but many priests in North America and Europe have difficulty in finding an experienced spiritual father.

FR. ARTEMY: It isn't a tragedy if you have not yet been fortunate enough to find a spiritual father, because we believe that each time we approach the Sacrament of Confession, we are in the presence of the Lord Himself and of His Mother, the Holy Theotokos.

Certainly, a priest should listen to us; it is his duty, but we may find ourselves confessing to a priest who is inattentive or hurried, who does not understand our need to name all of our sins aloud. When I realize that this is the inner state of a particular priest, I may confess, but I won't be await-

ing revelation or instruction. This was my own situation when I was a twenty year-old Christian. Although I knew many priests, few of them really wanted to understand me. However, I had heartfelt faith that when I confessed, it was the Lord and His Mother who embraced me. I understood this spiritual reality, and each time I enumerated my sins, I was happy because God's grace clearly visited me. It instructed me and revealed many secret things to my heart. Although they only listened without saying anything, I am grateful to these priests because God's instruction came through them. From confession to confession I was taught by God Himself how great the sacrament is, and it was God who grew greater in my perception while priests as people diminished. It was the priesthood itself I learned to value.

The Orthodox priesthood is a shrine that illumines and warms everything around it, but you must make a distinction between the actual man and this heavenly blossom that unfolds near his person. Discern between the shining candle of the priesthood that he holds in his hands and the man himself as a fallen creature. You may perceive spiritual warmth and light, but this is a gift from God; the priest himself (in his essence) cannot be completely permeated with this sanctity. This light can fill you, but it does not originate from him. If I approach a priest with a simple and believing heart, this grace can take me to heaven, but if he himself is not interested in spiritual life, if he doesn't like to read prayers, if his head is filled with problems about his car or the rising price of gasoline, or any of a multitude of other things, he may hardly notice the grace that has so affected me. He may just remain in his usual state. But if I have faith, this holiness will fill my heart with peace. Nevertheless, I will be grateful to him, as I am grateful to a person standing near a well with a golden chain and bucket, who, when I am thirsty, throws the bucket down and draws up living water. He may be covered with mud or bruises, but I am not to blame him. I am to be grateful that he serves me as he can.

Here is another comparison. Imagine that you are visiting a lawyer. You have an urgent official document that needs to be formulated in precise legal terms and as you wait in line, your only hope is to be on time before the firm closes so that you can receive your document with all of its necessary seals and stamps. When your turn comes, the moment that you enter the office and see that the attention of the lawyer is directed towards you, you are happy. You immediately forget about the line and the other people. It is your turn now! You are ready to pay all the necessary fees, but this is your time and your lawyer. You are not at all interested in his private life, in his failings, in his

youth, in his personality. You only want him to do what you require, so that it will be professional, competent, and timely. The only thing that is important to you is that he is a lawyer and that he has the legal right to sign the papers, nothing more. This is a useful comparison when we deal with modern priests.

A priest serves the liturgy, and without his participation it cannot be served. He makes the sign of the Cross above the offering, he pronounces the words of the sacramental prayers, he invokes the name of the Holy Trinity. He is the only one who can do this. It is because of him that we have the Holy Gifts, the Body and Blood of Christ Himself. Perhaps he didn't keep the fast, perhaps he hasn't read his prayers at home, maybe he isn't even a good husband, but he has not yet been banned by a bishop from serving. It is the divine institution of the Church and God's invisible presence that make his actions valid.

Perhaps I have just driven from Omsk to Tomsk in Russia, or 200 miles from the state of North Dakota to Montana to confess my sins – simply because he is a priest, I am happy. When he covers me with his stole and reads the prayer, I feel my sins disappear. I feel the blood of Christ cleansing my heart. I know that this invisible reality has taken place and that the thorns of my sins have been removed. This is not due to *his* skill, *his* wisdom, or *his* own effort. It is not his virtue, but his ministry, and nothing else. It is the priesthood of Christ, not the man, that I revere and value as the most precious thing in the world. Even if the priest doesn't take any notice of me, if he can't instruct me, I know enough from the books I've read about how to behave. Through His Church, God will instruct me on how to resist these sins and wage war against demons.

RTE: What if someone gives bad advice?

FR. ARTEMY: You shouldn't be overwhelmed or upset by incorrect instruction. We are sensible sheep, not stupid rams that we should take every word of a clergyman as a revelation. We should reject everything that is contradictory to Holy Scripture, Church tradition, and our holy faith. Even if such words are uttered by a bishop, we cannot take this as a compulsory instruction. We are to ignore any advice which does not coincide with the commandments of God.

RTE: These problems are not usually something obviously against the Commandments, but an interpretation of Church tradition or the writings

of the Holy Fathers that is perhaps too lax, or conversely, is used to enforce obedience, such as a very strict reading of a canon.

FR. ARTEMY: In Russia it frequently happens that one of my parishioners, when visiting a monastery, may confess to a priest who is eager to give strict advice and heavy penances. There are many such priests. As Our Lord Jesus Christ says about the Pharisees, *they bind heavy burdens and grievous to*



Photo courtesy Alexander Khudasov

*be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders.* They pile these burdens onto people's backs and they return to the parish just bent double under this terrible weight.

No priest is to give you a penance except your spiritual father. When you are given guidance or recommendations by an unknown priest, you are to go to your usual confessor and tell him everything, and he is to think and to decide whether this is useful for you or not. It is a dubious idea that a priest who is seeing you for the first and last time in your life can utter a word or

give a penance that binds you for eternity, a word that only he can release. (And if he reposes, you are doomed...!) No, this is impossible.

If the advice of a sincere priest does not coincide with your inner feelings, your experience, or with the circumstances of your life, don't be deeply worried, and don't be too eager to take his advice upon yourself. Discuss it with another priest, or with an experienced Christian whom you trust, and come to a conclusion. Another important guideline is not to be shocked by or to panic over anything you come across in your spiritual life. Confessors in this or that church or monastery often cannot understand everything in a single moment. They cannot take in all of the circumstances of your situation the first time they meet you. They may be too direct, too harsh, too simplistic. We are to analyze all these things and not think that they are angels who know everything before you even tell them your name.

RTE: What is the difference between confessing to your parish priest and having a spiritual father? Some people see that their local priest is sincere in his service and dedicated to his parishioners, but after reading or talking with other people who claim to have a "spiritual father," they begin to feel that they lack something and visit other churches or monasteries in search of someone with greater spiritual experience.

FR. ARTEMY: This is also a common situation in Russia, that there is a distinction between a confessor and a spiritual father. I'm deeply convinced that it is not such a simple thing to find a real spiritual father and that it doesn't take place as quickly as we may think it should. Let years pass. As we Russians say, "I must eat more than 100 kilograms of salt with a person before I trust him." We use this expression when we speak of simply trusting another person, but when it concerns a spiritual father, it is only life itself that shows him to be a real father and me to be a son or daughter. Our life is to be shared. There are many trials to go through together and overcome. It is not an instant partnership or an oral agreement. It is life itself that will shape and mature the relationship.

Just as when we hear of divorces we understand that people often do not verify their feelings, that they don't know their own souls, much less the person they are marrying, and after a few years they just run away from each other. It is the same with a spiritual relationship. You are to prove to yourself that you are an obedient son or daughter, that you want to live

according to this person's advice, and that you are able to change those things in your life that are required by his pastoral conscience. I am to change my inner habits so that I can live in accordance with his soul, with his spiritual point of view, but these changes are to produce peace in my heart. They are to help me free myself of my vices. They are to give me wings of joy and to make me calm, reasonable, and peaceful. I am not to become an unreasoning mindless slave, or a zombie capable of any malicious deed. I am not to be a blind instrument of someone else's self-will.

The mark of whether this is a beneficial relationship is if, after eating the fruit of my obedience, I realize myself to be a child of God. Have I come closer to the Lord Jesus Christ? Do I pray to Him like a child in the depths of my soul, which is filled with repentance, trust, and love? I am to see some inner effects of my spiritual father's instruction, but not to feel that he is dominating my soul. Also, he should not be interested in any material things connected with my life, in what worldly benefit I can bring him. He should not flatter me. His foremost interest should be in the salvation of my heart. He does not blind me nor deprive me of my individual personality; he does not want to mold my soul in his image, but he shapes his instruction in accordance with my soul and my choice. He doesn't solve my problems for me. He doesn't run too fast, but he waits for me to come to this or that solution. He enlightens the situation, he doesn't preordain the answer.

Like a shepherd, he calls his sheep, he doesn't drag them by the ears. He knows, as the Russians say, *ne volnik, nepogovolnik*: without your will, there is no prayer. Nothing fruitful in the realm of prayer can be accomplished against one's will. If a person is ordered to do something against his own understanding and inner assent, this endeavor will fail. A priest or an abbot cannot decide for me that I am to marry or to become a monk. We say that, "grace does not violate human free will," and this is the principal quality necessary in a spiritual guide. As St. Paul says, *we were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children*. A spiritual father is to be as careful and as tender as a nurse.

Another feature of a real spiritual father is that he is not only constant in his own striving and repentance, but is sacrificial in his love for Christ and the Church. This is one of the most vivid and obvious criteria, that he gives of himself to God and serves those who come to him in sincerity and love, not using them to pursue his own interests.

RTE: An interesting characteristic of your own ministry is that you never seem to use the term, “my spiritual children,” about the people who come to you regularly. Nor do you refer to yourself as their “spiritual father.”

FR. ARTEMY: I prefer that life reveal the real depth and unity of our friendship and our spiritual collaboration. We are all weak and feeble. Let life itself show if you are able to reconcile yourself to my individual characteristics, if you can separate what is useful from what is not, and evaluate what



Photo courtesy Victor M. Klacinski

is true. Perhaps you will have to endure some features of our relationship that are inconvenient, but if you find that there is some profit, these difficulties may seem bearable.

RTE: In regard to families, is it necessary for the members of a family to have the same confessor?

FR. ARTEMY: Certainly, it is a reasonable thing to have the same confessor

for the whole family, but often it doesn't work out this way. For instance, a devout wife and mother may come to confession to ask advice of a priest who is new to her. If the priest is intelligent, an experienced pastor, and understands everything as he should, there won't be any harm for the family. He will explain everything she needs to know, but this doesn't mean that she should afterwards go home, catch her husband by the sleeve and pull him to the priest as well. We are to be careful not to upset the family balance.

We are to be content if her husband attends church. Perhaps he is less formal in practicing his Christianity than she is, and does not yet look for a deeper spiritual life. He is a good father and fulfills his duties as a husband and as a provider, but the life of prayer is not yet his life. He has his pastimes, like television, football, music, working in his garden, or for the past twenty years he has been working every weekend on their country *dacha* that will never be finished, but if they live in peace, if they endure one another and feel that this unity is good for them, let us not press him. She can become deeper in standing before the face of God, in cleansing her heart from passions, and in bringing up their children. He will reap the fruit of her love and patience, and this doesn't have to upset the balance of the family.

Sometimes, here in Russia, husbands become not jealous, but upset, when they feel that their wife is becoming more interested in church life than in their household. She breathes the air of spiritual freedom in church, and uses every possible opportunity to visit. The services are her fulfillment and happiness, but he does not yet share her spiritual tastes, and when she is not beside him, when her place is frequently empty, he feels that they are no longer a couple. He becomes upset, dark, and mute, and she understands that something is wrong, that they no longer have harmony and mutual understanding. She is not to abandon him spiritually, she is to support and to console him, even if this means that she is to limit her pious exploits and sacrifice attending some services for the sake of their family unity.

RTE: Can you speak now about what degree of obedience should be shown to a confessor or to a spiritual father? People sometimes feel they need to be like the disciples of the early desert fathers.

FR. ARTEMY: I would prefer to say that a spiritual father nowadays is to be very discreet and careful in his instruction. He is not to dare to impose anything, particularly concerning some earthly matters. For instance, I know that some priests forbid their spiritual children to visit other churches or

monasteries and never to confess to another priest, or they require you to associate only with their other spiritual children and never invite anyone else to your house. This is unheard of in real spiritual fatherhood. These priests are enslaving people by cutting off things that are not bad in themselves. They invade their souls as if they are not adults with their own experience of life, with their own tastes and habits.

This is especially true with monastic obedience when, lacking real love, an abbot or an abbess behaves as if their novices and monastics are *prisoners*, with *no respect* for them as fellow human beings. These leaders can be hard and rude, despising those under them and imagining that trampling these souls underfoot is a method of teaching obedience. When you humiliate a soul created in the image of God, pretending that you give him spiritual profit as if you are St. Macarius or St. Anthony, you annihilate the human dignity of the person, and you may just break this soul. You can oppress and ruin it, making it ill in body and spirit.

RTE: Patriarch Alexis II has recently ruled that abbesses under the Russian Church cannot require revelation of thoughts from their nuns because the practice has been too frequently abused. Not only has confidentiality been violated, but sisters have been expected to report on one another, a means by which some abbesses maintain control.

FR. ARTEMY: Abbesses are to be obedient to our patriarch, to pay attention to his instruction, but I think that this problem can be solved without any outward measures. What do I mean? If an abbess lives in piety, if her heart is humble and mild, if she reproaches herself and prays deeply, if she cultivates real love and amiability between the sisters, certainly, sooner or later, they will desire to open their sorrows, misunderstandings, and doubts to her. If they receive real spiritual help, they will want to continue in this spiritual practice, but this takes great spiritual maturity on her part.

Of course, this is not at all the same thing as a Church confession with a prayer of absolution. Revelation of thoughts has been a traditional practice of monastic life in Orthodox countries for over a thousand years, but it is not a formal obligation, it is voluntary. No one is to be obliged or compelled to open their heart. If the sisters of a particular monastery find that this practice has been used against them, the direction of our patriarch is a necessary instruction. No one can impel them to reveal their thoughts.

It is also important for novices to understand that real obedience is to God's will. It is a terrible thing when a novice or a newly converted Christian thinks that he is to be obedient even to human whims and capriciousness. The fruit of this naïve approach is awful, because it fills the confessor, abbot, or abbess with self-conceit. It corrupts them. He or she will become like a feudal ruler, who exercises limitless power over his peasants. Saint Nektary of Optina says that one is to be "obedient with dignity," and I believe that he meant that we are to distinguish between God's will and human passion, and to oppose these fallen human passions. Not to revolt against all authority, but to be sensible and rational in distinguishing between human whims and fulfilling God's commandments.

In many cases when spiritual leaders oppress or manipulate human souls, it is because they don't feel the real nature of the Church. They are worldly leaders, not humble servants with moral authority. In his book of spiritual counsel, Archimandrite George (Capsanis) of Gregoriou Monastery speaks of *sobornost* as an atmosphere of Christian love, when a priest tries to listen to people and understand God's will through the atmosphere of the heart. A priest or an abbot is not to be a Red Army officer who attains his goals with his fists or with his cruel tongue, but he is to sense God's will. Certainly, he is responsible for answers and solutions concerning parish or monastery life, but he is to feel the wind of grace, the still small voice, instructing him through other people. His talks with them should lead him to an understanding of our common experience. He is to be very sensitive and intuitive, interested not in his own solutions, but in God's will in building a spiritual life.

This is the realm of *spiritual freedom*: neither to impose the aims of your fallen nature nor manipulate those under you, but to try to discern God's will and to formulate it. This can only be done by listening to their hearts. It is the same with giving advice. You are to feel the inner structure of the soul, to understand the person's will, their hopes and inclinations, and to choose the best solution, one that won't cause harm but will coincide with the pastoral requirements of your heart. One way to do this is for a spiritual father to ask questions, or to have the person before me ask the questions, that I might understand his soul. I am to uncover God's will, hidden there in his heart, not to make him do this or that.

When we enjoy a real spiritual association, when a person has come to know me very well, certainly I have some power over him, but it is the power of love and moral authority. I do not suppress the soul. Never! This soul is a

blossoming flower, and when the realm of love in Christ is evident, when God's love and peace dwell within my heart, I may be very courageous, powerful, and definite, because I know that this soul will do anything that I ask of him, but I would never ask this person to do anything that might cause harm. When I have love and peace in my heart, I may express some "hardness." "Kneel down, repent, stand up," but he or she is smiling, because he knows that this is not military suppression, but an exercise. It is not humiliation. Love does not violate, and spiritual children obey with pleasure. It is a pleasant thing for them.

This is very delicate, and something that I would never dare do with a parishioner who comes to me as a confessor, but who has not yet been taught by our mutual life. A spiritual father or abbot is to hate every kind of oppression, any diminishing of our God-given freedom, and any temptation to make a person an instrument of his earthly will. This is a demonic substitute for spiritual fatherhood.

Now there is another trend. People in Russia, particularly women, want to overwhelm their spiritual father. They try to spread their influence over him like wings, but this is harmful to the soul and they will lose heavenly grace attempting such things. Some send daily SOS messages, "Save Our Souls!" Every day there is a new drama or tragedy, as if they are sailors on a small ship amidst a raging sea. Others try to attract the attention of the priest by being informal apostles; they constantly ensnare new people and drag them to the priest with all of their problems – as if they are my right hand, sent out to capture people. At first you are simply curious and wonder what is happening, but then you begin to understand that this is this person's way of behaving. I never asked her for a hundred new parishioners. Others imagine that they are "spiritual children," but are so oppressive, so insistent, that they don't know what it is to be delicate, to have pity for a tired priest and to give him a chance to rest. They want to fill every moment with their own ego and assume that I am to think, to pray, and associate myself only with their problems.

Sometimes these people are simply incapable of obedience. They don't know what it is (perhaps I don't know what it is, either.) They just follow their own egotistical spiritual interests. They won't be quiet until they gain their goal, and they fall to pieces when an outcome doesn't coincide with their wishes. They imagine their desires to be spiritual, but certainly, with such insistence and self-will they won't make progress in the spiritual life.

Certainly people can be a little strange, and much of this egotism and self-pity is from people who are not quite normal and perhaps not so blameworthy. But it is not a good thing to be "a novice of one's own novices," especially those who would like to sit on your shoulders and point the way. This is a distortion of the priesthood and of any spiritual relationship. Just as you respect their dignity, as a priest you are to protect your spiritual sovereignty, your inner independence, and if you must, you are to be brusque, joke, or even act a bit like a fool-for-Christ to make this spiritual fence.

RTE: Thank you. Do you have any final thoughts?

FR. ARTEMY: Yes. For Christians, the miracle of all time is the Holy Liturgy, and the Church itself is the first circle of paradise, heaven on earth. No matter what our circumstances, our hearts should be at peace because God Almighty, our Saviour Jesus Christ, is with us as He promised, to the end of the world. The darker the world and the crueler its habits, the lighter is the Church with its celestial laws and rules, warmed by Christ's life and love. The weaker we feel ourselves, the swifter we are to run to the Church. If we have true faith and a sense of kinship with the saints, who are our intercessors and elder brothers and sisters, we need have no fear of being misled, of falling into delusion or *prelest*. Whether we are confessors or parishioners, bishops or laymen, we are to have strong hope, a sober mind, and a peaceful heart, walking in the light of Almighty God's wisdom and love. ✚