



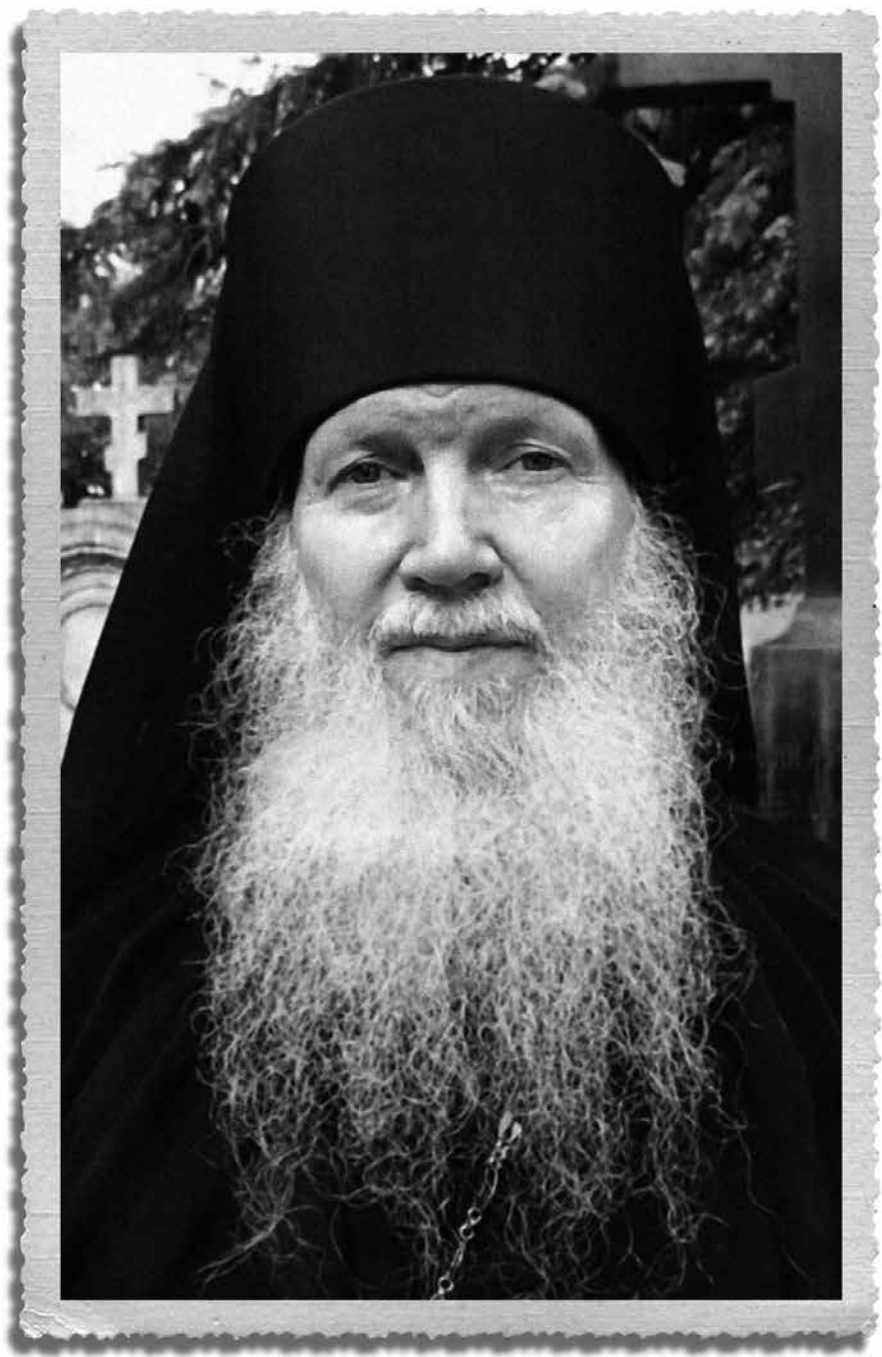
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A HIDDEN LIFE OF GRACE

Fr. Artemy Vladimirov recounts the life of Hieromonk Pavel (Lysak)
and his own years as his spiritual son.

As my readers may remember, I first heard about Hieromonk Pavel (Lysak) from Hierodeacon Benedict in Zhirovitsky Monastery, who had recommended that I find a confessor in Moscow and gave me his address. A month later I timidly rang the bell of Fr. Pavel's flat, only to have it opened by a sleepy young man who said, "He moved out long ago, he no longer lives here." I understood that this meeting was not to be, and for months I continued to feel my spiritual orphanhood.

One day, my brother Andrei called to me from the steps of the church where we both worked as guards – "Artemy, come receive batiushka's blessing." I came out, blinking in the sunlight. Before me stood a priest with a full beard, dressed in a long grey coat. "Batiushka, bless," I said, folding my hands cross-wise. "Here you are!" he replied, as he blessed me with a sweeping gesture. His face was shining with spiritual joy, and an unearthly delight overcame me. Although I did not yet know it, this was the missing Fr. Pavel, on the threshold of my own dear Church of St. Elijah. God had brought him to our doorstep! In my spirit I knew instantly that this was my spiritual father!

As a monk who had absorbed the spirit of Russian monasticism, Fr. Pavel was a modest man of few words, his inner life concealed from everyone. On rare occasions he might speak a little about himself or share some memories of his youth in order to strengthen someone spiritually, but few people knew the outward events of his life.

Born in June 1941, he was the thirteenth and last child of a pious Orthodox family. To gain self-confidence as a young man, he dedicated himself to sports, particularly bicycle racing, and later in the Army his superior officers praised him for the same diligence in his military training.

Opposite: Hieromonk Pavel (Lysak).

On Sundays, if he had a few hours' leave from his duties, the future Fr. Pavel would go to church. He recalled, "After the service, the babushkas who worked in the church would invite me to lunch, where we sang church hymns and spiritual songs that I'd learned as a child." Gifted with a tenor voice, he sang with a slight Ukrainian accent, and when needed, often stepped in as choir director. Later as a pastor, he used music to bring people together, often asking his spiritual children to read prayers and psalms aloud in turn, and encouraged us to sing the "Our Father," "Theotokos and Virgin Rejoice," and "O Heavenly King." Such moments drew us together and brought him joy.

In 1970, Fr. Pavel became a monk at St. Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra and was soon ordained, but five years later he was forced to leave the monastery due to outward circumstances that did not depend on him. Since then he had lived a quiet life of prayer, serving as a spiritual father for hundreds of people from all over Russia.

Even in Soviet times, Father Pavel insisted on always wearing his worn but very neat priest's clothes. Before leaving home, however, he would pin up the bottom edges of the podryasnik cross-wise on his shoulders and put a light grey coat over it. He retained this habit until the end of his life.

This was the early 1980s, when Orthodox clergy were still closely watched by the government and could not wear priest's garb openly on the street. (Indeed, in less than a year, Fr. Pavel would be arrested and imprisoned on false charges because of his pastoral ministry.)¹

Once, as we walked together towards the metro, a young man approached us. Without slowing his pace, batiushka talked to him for a few minutes and I couldn't help but hear both the questions and the answers. Afterwards, Fr. Pavel noted: "Mind you, Artemy, informers are not rare. Planted from the outside, they remain secret, so we must 'cut off opportunity from those who desire an opportunity.' Remember the prayer: 'I will not speak of thy Mystery to thine enemies, neither like Judas will I give thee a kiss....' By disclosing someone's secret, you can, without meaning to, act as Judas did. The one you impart the information to may be harmless, but if he tells someone else who is not, such information can be used to harm the person who shared his secret with you. Do you see?"

¹ Editor's Note: Fr. Pavel (Lysak) was forced to leave the Holy Trinity–St. Sergius Lavra Monastery in 1975, when he was also deprived of residence rights in Moscow, where many of his spiritual children lived. He was allowed, however, to come to Moscow on three-day visits, but his growing number of spiritual children alarmed the authorities and led to his arrest. In 1984, Fr. Pavel was falsely charged and found guilty of overstaying the three-day limit and sentenced to ten months in a forced labour camp, which he served under great hardship.

Healing of Soul and Body

As a young man, Fr. Pavel once had an extraordinary dream in which he found himself inside his own body, observing the organs and their processes as if he was attending a lecture. Later, he became well-versed in anatomy and physiology, and for the rest of his life studied medicinal plants. He was always willing to listen to complaints about poor health and would give recommendations on diet and natural medicines, as well as share the phone numbers of good doctors, many of whom were his spiritual children. In the Moscow flat where he heard confessions, there were shelves of spiritual books and also volumes of recipes for ailments that used such common ingredients as lemon, oats, turnips, and various herbs. Due to my youthful indifference to my health, however, I rarely took this advice.

One exception was when I was going through a period of spiritual relaxation. Father Pavel delicately drew my attention to the extra weight I had gained and taught me how to lose it efficiently by taking strong black tea with a good quantity of lemon juice on Wednesdays and Fridays, along with a spoonful of honey. He himself fasted like this and had the tea and honey only after 3 p.m. Following his advice, I lost weight easily. I did not feel hungry and it gave me the energy to accomplish my daily work.

Father Pavel also advised my elder brother and I to make prostrations while reading our daily prayers. Aware of our long sedentary hours of study, he instructed us to make one hundred prostrations every day accompanied by the publican's prayer: "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner".

He taught me in other ways too. Once, after visiting a monastery, I was asked to deliver a bag of fresh tomatoes to him from the fathers' garden. Taking the night train, I arrived in Moscow the following morning. Batiushka cordially thanked me for the gift, but several minutes later showed me the open bag. Not a tomato remained whole – every single one was either split or broken. Although I could not recall hitting the bag against anything, my lack of attention had somehow brought this about. "Artemy, learn to be careful; there are no trifles in life," he said with a gentle smile. Not once did I see him irritated or annoyed, though at the time I was ashamed over this small episode.

Although he fasted strictly according to the Orthodox typicon, he never reproached me for breaking fasts, but only warned against eating after midnight because the evil one could use it to tempt us with unclean thoughts.

However, if I faint-heartedly broke fasts to please other people, he would quote: “God will scatter the bones of the men-pleasers ...” Only once in the forty years that he guided me was I fortunate enough to dine with him. I remember his praise for the hostess and how, child-like, he expressed warm enjoyment of the tasty food. His asceticism remained hidden, but his love shone out in his interaction with people.

As an integral part of his ministry, Fr. Pavel distributed spiritual books in the 1970s and 80s, when religious materials could only be printed in *samizdat* editions (usually prayer books and writings of the Holy Fathers) – and did so even more freely in the 1990s, once religious literature could be published freely. His flat was always full of piles of Orthodox books for those who wanted them, and the piles were regularly replenished. He well understood the risk he ran doing this during the Soviet period when the criminal code strictly forbade such activities.

After my own ordination I was welcome to carry away any quantity of books and CDs to help in my missionary work. Batiushka gladly gave them away and even helped me pack the books into bags he had especially bought for this purpose. His generosity was at first surprising, but later I saw it as something quite natural.

A Close Distance

Batiushka always kept a certain distance between himself and his spiritual children, while remaining a most attentive and sacrificing spiritual father. I never dared call him by phone to solve my spiritual problems, but when I had periods of hard inner struggle at the beginning of my spiritual life, I sometimes called the flat where he saw people. If he was available, they would give the receiver over to him. When mobile phones appeared, Fr. Pavel would call to greet me on my name day or birthday. It was always a remarkable event to hear his voice.

It was sheer happiness for me to talk to my spiritual father, although it never occurred to me to envy those who spent more time with him. He would have said, “Do not dream of what you don’t have, and be grateful for what you do have!”

Once, as we left together from church, a young man with an icon-like face came up to take Fr. Pavel’s bag from him. He walked quietly ahead of us, and for the first time I was stung with a bitter feeling: “He must be very close

to batiushka; that's why he carries his bag. Some people are like angels." Sometime afterwards, as we walked together again, batiushka looked at me intently, and handing me the bag said, "Well, here you are." I grabbed the bag, beside myself with happiness! This only happened once, as we were rarely together in this way.

Confession

Confession was Fr. Pavel's main means of pastoral care: "Repentance determines everything in our spiritual life, and even the sacraments may serve to condemn us if our soul does not want to repent."

It was shortly after our first meeting with him in 1982 that Fr. Pavel answered Andrei's and my request to come to our flat near the Church of St. Elijah to hear our confessions. For my first general confession with him, I prepared a list of sins – several hand-written pages in narrow, cramped handwriting, including things I had already confessed. Beside sinful deeds and on-going failings, I mentioned thoughts, memories, and daydreams that burdened my conscience. Without previous spiritual guidance, I was prone to the meticulous self-scrutiny of a new convert.

He came late in the evening and, although he was tired after a long day, listened patiently to my effusion. Some scribbled lines I couldn't make out myself, and seeing my anxiety he said quietly: "Artemy, go on." After the long confession, Fr. Pavel covered me with his epitachelion and, as was his practice, pronounced the entire prayer of absolution over me. Then, as he blessed me, he said: "Be always like this...." "Like what, Batiushka?" "Open and sincere..."

He himself was warmly pastoral without being effusive. Hearing something negative or shocking, he would cross himself and exclaim sincerely: "Oh no, it's awful!" Such sincere words removed the sting of the situation and channeled the conversation in a different, calmer direction.

Usually, he heard confessions between nine in the evening and midnight in the flat he used in Moscow, and after some time passed, he blessed us to come every week. As I confessed, I could see numerous "sin lists" that his spiritual children had given him as he left church after a vigil. As he said the prayer of absolution over me, Fr. Pavel sometimes also said the names of other brothers and sisters whose confessions he had read. As he pronounced a name, he made the sign of the cross over my head to absolve them as well.

Once, in those first years, entangled in passions from head to foot and devoured alive by despondency, I asked batiushka if I had demons acting inside of me. “Artemy,” he said calmly, “demons have no room in us if we address God with our mind and heart. Pray to God, stand before Him, and everything will be alright. We believe in the Son of the Living God and our faith is not built on sand.” Standing next to him, I was free from such torturing thoughts, and questions and perplexities seemed to vanish into thin air.

Batiushka taught us to be vigilant over our small everyday sins, and many of his spiritual children made notes during the day of voluntary or involuntary lapses in fulfilling God’s will. As for me, I summarized in confession whatever I had disclosed to the Lord in my daily evening prayers. Putting down the sin itself brings relief because it makes obvious the invisible nets that the evil spirits incessantly weave around us. Attentive to himself and others, Fr. Pavel often noted subtle tendencies with a remarkable sense of humor. The fruit of such confessions and his guidance echoed in my heart with happiness.

Typically for a neophyte, it seemed to me that my spiritual father knew every detail of how I spent my weeks, and I greedily took in the stories of other believers who incessantly spoke of miracles in the lives of the spiritual guides they knew. As I was highly emotional and my moods changed often, I did not yet know that my life did not depend on such “changes of temperature.”

I also remember Fr. Pavel’s words about clairvoyance. “True clairvoyance is always hidden from people; only those who have the gift themselves can see it in another person. Those genuinely bearing God’s Spirit will never shove it up your nose.” He said this to puncture the banal genre descriptions of visits to a “clairvoyant elder”: the pilgrim enters the elder’s cell and the elder immediately unloads information about the pilgrim’s life, supposedly obtained through clairvoyance, onto the unsuspecting visitor.

Once I asked batiushka to hear the confession of a friend, an elderly woman who frequently received Holy Communion, but, as she told me, still did not dare confess an “awful sin” she had once committed.

He was willing to help, and at my friend’s invitation, Fr. Pavel came with me to visit her. Patiently, I rang the doorbell at long intervals before we heard her shuffling down the hall, and then we waited even longer for her to successfully unlock the door. Finally, it opened.

- “Batiushka... but you came to me last night and I confessed everything!” she exclaimed, looking with amazement at Fr. Pavel, whom she was seeing for the first time in her life.
- “Oh, really?” he replied, smiling at her warmly.
- “...but your podryasnik was a different color.”
- “And yet, let us get to know each other better and confess once again,” he suggested.
- “With pleasure! Do come in!” she replied.

Half an hour later, when batiushka came out of her room, my friend followed him, beaming with happiness. This I saw with my own eyes.

Dmitri’s Meeting

At one period my twin Dmitri found himself in a difficult situation. Immersed in his unhealed youthful passions, he felt estranged from his relatives and reproached them – perhaps not quite fairly – for their lack of understanding and forgiveness. No doubt, in his soul my brother believed in the Lord, but he could find no peace, and I very much wanted to bring Dmitri to batiushka, whose love and prayers along with weekly confession and Holy Communion had helped me grow in faith.

After several invitations, Dmitri agreed to go with me to the flat where Fr. Pavel confessed. On the way I cast sidelong glances at him and could see the tense anxiety that recalled the tortures my own soul had gone through two years before.

We rang the bell and the door was opened onto a hall that led to a living-room full of people getting ready for confession. Batiushka was speaking with someone in an adjoining room, and as there were no free chairs we modestly stood by the wall. Dmitri gazed moodily at the women in headscarves writing in their notebooks and at a family reading prayers in front of the icons. Suddenly the door opened and Fr. Pavel came out wearing his stole. He immediately came up to Dmitri saying, “Oh what guests we have!” and pressed my brother tightly to his chest. Dmitri, who had been standing with a hard and frozen face, broke into tears. Bending his head down to batiushka’s shoulder he cried without restraint. Batiushka patted him on the shoulder lovingly: “Come, come, let’s talk.” Dmitri followed him into the room like a lamb.

Living in God

There were no “soulful” feelings in batiushka. In the forty years of our relationship I did not hear a single word of praise or emotional affection from him, and every word he said was saving in its strictness. His love was without a hint of sentimentality, yet it brought immense joy and consolation – a combination that is still inexplicable for me. My first attempts to idealize and ascribe attributes to him that only belong to God did not last long. He never gave any grounds for this and, by and by, my judgment became more sober.

I came to understand that he lived in God and with God and that one could not be friends with him as is usual between two people. Even so, in speaking with us or answering questions, a portion of his soul was in each and every exchange, and my heart remained full and warm the following week.

As we know, monks do not part with their prayer-ropes, and when he spoke with his spiritual children or heard their confessions, batiushka’s old black prayer rope never stopped moving in his hand. In one of St. Theophan the Recluse’s books I had read that laymen may use small prayer-ropes for convenience so that they do not have to count the prayers with their fingers, but I did not yet have one, as prayer ropes were not easy to come by at that time.

One spring day I met with Fr. Pavel in the park near the ill-famed Moscow swimming pool, the place where Christ the Savior Cathedral was later rebuilt. “Well, Artemy, ask me something,” he said as usual. I do not remember what I asked, but as we said good-bye, he took an amber prayer-rope from his chest pocket and gave it to me! “Here is a blessing for you. Don’t give it away to anyone.”

This prayer-rope from my spiritual father was so precious to me that I hung it on an icon at home and never touched it. It has been forty years now that this holy object has been with me. Batiushka said that a blessed prayer-rope is a spiritual sword that demons abhor, that it is good to fall asleep saying the Jesus prayer with the prayer-rope, and that one should not touch his prayer-rope with unwashed hands or carry it in the back pocket of his trousers. Even now, when I look at the amber as it shines from the icon, I remember the morning that he gave it to me – his smiling face and warm eyes looking into eternity.

Batiushka’s everyday life remained altogether hidden. He was a true monk living in the city as a hermit and he allowed no one into his private life. Several times over the years, however, he mentioned to me that people had

offered him cars, dachas, and even (pardon) the episcopacy. The latter was suggested during Soviet times – on certain conditions, of course – by forces alien to the Church. However, Fr. Pavel valued freedom in Christ and the blessed poverty of the gospel above all else. “Having nothing, he possessed all things,” as the apostle wrote... including us, his spiritual children. Caring for our physical and spiritual well-being, he willingly shared what he had and served us without thought of gain. The dearest thing to him was the grace of the Holy Spirit living in him. After his repose at age seventy-eight, nothing was found in his cell except books on spiritual life.

With my new-found faith and my spiritual father’s guidance like a warm wind at my back, I soon married and began my teaching years. ✦

The next chapter of reminiscences by Fr. Artemy Vladimirov, “The Teaching Years” will appear in Road to Emmaus Journal, Issue #84, Winter, 2021.