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A MATTER OF GRACE

Building Strasbourg's Russian Orthodox Church of All Saints

Archimandrite Philip Ryabikh of the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) on the newly consecrated Church of All Saints in Strasbourg, France. A candid and revealing discussion of the trials, temptations, and successes of building what many are calling the most beautiful Orthodox church in Europe.

RTE: Father Philip, how far along were the church plans when you arrived in Strasbourg? And why did the Russian Orthodox Church decide to build here?

ARCHIM. PHILIP: Our community started in 2003 when a group of mostly Russian-speaking immigrants initiated the founding of our parish. Father Nikolai Nikichine, a Russian priest from the Moscow Patriarchate in Paris, helped organize them and returned periodically to serve.

RTE: How interesting – Fr. Nikolai did a wonderful interview with *Road to Emmaus* over a decade ago. He is a church historian from Sarov, specializing in first millennium church relics in France, and, as I remember, read history at the Sorbonne and later at Saint Serge in Paris.¹

¹ *Road to Emmaus Journal*, Spring 2006, Issue #25. Order at: http://www.roadtoemmaus.net/back_issues_2006.html

Opposite: Detail of ornamental roof. All Saints Church, Strasbourg.

ARCHIM. PHILIP: Yes, I saw the interview. He was a great help and the first rector of the parish. For over a year he traveled the 500 kilometers between Paris and Strasbourg. Then in 2004, the Holy Synod decided to found a representation to the Council of Europe in order to be able to dialogue with this organization. They removed the parish from diocesan oversight and gave it *stavropegal* status, which means that it is directly under the patriarch. Father Philaret Bulekov then became the permanent rector.



Archimandrite Philip Ryabykh.

RTE: What is the difference between the European Union and the Council of Europe?

ARCHIM. PHILIP: The Council of Europe is much more concerned with human rights than with being a political federation like the EU, which shares economic and legislative policies. The Council of Europe also has more members; any country that has territory within geographical Europe may join. There are twenty-eight nations in the European Union and forty-seven in the Council of Europe.

This representation to the Council of Europe began a new chapter of parish history and we were legally registered as a French religious association. Spiritually, of course, we are linked to the Russian Orthodox Church. There wasn't even a temporary church when Fr. Philaret arrived, so he began searching for a place to meet. It was a difficult time because, then as now, the Russian speakers living here had so many of their own difficulties, especially with language, that they didn't have the energy or material resources to begin. But then, Fr. Philaret found a large garage on Rue de Niederbronn that the community was able to remodel. This chapel was visited by Patriarch Alexis II in 2007 when he spoke at the Council of Europe. Although it was a very humble place, people did their best to fix it up and the patriarch served a moleben there as the primate of the Russian Orthodox Church.

By that time the parish was growing and there was already talk of buying something suitable. Father Philaret spent months looking for a building that

could be adapted as an Orthodox church, but when nothing came to light, they began to think about building their own.

In 2008, a new mayor was elected who was very sympathetic to Russia and the Russian immigrants, and who established a sister-city relationship exchange between Strasbourg and the city of Vologda. At the same time, he wanted to help create places of worship in Strasbourg for other newly-arriving immigrant communities. Incoming Muslims, Buddhists, and our own community were asking for help to obtain affordable land, so the city council decided to respond to everyone. They also wanted to monitor the architecture of these new places of worship. Alsace has a distinct and traditional architecture of Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish churches and temples – never mosques, pagodas or Orthodox churches – but because Strasbourg was the headquarters of the Council of Europe, they wanted to promote the city as welcoming all cultures and religions.

They understood that it was difficult for immigrant religious groups to buy land, which is extremely expensive in Strasbourg. Even if a church or group had a substantial building fund, it was usually spent entirely on land alone. So, the city decided to find a way to make it possible for these communities to begin constructing their places of worship without having to spend money on land. The idea was to rent the parcels, then once the church or temple was built and established, the community could begin making payments on the land to the city.

The city looked at where they had parcels of unused land or an old building slated to be torn down. Father Philaret and the parish were given the choice of several sites, including the beautiful location we have now at the intersection of two canals. At the edge of an old and distinguished residential quarter, the property was occupied by an abandoned, overgrown city tennis court. Since 2013, the city has generously rented us the land at the symbolic price of fifteen euros a year. If we have not paid it off once the ninety-nine-year lease is up, the parish can renew the lease, but of course we expect to have bought it by then.

When I arrived in 2011, Fr. Philaret had already set up a tax-exempt foundation for donations to the building fund and a preliminary plan for the church and parish hall that had been approved by the city. I was inspired about taking over the project, but I was completely inexperienced and had romantic ideas about what organizing construction meant in practical terms. It all started so smoothly that I didn't foresee any problems at all. (*Laughter*)

Challenges, Permissions, and Support

ARCHIM. PHILIP: To begin, I had to learn how to go about constructing the church and to whom I should speak. This was complicated by the fact that I was in a foreign country, working in a language that I knew but was not my own, and I didn't yet have the specialized vocabulary for construction or for dealing with legal documents. For a non-builder, our first architect compared it to reading Chinese.

Another problem was raising money. People think that if the Russian Patriarchate blesses a project it also supplies the funds, but this is not the case; not at all. Over the past thirty years, there have been tens of thousands of churches and monasteries restored or newly built in Russia and in other former Soviet republics, not to mention schools, orphanages, homes for the elderly, children's camps, and so on. It was impossible for the patriarchate to finance them all, and it would have involved oversight and management of each individual project that the patriarchate simply doesn't have the staff for. So, each church building project, headed by its own priest, finds donors and manages the construction locally. It is always a community effort.

This fundraising was one of my first tasks – to find individuals or companies to approach. I was not only to find the money and spend it but to set up business relations with the bank and fulfill the requirements for accountability to the donors and to the city, regional, and national governments. They all demanded complete transparency, which is correct, but it also meant huge amounts of paperwork. This ongoing presentation of your financial activities is a full-time job, and in France is published in a yearly journal so that the public has access as well.

Another question was the administrative aspect. After the positive decision of the municipal council about the land, we had to prepare a series of contracts between the city and the parish community and obtain permissions to begin construction. Without these long, complex steps, we couldn't begin to build even if we had the money.

One of our first tasks was to draw up general plans that the city would approve, which had already been done by Fr. Philaret. The project's Russian architect Dmitri Pshenichnikov and our second French architect, Michel Arnold, later helped us refine, revise, and execute these plans. According to

Opposite: Library in parish house.



code, only a French architect can work onsite on a French project, so it was very important that one of the architects be local.

RTE: I remember that the first idea was to build a copy of the exquisite St. Nicholas Church on Valaam.

ARCHIM. PHILIP: Yes, that was the plan before I came, but the church exterior was supposed to be covered with highly decorative stonework and when we calculated the cost, it was hugely expensive. I asked why we should spend so much money on decoration when, to my mind, the architecture itself should be the decoration. That was when we asked the Russian architect Dmitri Pshenichnikov to make a proposal. We liked his idea very much and, as you can see, although it is roughly the same architectural style, it is quite different from the church on Valaam.

After preparing these papers, we learned that several meters from our plot of land is a large high-pressure gas pipe that supplies gas to France. According to the building codes, if you build something with public access near such a pipe, a large section of the pipe must be secured. Because the site was abandoned, it hadn't ever been secured and the gas company informed us that the cost to do so was €270,000. The city said that they had neither thought about this, nor did they have money to cover it, but that perhaps in the future they would be able to budget for it. However, until we provided proof that the pipe had been secured, they could not give us permission to open the church to the public.

I suggested, "We can't pay for this now as we still have to find the money, but perhaps you could count our payment to secure the gas pipe as a preliminary down-payment on the land?" The city agreed and was very pleased that we were taking this on ourselves. Since I knew that we would have to raise €10 million total for the construction of the church and the parish house, the €270,000 was in proportion a small amount. These unexpected problems were discouraging but, I felt, not insurmountable. I knew that we had to continue.

In going ahead, God gave us spiritual support and even some signs. For example, in the summer of 2012, a priest in Germany from the Russian Church Abroad called me to say, "The Kursk Root Icon of the Mother of God is visiting our parish, and we have it for an extra half day. Would you like

Opposite: View of Church of All Saints from library.



me to bring it down?” I said, “Of course, please come! We will be very glad.” Many people came to the service and after we blessed the site with the icon we felt that the land had been renewed by the Mother of God. It was a wonderful support, especially because the visit had not been initiated by us. I had never had such a proposal before and understood that it was truly a gift from above.

A few months later, I signed the contract for the rent of the land at the mayor’s office, the last document we needed to begin construction. The mayor co-signed it on March 14, 2013 and the agreement went into effect the following day, March 2/15, the feast of the Reigning Mother of God Icon of Kolomenskaya. The concrete construction of the church would end on the feast of the Pochaev Mother of God, a few years later.

Once we received the plot of land we began praying about the construction and asked our parishioners to do the same. We started building at the end of 2013, and one of the first things I did was to order a large marble cross that we planted on the site. The next step was to submit a “Declaration of the Beginning of Construction” to the city. When we received the document back, I saw that the mayor had co-signed it on December 4, the Entry of the Mother of God into the Temple. So, again, this was a date that was not planned by us, but fell on one of her Orthodox feasts.

We celebrated the first moleben at the site on December 7, 2013 where we blessed the land with holy water to prepare for construction, then began digging the foundation in 2014.

The Building Fund

RTE: How did you raise the money to start? Was it through individual donors or corporations?

ARCHIM. PHILIP: The money was from both private donors and corporations. The construction was extremely expensive because it was done in France and could only be done by licensed French construction companies, electricians, plumbers, and so on, and so on. This large sum could not be raised solely through individual donations; we needed corporate support as well.

The first opportunity was through friends who contacted a large Russian steel-making company, the Chelyabinsk Metallurgical Plant, who gave us €680,000 to start. Of course, we wanted to begin with the church, and felt that symbolically it should be built first, but because we had not yet received the final church plans from the construction bureau, we decided to start with

the parish center for which the plans were ready. We had the money and materials, and the builders were ready; we simply couldn’t wait any longer.

Unfortunately, we soon discovered that our highly recommended French architect could not manage the construction or the workers, and was unable to fix some rather serious mistakes. We had only just started when these problems arose, and I understood that it was the providence of God that we had begun with the parish center, which is a rather simple, classically-shaped building. If we had started with the much more complicated church, the problems would have been far greater and more costly to fix. I decided we had to find another architect.

By this time, it was 2015, and I had a better grasp of construction and the requirements of working in France, so it was easy enough to find a new architect. This was Michel Arnold, whom I mentioned earlier. I felt a difference immediately. He understood the plans, how to explain unfamiliar details, and how to make the builders do what was needed. He is deeply religious, a practicing Catholic, and did even more than the contract obliged him to do. He told us later that it had always been his dream to build a church. Both our Russian and our French architect were a blessing from God and I was really very happy. By 2015, the whole team was shaped.

Another problem was that after we spent that first infusion of money, there was no more and we simply had to halt the construction. Now we had all of the pieces in place, but no one else wanted to help us. I had applied to all of my prospects and was very discouraged. Although many people promised to help or to make contacts, in the end, most did nothing. We were already in debt for €700,000, but I didn’t allow myself to dwell on this. I just hoped that we would find the money, and the director of construction said that he could wait a few months. I also spoke to our parish about donating whatever they could because, how will God send us large sums if we do not first give according to our ability?

Perhaps you have heard of a famous classical music festival held in Colmar, France every summer? It is organized and directed by the famous Russian violinist Vladimir Spivakov, who is also the conductor of the National Philharmonic of Russia. In 2015, I was invited to the festival, where I would have an opportunity to speak to him about the church. I was skeptical: “How can he help? He’s a musician,” but then I thought, “If I go, at least I will have become acquainted with this great conductor.” I did go, and we had coffee before one of the concerts. He was immediately very open, it was easy

to speak to him, and when I answered his questions about how the church construction was going, he believed me. This was very important because frequently people would say, “What do you mean, you don’t have money? The Moscow Patriarchate is wealthy.” I had encountered this skepticism over and over, and it is difficult to even speak when you feel this disbelief. You understand that your words are not being taken seriously.

So, the conductor agreed to be a member of our council of patronage, but said, “I’ve never been just an honorary member of such a council; I will try to do something.” Two weeks later, he called to say, “I’ve spoken with some people. One of my friends is in charge of Transneft, the oil transport company, and they are ready to help with construction costs, but they need a letter from His Holiness, Patriarch Kirill. Transneft is one of the largest companies in the world and has its own philanthropic program, so company representatives came to Strasbourg to tour the project, view our progress, and to meet with our architects, builders, and so on. Afterwards, they asked for a budget for the rest of the construction and became our major sponsors, giving us about €8.5 million. The total cost of constructing the church and the parish center came to €12 million. Thanks to their generosity, we were able to build this church. All of this was through the help of Vladimir Spivakov.

Afterwards, Vladimir organized a benefit concert in Moscow for the construction of the church, and gave us the beautiful icon of the Mother of God “Hodigitria” that is in our church. He is always interested in what is going on, and really took this construction to heart.

Now, of course, Transneft didn’t just give the money and say, “Use it as you like.” They asked me to prepare preliminary lists of all of the construction work with projected prices, as well as regular reports detailing how we spent the money, with invoices and receipts. This was even more difficult because we had to translate every document and receipt to send to Moscow. I did the financial detailing and reports myself the first few years, but as the construction advanced, I had to get a secretary to help. We also made such reports to the prefecture about how we obtained the money and how we spent it. The whole process was completely transparent. It was difficult, but we were overjoyed that we had the money.

I also learned to bargain with companies and we found ways to lower prices as well. We counted every cent. The rest of the cost was covered by the Chelyabinsk Metallurgical Plant and Vneshekonombank, as well as a

Opposite: Decorative royal doors looking into the sanctuary.

few large private donations and many small ones. In total, we had about a thousand people who donated to our church from France, Germany, Russia, Ukraine, Japan, United States, Canada, and even from China. We tried to spread information about our project on the internet, and we received donations from every continent. Here in France, many French Catholics, and even people who weren't religious, donated as well. One woman sent €200 from Japan. I appreciated this very much and was especially touched when we received a ruble donation from a Russian village for the equivalent of five euros. It was like the gospel story about the widow, and we still carefully pray for all of our donors.

Beauty and Grace

RTE: Can we speak now about the church itself? It must have been a unique experience for a French construction company to build such a roof. It would be astounding even in Russia. The repeating forms at the peaks of the roof are almost like flames.

ARCHIM. PHILIP: Such a church does not exist in Russia. The style is Russian but the particular forms and shapes of the church are completely unique. We used special forms to make these shapes, and you also see these geometrical and flame-like shapes on the inside as well. The domes and crosses were made in Russia; they probably could have been made here, but these shapes are so rarely asked for that they would have taken much more time.

RTE: When did you celebrate the first liturgy?

ARCHIM. PHILIP: We did a small consecration, or rather, blessing of the church on December 23, 2018. The patriarch blessed Bishop Nestor from Paris to do the service, and after this blessing you can celebrate the liturgy. It is not the major consecration which involves placing relics in the altar. Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All-Rus' will be coming for the consecration at the end of May 2019.²

² On 26 May 2019, the 5th Sunday after Pascha, Sunday of the Samaritan Woman, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia celebrated the Great Blessing of the Russian Orthodox Church of All Saints and officiated at the Divine Liturgy in the newly consecrated church. In attendance were Orthodox hierarchs and clergy and clergy from other Strasbourg churches, as well as representatives from the Council of Europe, the mayor and officials of the city of Strasbourg, and a number of foreign diplomats.

Opposite: Oleg Shein placing tiles on his baptistry mosaic of the Jordan River.



RTE: My goodness. It already feels fully consecrated.

ARCHIM. PHILIP: It has been prayed in. When Bishop Nestor came on the eve of the blessing, we entered the church and he said, “Fr. Philip, what do I have to bless here? It is already full of prayer, but we will bless it anyway to fulfill everything according to the rules.” We had said some evening prayers there, a few molebens and matins services, but no liturgies as yet. So, the first liturgy was on the 23rd of December of last year. The parish house had been finished earlier, in May 2017, so we celebrated liturgies in the great hall those months.

RTE: I took a close look at the floor mosaics in the church last night. They are also quite remarkable.

ARCHIM. PHILIP: They were made by Oleg Shein, a Ukrainian mosaicist who is living in Strasbourg with his family. I also very much like what he is doing. We met through his wife, who works at the European Court. Oleg visited once or twice and we knew that he was a sculptor and mosaicist, but we didn’t know how talented he was until he began making the ceramic icons and decorative plaques for the fence posts surrounding the church. Then he did the church floor mosaics, and now he is working on the baptistry of the church, complete with a mosaic Jordan River.

Also, Oleg has an astonishing story. Some years ago in Ukraine he was on a bicycle when, on a sharp curve, he was hit by a car coming the other way at high speed. He said, “In the moment before the inevitable crash, I had a vision of a white church on the edge of a river, and an angel (or someone) said to me, “This is not the end, you will finish this first.” The car and the bicycle crashed, the bike was completely ruined, but Oleg was not hurt at all.

He thought the words he had heard were about a church he was working on at the time, which was slightly similar to this one, but when he moved here and saw our finished church, he said, “This was the church in my vision.” He is very humble about this story, but I told him that it is so wonderful that I have to repeat it. At the time of the crash, Oleg lived in Ukraine and this church had not even been thought of. It was something that God had already prepared for him in his life.

We also have a very fine iconographer, Dmitry Pichinin, who periodically comes from Russia to stay with us. He has painted both portable icons and those for the iconostasis.

RTE: You have a marvelous array of people with other professional skills as well: cooks, administrators, artists, and so on. What do you need to do to finish the church?

ARCHIM. PHILIP: We now need to decorate the church, which includes planning the frescoing of the white interior and commissioning large portable icons for the walls. A group of Russian iconographers has already estimated that it will take nine months of full-time work to paint the frescoes. Besides paying for their supplies and salaries, we will need to find a place for them to stay and the means to feed them.

Many French visitors, say, “Ah, we thought you would have icons on the walls.” and I have to explain that we hope to, but that it is complex to execute frescoes on such large spaces. Also, the unique geometrical shapes of the top of the walls and the ceilings will be a challenge for the painters. All of this demands time, money, and people. Then there are other visitors (and parishioners) who love our white walls with their intricate shapes and say, “Oh, this is remarkable. Please just leave it as it is and use portable icons.”

RTE: Earlier you had an idea to fresco one side of the church with French saints, and the other with universal saints.

ARCHIM. PHILIP: Yes, we are certainly going to honor the French saints, but we don’t yet have the exact plan. For instance, there are many depictions of St. Richarde, a local pre-schism saint who is usually shown with the church that she founded. Her images and statues in Catholic churches often have traditional elements that we can transfer while making iconographic-style adaptations. One icon of a French saint that we’ve already commissioned is St. Odile, the patron of Alsace, who is portrayed with her monastery in front of the Alsatian mountains.

Looking to the Future

RTE: How will you maintain the church and parish, now that the major construction is over?

ARCHIM. PHILIP: We have the usual ongoing expenses that include the church itself, the parish center with electricity and food for those who live onsite and work for free or at very low wages, as well as the other routine



expenses in running a church. With the church open every day, we now need other full-time paid staff.

How we will support ourselves long term is a question. We receive some donations, and as I said earlier, offer paid guided tours (although, of course, the church is also free to pray in during the day). We are always happy to answer simple questions, but many people want deeper explanations, and these are who the guided tours are for. We also hope to develop the church shop, and are planning to open a public restaurant. This was not in the original plans, but once we thought of it, we realized that the large basement garage of the parish house would work beautifully. We only have one car and the winters here are mild, so we don't really need the garage.

Without any advertising, the number of visitors is growing, both Strasbourg residents and tourists. We aren't far from the famous L'Orangerie Park, and many people out for a walk stop by.

This is a blessing but also a challenge because people not only come to pray, but they often just want to see the church because it's beautiful. Europeans visit Orthodox countries and have seen our churches, but most visitors tell me that this is the first time they have been inside. Their most frequent questions are about the differences between Orthodoxy and Catholicism, as well as simpler things about the meaning of icons or the shape of the Orthodox three-bar cross. You have to explain what these things mean and why.

Caring for so many casual visitors means that we need people continually present in the church and on the grounds to watch over everything, to keep the bookstore open, to clean the floors of the church and bathrooms, and as tour guides. Groups often request coffee and sweets or a light lunch with the tours, and even if they donate for the excursion and food, it requires much organization and forethought to do it right.

Of course, for some people such a visit may be a revelation, and then it is a missionary encounter, but we can't predict who will be affected in this way. In any case, it's important that people have a good impression. We can't be hidden – we are in the center of the city and the church is very visible. We can't close the doors and we don't want to. We have a responsibility towards them.

RTE: No matter their reason for coming, they will experience the peace and beauty of the church. That, perhaps, was what most surprised me. You've

Opposite: Choir practice in the grand salon of the parish house.

only been celebrating liturgy here for four months, yet the church feels as if it has been prayed in for decades.

ARCHIM. PHILIP: Yes, we tried to pray during the construction. Even the construction workers were willing not to smoke or play music on the site as they usually do. They understood that the church was being built with love and care, and they respected that.

RTE: Do you think that more Europeans will join the parish?

ARCHIM. PHILIP: I hope so, and although we are a part of the Russian Orthodox Church and serve in Slavonic, adding to or changing the language may be a question for the future. We already have a multi-ethnic community here and Russians are no longer the majority. We also have Ukrainians, Georgians, Moldavians, French, Germans, Serbs, and even an Albanian. I promote this spirit of multi-ethnicity so that people will feel welcome. If you only concentrate on one ethnic group, people will go away thinking, "It's only for Russians, or for Greeks; it's not for us." We work hard to maintain this openness to everyone.

RTE: What are your hopes for the future of the community?

ARCHIM. PHILIP: To return to some forgotten basics. Although we have these beautiful churches and a long tradition of Christianity in the West, people often don't realize the richness of the heritage they possess. I think it's our mission, and the mission of everyone who cares about Christianity to begin to rebuild this Christian mentality: "What is Christian anthropology? Who am I? What is my heart, my mind, my body, my soul? What is sin and virtue? What is natural and unnatural?" We need to discuss these things calmly, without rigor. Let people think logically and then come to their own conclusions; then they will have real beliefs and convictions.

If, instead, we only lay down rules of what to do and what not to do, they will simply be disregarded. That is why we have ongoing conversations in our community about human nature, about worship, about prayer. For example, when I ask people what it is to praise God, they often can't think of anything. They are paralyzed. Our usual prayer is mostly requests, or even demands.

Opposite: Weekday service. All Saints Church.



I see today that most Orthodox people are more interested in their relationships with others than with God: “Why is this person unfriendly to me?” or “Why did he do this or that?” Moreover, this kind of thinking is almost always about change for the other person. As for spirituality, someone may think they want a new life, but often their questions are something like, “What saint do I pray to for this problem?” It’s rare that someone really wants the new life that Christ is ready to give.

What is this new life? How do we restart our spiritual life? How do we become real Orthodox people? We can offer these refreshing ideas based on the Holy Fathers who gave very simple and clear advice.

I would rather focus on these things than on entertainment. Although we are going to offer interesting exhibitions and concerts with good choirs and moving singing, these things can touch, but they won’t change you. Look at the many self-help seminars: people want to change, but they don’t know how.

Satisfaction: Our Efforts and God’s Will

RTE: What has been the most satisfying moment in building the church and seeing the community grow? What made you happiest or the most joyful?

ARCHIM. PHILIP: The most peaceful time for me was when I first came here, when we were preparing to build the church and had time to think, talk, and to plan. It was a very joyous time. We lived as if we were floating downstream. After 2014, it was unrelenting pressure.

One of the most satisfying realizations is the profound feeling of God’s love for us, and understanding that we have been given all of this, but that we don’t deserve it. We hardly understand what it means to have such a church in Western Europe. In Russia it is astonishing that so many churches have been built, but here it is a complete miracle. Many Orthodox communities in Europe and America can only dream of having a church of their own, and yet God has given us this blessing. It is his mercy, his love, but also his providence. Somehow, He saw that it was necessary to have a church here. We did what we could, then He blessed it and gave us everything necessary. It really is a work of God.

For myself, I became one with this church. It is not only part of my soul, but perhaps also a part of my body. I am completely tied to it. We’ve made a huge

effort these past six years and now I see how people in the community are tired, and how I’m morally and physically tired. Nevertheless, I understand that the church isn’t the result of our efforts, although they had to be there.

It was God’s providence to send people to help, and when they came, it was obvious that they were sent by him. Whenever I relied on someone who I understood could help, who promised to help; almost always in the end they gave nothing. When real help came it was almost always from unexpected places.

So, you understand that our efforts are important to God because then He sees that we really want this. When He sees this, and it is in accordance with His will, He will grant it, but often in ways that we don’t expect. He does this to show us that it is not we who did this but that He did it for us, in response to our prayers and efforts. This is something paradoxical, almost a contradiction: your efforts don’t mean anything, but they mean something. They are important, but God does it all.”

It is necessary to be courageous, not to say, “If I’m not guaranteed a result, I’m not going to pursue this.” If you start thinking like this, you will never do anything. Instead you say, “I see it is necessary to go forward. If I win though, thank God. If I perish, I perish, but I can’t stop.”

For instance, when we finally had the foundation dug and then ran out of money (in fact, having run up a €700,000 debt), what should we have done? Stop all the construction, go away and declare bankruptcy? You can’t do this; it’s a kind of hysteresis. At the same time, you realistically don’t have a way to move forward. All you can do is to cry out to God, “Help!” To say, “No, I can’t,” means that you’ve stopped trusting in God and are only depending on your human strength. If something catastrophic happens, God will stop it himself, but if you manage to hope, you will see that help comes.

When the church construction was nearly over, some extra work had to be done that we could not have foreseen. Our main sponsor said that they were sorry, but could not help with this because it was not included in their original budget. Of course, we are immensely grateful to them, but I have to admit I was disappointed. And I still had to pay: no one will forgive these debts.

I contacted a private person who I knew might be able to help us with this amount, and sent a list of this extra work that we owed money on. She called and said, “Oh, yes, about this €370,000. We can only give 25....” I understood that she was donating €25,000 euros and thanked her for her

contribution, but at the same time, my heart sank because I knew that I would not be able to meet the deadline to pay off the debt. But when I saw the bank account balance a few days later, I realized that she had not been speaking about euros, she was speaking about rubles, and the amount was 25,000,000 – about €300,000. It was a very joyous moment because it was almost everything we needed. We paid the majority of the debt immediately and although we still owe a substantial sum, it is not as pressing. I hope with the help of God that we find the last €70,000.

Humility before God means that you have to give him a place to work in this world. You can't say, "It's my will, not Your will." You have to surrender a little. You act as you can and let him fill the rest.

As for the future, I don't know what God's will is, but I do know that it is necessary to allow him to work, to show us how to save people and how to help them to be saved. Yes, we can cultivate some discipline, some order, teach people how to live, but it is not only these things. We also have to show this vision to people: how to serve and not only to find your personal peace.

RTE: I haven't seen that working for God always brings personal peace, at least not a lasting one.

ARCHIM. PHILIP: Yes, I agree. To come to inner harmony, the ability to pray, even to a basic feeling of peace, you have to go through these temptations and challenges. You don't get these things by being pleasant and smiling.

RTE: When we see priests, we often assume that you are in a continual state of harmony and unshakable faith, when you actually may have all sorts of worries and troubles. But your appearance of being so is another kind of grace.

ARCHIM. PHILIP: It is also a kind of knowledge. I know that only God can resolve my troubles, and this has come through experience. You can say this or that to people, but only God can help. When we have troubles, I go first to God, because I know that I can't sit at the community dinner table night after night listing our problems. No one there can help me with them, and I need real help, not just sympathy.

Of course, when we have troubles I do tell the community, because we all share in this and we all can pray. If it is right to share in more detail, you immediately feel that this person understands and that it isn't a burden for

him. Sometimes people don't get the point, not because they are ignorant or don't care, but because they aren't in your skin. If things can't be fully explained, then it's wise not to say too much. There are things you have to live through, that only God can help. ✦

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