



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

ROAD TO EMMAUS

Help support
Road to Emmaus
Journal.

The *Road to Emmaus* staff hopes that you find our journal inspiring and useful. While we offer our past articles on-line free of charge, we would warmly appreciate your help in covering the costs of producing this non-profit journal, so that we may continue to bring you quality articles on Orthodox Christianity, past and present, around the world. Thank you for your support.

Please consider a donation to Road to Emmaus by visiting the Donate page on our website.



OPTINA'S SECOND SPRING

Optina Pustyn's Igumen Melchisedek¹ is a long-time friend of *Rusky Palomnik* and *Road to Emmaus* staff members. An Optina hieromonk from the first days of the monastery's revival in 1988, he has served as the monastery *econom* (steward) and been an integral part of Optina's restoration and publishing work. Now in charge of Sts. Peter and Paul, Optina's Moscow podvorye, Fr. Melchisedek's warm appreciation of Optina's legacy and hope for the rebirth of the Optina spirit, has nurtured two decades of pilgrims to this holy refuge.

RTE: Father Melchisedek, how did you become a monk at Optina Monastery?

IGUMEN MELCHISEDEK: My first encounter with Optina was in 1984 when, in my first year of seminary at Holy Trinity Monastery-Sergiev Posad, I had a chance to go somewhere over the November holidays. I thought, "Three days, where do I go?" I knew that Optina Monastery had existed before the revolution and four of us seminarians decided to try to find it. We went there "by chance," but we were actually led by God; four years later two of us returned to Optina as hieromonks.

My first impression of Optina was that it was completely destroyed. It was in ruins and there wasn't even a possibility that it might be given back to the Church. The monastery had been turned into an agricultural school and in 1984 the grounds were full of students and families who lived there year-round. The large Church of the Kazan Mother of God was being used as a garage for agricultural equipment and they had parked a huge combine in the altar.

RTE: Did you feel holiness there and the presence of the Optina elders, or was it spiritually empty after decades of desecration?

¹ Although often used to mean the abbot or head of a monastery, in the Slavic tradition, the title of Igumen also denotes a priest-monk between the rank of hieromonk and archimandrite. The Optina Monastery Brotherhood includes monks, hieromonks, igumens, and archimandrites.

Opposite: Igumen Melchisedek, Protopriest of the Optina Podvorye of Sts. Peter and Paul, Moscow, 2010.

IGUMEN MELCHISEDEK: We were flying. We had wings. The grace! The cells, the graves... everything. Elder Amvrosy's grave was the only one shown to us, but we knew that all of the other elders were buried around the main church.

I took slides of the monastery and when we returned to the seminary, I borrowed photos of the elders from the library and found good pre-revolutionary materials, particularly *Optina Pustyn and Its Era* by Ivan Kontzevitch, the most unique book on the history of Optina. Within a week, I gave a lecture to the seminarians on the history of Optina Monastery and the life of its elders. (smiling) I'd spent half a day there, and was now speaking like an expert on Optina, but the whole experience was very close to me. It had made a huge impression.

Four years later, in 1988, I'd finished seminary and was now a hieromonk at the Lavra. On Pentecost, the great feastday of Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra, during the festal dinner, Archimandrite Alexei Kutepov, the *namestnik*² of the Lavra announced, "The following fathers are being sent with the blessing of Patriarch Pimen to revive Optina Pustyn: Archimandrite Evlogy, Hieromonk Theophilact, Hierodeacon Innokenty...." He ended the list with Hierodeacon Pankary and myself, who'd both been on the original seminarians' visit. I'd finished seminary and had just entered the Lavra's theological academy. I wept because I had to leave the Lavra, but I also knew that God had prepared me for this in advance.

There were two contradictory feelings in my soul. I was leaving St. Sergius-Holy Trinity Lavra where I'd spent four years in seminary, where I'd been tonsured, and where my spiritual father lived. It was there that I'd learned to be a monk and I'd become accustomed to the Lavra's traditions, but when I heard the words "Optina Monastery" quite different feelings began to appear in my soul. I understood that it was a great honor to be part of the revival of such a monastery, which coincided with the celebration of the 1000-year anniversary of the Baptism of Russia in 988.

Although the Sobor of the Russian Church³ was gathering at the Lavra for the millennium celebration, Optina's first namestnik, Archimandrite Evlogy, went to Optina a few days before. I went with him as I'd been given the task of

² *Namestnik*: A Russian term meaning "viceroy", or "deputy," literally *in place of an appointee*. Many of the large Russian monasteries are directly under the Patriarch of Russia, with the day-by-day running of the foundation entrusted to a *namestnik*, an experienced hieromonk who takes on the role of abbot in his stead.

³ Sobor: from Slavonic for "assembly" is a council of bishops gathered with other clerical and lay delegates representing the entire church.

Opposite: Pilgrims at pre-revolutionary Optina, early 20th century.





carrying the antimens⁴ from the Moscow Patriarchate to Optina. As I traveled to Optina with the antimens for Optina on my chest, at first I was sad and anxious at leaving my monastery, but about half-way, I began to feel that the antimens were like a warm, vital heart that were being taken to a dying man. By transplanting this heart into him, he would come alive. I felt an inner warmth, a joy and a certainty that from the very first liturgy Optina would revive.

The first liturgy was on the 3rd of June, 1988, the feast of the Vladimir Mother of God. Since then, the liturgy in Optina has been served every day for all these years without a break. After we served the first liturgy, I immediately returned to the Lavra to take part in the Sobor for the canonization of Elder Ambrose [Amvrosy] of Optina, as well as that of eight other saints: Great Prince Dimitry Donskoy of Moscow, Andrei Rublev, Maximos the Greek, Metropolitan Macarius of Moscow and All Russia, Schema-Archimandrite Paisius Velichkovsky, Blessed Xenia of Petersburg, Bishop Ignatius Brianchininov, and Bishop Theophan the Recluse.

Four pairs of hieromonks were entrusted with processing with the icons to the Sobor for the canonization. Each pair had two icons of the saints who were being consecrated. Father Alypy and I made one pair and out of the eight saints, he carried St. Maximos the Greek and I was asked to carry St. Amvrosy of Optina.

RTE: What a wonderful beginning. How long before this had the monastery been given back?

IGUMEN MELCHISEDEK: Optina Pustyn was given back to the Orthodox Church on the 17th of November, 1987. The temporary head was Igumen Joseph Bratishev from Danilov Monastery, who later went on to become the abbot of Solovki. He had gone to Optina a bit earlier with a few workers to begin some restoration. In that first year only the famous angel bell-tower and a few small rooms above the *trapeznaya* [monastery dining-room] had been given back to the Church. In a tiny room high up in the belltower we made a temporary church dedicated to the Vladimir Mother of God, in honor of our first liturgy, which took place on this day. We lived in the same cell as the head of the monastery, while the other small rooms were used as the dining room, office, library, and vestry.

⁴ Antimens: A cloth containing relics given by the local bishop that Orthodox liturgy is served upon, especially if using unconsecrated altars. A permanent church has relics placed within the altar at its consecration.

Opposite: Elder Anatoly the Younger with monks and novices at Optina, early 20th century.

In the summer of 1988 four other seminarians came, who were then tonsured as monks at Optina. Three of them still live here: Igumen Vladimir, Igumen Alexander, and Igumen Antonii. The foundation of our monastic life were the daily services to God: up at 5:00 am for a brothers' moleben to St. Amvrosy, then Matins, Hours, and Liturgy, ending at 9:30. Then we started on our work, and at 12:00 had lunch. After lunch we had something unique, the so-called "Brothers' Hours" when, headed by the abbot, all of the fathers and brothers took part in restoration and agriculture with the workers; learning how to dig, build, operate the heavy machinery and so on. At 5:00 we had supper, then Vespers, and then the monastic rule (Canons to the Lord, the Mother of God, and the Guardian Angel) followed by Compline. All of this ended at about 8:30 in the evening. Then the next day, the same again. All of the brothers took part, as did Archimandrite Evlogy, who also directed the monastic choir.

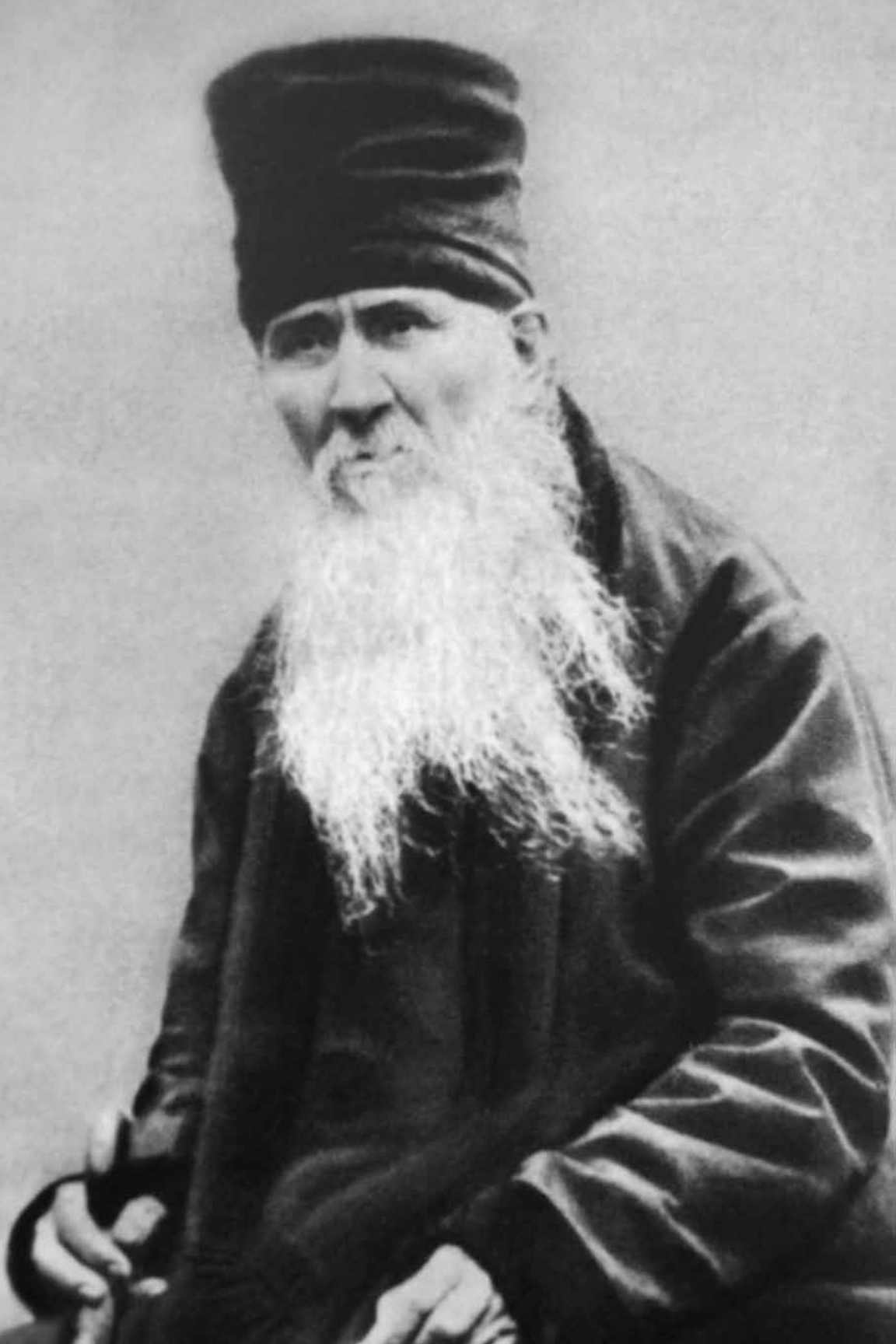
Little by little we received more of the monastery back. About seventy percent of the buildings were still standing but all were dilapidated, and many were completely ruined. In those early years we concentrated on physically restoring the monastery. Although the school had left the agricultural equipment behind, we couldn't grow our own food yet as we had no land. We had only been given back the buildings. The gardens and farm came later.

The church of St. John the Forerunner Skete in the woods a short distance from the monastery, where many of the Optina elders had lived, was given back only in 1990, and we began services then. For many years after this only the church was ours, as the small houses that had originally been part of the skete all had families and laypeople living in them. There were two regional museums there as well, dedicated to Optina-Kaluga history and to Russian authors of the 19th and 20th centuries who had visited the area. At night from Monday to Tuesday, the whole monastic brotherhood gathered for a true all-night vigil like on Mount Athos, until 5:00 am. This was a good foundation for the future.

Now with such a large number of brothers not everyone can always take part in all of the services, and I think this is a problem. In those early years, when everything was in ruins and we had to rebuild quickly, there seemed to be no time for prayer, but I believe we actually prayed more and things went on more successfully. When we try to do more active work at the expense of the services, we have more problems. The first priority is services, the foun-

Opposite: Ruined Church of the Entrance of the Mother of God, 1945.





dition of monastic life, and also our practice of eating together at trapeza. At meals we read the lives of the saints—most often the teachings of the Optina elders, so we feed both body and soul with Optina food.

Do you know how Optina's namestnik set the brothers free from being attached to things? At first, he used to move them from one cell to another every year, and some of the brothers would ask for a truck to move their things. Then he began moving them twice a year, and now they asked only for a car. When he began to move them even more frequently, the brothers began asking the monk whose cell they were moving into to describe it, exchanging information about what was there, down to the books. Most ended up with only one bag, moving from room to room.

Reclaiming the Monastery

As I said earlier, the authorities didn't give the monastery back all at once because there were forty families living there, as well as the agricultural teachers and students who were still going to school. There were also families in the skete. In order to take possession of the monastery, we had to find apartments or homes in the area of Kozelsk at our own expense for all of these people to live in, and they had to agree to move.

There are many incredible stories from these early years, but I remember one in particular. In half of St. Amvrosy's old cell in the St. John the Forerunner Skete, there lived a man named Constantine Abramov. Our first task was to get these two rooms free. We had very little money and the monastery gave the namestnik the task of bargaining with him. An entire house for a family could be bought for 5000 rubles at that time, and Constantine and his wife lived in only two of the rooms of St. Amvrosy's cell, but he wanted 10,000 rubles to move out—the cost of two houses. In these long talks about the sale, Constantine would bring up many different objections, and even after they finally agreed on the price, he decided that the notarized contract was not made up properly, so he refused to sign until the wording was altered. Finally, he stipulated that we had to give the payment in one, three, and five ruble notes. Everything was complicated.

Finally one evening, I invited him to the office. I was the econom of the monastery, and gave him the sum in one, three, and five ruble notes, just as he'd asked. In order to make up the 10,000 rubles, it was a huge bag, and I asked him to count it. When he saw the immense pile of banknotes he said,

Opposite: Staretz Ambrose of Optina, late 19th century.



Entrance to St. John the Forerunner Skete, early 20th century.



Ruined gate of St. John the Forerunner Skete, 1960's.



“Is it 10,000?” I said, “Yes. Count it.” He said, “I won’t count it. If I can’t trust you, who can I trust?” But this was not reassuring because I understood that he was not at all a simple, straight-forward person, and that there could be some unpleasant consequences later. So I said, “If we agree on this, then this transaction is finished. Sign the contract and the receipt.” He signed, I signed, and he left with the money.

Suddenly the next morning I saw him returning to the monastery. He came straight to me and said, “I need to talk to you urgently.” I immediately felt apprehensive; there would surely be another complication behind this. “Tell me,” I said. Constantine replied, “I went to the place where we were staying, and my wife and I went to bed happy that our deal had taken place. Suddenly, in the night, I saw a priest in my dream—it was Amvrosy.”

I began to test him. “Why do you think it was Amvrosy?” I asked. “I lived my whole life in his cell,” he said, “I took people on excursions there and showed them his photo. How can I not know him?”

I said, “What was he wearing?” Constantine said, “Something shining.” I asked, “Was it the robe that monks wear every day, or the special clothes that they serve in?” He said, “The ones you serve in.” “And what did he say?” I asked. “He said very sternly, ‘Constantine, count those packs of money.’ So, I woke up my wife and said, ‘Come on dear, get up and count the money.’ ‘You’re crazy,’ she said, ‘You’ve gone mad.’ ‘I tell you, let’s count it.’ So we counted the money until morning. There were 157 rubles more than there should have been, and here it is.” What I regret now is that I put those 157 rubles into my desk and used it to pay the workers. It should have been saved for the monastery museum as a miracle of God’s grace.

It was very hard work to begin to restore the monastery. Frankly, it was a miracle and the greatest miracle was that St. Amvrosy took care of every kopek.

Elder Amvrosy Teaches Constantine Not to Swear

Later, Constantine told us of another event connected with Elder Amvrosy. One day, a few years before the monks returned to Optina, as he was taking his turn as the local cowherd, Constantine approached the Paphnuty Borovsky spring with the cows and saw an old man sitting next to the water. He said, “Old man, how are you?” The old man replied, “Praise God, my son,” meaning that he was well. “And is there a God?” “Yes there is.” Then Constantine told

Opposite: View of pre-revolutionary Optina across the Zhizhdra River, early 20th century.

me, “I swore at him, using some bad words about God. Suddenly, something invisible hit me hard from behind and I found myself in the spring, which is about three by three meters and four meters deep, lined with log walls and open to the sky. It was October and I was wearing a heavy coat, and as I began to sink, I called out, ‘Old man, help me!’ For a very long time he didn’t reach out his hand to help, and my clothes started dragging me under the water. When I’d taken in a good amount of water, the old man finally stretched out his hand. Instantly and quite unexpectedly, I found myself standing on the bank. He said to me, ‘Never say that again.’ I started walking home to the skete, about a kilometer away. After a few feet I turned back to look, but the old man had disappeared; he was nowhere to be seen. I went home, changed my clothes, and my wife gave me tea and then some vodka. She was distressed by the fact that I had been in the water at that time of year and said, ‘We don’t have such an old man among our local people.’ I tried to think of who it could have been from among the people I knew, and then realized that it looked very much like the photo of Elder Amvrosy.” From that time Constantine didn’t swear, and he always spoke about that meeting with repentance.

RTE: How did the other villagers living at Optina respond to you?

IGUMEN MELCHISEDEK: Our main problem in the beginning was that the people living in the monastery put radios and tape recorders in their windows and played very loud music—as if we were enemies they were trying to drive away. Fr. Mikael Timofev and I were in charge of finding places outside the monastery for these people to live and after about a year, when the villagers had gotten to know us better, they didn’t play their loud music anymore.

In time, the monastery built a new apartment house with forty apartments near Kozelsk, all ready to live in. The lumber was brought 300 kilometers from Moscow; it was an incredible construction project. We owned eighteen of the apartments, which went to some of the families we needed to move from Optina; the other twenty-two were taken and sold by the state, who had helped with the financing. This house is still locally known as “Popovsky,” a derogatory name for priests.

When I had to take the documents around to the families who were being given new apartments, I went to the first house in which there lived a man named Obed Koslov. He knew me by now, and when he saw me coming he put potatoes, cucumbers, and cognac on the table for hospitality. Then he

Opposite: Villager in front of ruined Church of the Entrance of the Mother of God, 1960.





took out a sausage and began to slice it. I said, "It's the fast." He replied, "No one can see." He had the impression that we fasted only when someone could see us, and was very surprised to find out that it was real. Although he was worldly, he was such a memorable character, that even though he is long gone, the house he lived in is still called Koslov's House.

As well as liking music, Koslov was a very fit athlete, and he told the local hoodlums, "If you hurt these people, I'll show you." One year, towards the end of the Nativity Fast, Kozlov, who was very proud of his physical condition and his immense strength said to Fr. Michael, who is also no weakling, "Why do you fast?" "Grace," said Fr. Michael. "What's grace?" Koslov asked. "Look, you eat sausage and I eat potatoes, let's arm wrestle." They started wrestling and Kozlov turned red with effort. Fr. Michael said, "That's your sausage." In the end Kozlov beat him, but just barely. He walked away groaning and said, "Yes, potatoes give you a lot." I was present also as the judge. So, God gives strength. When people ask, "How can we fast? We'll have no energy," Fr. Naum at the Lavra replies, "Elephants and bulls only eat grass but they can carry logs."

RTE: Were any of the laypeople living at the monastery or in the skete Orthodox, and did they have a sense of the importance of the Optina elders?

IGUMEN MELCHISEDEK: Yes, as I mentioned earlier, when we first came to the monastery Elder Amvrosy's cell was divided between two families. The Abramovs lived in one side and the accountant for the agricultural school, a woman named Claudia, lived in the other. Claudia had asthma, and at that time the attacks were becoming more and more frequent. One night as she lay in bed, she felt that she was suffocating and, certain that she was dying, turned to the wall thinking, "Lord, let this end as soon as possible." As she lay with her face to the wall she heard a voice behind her, "Claudia, put on your cross!" She had forgotten that she wasn't wearing a cross. She remembered that her baptismal cross was behind one of her icons, so she took it down, put it on, lay back down and fell peacefully asleep. After that, she had no more bad attacks. The asthma was still there but she didn't experience the suffocation again. When she was asked whose voice it was, she replied, "I don't know, it must have been the Lord." She lived in St. Amvrosy's cell, and in principle her life was pious, so this was God's mercy to her. This is what wearing a cross means.

Opposite: Villagers at Optina, 1970's.

RTE: Yes. Can you speak now about some of the major events you witnessed, feastdays and the reopening of churches?

IGUMEN MELCHISEDEK: One liturgy that stands out in my mind is that of Transfiguration, August 6/19th of 1988, when so many people came to Optina that they couldn't all fit into the belfry chapel, so we decided to serve outside. The pilgrims stood in the street and a staircase was built from the lower part of the tower (which used to be the monastery's main entrance) up to the level of the second-floor chapel in the bellfry. At the top of the steps a landing was built, where the priest stood—you couldn't see into the altar because it was enclosed by the iconostasis—then, there were more steps up to the cross. The people stood on the ground, with the cross at the top and the priest in the middle. It was at that service that I understood that the priest is just an intermediary between heaven and earth.

The first liturgy served at the central altar of the Church of the Presentation of the Mother of God was on the Feast of the Dormition on the 15/28th of August, 1988. This has always been the main church of the monastery, and it is as large as some city cathedrals. We had already been using the side altar, dedicated to St. Nicholas, but this service was a real joy, because it was the first time we were able to serve in the main altar. After the service, the namestnik asked, "Is it possible that by the feastday of St. Amvrosy, (the 23rd of October), we can restore the whole church?" The feast was less than two months away and there was an immense amount of work to be done, but I said, "We have to try."

Then it started—we worked day and night. A week before the feast, we sent a bus to Kaluga to bring the diocesan seminarians and a truck for beds from the nearest military post for the pilgrim workers. There was only a week left until the feast, and during this week about a hundred people came to work nonstop on the church. Everyone was doing something. To keep the work organized, the head of the project stood in the middle of the church for two or three days, saying, "Put this here, take that there. Put the floor here, the iconostasis there." It was like an anthill. By St. Amvrosy's feastday, the church was ready. It was whitewashed, the marble floor had been laid, and all of the icons were up. It was a blessing from God.

So many people came for that first liturgy that they couldn't fit into the church. It was the first feast of St. Amvrosy's repose in the reopened monastery, and in that last week, as we were working so hard, his relics were found.

Opposite: Ruined Church of St. Mary of Egypt, Optina Monastery, 1965.





ХРИСТОСЪ

РОСКИ

Restored Church of the Entrance of the Mother of God, Optina Pustyn, 2010.

The New Martyrs of Optina

RTE: One of the great tragedies of those first years was the murder of three Optina monks: Hieromonk Vasily (Roslyakov), Monk Ferapont (Pushkarev) and Monk Trophim (Tatarinov), who were stabbed by a madman on Pascha night of 1993. Did you know them well?

IGUMEN MELCHISEDEK: I was close to Hieromonk Vasily, but Fr. Ferapont and Fr. Trophim came later and I have only general impressions of them. Father Ferapont was very quiet and reserved, and even at the services, he retired into himself. He rarely spoke with anyone. Father Trophim, on the other hand, was very talkative. His obedience was to be at the candle box to sell candles; outside of services he drove the tractor. Hieromonk Vasily came the very first summer that Optina was reopened and I have many memories of him.

In those first summers, many people came to Optina who were not yet baptized. People are almost never baptized in monasteries—the monks usually send them to parish churches, but if there is a real need, we now have a small chapel outside the monastery where we can baptize and the elderly monks do this.

In these early years, however, I once asked for permission to baptize a group of three or four young people who had come to us. I was told, “Go ahead, but do it in the evening, so that no one knows. So I went to Fr. Vasily and asked, “Do you know first aid, if one of these people starts to drown?” (*laughter*) It turned out that Fr. Vasily was a very good swimmer,” so I said, “Well then, assist me.” So, we started the baptismal service at 11:00 at night, followed by their first confessions, and at dawn, with a cross procession there and back, we baptized them at the Paphnuty-Borovsky spring about a kilometer from the monastery in icy cold water. The spring is three or four meters deep and as they went down the stairs Fr. Vasily held them by the hand so that they wouldn’t fall. I have such impressions of that night! In the morning when the brothers came into church, the newly baptized Christians were there. They stood through liturgy and received Holy Communion. One of them became a monk at Optina, and the others came back for years afterwards.

Many people felt that Fr. Vasily would be a future elder. He was interiorly very disciplined, prayerful, humble, and well-read in Holy Scripture and the Church Fathers. Even when he was a deacon, he gave sermons. They were

Opposite: Bright Week 1993 funeral for New Martyrs Hieromonk Vasily, and Monks Trophim and Ferapont, murdered on Pascha night at Optina Monastery.





very short and deep, built on the works of the Holy Fathers. After his death, we remembered that Fr. Vasily had begun one of his last sermons with St. Peter's words, "I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to arouse you by way of reminder, since I know that the putting off of my body will be soon, as our Lord Jesus Christ showed me." (2 Peter 1: 11-14)

The last I saw of Fr. Vasily was at the Paschal cross procession. There were many priests already at that time, and each priest was given an icon from the church to carry; Fr. Vasily carried the Resurrection icon. After the procession, during the Paschal Matins, Fr. Vasily was sent into the altar to do the proskomedia. At the Paschal service in Russia, we wear white for the liturgy, but before we change into our white vestments, we kiss each other three times. When the priests came into the altar we had already changed into white and Fr. Vasily, who had been asked to do the proskomedia, was still in red. I came up to him and said, "Christ is Risen!" He looked at his red robe, and at our white ones, and said, "I've already risen." He didn't say, "In truth He is Risen," but what he'd said was kind of a joke. We laughed because it was a nice joke, but it turned out to be prophetic when he was attacked a few hours later. Red is the color of both martyrdom and of resurrection. Afterwards, he carried the icon of the Resurrection in the procession. It was a sort of foreshadowing.

I had once worked in a hospital emergency room, so after Fr. Vasily was attacked I went with him in the ambulance—Fr. Vasily, the nurse, and myself. I asked him, "Can you hear me?" and when he nodded yes, I told him, "Be patient, we'll soon be at the hospital." He gave out a long sigh, "Good." Working in the hospital, I had seen many dying people. They were troubled, almost always begging for help, but Fr. Vasily was quiet, accepting whatever God sent him with patience. His wound was mortal, however, as the knife had pierced the large blood vessel to the heart and there was much internal bleeding. The doctors were surprised that he managed to live even a few hours.

When we entered his cell after his death, there was nothing except a bed, books, and a table. He was absolutely an ascetic, yet this was combined with a warm love for people. When he took people on tours of the monastery he was so loving and glad to serve them that it was hard to see an ascetic in this smiling man. We usually think of ascetics as severe.

RTE: When we heard at our monastery in California that the three monks had been killed, it was as if our own brothers had died, and I understood

Opposite: Optina Podvorye Church of Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, Moscow, 2010.

then how close all monastics are. People who were at Optina at the time have told me that during the funeral in Bright Week, there was a very strange mixture of joy and sorrow.

IGUMEN MELCHISEDEK: When people tell you there was joy in our souls, this isn't true. The atmosphere was terrible. It was such a loss. We understood with our minds that they were in heaven, but our souls and bodies felt as if our right arms had been cut off. In those days, one would have had to have been very spiritual to be able to truly say, "Yes, they were martyrs and it is better for them." It was only afterwards that we slowly became aware of this. There were only about forty monks then, and we were always together, like a family.

RTE: Weren't you also at Optina when they translated the relics of Elder Nektary in the 1990's from his place of exile in the village of Kholmisha, about sixty kilometers from the monastery?

IGUMEN MELCHISEDEK: I wasn't at Kholmisha when they took him from the ground, but I was here when the relics were brought back, and I'm a witness to another story connected to Elder Nektary. I'd gone to Kholmisha with Fr. Philaret, where we met a man whose father-in-law had given Elder Nektary shelter when he was driven out of Optina. The father-in-law's name was Denezhkin and he told his daughter, this man's wife, that Elder Nektary lived a very modest life in the village. People still came to him all the way from Kaluga and Moscow for confession, and he prayed with them mainly at night. For some reason the priest of the parish church there didn't accept him, and when they asked the elder if he wanted to be buried outside the church, behind the altar, he said, "No, bury me in the village cemetery, because at the church it will be worse than a pig field." Denezhkin didn't understand how a church could be worse than a pig field, but in the 1930's the church was closed. Afterwards they began to have market fairs, with drinking and dancing in the big field all around the church; they even danced on the graves. The son-in-law saw all of that himself.

Thus, St. Nektary's foresight saved his relics, and he was buried in the further village graveyard with a cross above the grave. If he had been buried behind the altar, all would have been broken and trampled down. On Mount Athos the monks believe that if someone has pleased God very much, when they dig out the bones after three years to place them in the ossuary,

Opposite: Restored Entrance to Skete of the Forerunner, Opina Monastery, 2009.



the skull will be brown. Most often skulls are whitish grey. St. Nektary's is yellow-brown, and although there are often natural cracks in the skull and a natural seam that can form a cross, St. Nektary's skull has two crosses on his forehead.

Chairman Malenkov, Marshall Zhukov, and Elder Nektary

Another story told to me by Denezhkin's son-in-law was that the villagers always claimed that in 1926, Elder Nektary had a visit from two young soldiers enrolled in an officer's training course in Leningrad: Georgy Malenkov⁵, who would later succeed Stalin as the Chairman of the Council of Ministers and Georgy Zhukov⁶, who became Marshall Zhukov, Russia's Commander-in-Chief during WWII. They had come to visit Elder Nektary at Kholmisha because they were afraid of Stalin: top officers and government officials were already being tried and executed in purges that would escalate in 1935-7, prior to World War II.

Denezhkin knew of the conversation: that the two young men had asked the elder if they should go on with their careers or just hide in the shadows. Elder Nektary told Malenkov, "You study. You will be a great statesman, but only for a short time." In fact, Malenkov held the chairmanship of the Council of Ministers from March 1953 to February, 1955, for twenty-three months. Elder Nektary also told Zhukov to continue his studies, "Your talent will save Russia." Zhukov eventually became Marshall of the Soviet Union, and commander of several different fronts—a major figure in winning the Second World War. Zhukov was not publicly a believer, and at first I doubted this story, but now they say that he always secretly carried an icon of the Mother of God of Kazan with him.

After I heard this, I did some research in the Great Soviet Encyclopedia... (*reading from his notes*), "In 1926, Zhukov went to study in a year-long

⁵ Georgy Malenkov (1902-1988): Of Macedonian extraction and the great-grandson of an Orthodox priest, Malenkov was a Soviet politician, Communist Party leader and close collaborator of Joseph Stalin. After Stalin's death, he became Premier of the Soviet Union (1953-1955) and in 1953, before being overshadowed by Nikolai Bulganin and Nikita Krushchev, was considered the most powerful politician in the USSR. During his years as chairman, he was an outspoken opponent of nuclear armament and in 1961 was expelled from the party and sent to Khazakstan to manage a hydroelectric plant. Once out of the public eye he became a practicing Orthodox Christian and since his death, his daughter has used her inheritance to fund the rebuilding of many churches.

⁶ Gregory Zhukov (1896-1974): Marshall of the Soviet Union (the highest possible military rank) served in WWI under the Tsar, and in WWII as commander of the Leningrad and Kievan Fronts. Zhukov played a pivotal role in winning WWII, and emerged as the most decorated general in the history of both Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union.

officer's training course in Leningrad. After some months he was given a leave for two weeks. He and Malenkov, who was studying with him, took a trip on horseback from Leningrad to Bryansk, eleven to twelve days, about 1,000 kilometers. From Bryansk he went to his native village, a place called Strelkovka in the Kaluga Governorate to visit his mother." Now the village of Kholmisha was on his way from Bryansk to Strelkovka, and this is why I believe that there is a real possibility of them being there in 1926. Afterwards, when they became well-known, a secret visit would have been impossible, even if Elder Nektary had still been alive. Malenkov studied with Zhukov in the officer's course, so it is indeed possible that they went together. The villagers would have no way of knowing these details, so their linking the two names together at that precise time would have been nearly impossible unless it had really happened. Zhukov went on to study for another twelve months in Leningrad at an advanced officer's training course. Just as St. Sergius of Radonezh blessed Dimitry Donskoy to fight the Tatars, so did Elder Nektary bless Zhukov: "Study. Your talent will save Russia."

RTE: I remember that Helen Kontzevitch, the wife of Orthodox writer Ivan Kontzevitch, who acted as a spiritual mother to Fr. Herman Podmoshensky and Fr. Seraphim Rose of St. Herman of Alaska Monastery in Platina, often told them, "Remember, there were many monasteries, but there was only one Optina!"

FR. MELCHIZEDEK: My life is connected to this.

RTE: What impression would you like to leave our readers with?

FR. MELCHIZEDEK: Strange as it may seem, Optina grace is now in Optina. Not only because there are some special monks here, but the spirit of old Optina itself is here. Why is this? Because the Optina monastic principles have been restored: services, revelation of thoughts, the Jesus Prayer is being practiced, the study of the heritage of the Optina elders is available, and the books have now been published. Earlier, only a few monks had seminary education, now it is ninety percent: the brothers just read and soak it all in. Not only are the holy walls restored, but the Optina spirit has been revived. The most valuable, the most precious thing that Russia has now is this spirit. Pavel Florensky once said that Optina Monastery is a golden cup into which the best spiritual wine of Russia has been poured. My wish for each of your readers is that, if only once, you come to Optina. ✦