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# “DON’T PASS BY; HEAVEN IS HERE!”

## Raising Moscow’s Pokrov Church in Yasenevo

A decade ago we interviewed long-time friend of *Road to Emmaus*, Archimandrite Melchisedek (Artyukhin), about his years as a hieromonk and *econom* overseeing the restoration of Russia’s famous Optina Monastery. In 1997, he was sent to organize the new Optina *podvoriye* at the pre-revolutionary parish of Sts. Peter and Paul in the south of Moscow, which in turn inspired the building of what is undoubtedly one of the world’s most beautiful new Orthodox churches – the Protection of the Mother of God at Yasenevo, consecrated in 2016. His account of the construction will move everyone inspired by good Orthodox architecture.

RTE: Father Melchisedek, can you tell us about your own background and how you, as a hieromonk and the former *econom* of the famous Optina Monastery, ended up here in Moscow?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: I have been a monk of Optina since it reopened in 1988, and in the 1990’s we understood that there was a need for a monastery *podvoriye* in Moscow. Monks often had to come to Moscow<sup>1</sup> for medical reasons, to take exams for their studies, or for publishing and other monastery business and they needed a place to stay. Finally, in 1997 we were given an old church, Sts. Peter and Paul in the Yasenevo district, and on the Feast of St. Xenia of Petersburg Abbot Benedict (Penkov) sent me to Moscow “for two or three months” to help organize the *podvoriye*. This simple business trip turned into a mission. First, we organized the *podvoriye* and parish, and for the past fifteen years I have been occupied with building the nearby Pokrov Church, dedicated to the Protection of the Mother of God. I’ve been here now for twenty years.

<sup>1</sup> Podvoriye: The small outpost of a larger rural monastery, usually in a major city.

*Opposite: North entrance and interior of Protection of the Mother of God Church, Yasenevo, Moscow. Photo courtesy A. Gould.*

## Building Pokrov

RTE: How did the Pokrov parish come about?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: On the Feast of the Protection of the Mother of God in 1999 there were so many people for services that hundreds had to stand outside, and I understood that we urgently needed more space. At that point there were 180,000 people in this district near the southern edge of Moscow, most of whom were baptized Orthodox, and Sts. Peter and Paul was the only church. As time went on, still more people came, and we began planning for the Pokrov (Protection) Church.

RTE: For our readers, Sts. Peter and Paul was one of the last churches built in the south of Moscow before the Revolution. During the Soviet period, new churches were not allowed to be built, so although the city expanded beyond this point, it remained the only church in the area. Do other districts have the same problem?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: Yes, and when His Holiness Patriarch Kirill was enthroned in 2009, he negotiated with Moscow Mayor Yuri Lushkov to initiate a program that would allow us to build 200 more churches in Moscow.

RTE: Was that because 200 Moscow churches were destroyed during the Soviet period, and it was acknowledged by the government that they should be replaced?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: No, it was because in large regional cities such as Kaluga and Tula there is one church for 10,000 people, while in Moscow the ratio is one church for 100,000 people. The patriarch asked that small parcels of land be set aside and building permission granted, so that there would be the same ratio of churches to population as in the large regional cities. He originally asked for 600 churches, which would be one church for every 10,000 residents.

RTE: Isn't 80-90% of the Moscow population baptized Orthodox?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: Yes, and according to this calculation at least 600 churches were needed. Of course, there are many less regular church-goers than the number who are baptized. No single church could handle 10,000

people every week. The patriarch's request was only for small parcels of unused land and permission to build; the patriarchate itself would build these churches out of their own funds. Of course, the city helped connect the electricity, water, and other utilities, as they would for any new building.

RTE: Did you also benefit from this plan for new churches?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: No, because I had begun negotiations for our new Pokrov Church a decade earlier, in 2000. It took us eight years to obtain a small plot of land and permission to build, and we had to use our heads to make a hole in this concrete bureaucratic wall. Since the 2009 agreement, all of the necessary permissions can be received in eight months. The 200 Churches Program has been a great help.

RTE: Besides an aching head, how did you start?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: I first had the idea of creating this new parish in 2000, and I understood that I had to start organizing people. It didn't matter who would eventually be in charge, we just had to start. This all happened on the Feast of the Protection of the Mother of God, October 1/14 in the Slavic tradition. After Liturgy, I was walking in the woods reading prayers, when I found myself wondering, "If there was a church, what would we name it?" Then a thought came, like a female voice deep in my heart, "Do you not understand how the people love my feast?" I understood then that we should dedicate it to the Protection of the Mother of God.

The patriarch blessed the formation of a new parish community, and then we elected a *starosta*, the church administrator, and a building committee. Our first *starosta* was Tatiana Vasilievna Zolotsa – Zolotsa meaning "gold," and she was. The strip of land we were finally given by the city was on a median dividing the six-lane Ayvazovoskogo Street, about a kilometer from Optina Monastery's *podvoriye*.

RTE: Was it surprising that they gave you a boulevard median?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: This wasn't an intentional boulevard as in downtown Moscow or Paris; it was just a long narrow strip of land between the divided street which had a lot with 200 small metal rental garages and a number of trees. The church was given one hectare [2.5 acres] of this four-hectare median.



The actual site of the church was covered by 110 trees, including fruit trees that were thirty to forty years old. According to Moscow city law, trees on a building site cannot be cut down, they must be relocated, so we transplanted these full-grown trees to our Optina *podvoriye* territory in the same district. We were very careful, and the city commissioners who came to check on our transplanting were quite astonished at how well we had done. Only two or three of the trees died, while the usual attrition rate is 20-30%.

Of course, it would have been much cheaper for us to simply buy that many young trees to replant, so this requirement was very expensive in terms of time, labor, and transport. Another interesting detail is that we have a strong Green Party in Moscow that actively protests everything to do with the removal of open land and trees. Although they could see with their own eyes that this entire orchard was being removed, they never said a word against it. The impression was that their eyes were closed.

RTE: What happened to the rest of the median?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: When we were given the land, the mayor's assistant Vladimir Ioasavich Rason, said, "A pearl must have a golden necklace," so the city planted the other three hectares of the boulevard as a public park. So, now, because of the church, there is a flourishing territory in the middle of the district for both the soul and body.

RTE: How did you begin such an enormous building project?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: We started with prayer. The parish community began in a small wooden hut, 2 x 2 meters, where during the day the sisters (women of the parish) read the psalter continually. The builders, architects, and planners were all mentioned by name in the prayers. We knew the project would take years, so we decided to build a temporary church on the site first. On November 22, 2008, Archbishop (now Metropolitan) Arseny (Epifanov), came to bless the territory. When he reached the site of the temporary chapel he asked, "Who will you consecrate this to?" I replied, "It is no accident that you came today, the Feast of the Mother of God, Quick to Hear. We need the Mother of God to hear us quickly, so the temporary church will be dedicated to her, and it will be ready for you to serve in by the Feast of the Presentation."

*Opposite: Protection of the Mother of God Church on Ayvazovskogo Street. Photo courtesy A. Gould.*

The temporary church was built in three weeks using large sea shipping containers. Two forty-foot metal containers became the church, and two others that were twenty feet long were used as the altar area. Another twenty-foot container became the narthex and the bookstore. We cut out the walls between them and made doors out of yet another container. There was a cross on top of the church. This was the last church for which Patriarch Alexis II signed the antimens. He signed them on December 3rd, 2008. The first Liturgy was served the following day, and on December 5th the patriarch reposed. Since then, Liturgy has been served here without missing a single day, except, of course, during Great Lent.

RTE: What part did you play after initiating the project?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: Once it was clear that a permanent church would be built, the question was, “Who will be the head of the church?” The *stara-rosta* and the people asked the patriarch, “Please give us a father superior.” The patriarchate looked for half a year, and I was nowhere mentioned in the papers as I was already in charge of the Optina podvoriye’s Church of Sts. Peter and Paul. Although I had initiated the idea, there was no thought on anyone’s part that I would be involved further. Finally, Archbishop Arseny said, “It was you who began this, and if the patriarch gives his blessing, will you go on as the superior and finish building it.” I said, “Yes, if the patriarch blesses.” So, this was how it happened.

In their free time most monks paint icons, or read, or make prayer ropes and incense. Other monks with spare time on their hands build churches. (*Laughter*) After we began building, I was made the superior of other new churches in the area as well. There are now six: the original Sts. Peter and Paul parish at the Optina Monastery Podvoriye; The Protection of the Mother of God (Pokrov) Church that we are speaking of now; the Church of the Resurrection, which is located in the local Orthodox home for the elderly; Sts. Peter and Fevronia in the community social center; St. John the Theologian in the Orthodox *gymnasium* – a secondary school where students are intensively prepared to enter university; and All Saints Church, which is also in the Yasenevo district.

*Opposite: Archimandrite Melchisedek. Photo courtesy O. Tartarkin.*





## Post-Soviet Years and Creativity

RTE: The Yasenevo district is an example of the tremendous growth of the Russian Church, which for you, after reviving Optina, meant restoring the partially ruined church of Sts. Peter and Paul, building new ones, and developing an array of pastoral services. To put this in the context of the post-Soviet period, what difference do you see between the early years of intensive rebuilding and today? Some say that the development of Church administration has dampened the spontaneous initiative of the 1990s, and that although there is more order now, there is also less room for creative ideas and projects. Do you agree with this?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: This isn't true regarding creative people. Those priests and bishops who were creative back then remain so now. In those early days, when the Church was building a new external foundation in society, we had to rely on God and on our own strength.

But for those who could become creative, a bureaucratic approach will quench the fire to some extent. If there are mostly restrictions and orders, one can hardly expect to see freedom or creative flight. This new generation of priests is ordained and lives within the framework of councils, guidelines, and planning, so there is some truth in what you have heard. There is more order and less flight now.

RTE: Which is understandable if we remember that rebuilding Russia's tens of thousands of ruined monasteries and churches is probably the largest restoration effort ever undertaken in history. Now, twenty-five years after the fall of Soviet society, we have Pokrov as a crowning moment in Russian church building, which you and your parishioners have managed to fulfill with inspiration and attentive oversight. What was the essence of that post-Soviet freedom that you tapped into in building this church?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: Encountering the faith back then was a powerful and outstanding experience. For example, when Fr. Vladimir Volgin and Fr. Arkady Shatov (now Bishop Panteleimon) were converted during the Soviet period and asked to be ordained, they were told: "Serving in Moscow is closed to you." Although they were educated Muscovites, they had to live in country villages to become priests, and they agreed to this because they were not interested in externals. Later, when they were allowed to return

to Moscow, they were in great demand. One of them is now a well-known confessor and the other is both a confessor and bishop.

Another example is Fr. Gennady Ogryzkov, who served in the Church of Maloye Vozneseniye near the Moscow Conservatory of Music. During the Soviet period he was an architect with a good salary, but once he decided to become a priest, he had to conceal the fact that he was well-educated or the Soviet state would not have allowed him to enter seminary. So, he quit his prestigious architecture job and worked as a night guard in the Tretyakov Gallery for half of his former wages. It was only as a simple worker that he was eligible to enter the seminary. You can see what sacrifices people made.

Practicality is what prevails nowadays: "If I come to sing, care for the sick, or teach, what will I get for this?" This is not just materialism, but young people today want to both serve God and have a prosperous external life. It seems to me that there are fewer now who would agree to a social downshift in order to serve God. Now when called to enter the seminary, they say "I have to think it over." Everything was deeper then, and people were ready to leave everything to follow the Gospel. As Alyosha in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* puts it, to just keep going to Liturgy and giving a ruble to the poor was not enough for them.

As for freedom, this civil freedom from Soviet-period restrictions is undoubtedly for the better. The Nativity of Christ is now a national holiday. We can publish anything and as much as we want, quite openly. We have access to radio and television broadcasting; we have Sunday schools and Orthodox primary and secondary schools. This is not because the state supports us financially, but because its policy towards us is sympathetic and it gives the Church the freedom to do what we think is necessary.

Freedom is a real thing. There is nothing bad about it, and although we know that times of persecution are often the best for Christians spiritually, we would not like to go back to those oppressive times. Many people use this freedom to work, but for God it is not the quantity but the quality that is important: there were 12, not 120 apostles.

So how does freedom affect quality? Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov says, "First come leaves and then the fruit," and now we see more leaves and less fruit. How deep that desire to bear fruit is, is a different question, but I hope that such a quantity of leaves will someday reveal quality. This is all a mystery; it is all part of God's Providence.



## Pokrov's Architect

RTE: Returning now to the beautiful Church of the Protection of the Mother of God, what can you tell us about the architect?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: The architect is Vladimir Ivanovich Kozlov, who traveled with me to visit the Sicilian churches. He is a graduate of the Moscow Institute of Architecture and had already built one church dedicated to St. Seraphim of Sarov and a second near a monastery in Moscow's Perovo district.

It's a real tragedy that today architecture students are taught to make a box and fill the space, but they cannot construct an iconostasis, a chandelier, icons and kiots. It is rare to find an architect who is both a believer and has the traditional skills to build such a church. Kozlov was unique in that he could also design the interior elements and was as inspired as I was by the Byzantine-Sicilian churches.

RTE: And his final overall structure?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: It is a two-storied church on a cross and dome plan. The area of the main upper Church of the Protection of the Mother of God is 1,323.5 square meters and 33 meters high.<sup>2</sup>

RTE: Thirty-three, the age of the Lord. And the lower church?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: The lower church underneath is much smaller. It adjoins a few small meeting rooms, offices, and a trapeza and kitchen on the north and west sides. Outside, we also have a small monument-type chapel, a free-standing office, and a courtyard with flower gardens, benches, fountains, and two small stores – one with books and icons, and the other selling fresh bread, pastries, dairy products, and other locally-produced food.

<sup>2</sup> In Imperial units, the area of the upper church would be: 14,246 square feet, with a height of 355 feet.

*Opposite: Marble facings on the church and pillar walls, reminiscent of Hagia Sophia. Photo courtesy A. Gould.*

## From Sicily to Constantinople

RTE: And how did you decide on this unique Sicilian-Byzantine-Russian style for the Pokrov Church?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: Before beginning this church, I travelled all over Europe, including Greece and Istanbul. I knew that several UNESCO World Heritage churches in Sicily had been built under Byzantine influence and are considered the best surviving examples of mosaic work, so we went there first. The churches that most inspired us were the *Duomo di Monreale* (Cathedral of Monreale) in the suburbs of Palermo, which is dedicated to the Mother of God and is one of the largest mosaic-covered churches in the world; *Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio* (St. Mary “of the Admiral”) in Martorana, which was built by George of Antioch, the Greek admiral of the Kingdom of Sicily, in thanksgiving for protection by the Mother of God; the *Cappella Palatina* (Palace Chapel) in Palermo; and the *Duomo di Cefalù*, in Cefalù. These Norman-Byzantine churches greatly influenced our plans for the Protection of the Mother of God Church.

Later, I also went to Constantinople. In Hagia Sophia, which is now a museum, I saw the beautifully-patterned marble facings on the church walls and balconies, and thought, “So few people can come to experience the beauty of the most outstanding church in the world; what can we do to bring this to them?” So, we reproduced that marblework on our balconies, replacing the crosses that had been despoiled on the Hagia Sophia facings. People who come to see Pokrov and already know Hagia Sophia always remark on the subtlety and faithfulness of the work.

There is another famous Byzantine church in Istanbul, also a museum, called *Chora*, which has wonderful, amazing frescoes, and we used elements from this church – particularly the image of the cross in the cupola. In Pokrov, the cross is being carried by angels, and this detail is from Chora. We also borrowed an early Byzantine mosaic scheme from the Ravenna *Basilica di Sant'Apollinare in Classe*: the sacrifice of Abraham, along with images of Melchisedek and Abel, although we went further and added Noah.

Our inspiration comes from many places: for example, decorative bands were often used on the lower walls of Byzantine churches, so below our

*Opposite: Basilica-type apse above altar, with icon inspired by Sicilian Byzantine churches. Photo courtesy M.N. McLees.*



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mosaics we also have these bands based on designs from different churches. Our large central chandelier represents the New Jerusalem, and the twelve lanterns affixed to it symbolize the twelve gates of heaven. The decorative gemstones are those mentioned by name in the Book of the Apocalypse. We tried to take all of the best ideas and use them in our church.

## Inspired Mosaics

RTE: How did you come up with the astonishing scheme of mosaics that covers the entire upper half of this large church?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: Early Christian churches in the West were modeled on Roman basilicas, long halls for public assemblies which usually had a row of columns on each side and a semi-circular apse at the end. Even now most churches in Italy are built as basilicas, without a cupola or dome, but with the large apse above the altar that portrays an image of the Saviour. Under the apse is an image of the Mother of God. We took the idea of our apse icons from Sicily. Since Orthodox churches also have a cupola, our Pokrov church is on a cross and dome plan with the addition of a Sicilian apse. The altar, of course, faces east.

Now, we Orthodox always have the Saviour in the cupola, but because we were going to place His image in the apse, we knew it shouldn't be replicated in the cupola, so instead we portrayed a symbolic image of Christ – the cross being carried by angels – which is an illustration of the feast of the Ascension found in older Armenian, Georgian, and Cappadocian churches. This was also appropriate for us because in Russian churches the first image below the dome is traditionally the Ascension. And, as I said, the ornamentation around the cross image in our church is borrowed from the Chora Church Museum in Istanbul.

We also followed tradition in placing the other images. In western churches, the back western wall with the entrance door has an image of the Dormition, while in Russian churches it is usually The Last Judgment and Christ's Second Coming – perhaps because the Last Judgment is the end of history. While the Resurrection image depicts God's Resurrection and the Dormition depicts human resurrection, the Last Judgment is everyone's resurrection. In this the Russians went further by showing the final end of history: the victory of the Cross over evil and death.



It occurs to me now as I speak that we have observed both of these traditions. On the western wall over the central door we have the Dormition, and on the upper floor in the balcony above the Dormition mosaic is the Last Judgment.

RTE: A union of East and West.

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: Yes. Now, when we drew up the plans, there were four church artists who applied to design the icon scheme. When they submitted their plans, I understood that there was no logic, no overarching idea of why one saint is here and another there, and no sense of how they are interconnected. I prayed and worried over this until I visited the old churches in Armenia, Georgia, and Cappadocia where, in every case, I saw icons in pairs. The first main pair was always the Saviour and the Mother of God. Even if the church was tiny, this pair was present on the iconostasis or on the columns separating the nave from the altar. The second pair present in every church was of Archangel Gabriel and the Mother of God.

This phenomenon of pairing was very interesting for me. In the Gospel we read that the Lord sent his apostles out "two by two," and in this older scheme of church decoration, the images are as well. So, I stood in the middle of our unfinished church to think about pairing. You can see for yourself that the first and most important pair for us is also the Lord and the Mother of God in the altar apse. Then there are the two smaller apses to each side of the altar with Sts. Peter and Paul. This is unusual because in the Russian tradition, the altar area doesn't have Peter and Paul, but rather Archangel Michael and St. Nicholas. Some churches have Archangels Michael and Gabriel, so there are different possibilities, but I decided to include the apostles because, after all, who did we receive the gospel from? These two saints are the pillars of the church.

Then we have the two main columns in the nave, and I saw a logical chain. Where did we receive Orthodoxy from? From Equal-to-the-Apostles Constantine and Helen. And who did Russia receive Orthodoxy from? From Sts. Vladimir and Olga. And who translated the New Testament into Church Slavonic? Sts. Cyril and Methodius. And who were the name-saints of these two saints? St. Cyril of Jerusalem and St. Methodius of Olympus. So, these two columns are themselves drawn together by having one of the paired saints on each.

Because the martyrs are the foundation of the Church, below the column depictions of Sts. Vladimir and Olga are two early martyrs. And who was the



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first martyr? Stephen the Protodeacon. Who is the most venerated martyr in Moscow? St. George the Trophy-Bearer.

On the far columns are the pair of monastic saints most loved by monks: Sts. Ephrem the Syrian and Isaac the Syrian. Then we have the Russian Passion-Bearers Boris and Gleb. Who did we Russians receive monasticism from? Again, a Russian pair: Sts. Anthony and Theodosius of the Kiev Caves. Then of course, the Mother of God and Archangel Gabriel. This idea of pairing is everywhere.

We also depicted the paired apostles as they are enumerated in the Gospels, some on the columns and others on the side walls. To honor the patron saints of families we added two husband and wife couples: Sts. Peter and Fevronia with Sts. Dimitri Donskoy and Evdokia of Moscow. The women are pictured on the medallions on the arches on the left, the women's side of the church, and the men on the right-hand arches, the men's side.

RTE: Even the stylite saints are beautifully portrayed on their paired pillars between the elongated upper windows.

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: Yes, we have Sts. Simeon the Elder and Simeon the Younger, and Sts. Alypy and Nikita. Nikita was a Russian stylite saint whose pillar was a hole in the ground, but it was the same idea.

We also depict the feasts of the Lord and the Mother of God, as well as six stories from the Gospels. Near the apse of St. Peter is the resurrection of the righteous Tabitha by St. Peter, and near St. Paul, the meeting of St. Peter and St. Paul in Rome. For Rome to be recognizable, it shows the Colosseum, a symbol of the early Christian martyrs. In the far background there is an image of a hill with an upside-down cross and a marble pillar with a sword, both of which remind us of how Sts. Peter and Paul were martyred. This mosaic just carries us away to Rome to the sites of their martyrdom. It is one thing to read about their suffering and another to see it against this common background.

One of the most difficult problems priests come across is the need to give a genuine answer to a person going through the great sorrow of losing a loved one. A believer can cope with this problem, but for a person who is far from the faith or just coming to it, his own death and the death of his close ones is

*Opposite: Paired saints on the facing columns (from top): Sts. Constantine and Helen, Vladimir and Olga, and Stephen the Proto-Deacon with George the Trophy-Bearer. Photo courtesy M.N. McLees.*

an absolute tragedy. So out of the many Gospel stories and miracles, I chose those having to do with resurrection: the raising of Lazarus, the raising of the son of the widow of Nain; the raising of Jairus' daughter, the raising of righteous Tabitha; and the myrrh-bearing women near the empty tomb of the Lord, where the snow-white angel is saying, "Why are you looking for the living among the dead?" (This, by the way, is a copy of the most important image of Serbian Christian art, the White Angel of Serbia at Mileševa, which we replicated here in mosaic.) Finally, we have the miracle of the Resurrection of Christ with the myrrh-bearing women at his feet, "Rejoice and fear not." All of these stories are about the strength and might of the Resurrection and of the immortality of the human soul and body. In this way the Church can express the Gospel even without words. As Pavel Florensky said, "The Church's imagery is theology in color."

RTE: This is extraordinary and as a visitor you feel these connections, even if you don't notice them consciously at first. How were the mosaics constructed, and by whom?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: The directors of the mosaic work were Alexei Maltsev and Anastasia Denezh, who graduated from the Department of Monumental Painting of the V. Surikov Moscow State Academy Art Institute. They are students of Alexander Karnaukhov, a famous mosaic artist, and were recommended to create the apse mosaics of the Saviour and the Theotokos. Although there were several groups of trained mosaicists involved, these two were the main teachers. There was also a group of artists who had graduated from icon painting school that worked on the frescoes.

The church mosaics took about two years and during this time graduate students who were learning from Maltsev and Denezh did a lot of the background and ornamentation, which did not require as high a degree of professionalism. It is a long process, and although one person was in charge of an entire piece, other workers each had their own specialties, such as being able to take a colored block of stone and cut it into many small pieces. Another lengthy job was to prepare the walls and the framed foundations on which the mosaics would be laid.

The professionals were freed from this preparation work, which they also taught to our church workers and volunteers, so that they could concentrate

*Opposite: Mosaicist at work on icon of an archangel. Photo courtesy T. Trofimova.*



on the fine work on the faces and hands. These helpers cut, prepared, and sorted the stones into colors and shades, so that the artists just had to choose what they wanted. There were about one hundred people who helped them with this preparation, and in general each mosaicist had ten helpers. Some were volunteers while others were paid because they were more professional. These one hundred people often came after their day jobs to work, and some even worked through the night on weekends.

Because of the high degree of organization, this complicated work did not take very long. It took two years (2008-2010) to build the church, and another four (2011-2015) to paint the frescoes and create the 2,500 square meters of mosaics. In comparison, the Church on the Blood in St. Petersburg, which takes third place in the world for the amount of mosaic work, has about 6,500 square meters of mosaics, and took twenty-five years to build (1883-1907) with the same techniques.

## Creating the Mosaic Work

RTE: Can you describe how the mosaics were created?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: We used the same methods that were used in Byzantine times. The small pieces of mosaic tiles are called tesserae, and the pieces used for the clothes were usually about 1 x 1 centimeter [less than 1/2 square inch]. Pieces for the faces were even smaller, while the background pieces could be a little larger. We have over 18,000,000 pieces of stone and glass in these mosaics, all hand cut by our workers.

RTE: I was told by one of the parishioners that people sent old gold jewelry to be melted down to make the gold tesserae.

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: It is true that gold jewelry was donated from all over Russia, but it wasn't used directly, it was exchanged for the gold leaf needed to make the gold tesserae for the mosaics.

There are three kinds of mosaic tiles used in this church: marble, stone, and glass. The gold tiles are not solid gold, of course. They are *smalti*, hand-cut mosaic glass or crystal, which are different than stone, marble, or the cheaper ceramic tesserae. In addition, gold smalti are made by a process different from that of colored glass tesserae.

To make the gold tesserae that we used, artisans start with a sheet of glass, and on top of this glass they lay the gold leaf. Over that, they sprinkle a glass powder, the consistency of sand, and this goes into the oven to be baked. The sand melts into a very thin layer of glass over the gold, so that the gold now lays between two layers of glass and is protected from flaking. This is the same technique they used in Byzantine times. Gold smalti is sold in blocks of 10 x 10 cm and 1 cm thick. There are also specific grades, ranging from high-quality layered glass and gold leaf to less expensive manufactured tiles which are simply gold paint on glass. This is why mosaics turn out to be ten times more expensive than paintings.

For our other colors, we didn't buy the usual mass-produced ceramic tesserae, which is baked clay with added pigments, but we took naturally-colored marble and stone: red, green, blue, yellow, and so on, and the artisans had to cut this very difficult material into quite tiny pieces with a hammer and a chisel. There is a great difference between man-made artificial colors and the color of the stone that God has created.

Also, because of different levels of light refraction in a mosaic, specialists consider a church to be less than ideal when mosaics are made only with highly reflective glass smalti. For example, faces should be a combination of glass tesserae and marble or stone. If you only use glass the face looks unnaturally bright, but if you add marble and stone it looks softer and more natural. The top professionals tend to use mostly marble, and we did this as well, with glass tiles for contrast.

So, in the end we used marble, stone, some manufactured glass tesserae, as well as layered gold smalti on our mosaics. With this combination we also have a spiritual meaning: God made the stone, gold, and pigment, and man works with this beauty.

RTE: Wonderful. How have parishioners responded to the mosaics, especially the marvelous image of Christ? My first impression was that if I just stood in front of it long enough, my soul would be healed.

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: Yes, in this complex of mosaics, the central and most attractive image is that of Christ the Saviour. Even if there were nothing else but this image, its spiritual success would be renowned. It is unique in that there is no other Russian church that has such a huge image of the Saviour covering the entire altar. In Orthodoxy it is usually the Theotokos who is shown in full figure, while you see the Saviour as Christ Pantocrator, the





Ruler of All, high up as if looking down from heaven in the cupola. In our altar we have both the Theotokos and the Saviour, and this also is unique. Parishioners and visitors tell us that the image of Christ is hugely impressive for them, and I was myself amazed when I first saw it in apses in Sicily and Sinai.

RTE: Did you take this image of Christ from one particular Sicilian church?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: The general pattern of the icon is taken from the *Duomo di Cefalù*, modified with our own interpretation. Specialists all note that the image of the Cefalù Christ is the youngest portrayal among those four churches, and the kindest. The most perfect image we have in all of Orthodox iconography, however, is the Vladimir Mother of God; even the Cefalù mosaic cannot surpass that.

RTE: After our last talk, I looked at the Sicilian Byzantine churches online and noticed the similarity to Cefalù's, but I believe that the Pokrov image has even more spiritual warmth. The first time I visited the church was after it was already finished, and as I entered, there was a man ahead of me with his little two-year-old daughter on his shoulders. It seemed to be his first time as well, because he stopped on the threshold to take it all in, and said quietly, "How beautiful!" The little girl looked up at this marvelous mosaic of the Lord, threw up her arms as if begging to be picked up, and shouted, "Tiotya! Tiotya!" ["Auntie! Auntie!"]. She had seen the Lord's long hair, but she was responding to the warmth.

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: Yes, the image is very kind.

RTE: After the icon of Christ the Saviour, what are your other favorite mosaics here?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: The small icons of St. John the Theologian and, of course, the icons of Sts. Peter and Paul. Unfortunately, in Russia, Peter and Paul just appear in painted frescoes on the walls. Here, their images are in apses prominently on each side of the altar, so that people will understand how much they mean for Christianity.

As for my other favorites, there is no figure in the church that I did not take part in, so I feel close to them all. One of the mosaic icons, that of St. Matrona of Moscow, who was blind during her lifetime, is already semi-legendary.

*Opposite: Mosaic icon of the Last Supper. Photo courtesy M.N. McLees.*

People say that when the patriarch consecrated the church on December 26, 2016, because of the greatness of the service and the beauty of the church, the saint opened her eyes and has not closed them since. They say this out of love, and because they notice that Matrona has open eyes, while in most icons her eyes are closed as they were in her lifetime.

We chose to portray her with her eyes open because, in general, an image of a saint as blind or with some other physical defect is not canonical. It is neither right nor true because an icon is not a photograph. An icon shows a saint in his or her heavenly glory, whole and alive in eternal joy. The reason we emphasize this is that there are thousands and thousands of icons of Matrona with closed eyes. We don't need to discuss why this happened, but we decided not to repeat the mistake. If you follow that logic, an icon of St. John the Baptist would always have him carrying his head on a platter.

RTE: That is a very good point. When you said that you have participated in every single image, I remembered my own favorite photo of the construction – of you in deep winter, hundreds of feet in the air, placing the last brick on the top of the highest cupola of the snow-covered church.

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: It is my dream that when I am a retired pensioner I will work with my hands. Because I managed everything, my contributions were mostly administrative. I really thought that we would be doing mosaics long after I retired, but it was finished much faster.

## A Church of Reconciliation

RTE: That must have been extremely satisfying. On another topic, I understand that along with its intricately carved stonework, there are also decorative stone memorial plaques on the outer wall of the upper church to commemorate those who have fallen in war.

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: There is an interesting story here. In Russia we have a very famous twelfth-century Church of the Protection of the Mother of God built at a bend in the Nerl River in the Vladimir Region. This is a UNESCO Heritage Site. There are no villages near the church, and it was

*Opposite: Twelfth-century Church of the Protection of the Mother of God on the Nerl River, where medieval princes gathered to make peace.*



built on a man-made hill with a five-foot foundation to avoid flooding during heavy rains. In earlier centuries a canal seems to have been dug into the ground at the base of the hill, and part of the canal is still under water. It was not clear why the church was surrounded by water until historians discovered that quarreling Russian bogatyr – knights or local lords – would come to this place to make peace. They didn't formalize their peace-making in a palace with a notary, but with prayer; after venerating the Cross and the Gospel they would sign their treaties in the church before the faces of Christ and the Mother of God. It was seen as a church of reconciliation. The surrounding canal was filled with water so that if they couldn't agree, there would be no bloodshed on holy ground: their warriors stayed beyond the canal while negotiations were carried on inside. This is also thought to have been a memorial church for fallen Russian warriors.

In building Pokrov, we also wanted to make this a church of reconciliation, in the memory of all of those Russian warriors who fought for peace so that our motherland was not enslaved by its enemies. These soldiers and battles are commemorated by nine white stone memorial crosses around the outside base of the church. Beginning with St. Alexander Nevsky, who in 1240 repulsed the Swedish invasion of Russia across the ice of the Neva, the church also commemorates the Russian victory over the Polish invasion of 1612; over Napoleon's army in 1812; and the defeat of the invading Germans in World War II. The memorial also includes soldiers who have fallen in other international wars. Schoolchildren and many other people come here to look at these crosses because our entire history is here, and this is also the starting point for our guides to begin their talks. There is also a memorial cross dedicated to General Suvarov (1729-1800), who won sixty victories without a single defeat. His words are inscribed on the cross: "The soul goes to God; life to the motherland." He also said, "Today we study, tomorrow we pray, and the day after tomorrow, either glorious victory or glorious death."

RTE: May they all rest in peace. The idea of a church being both a memorial to fallen warriors and a place of reconciliation seems very Orthodox.

## Funding the Construction

RTE: Can I ask now about funding and materials to build the church? I understand that there weren't large corporate sponsors, but that people donated from all over Russia.

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: In the old Russian church-building tradition, there was something called "brick-naming," when people donated money to buy bricks. The suggested donation, of course, was several times more expensive than the cost of a single brick, but each person who gave could have their names, the names of relatives or friends, and even of the reposed, written on the bricks that built the church. So, we began this also. Each person who gave in this way received a certificate, and one of our volunteers painted the name on one of the bricks. This was all done in a very orderly manner: the top of the form was the donor's certificate, while the lower half was kept for our records and for the volunteers who painted the names. There are one million bricks in total, and about seven hundred thousand named bricks went into the church.

The second way we raised money was by contacting different firms and companies. About thirty or forty people were involved with this. I call this "prospecting," because you have to look far and wide before you find any gold nuggets. When we analyzed the results of this work, we found that out of every one hundred organizations we contacted, only one would donate. Of course, there were also private donations by individuals who spontaneously gave; some once or twice, others every month.

## The Lower Church and the Jerusalem Shrines

RTE: Now that you have described the upper church with its marvelous mosaic scheme, can we go on to the equally astounding lower church? The tradition of a large temple having a large upper church and a smaller lower church for baptisms and for week-day and winter services when there are less people and it's easier to heat, is unique to Russia. In most cases, the lower temple is an afterthought, but in the Pokrov Church it houses magnificent and authentic replicas of the major Holy Land shrines of the Lord and the Mother of God.



ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: Yes. While we were planning the church, some of our parishioners returned from a pilgrimage to Valaam Monastery where they had been to Resurrection Skete, and said, "Batiushka, they had a church with simple pre-Revolutionary reproductions of the tomb of the Lord and the stone of anointing from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem,<sup>3</sup> though neither was faithful to the originals in size or style. In our new church, why don't you make accurate reproductions?" I didn't know if it would work, but I knew I had to try because the parishioners wanted it.

RTE: And why did you feel the need to be so responsive to their desires?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: Some years ago, when I was sent from Optina Monastery to serve in Moscow, I asked an old priest named Fr. Leonty Niki-forov for three pieces of advice. Father Leonty had served for fifty years at a church in the town of Kozelsk near Optina Pustyn, and even after the monastery was closed he continued to serve. One of the pieces of advice I remember very well was, "The *babushki* [grandmothers] love an obedient priest." (*Laughter*) So I did my best to be obedient.

We began to plan, but it was immediately clear that the reproduction of the Holy Sepulchre could not be in the center of the lower church as it is in Jerusalem. Another Moscow church has a miniature copy of the Lord's tomb set between two altars, and when I saw this it occurred to me, "I don't have to put this in the center of the church if there is no room." So I looked to see where it might fit and realized that we could use the space we had planned as a vestry. Our architect went to work and found a way to fit in an authentic reproduction of the Holy Sepulchre in its actual size.

After he drew up the plans, I went to Archbishop Arseny for approval. I was worried that it might not be approved because New Jerusalem Monastery outside of Moscow had done this on a large scale before the Revolution. Because the monastery was now being restored, I felt that the idea might seem redundant. Nevertheless, I had to ask. When I told the archbishop, he thought for several seconds and then said, "Besides the Lord's tomb and the

<sup>3</sup> In Jerusalem, the single Church of the Holy Sepulchre covers several traditional sites: the altar over the site of Golgotha where Christ was crucified; the stone of anointing, which marks the place He was laid and anointed after being taken down from the Cross; the "Edicule" – the small building built at the site of the cave-tomb and over the limestone shelf from which Christ's body resurrected; and several other chapels built around the Edicule that belong to different Christian denominations.

*Opposite: View of Golgotha and the anointing stone in lower church dedicated to St. Michael the Archangel. Photo courtesy A. Gould.*

anointing stone, make a copy of the place of Christ's birth. You will not find this in any other monastery." So, I went back to the parish and said, "We have a blessing, but it is broader than we thought."

Now, this story has a miraculous continuation. I returned to the lower church right after this conversation to see how we could solve this architectural puzzle, when I noticed that the lower church had a decorative arched niche set into the wall near the door. This reminded me of the altar in the cave in Bethlehem where Christ was born, which is also set into a niche. To the right was a second niche where I realized we could build a copy of the altar at Golgotha, the site of the Lord's crucifixion. Then I thought, "If this is Golgotha, then in front of it should be the stone of anointing." This is how it developed all on the same day.

Sometime later we decided to replicate the column in the courtyard of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre that was split by the Holy Fire.<sup>4</sup> Then we added several fifty-liter stone jars for water like the ones they still have in Cana, where the Lord changed water into wine. A few weeks later we added the small inner tomb of the Mother of God which stands at the foot of the Mount of Olives, and finally we planned a replica of the prison where the Lord was held from Holy Thursday night to Good Friday. This site is along the Via Delarosa in Jerusalem, and is cared for by a Greek monastery.

<sup>4</sup> Eastern Christians believe that from early Christian centuries a miraculous fire has descended in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre each Holy Saturday. Now, as in centuries past, the Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem enters the tomb of the Lord and after a period of prayer, the fire appears from heaven to light his candles. He then passes the flame to the waiting worshippers.

On Holy Saturday, 1579, Turkish authorities refused to allow Patriarch Sophronius IV and the Orthodox faithful to enter the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to receive the Holy Fire. On this day the patriarch remained outside in the courtyard in front of the church doors. The Orthodox continued singing, and, as night fell, a large marble column framing the left-hand door split, and the Holy Fire leapt out from inside the column. The patriarch lit his candles and then passed the flame to the faithful. Awestruck Turkish guards then threw open the doors so that the Orthodox could enter the church. The split and burnt pillar can still be seen next to the great doors.

*Opposite: Reproduction of the Holy Sepulchre (Tomb of Christ) in the lower church. Photo courtesy M.N. McLees.*





## Recreating the Holy Places

RTE: And where were these reproductions made?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: The reproduction of the tomb of the Mother of God was made in Europe out of the famous white limestone from the Russian city of Vladimir that is seen on many ancient Russian buildings. The Holy Sepulchre of the Lord, the stone of anointing, and the column split by the Holy Fire were all made in Israel.

RTE: In Israel!

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: Yes, in a workshop called Jerusalem Marble, fifteen kilometers from the city.

RTE: I marveled at how you had made such accurate reproductions, and when I looked up photos of the Holy Sepulchre sites, not only the proportions but the shades and textures of the stone, even to the cracks in the marble, are identical to the originals.

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: Jerusalem Marble is a workshop whose specialty is making carved marble look antique. Our replicas also look authentic because, like the originals, they were made of local stone quarried near Jerusalem. Once finished, they were shipped to Finland, and then brought overland to us by truck.

RTE: Even the decorative stonework, as well as the oil lamps above the anointing stone and the Holy Sepulchre are exact.

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: Yes. When these stonemasons were doing their work and something wasn't clear in the plans, they would take a taxi to Jerusalem to look and measure again. Once I had a phone call from Israel asking, "Batiushka, in your plan we don't see a small rope-like decoration that is carved into the original stone on the Holy Sepulchre. Shall we do it or not?" I said, "Of course, do it." These people were so inspired that they didn't just work from the plan without thinking; they were deeply and consciously involved in the creation of these pieces. They were so attentive that you understood that it had become something personal for them.

RTE: Were they Christian?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: The stonemasons, engineers, technologists, and architects were all Jewish, but they took this project very seriously and wanted to do everything accurately. On the one hand this is professionalism, but on the other, they themselves embraced the idea. Their dedication was more than I had expected. We couldn't tell them in detail how all of these pieces should look because we'd only seen them on visits to Jerusalem, so they took it upon themselves to make them look as identical as possible.

RTE: Did they say how they felt while working on these monuments?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: They said that they were very proud to have done this job, which they told us was the most complicated and difficult in the history of their business. Many things had to be done by hand, and when they were shown pictures of it all put together in the church, they were amazed.

Also, this church was built with international cooperation. The Jews made the Holy Sepulchre and the column, while Arab Palestinians from the West Bank quarried and carved the anointing stone. Throughout this work, those who are not usually at peace were able to work together. The rest will be forgiven.

RTE: How do your parishioners or visitors respond when they see the lower church?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: "Wow!" (*Laughter*) Those who have already been to Jerusalem are even more amazed at the authenticity of the structures, the smell of incense, the lamps. The goal was not just to make the pieces architecturally accurate, but to make the stone look old so that people could feel that it is not just a modern facsimile.

RTE: And what did Patriarch Kirill say when he visited?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: He just looked and listened to what he was told about the church. There is one photograph from when he went into the prison of the Saviour, and you can see that his eyes are full of interest and wonder. He saw and heard everything.



## Good Friday and Pascha Services

RTE: Is there anything else you would like to say about the lower church? I was fortunate to be there during the beautiful Good Friday service this year, and it was just as I remember from the Holy Land. You even sealed the door of the tomb with wax seals and ribbons.

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: When we serve on Good Friday it is exactly as they serve in Jerusalem at the Holy Sepulchre, and it is unforgettable. At about five o'clock in the evening, we start inside the lower church with the *plachanitsa*, the embroidered cloth image of Christ in the tomb, and process from our Golgotha altar to the anointing stone. Like the Greeks, we cover the stone with rose water and then we sprinkle it with rose petals as a symbol of anointing. The *plachanitsa* is then taken into the tomb, the door is sealed with wax and ribbons, and we wait for Pascha.

We do the usual Holy Saturday services, and then as midnight approaches, we begin the Paschal procession by singing, "Thy Resurrection, O Christ our Saviour..." The first time this is sung we remove the seal from the tomb; the second time we open the door; and as we sing the third time, the priest comes out of the tomb with the Resurrection icon and we light candles from the Holy Fire that has been brought from Jerusalem that day.<sup>5</sup> This is the bright moment of Resurrection, the heavenly kingdom breaking in. We then process outdoors from the lower church, up the stairs and around the upper church, and return inside singing, "Christ is Risen."

## Raising the Church: Gratitude and Grace

RTE: Looking back, what has been the main spiritual help?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: It was clear from the very beginning that we could not do anything without prayer. As I said, before we began to talk about building and were still only preparing the documents to obtain permission to

5 Pre-revolutionary Russian pilgrims to Jerusalem who were present when the Holy Fire descended would often try to return by ship with their lanterns alight. Since 2003, the Holy Fire has been brought by a four-hour flight from Jerusalem to Moscow's Vnukovo Airport, and from there spread throughout Moscow and all of Russia. In 2015 the fire was taken to fifty-three Russian cities; in many cases, in time for the midnight Paschal service.

*Opposite: Celebrating Pascha. Photo courtesy O. Tatarkin.*

build, we had a small Orthodox bookstore on the hectare of land we'd been given, where volunteers would read the psalter and pray for the architect and for those who were making decisions. The volunteers who prayed in this way said that this was a golden time, that when they went into the bookstore and closed the door they were in a different world. Amidst the icons, lampadas, and books, it was as if you were in a small country chapel and central Moscow was left outside.

From the moment the prayers began we moved closer and closer to building the church. When we finally began digging the foundation in November of 2008 we understood that we first must quickly build a temporary church. Once daily services began in that church it was obvious that the most essential thing had already happened: we were serving on the site. From that moment, what was being built behind the walls was not as important as what was already going on. The candles were already lit.

Around this time, a priest from outside of Moscow showed us pictures of his new church. It was unusually large and beautiful for a village, and when I asked how he had managed to build it, he said, "During the Liturgy, right after the Gospel, we read the *ectenias*: petitions for health, for those who have reposed, and for the catechumens. In our liturgical service book there are other prayers that can be incorporated into the *ectenias*: petitions for travelers, captives, and so on, but there is also a prayer calling on the Holy Spirit 'to bless all good deeds.'" The priest said that he had read this prayer every time he served, and when I asked my priests to do the same, the puzzle-pieces just began falling together, even things that had seemed impossible. I understood that events were moving rapidly with God's help.

Later, out of my own gratitude to God, I added prayers of thanksgiving to the *ectenias* and things moved even faster. Saint Isaac the Syrian has a saying, "Gratefulness is a hand outstretched that will receive more." This was how the church was built, but now we don't disturb God in this way. We just pray the *ectenias* in the usual way, although we often still add prayers of thanksgiving. As I said earlier, by God's mercy from the moment in 2008 when we received the *antimens* for the temporary church, we have served Liturgy on this site every single day except for the weekdays of Great Lent. There were situations in which there was absolutely no one to serve, but something would always happen and there would be a Liturgy. God did everything.

*Opposite: Pokrov Church under construction, circa 2012. Photo courtesy T. Trofimova.*



RTE: How would you describe the building atmosphere?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: There wasn't anything specific about building the church structure itself, as most of the construction workers were not church people. The candles didn't miraculously light themselves, and the air was full of cigarette smoke rather than incense. Liturgy was served before the beginning of the workday, and at the end of the service the priest would bless the workers on the building site. There was the usual atmosphere of people who didn't want to work, because these were not enthusiasts but just regular paid construction workers and tradespeople.

RTE: Were there any specific instances of God's Providence?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: There were two important incidents we should write down. First, our architect Vladimir Kozlov, had considered everything and had drawn up quite detailed plans for the church, to which we only had to make minor changes. One day, as he went over the plans, God suddenly put it into my mind to ask about windows in the altar of the lower church. The architect replied, "The nave of the lower church will have daylight from three long narrow glass windows opposite the anointing stone, and the altar will have electric light." (Can you imagine if there was no natural light in the altar?) I said, "No, we need to have windows." He answered, "It's impossible." I said, "Think!" (*Laughter*) In the end, we cut windows through the concrete. They are quite small windows, but we do have enough natural light. Clearly, this was a direction from God, because I do not know how to read blueprints and was not thinking of such details. The plan was close to being approved by the authorities, and the architect had to make this change at the very last minute.

Another instance of God's help was in naming the lower church. As I said, the idea of what to name the upper church came at the beginning of the project on the very day we decided to build, but we couldn't name the lower church for eight years. All of the ideas from human reasoning were good ones: The Optina Elders, St. Ambrose of Optina, St. Sergius, St. Seraphim, All Saints of Moscow... all were good, but none seemed quite right.

When we finally received approval for the construction in 2008, we understood the building needed to go up rather quickly, and that we were facing a huge endeavor physically, financially, and spiritually. We had to find contractors we could trust.



Within a few days, one of my acquaintances from Optina offered us the opportunity to speak with an assistant to the mayor of Moscow, an expert from the city building department, Vladimir Iosafvich Rason. On November 20th, after serving the Vigil for St. Michael the Archangel, I received a phone call: "Rason is waiting for you tomorrow at 10:00 a.m." In order to be there at 10:00 in the morning, I had to start the feast-day Liturgy at 6:00 a.m. The meeting took about forty minutes, and he recommended a very good construction company in Moscow. The name of the CEO of the company was Michael, and Rason called him personally during our meeting to ask him to build the church. When he agreed, I understood that this meeting, this call, and this request marked the birthday of this church.

While we'd been waiting for eight years to name the lower church, now it seemed that Archangel Michael had taken it for himself. Two days later, we met this Michael from the construction company, and were given a starting date, even though all we had at this time were the plans, the property, and construction permits.

It wouldn't have been bad, of course, if we had chosen the name ourselves. For example, when you decide to build a dacha you choose between different styles, and you may even pray to make the right choice. Will something fall down from the sky on the picture of the right project? No. God will answer, "Choose the one you like. You will live there, not me." Something that depends on us often has to be decided by us, and we are right to do so. At other times you wait for God's answer, to know his will.

## Observation and Oversight

RTE: The process of construction was epic, requiring a tremendous amount of resources, including human resources. It could not have been done without efficiency on every level, so how did you balance good will with the need to be efficient?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: Outwardly, we had weekly meetings, plans, constant deadlines, and it was important to be in control of the situation at all times. I had to check the quality of the work, supervise the finances, make agreements and contracts, and oversee everything at every moment. To make the process optimal, I also had to coordinate the logistics. For instance,



in the summer when we were building as fast as possible, we had over 120 people working on site at the same time, just like ants, and it was important that they didn't get in each other's way.

Our former mayor, Yuri Luzhkov, once said, "A project left without oversight will develop according to the worst possible scenario." I remembered this and the thought came to me, "These people have their tasks, the means, a goal, and you would think that everything would be fine, but if you do not oversee it, they will not just do it badly; they will ruin everything." This idea was just ingrained through experience.

Each of my assistants also implemented this oversight for their workers. They had to continually observe and think about how to do everything in the best possible way. Except for several contracted workers who really cared, most would do things any which way, but once we had several people to oversee and think about how to improve the construction, the work progressed well. Thank God we had such people with good minds, consciences, hearts and souls.

Moral influence also helped. During the construction I was accused of being quite cruel in the meetings because I didn't show my kind face. I told myself, "It's all a game. I'm just playing the bad guy so that we can keep this moving." Unfortunately, this is the reality of our nonspiritual world. Regular people were building the church, not priests, monks, altar boys, or saintly church people. The construction workers remained alert because of my attitude.

I also realized something that is still deep inside of me: I will never agree to do anything like this again, because I really dislike being the bad guy. During this time, I lost a lot. I was supposed to be a sheep, but I had to be a lion.

For instance, once I noticed a new electric cable incorrectly made of two lengths twisted together, when it should have been one long piece. This was about the tenth mistake I'd spotted by this electrical installation company, and we had already spoken to them several times about such careless errors. When I saw this, I just walked over and tore the cable out of the floor. The workmen had to do everything over again from the beginning, but what could I do? Either you do it well, or you don't do it at all. I told them, "You won't get any money until you fix the mistakes," and because of this, they had to redo the entire job. I had to force this through with nerves and will. Even our paid workers who were responsible for the wiring hadn't noticed the installation company's mistake; I had to correct it myself.

*Opposite: Creating the apse mosaic of Christ, c. 2014. Photo courtesy T. Trofimova.*

Now, when priests ask me to come by and take a look at the construction of their new church, I tell them, “I can’t, I’m just allergic to the whole process now. I understand what’s behind it, and what you have to deal with.” *(Smiling)* I never go to construction sites now, so as not to bring up bad memories.

RTE: But you were one of the main movers in restoring Optina Monastery after the Soviet period. There you had to restore or completely rebuild five or six large churches and a number of other buildings. Was this harder than Optina?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: In Optina, it was as if we were flying on wings. It was easier to play such a great role because we were young, naïve, and in Optina there were many who were interested in such selfless sacrifice, so we were doing everything together as one soul for God.

RTE: Don’t you think that when someone with good intent is in charge of a project, the Holy Spirit often gives them grace to see things that people who are working on it cannot see? When you are responsible, God gives both sight and intuition.

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: You are right.

## With God, You Have Everything

RTE: Dealing with such numbers of people, not only as a priest but as the head of this project, how has your understanding of human nature changed?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: I’ve had some awakenings. Those who I thought would never deceive me, deceived me; and those I never thought would steal from me, stole. Unfortunately, there were only unpleasant realizations and no unexpectedly good news about human nature. *(Laughter)*

To be just, I should add that once we began painting the walls and creating the mosaics, there were many deeds of selfless and heroic effort by volunteers. I couldn’t have imagined that such a huge number of people would eventually take part in the building of the church. I knew those who helped

*Opposite: Archimandrite Melchisedek. Photo courtesy O. Tatarkin.*



during the day and into the evening, but there were others who often worked through the night. This is what a person can do, who does it for God.

RTE: Did the volunteers' spiritual lives deepen as they worked on the church?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: Many of the volunteers were not very interested in church life. Religious people would ask their friends who were experienced in one field or another but not believers themselves, to come and help. They painted the walls, worked with the mosaics, and after a time might ask questions about how this or that was done in church. The professionals who were far from church also sometimes began to show an interest. Because believers and non-believers were working together, they talked as they worked; not as if they were in a classroom with someone telling them facts. In the end, some of these people did become members of the church. They came to help, but the church also helped them, because the church opened God to them. If you have God, you have everything.

RTE: Parishioners seem to feel that they are a part of this church in a way that I don't see in other parishes.

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: This is because most of them did take part. There was a lot of secondary work, hundreds of small things that needed to be done to help the professionals.

RTE: Are you finished with the building?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: There is one thing left to do, and I will tell you what it is. We need a zeppelin imprinted with the phrase, "Don't pass by; heaven is here." (*Laughter*) This is an example of a happy ending, when we finished almost everything we thought of.

RTE: Is there anything that you would like to say to Orthodox who are planning to build a church?

ARCHIM. MELCHISEDEK: We will end with a Russian saying: "Look forward with hope, backward with gratitude, down with repentance, above with faith, and around you with compassionate love." Then everything will work out.

RTE: A beautiful finish. Thank you! ✦

*Opposite: Wrought-iron decorative cross in the lower Church of St. Michael the Archangel. Photo courtesy T. Trofimova.*