



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

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THE ORDINATIONS: 1987-1988

I. The Calling

To begin this account of my pastoral years, I recall one Pascha night as a young altar server at the Church of St. Elijah on 2nd-Obydensky Pereulok, watching as the priest broke the Holy Lamb, the sacred bread that had become Christ's body: "He holds Christ in his hands! A mere man touching the Lord's Body... What kind of a person can be blessed to do this?"

As I did then, I firmly believe that the saints protect us, especially those whom our parents and grandparents loved dearly and perhaps even passed down to us a torch of love and prayer for these saints.

If you remember, I earlier recalled the dark days of WWII when my grandmother Lyubov was left alone in cold and ever-hungry Moscow with three young children. At first, she waited on tables in an officers' canteen where she was allowed to bring home food scraps, but once the job ended there was no work to be found and nowhere to turn. Her small daughters, already malnourished, began to swell with starvation. Finally, unable to bear their tears, famished herself, and at the end of her physical and moral strength, Lyubov despaired and rushed out of the flat, perhaps never to return. At that moment, her eyes fell upon an icon of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker that her mother had venerated, and crying: "Vladika Nicholas, how can you bear this?" she flew out the door and down the steps. At the threshold of the entrance to their building, a spot of color caught her eye and she looked down to see two banknotes sitting precisely one on top of the other in the

Opposite: Fr. Artemy Vladimirov blessing kulichi and pascha on Holy Saturday. Courtyard of the Church of the Resurrection on Assumption Vrazhke, 1989.



Lyubov Vasilievna with her three daughters, Susanna, Marina (Fr. Artemy's mother), and Anna. Late 1940s.

form of a cross. There was no one around. After searching to see who could have dropped it, she understood that this was her answer from the saint.

Even as a young boy I knew that St. Nicholas had saved my mother and her sisters from starvation and although this was all I knew of the world of saints, perhaps it was enough.

While I loved my work as a teacher, I sometimes sensed another vocation awaiting me. One evening in the Church of St. Elijah, I stood in the side-chapel by the wonderful icon of St. Nicholas, bordered with small scenes from his life. As the sound of chanting washed over me, I found myself turning towards the icon to beg that the saint would lead me on this still unknown, but God-pleasing path. A moment later, a thought leapt up, "Could it be the priesthood?" I said to myself, "I would be glad if it were, but with my sins, I am unworthy."

As my conscience passed this quick but fair verdict, I opened my eyes, and my glance fell upon the small scene of St. Nicholas' ordination at the edge of the icon. The saint stood with his head bowed under the hands of the

ordaining bishop, and for the first time I saw a tiny word inscribed in red inside the saint's golden halo: *Axios!* – Worthy! I shuddered, struck with the correlation between my inner perplexity and the immediate response through the icon.

“Saint Nicholas, “I prayed, “If this is not a coincidence, if I am to become a priest, I must know this is from you. Give me evidence so clear that it will not leave a shadow of doubt. Thank you and forgive me.”

A week passed before I saw my spiritual father. Of the many questions that surged in my heart I picked the most urgent: “Batiushka, is it possible for me to consider the priesthood?” I stumbled even pronouncing the phrase. “Yes, it is,” was the brief answer. Have you experienced the feeling when, after wandering through dark, swampy woods, one suddenly finds himself in a sunlit field? That was how I felt at that moment. If my sins did not prevent me, perhaps my future was connected to the Church.

I believe that this is exactly how such a vocation is revealed to us. Although aware of our unworthiness, we still have the inner will and desire to devote ourselves entirely to the ministry, and there is no need to look further for happiness. Happiness is here, inside yourself, because happiness is to serve the Lord with everything you have, asking for nothing in return.



Those of you who have read my previous accounts know how fulfilled I was as a teacher of the seminary and theological academy, but one day my spiritual father advised me to ask the rector for a blessing to wear a *podraznik* when I taught class.² Vladika Alexander (Timofeyev) replied authoritatively:

– “Why just a *podraznik*? Submit a written application to be ordained as a deacon. But first you are to go for a pre-ordination confession to Archimandrite Kirill [Pavlov], the confessor of the Lavra brotherhood.”

I had not expected such a turn. I stood silently for a moment to recover from the impact of his words, and then asked:

– “When?”

1 *Axios!*: From the Greek for “Worthy!” – the exclamation given by those attending an ordination as a witness to the candidate’s fulfillment of the high moral standards required for the priesthood.

2 *Podraznik*: The black cassock worn both by ordained readers and by clergyman.

– “Any time, including today!” He rose to bless me, indicating that the meeting was over.

I left his room stunned and amazed. “To go to Fr. Kirill for confession means that I will have to tell him everything I remember about myself from the beginning of my life.”

Here I am in the elder’s cell. It is July 5, 1987, and as I finish my confession my cheeks are crimson with shame. My heart beats desperately. What will the verdict be? I’m praying deeply.

“You can be ordained,” says Archimandrite Kirill in his calm, even voice. “Kneel, put your hand on the Gospel and repeat the pre-ordination vow.”

I do as the elder asks. The text is in front of me. I read it slowly, conscious of every word: “I vow to lead a pious and sober life, to keep myself from the vain habits of the world, to live in humility and meekness, and by my good example to guide others on the way of piety. In any work that my ministry requires, I will consider neither my own honor, interests, or gain, but the glory of God. To seal this promise, I kiss the Holy Gospel and the Cross of my Savior. Amen.”

Father Kirill then put his signature to the certificate affirming that there were no canonical obstacles to my ordination and handed it to me. With this wonderful endorsement, I flew into the open air as if I had wings at my back. Can this be true? Can this be happening to me? *Lord, Thou knowest that I love Thee...*

A hieromonk who also taught at the Lavra saw me a few moments later and asked, “Artemy Vladimirovich, your smile is so bright today. What has happened?”

– “Batiushka, can you imagine? I had my pre-ordination confession with Fr. Kirill, and tomorrow is my nameday, July 6, the feast of St. Artemy of Verkola!

– “You don’t know? Because tomorrow is also the feast of the Icon of the Vladimir Mother of God, we celebrate St. Artemy’s memory today in the lavra. Do you see? He stepped forward a day to participate in an event so meaningful for you!”

II. Temptation and Grace

I learned that my ordination to the diaconate was to be July 5/18, 1987, the feast of the Uncovering of the Relics of the Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra's founder, St. Sergius of Radonezh. This was the summer of 1987, a work period for lavra students, and we teachers took part in these projects as well. A few days before the ordination I was asked to supervise a group of seminarians who were to pull down the old wooden roof of a house outside the lavra gates; rumor said that it belonged to the rector. As we had not been given any special instructions, I directed the young men as well as I could: "Do you know the first rule of work safety? If you don't want to get a splinter in your hand, smash your thumb with a hammer or experience any other misfortune, say the following prayer before you begin: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner!" I advised them to say the prayer, but it was not me saying the prayer. A light fragrance of self-assurance had permeated my young heart.

The work began, and soon there was a steady rhythm of hammering as the heavy wooden roof beams and rafters were dismantled, lowered to the ground, and stacked at the edge of the yard. At one point, I took a step backwards and my right foot, clad in a simple canvas soft-soled tennis shoe, came straight down onto a weathered board that must have been waiting for its day after a long winter sleep. There was a sudden sharp pain and, looking down, I realized that a long rusty nail sticking up from the board had gone straight into my foot. Warm blood ran down my toes. With the instinct of a seasoned soccer player, I sprang up and aside, only to land on another board half a meter away, whose equally rusty nail pierced my left foot.

Fortunately, the hard-working seminarians did not notice my predicament. I pulled my foot off of the second board and bending down, gingerly felt inside my shoe. My hand came out covered with blood. I am not afraid of blood, but I admit to feeling uneasy that day at seeing so much of my own.

I did not want the young men to know what had happened so, inventing an excuse, I hobbled down the road to the small house where teachers from Moscow sometimes stayed overnight. I was terribly worried... the nails were so long and rusty. "What if I get blood poisoning? What if they don't have enough time to save me?... A premature death at the age of twenty-seven. I have not yet really lived, let alone begun to serve.... If I can't walk, I will miss my ordination and perhaps be crippled, or worse.

As such panicked thoughts raced through my head, my eyes grew dim and I knew that I was no longer thinking clearly. Walking carefully to spare my wounded heels, I prayed fervently, “Lord, You know everything, all things are open to You. You know that I want to serve You. You see my desire and my faith.... Please heal me and save me from blood poisoning! Let it be a sign that I can please You by serving as a deacon. I will put body and soul into this angelic ministry. Lord, let Your holy will be done!”

With this prayer, I calmed down a little and wiped my eyes. Entering quietly through the gate, I stole upstairs to the bathroom. My shoes were full of blood. I washed the wounds thoroughly, attempted to clean the canvas shoes, and then asked the housekeeper on duty for iodine to swab the wounds. Weak from the sudden shock, I thought vaguely of the infirmary, but knowing I couldn’t walk there, I collapsed onto the bed. Huddling under the bedclothes like a wounded animal, I fell asleep almost at once with the prayer, “Oh Lord, Thy will be done.”

I slept undisturbed into the afternoon. None of the other teachers had returned at lunchtime; probably they had already gone back to Moscow. When I awoke, I checked my feet. Surprisingly, they didn’t hurt, nor was there any throbbing or swelling. Encouraged, I swabbed them again with iodine.

I felt calmer now, and hungry, so I slipped into my shoes and crept down to the kitchen to see if anything was left from lunch. Our kindly, good-hearted cook put warm soup and bread on the table, “Help yourself, Artemy Vladimirovich,” she said. “You must be tired after working all morning.” As usual, my appetite did not let me down and, as I ate, I began to think that perhaps this was not the end. I couldn’t tell the cook my troubles, but instead, repaid her kindness with seminary stories, then hobbled upstairs and again fell asleep.

The following morning, even before I examined my feet, I realized that there was no pain at all. When I removed the socks, not only was there no tenderness or swelling, but strangely, the marks of the wounds were barely visible. Only the canvas shoes, pierced through the soles, witnessed to the misadventure that had befallen me.

Gratitude for the Lord’s care filled my heart; it was only a few days before my ordination and I would be able to walk. At the all-night vigil for St. Sergius, the urgent question arose in my mind: “If I am not yet a deacon and both feet have already been nailed to the wood, what will my ordination as a priest bring?”

III. Ordination to the Diaconate

It was a warm July morning, and amidst the seminary choir in the small eighteenth-century rotunda church dedicated to the Smolensk Icon of the Mother of God were many of my own students. I remember myself in a white sticharion being led around the altar table by two clergymen. After three swift prostrations to the rector, I was instructed to go down on one knee. My hands resting on the edge of the altar, I felt Vladika Alexander's powerful hand on my head.

My eyes closed, I heard the prayer: "... Divine grace, which, at all times heals the infirm and supplies that which is wanting, ordains the most devout Subdeacon Artemy as a deacon!" In low voices, the clergy in the altar chanted: "Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy..." At the response of "Axios!" from those in the church, I was raised to my feet and received the orarion, liturgical cuffs, and the service-book. The senior deacon then handed me the seraphic fan, instructing me to wave it cross-wise over the Holy Gifts with the words from Psalm 50: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy great mercies..."

What did my soul feel at that moment? There was no room for feelings. My soul was simply all ears; a many-eyed cherub attending to the instructions flying at me. Partaking of Holy Communion in the altar for the first time, I received the Body of Christ in my hand and then the bishop gave me the Holy Blood from the chalice.

Next came the deacon's *ectenia*. Raising my *orarion*, the symbol of an angel's wing urging people to pray, I intoned the petitions joyfully. The choir later told me: "Father Artemy, you hit the right note! It rarely happens at one's first service..." This was sheer joy. Then the liturgy was over and the deacons were left to take turns consuming the Holy Gifts that remained in the chalice. As the newest deacon, I was last.

The priests and other deacons soon left the altar. The church was empty now, save for the long-bearded hieromonk still on duty (one of my students) and myself, still in my white *sticharion*. Suddenly, in an unexpectedly stern tone, the hieromonk asked:

–“Why do you stand there as if you are lost? Consume the rest of the Holy Gifts – and see that you don't knock the spoon against the side of the chalice. You aren't eating porridge.”

I was surprised to hear him address me with the informal “*ty*” rather than “*vy*.” The academy and seminary students are traditionally very polite to their professors, but I hardly noticed this as my attention was on the large gold-plated chalice with its brocade cover.

My hands shook as I approached the Holy Gifts. How can it be that I am allowed to receive again? How many times have I watched through the Royal gates as deacons consumed the Holy Gifts; an incomprehensible and sacred act. I removed the cover and looked inside, pausing a moment.

– “What are you waiting for?” the priest asked. “There is a fly in the altar. If it lands on the Holy Chalice you’re not going to leave until you catch it and eat it or burn it in the censer...”

His threat brought me back to earth.

– “And see that you wash the chalice inside properly with boiled water,” he instructed me, pointing to a small kettle on the altar table. “Some boneheads have to drink litres of water before it is clear.”

Alarmed by such an exacting regime, I did as he said, and then reverently removed the deacon’s vestments: “Father, bless!” The priest made the sign of the cross over me and then following the monastic custom kissed me three times on the shoulders, ending with a reserved smile – but a smile nonetheless. The morning was truly blessed.

Outside the church, a familiar face – a girl from the Philological Faculty – greeted me shyly but joyfully: “I am unsure how to approach you, Father Artemy. Please accept my congratulations on your ordination!” The word “Father” applied to myself for the first time felt foreign, yet also significant. Near the seminary I met the rector again, and with some kind words he presented me with a small icon of St. Sergius of Radonezh, on whose feast I had been ordained. This icon is still with me, among my most cherished possessions.

That July, at the end of the seminary year, newly-ordained deacons were so numerous that each one could only serve daily for a week, instead of the usual forty days. Nevertheless, a few of the more zealous managed to spend their entire “honeymoon” in the altar by having themselves assigned to services in different lavra churches.

Opposite: Deacon Artemy serving in the crypt-chapel of Dormition Cathedral, Holy-Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra, 1987.



I served my first week with three or four other young deacons in the crypt-chapel of Dormition Cathedral, dedicated to All Saints of Russia. In this cool, quiet space, the voices of altar servers fill the chapel, and its perfect acoustics echo every rustle and whisper. I watched closely, trying to learn fast, and was particularly struck by a young seminarian-deacon who stood at the altar as motionless as a birch-tree. Unlike myself, his half-closed eyes did not wander to the faces of the other servers but were turned prayerfully inside himself. I still remember his deep concentration, far from the activity around him.

For me, everything was new. I had to learn how to stand, walk, cense, and pronounce the prayers aloud. I was told with irony that the deacon's service is harder to learn for the "smart ones," that is, those with higher education. This is why they are ordained priests as soon as possible because priests do not need to move as much, nor are their actions as complicated or as noticeable as a deacon's.

Censing, for example, is not as simple as it looks. Each object is to be censed three times, no more and no less. At the second swing of the censor you make a half-bow and cense simultaneously. Experienced deacons do this so naturally that it looks beautiful, but uncoordinated new deacons are often laughed at good-naturedly by their brothers in the altar.

Thankfully, one hieromonk took me aside to teach me how to cense properly.

– "Father Artemy, take a book under your upper arm and press it to your side. Now cense and watch how your hand moves – just the hand, see, the elbow remains motionless!"

Despite my university education, I managed to wave the empty censer over and over.

– "That's it. You're doing fine."

Divine Liturgy is everything to priests and deacons. The first few days after ordination they are like the wise virgins who went in with the Bridegroom, Holy Communion being the bridal feast. When the service is over the young deacons who have been fasting strictly from the night before do not rush to divest, but as I said, wait to consume the remaining Holy Mysteries.

Coming up to the altar in strict precedence of length of service, we newly-ordained deacons await our turns at the end. For a devout deacon, consum-

ing the Holy Gifts is communing with Christ Himself. Heart-free and filled with joy, he calls upon the Lord for the living and the reposed. New deacons aspiring to sanctity were always eager to help in this, but in later years, unfortunately, fewer priests or deacons continued this pious habit.

I remember one day soon after my ordination when five of us waited patiently to partake. As the newest deacon, I was at the very end of the queue and quite anxious that there would be nothing left for me to do but to wipe out the holy chalice. Much depended on the consideration of the deacon who stood in front of you. Would he be egotistic or did he understand that the person behind him was also waiting for this spiritual gift? Suddenly out of nowhere, a little hieromonk appeared. Energetic and insistent, he said to us gravely: “Oh, my brethren, I have a terrible invisible war with demons; therefore, I need to consume the Holy Gifts myself. Everyone is free to go.” He was twenty-six. (*Laughter*) I remember repeating a Russian rhyme to myself: “He himself is waging a war. / We are free and nothing more.” In the end, it was a chance to humble ourselves.

IV. A Deacon’s Service

The first week of my diaconate passed as one happy moment and a seminary holiday from teaching allowed me to devote myself entirely to the services. My family kindly allowed their new deacon to spend this time entirely at the lavra where, sheltered from worldly commotion, I took refuge at the holy altar. As the week drew to its close, I went to the professors’ canteen one morning for breakfast, where I was approached by Archimandrite Benedict (Penkov), a quiet senior professor of the academy, who said in his unhurried, measured tone:

– “Father Artemy, we have discussed the matter and suggest that you continue your diaconate service in Moscow. They need help at the Church of the Resurrection on Nezhdanova Street while Protodeacon Nikolai Parusnikov is on leave. Do you agree?”

I immediately agreed, for the offer perfectly corresponded with my desire to serve the traditional forty days of liturgy.

– “Wonderful... We will also send one of our experienced seminary deacons. He will serve the first liturgy with you, and see to it that no one troubles you there ...”

Leaving the lavra for the first time since my ordination, I remembered the unassuming advice of Elder Kirill, the lavra confessor, to us new clergy: “Never part with your *podraznik*, even outside the church building.” It was a hot summer day, and on the way to Moscow, Fr. Deacon Nikolai, with his vast frame and intriguing Ukrainian-Transcarpathian accent, enthusiastically described the order of services and the particular duties of a deacon. In a short-sleeved white shirt, he gesticulated excitedly as he demonstrated how a deacon should carry the Gospel out of the altar and flourish his *orarion* at the words, “Lord, save the pious.” I attempted to take in his instructions as I sat sweating in my heavy *podraznik* and trying to overcome my embarrassment at the attention our extraordinary twosome was attracting from the other passengers.

Can you imagine how surprised I was upon entering the Church of the Resurrection to recognize the miracle-working icon of the Mother of God “In Search of the Lost” – the same icon that had healed my troubled soul in my student years! From the icon, the Most Holy Virgin again gazed back at me with ineffable love, and I saw God’s hand in my assignment to serve here. In addition, we had arrived on the eve of the Feast of the Smolensk Mother of God which, as you remember, was the dedication of the church in which I was ordained. It may have only been coincidence, but my heart experienced these things as heavenly gifts.

Archpriest Boris Tsepennikov was somehow apprehensive of us at first. He asked and re-asked who we were, and by whose blessing we had come. During the service, I felt safe under the wing of my venerable patron although the unflattering Fr. Boris did not hesitate to reprimand me sharply after each mistake. My feelings were hurt, but as the saying goes, “The man who never made a mistake never made anything.”

Thus, God granted my wish to serve liturgy the entire forty days after ordination. Physically it took much energy, so I would go to our family flat in Ostozhenka Street to sleep during the day, but my spirit soared, oblivious of earthly cares.

One of the most memorable days was the Feast of the Image of the Saviour “Not-Made-By-Hands.” Protopriest Vladimir Rigin who was serving that day told me:

- “Father Deacon, you are to give the sermon today.”
- “But I’m just a deacon!”
- “Well then, this is wonderful!” he countered with a smile. “In the early Church deacons also gave sermons.”

All through the liturgy I frantically thought of what I could say, and it was such a mental effort that I recall the essence of it even now:

Church history tells us of the miraculous circumstances under which this image, the face-cloth that covered Christ in the tomb and later seemed to have disappeared altogether, was reacquired. In such a way, we are to discover God’s image within our fallen nature. The task of the Lord’s disciple is to restore the image’s faded features, to cleanse and sanctify them with God’s grace.

How can we do this? First, one has to acquire control over the mind and unite it with prayer so that disorderly thoughts and dreams depart. Second, if we remember that our free will has been given to us by God, we can preserve this great gift by directing it towards good, learning to make the right choices, fleeing from evil and not allowing ourselves to be taken captive by sin. Third, we wage war against our passions, primarily the pride, wrath, and lust that pervert and darken the Lord’s image in us. Finally, we are to implant humility, meekness, purity and love in our hearts. This is a task for our whole life and our very salvation depends on how successful we are. Our eternal salvation lies in strengthening the human personality created in God’s image and Christ’s likeness, and thus appropriating the Christian virtues.

I am sure I spoke less concisely and coherently, yet I tried to bring together historical facts and spiritual edification. This was my first sermon from the pulpit, my introduction to the yet unknown realm of preaching. When it ended, I returned flushed to the altar where Fr. Vladimir was waiting for me. He was surprised and pleased.

- “Well, Fr. Artemy, accept my congratulations on your gladatorial debut! The beginning is very promising.”

My assignment to serve in Resurrection Church was to end on Dormition. I had come to love the church and enjoyed working there, but I knew that Protodeacon Nikolai would soon return from his leave. I imagined him thanking me for having served while he was away, and then with a stern countenance inform me that the church no longer needed my services.

On the day before Dormition, I stood before the icon “In Search of the Lost,” and again the image of the Theotokos seemed to compassionately watch me as I poured out my heart: “I do not want to leave your church but my forty days of service is over.”

Many priests and deacons gathered in the altar that evening for the all-night vigil, most of whom worked in the Moscow Patriarchate’s publishing house headed by Metropolitan Pitirim, who would preside over the feast-day services. Just before vespers, he appeared; a huge, tall man addressing Fr. Boris in a loud baritone. As was proper for a new deacon, I approached him to introduce myself in a nervous, faltering voice. Quite unexpectedly he embraced me, pressing my shoulders with his huge hands and said warmly and mildly: “My dear Father, what joy it is to have you. Stay with us until the end of time!” I understood that the Mother of God had accepted my prayer.

V. In God’s House

In the following months, I continued to serve as a deacon at both the Pokrov Church in Sergiyev Posad and in Moscow’s Church of the Resurrection, where I volunteered. They already had a deacon, so could not offer me official employment, nor did I ask for any compensation. What reward could be greater than co-serving the Divine Liturgy? The angels themselves want to attend the holy *anaphora* and, as I gained experience, it was a pleasure to be a source of help and joy, rather than a burden.

I was obliged to Vladika Pitirim, whose interest in me had provided the stable situation I now found myself in. Seeing the favor Vladika showed me, Fr. Boris, our strict protopriest, maintained a distance. Nevertheless, his fault-finding and criticism served me well, both in learning the deacon’s role and in acquiring a basic foundation of humility. Although psychologically dissimilar, over the years we slowly became friends.

Having heard a few of my attempts at preaching, Vladika blessed the priests to have me regularly give sermons. On December 31, 1987, as he greeted the

Opposite: Met. Pitirim (Nechayev) with Resurrection Church children, circa 1989.





clergy at a reception for the New Year, he unexpectedly bestowed the title of *didaskalos* upon me – a special ministry in the early Church dedicated to witnessing to the faith in the pagan world and teaching the gospel to newly-baptized Christians. Metropolitan Pitirim said this in high holiday spirits, as a half-joke, but I so wanted it to be even partially true! I felt an inner responsibility for his “nomination” and was bursting to go into action.

I also treasured this opportunity to become friends with Fr. Vladimir Rigin and Fr. Gennady Ogryzkov, two of the Resurrection parish priests. Both were gifted pastors with their own circles of spiritual children, and with great love and wisdom they gave guidance to any Muscovite who sought it. These shepherds could often be found sitting in different parts of the three-altar church after the evening service, talking quietly with those who had come to see them. Responsive to their willingness to teach real confession and to converse heart-to-heart, people swarmed to them like bees around a rosebush. I watched it all closely.

It's Saturday evening after the service, and the priests are hearing confessions: there's a film-director with a mane of hair, unbuttoned collar, and a script rolled up like a tube; two fresh-faced university girls in colorful dresses with small bags over their shoulders; a mother with her teenage son shifting impatiently from foot to foot... immortal human souls, each with its own story, grief, destiny, and its unique and often difficult path to God and the Church.

Father Vladimir reminds me of the writer Nikolai Gogol. Tall and thin, he bends over the mother and the schoolboy as he explains something, marking each idea with a downward thrust of his finger. The mother, who looks like a teacher herself, nods in earnest agreement, glancing at her son as if to say: “Do you understand; will you remember what he says?”

Father Gennady, with thick wavy hair and a beard, is a Russian knight. More like a mother than a father, he considers each penitent with deep attention, sympathy and compassion. This rare property of the heart, devoid of any affectation, draws dozens of souls, especially women and girls. A woman's lot, then as now, is not light, and the world's treatment is often harsh.

Hearing another sad story, he shakes his head in sorrow, gazing into space as if dissolving into the other person's life, and one can see him taking part of the burden upon himself. Father Gennady may forget to have lunch and

Opposite: Fr. Gennady Ogryzkov and Fr. Vladimir Rigin, priests of the Church of the Resurrection on Nezhdanova Street, circa 1987.

dinner, but he tirelessly offers his strong shoulder, often to the same person again and again.

Although I already felt that I too wanted to serve in this way, I told myself, “How good it is that I’m a deacon – I am not bound by anything, just as angels are not bound, for a deacon’s service is to stand before the altar, to handle the holy vessels, and to partake of the Divine Mysteries. This means that I have more time for my family, my *matushka*, and my books.” Nevertheless, I pondered over the meaning of the church feasts, the liturgical services, and the means of salvation in an ever-changing world. I was beginning to have things to say.

I poured out my heart in my Russian and Slavonic classes at the seminary. Along with advanced grammar and composition, it was obvious to me that the young men I taught craved a living word about faith, the soul, and family life. So, with the blessing of my seniors, I mixed duty with pleasure by choosing passages from the Holy Fathers as examples. The students thanked me for these informal readings, often addressing me as “*Batiushka*.” When I objected, they would stop for a while and then fall back into the habit.

I try to emphasize to newly-ordained deacons that there is nothing inconsequential in the diaconal ministry. Every detail should be considered: how you walk, how you pronounce the *ektenias*, how you hold and wave the *orarion*. It is all meaningful. I myself was especially impressed by Protodeacon Valentin Asmus, a respected Moscow cleric. He seemed to float rather than walk on the solea; watching him you understood how bodiless angels move about in the heavenly realm. Every word, every petition he uttered was understood clearly due to his distinct pronunciation. The words did not merge into one unintelligible chain of sound, but had “feeling, wit, and emphasis,” and most importantly, in addressing them to God with such clarity, he lifted the prayers and supplications of those present to heaven.

VI. Waiting and Imagining

I’ve already mentioned some peculiarities of our Resurrection Church parish and its parishioners, including a group of ladies of high society that we called “the bishop’s entourage,” because they missed no opportunity to visit the church when Metropolitan Pitirim served. Indeed, like an Old Testament prophet, his bright features, noble patriarchal beard, penetrating glance, and eloquent voice held his listeners spellbound.

At the same time, however, these pious ladies frequently bore an imprint of worldliness – artful makeup, elegant jewelry, and the sophisticated gestures and intonation of the cultured theatre, artistic, and literary circles that existed around our parish. Aware of my philological education and background in theology, these ladies were always willing to talk to the loquacious young deacon. One day, however, one of them struck me dumb. Waving her ring-laden hands, she asked in an emphatic tone, meant to convey her inability to wait any longer, “When, oh, when, Fr. Artemy, will you be ordained a priest so that we can confess to you?”

Taken aback, I shrugged my shoulders and lowered my eyes in self-protection. I could well imagine this lady coming to confess, rubbing her hands together with a triumphant, conquering smile: “So, Batiushka, now you are ours! You will be hearing my confession and it will be long. Very long.”

The lives of modern people are entangled, and the characters of our contemporaries are often complex. Knowing this, I tried to avoid imagining myself as a priest even in thought, and if I lingered over such dreams, I confessed them to my spiritual father. Frequent confession had long become an inner need for me. My favorite priests confessed to one another often and I too briefly cleansed my conscience before each liturgy. I believe this habit to be precious for a cleric, for a purified conscience is closely related to the keen desire to receive Christ’s Holy Mysteries. As we know, such a desire is a sign of wholeness of soul and a disposition to receive the Holy Gifts with reverence.

One day I shared my thoughts with Archimandrite Evlogy (Smirnov) who, after restoring Moscow’s Danilov Monastery, served as the first abbot of the newly re-opened Optina Pustyn, and later was consecrated Metropolitan of Vladimir and Suzdal. A man of prayer, his eyes were warm with love for those around them and quick to share his rich pastoral experience with me.

– “You wanted to ask me something, dear Fr. Artemy?”

– “Batiushka, I am worried about how I will hear the confessions of society women. Some of them look forward to my ordination. They are not simple people, their inner world is a sea of emotion which I will not be able to make sense of, much less cope with.

His answer was quite unexpected:

– “Here is what I can tell you, Fr. Artemy... Your main task in hearing confessions is to determine whether you are speaking to a sane or an insane person.”

– “Father, I am not a psychiatrist, and besides, how can one make such a conclusion in a few moments?” I asked in amazement.

– “Fr. Artemy, let me say it again,” he exclaimed, as if he had not heard my objection, “The most important thing is to see what kind of person you are talking to: normal and sound, or not!”

It did not seem proper to repeat the question a third time, so I changed the subject. Father Evlogy’s answer, though puzzling, remained in my memory, and later I will explain how its meaning was unexpectedly revealed not long after my ordination.

There was also another, stronger reason why I did not dwell on the priesthood. Although the Soviet state was unable to touch the Church’s spiritual essence, it did control some earthly aspects, particularly the appointment of clergy. I knew that state *apparatchiki* rarely allowed anyone with a higher education to be ordained as a priest and that those determined to give themselves to the holy priesthood had to go through labyrinthine channels, such as agreeing to serve only in a remote region, far from Moscow or St. Petersburg. Among the many forbidden books I had read as a student was Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago*, with his description of the state’s “all-hearing ears” alert to any divergent movement in the religious sphere. With the priesthood seemingly out of reach, I humbled myself and tried to keep my mind from wandering in the futile realms of imagination.

However, my students often reopened the wound:

– “Father Artemy, why are you still only a deacon? It is unfair! Half of your students already wear priests’ crosses on their chests.”

At that time in Russia, seminarians were often ordained priests within weeks of their diaconate and my students resolutely continued to address me as “Batiushka.” Although I corrected them time and again, the pain of knowing that this would never happen eventually stifled my energy to protest.

– “You are a batiushka! You will be! You will see for yourself!” they insisted.

“Is this a prophecy or a temptation?” I wondered. Sometimes, if I allowed my thoughts to drift, I even contemplated which feast I would like this impossible ordination to be on: “Pascha, of course! What happiness it would be to be a Paschal priest!”

That fall, while walking near the academy, I met a seminarian I knew well. He was wearing a new priest’s cross over his *podraznik*. Tall and handsome with long flaxen hair and beard, he shone with joy and health.

– “Ah! Accept my congratulations on your ordination! When did it happen?” I asked warmly.

– “Good day, Fr. Artemy! On Pascha! Can you imagine?” And he gave me a broad smile, beaming with joy like child. He looked like a small sun.

I congratulated him sincerely and felt a twinge in my heart, a momentary temptation: “Oh, what happiness the Lord has given him!”

Sometimes I was sure that my superiors had altogether forgotten me. With such a flow of candidates for ordination at the end of each seminary year, how could the rector remember an ordinary deacon, a common teacher of Russian. I drove such thoughts away with an effort of will until I felt peace descend upon my soul.

I loved serving with the monastery brethren in the Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra Dormition Cathedral. Everything was exceptional there – the heart-stirring chanting, the assembly of deacons (so full of reverence and always so friendly) and the huge golden chalice from which the clergy consumed the Holy Gifts. After liturgy I would run to Holy Trinity Cathedral before class to pray to St. Sergius, and in those moments heavenly grace seemed alive in my heart. What more could I wish for? I knew that I would gladly carry the candle of the diaconate to the end of my days.



VII. Saint Nicholas' Winter Feast

The following happened on St. Nicholas Day, 1987, the sixth of December according to the Old Church Calendar. “Cold frost and sunshine...”³

Daily services at Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra usually took place in the large trapeza church, but on the eve of a great feast they were held in all of the lavra's churches. Having stayed with my students after class on the eve of St. Nicholas, I knew that I wouldn't be in time for the service in Moscow, so I decided to remain at the lavra and leave later. Finding a corner in the crowded altar, I watched the monks' graceful gestures and amiable smiles as they prepared for the service. Suddenly, a young seminarian appeared before me. I wondered how he had found me, as I had not told anyone I was staying.

– “Father Artemy, the rector expects you in his study tomorrow after the service,” he said politely.

– “Yes, of course, I will be there.”

Although I was a conscientious teacher and upheld the academy regime, I was nevertheless a bit nervous about meeting with my seniors, particularly the rector, Vladika Alexander, whose composed business-like manner was daunting. At this time, I assisted Fr. Vladislav Tsypin with administrative work for the academy and met with Vladika frequently.

After the vigil I went in search of a phone to tell Matushka that I needed to stay overnight, and during the next morning's liturgy prayed for St. Nicholas' help in my mysterious meeting with Vladika.

After I received Holy Communion, I arrived at the rector's office in a peaceful, though slightly anxious mood, and was immediately ushered into his study. He greeted me on the feast, offered his blessing and a seat, and then returned to his large desk where he continued to write rapidly, giving me time to look around. From his demeanor, I supposed that he wanted to talk to me about academic committee affairs. A minute passed, then two, then five; the bishop seemed almost to have forgotten me. “He has so much to do,” I thought, “and a whole regiment of teachers, assistants, and cler-

³ First words of the poem “Winter Morning” by Alexander Pushkin, known by all Russian schoolchildren.

Opposite: Vladika Alexander (Timofeyev), Archbishop of Dimitrov and Rector of the St. Sergius Theological Academy.

ics. How can he remember that I have served as a deacon for five months, while many of my own students have already been ordained priests? Should I remind him?

I raised my eyes to the icon of the Savior, and suddenly felt that his right hand, fixed in a gesture of blessing was somehow also a warning. I checked myself. "This is not the right thing to be thinking about. Drive it away." I was about to make the sign of the cross over myself but refrained lest I should attract the rector's attention. With an effort of will, I pushed the thought aside.

At that very moment Vladika finished writing, looked at me and asked:

- "Father Artemy, you are still a deacon, are you not?"
- "I am, Vladika, thank you. I have been serving for five months already."
- "Then write a petition to be ordained as a priest!"

Again, I looked at the icons. I was still unsure of the Savior's blessing, but from St. Nicholas I was reminded of my long-ago request: "Give me evidence so clear that there will not be a shadow of doubt." Now he seemed to say, "Your desire is fulfilled on my feast day.... be careful not to miss the movements of God's Providence in your life."

Uncertain how to proceed, I asked the bishop:

- "How do I write the petition, Vladika?"
- "With your hand," he said shortly. "Just write it with your right hand."

Silent for a moment, he added:

- "You had better go to the secretariat. They will show you how to do it properly. Greetings to you again on the feast, and I will be waiting for you tomorrow to resume the committee work with Fr. Vladislav."

I did not need further urging. I felt that the Lord himself was speaking through the bishop. With a trembling hand I wrote out the petition using the sample they gave me in the office. Nothing depended on me any longer.

VIII. The News

I continued my service as a deacon. It was late December, and now on the feast day of the beloved St. Spyridon of Tremithus, Fr. Vladimir Rigin and I were serving liturgy in Resurrection Church. In front of the solea, to the right of the central altar, is a very old icon of St. Spyridon with a portion of his relics. Except for the street that still bears his name, this is all that is left of the famous Church of St. Spyridon, destroyed during the communist years.

It was a weekday with very few people present. Father Vladimir finished the proskomedia and told me that I would be giving the sermon that day. I incensed the altar, then came out onto the solea, thinking over St. Spyridon's life.

I was suddenly surprised to see my mother, Marina, standing close to the solea. I could see that she wanted to say something, so as soon as I had a moment, I went to speak to her.

– “Father Artemy, they called from the academy to say that you will be ordained by the rector on Nativity night in the Church of the Protection of the Mother of God.”

This was the most important news I had ever received in my life, and the fact that it was my mother who brought it made it still more blessed! I could not but share the happy news with Fr. Vladimir. He smiled, grasping my shoulders as a spontaneous sign of approval.

The sermon went well. Leaving the church on that frosty sunny morning I thought of St. Spyridon and St. Nicholas who had met at the First Ecumenical Council and, I supposed, were great friends. They are often depicted standing side by side on church icons, their feast days are close (December 19 and 25) and they are very much alike in their love and graceful simplicity.

Studies were over in the seminary by this time and I decided to arrive at the academy right before the service on the Eve of Nativity. The only thing left was to wait and pray.

IX. The Priesthood

Clad in a snow-white sticharion, I was acutely aware that this was my last service as a deacon. The academy church, packed to capacity, had all three seminary choirs singing. By local tradition the evening service was celebrated between five and eight o'clock, with the Holy Liturgy beginning at midnight. I began the service as one of the deacons, and then, at the minor entrance when the clergy came out of the altar, the protodeacon raised the gold-covered Gospel before the Royal Doors and in his powerful bass (reminiscent of the ram horns of Jericho) intoned: "From the womb before the morning-star have I begotten Thee.... The Lord hath sworn and will not repent: Thou art a priest forever, after the order of Melchisedek."

I knew, of course, that this prophecy of King David foretold the coming of the Son of God, the true High Priest, yet I could not help marveling at how in tune these words were with the thoughts and feelings that overflowed within me.

However, real life is not a chocolate box and it would be wrong to leave things out because they don't quite fit the high tone of an ordination story. By the end of the vespers, nervous anxiety had seized me from a source I could not identify, and my soul was filled with doubt: "How can you stand here, about to be ordained, knowing that you are unworthy? Just imagine what awaits you and what disgrace this could lead to!" I could not disagree, but was at a complete loss about what to do. It was too late to go to my spiritual father, and asking one of the priests for confession did not seem proper because it would be too hard to explain. I had set out and there was no turning back.

Such was my perplexity in the hours preceding the midnight liturgy. Deep in my conscience I knew that I was rooting around in my sins, tortured by the evil one because of my lack of trust in God's holy and perfect will.

Finally, midnight arrived and the service began... "Christ is born, glorify Him. Christ is from heaven, receive ye Him!" I stopped thinking of myself and attended to the service so as not to make a mistake.

The hour finally came. The priest who led me around the altar was, to my great joy, Archimandrite Evlogy (Smirnov). I had first met this grace-filled pastor years earlier as a student guard for St. Elijah Church when he rang the doorbell late one evening asking to venerate the miracle-working icon of the Mother of God. Having prayed alone before the icon, he returned, ven-

erating other icons along the way. I stood by the counter with the keys in my hand watching him. His prayerful state had somehow communicated itself to me, and after asking where I studied, he said with a deep sigh: “There is no greater happiness than to commit oneself to serving God’s Church.”

That long-forgotten scene came back to me now, as I, on my knees, bent my head down to the altar. Again, as in my deacon’s ordination half a year before, Bishop Alexander laid his hands on my head as he invoked the Holy Spirit. I listened with closed eyes, asking: “Merciful God, please do not allow any of the immortal souls entrusted to me by Thy mercy to perish, but may each one be saved by Thy omnipotent grace. And may my priesthood not lead me to condemnation.”

“Axios!” exclaimed the bishop. Then he put the epitrachelion, the cuffs, the phelonion, and the cross on me, and I became a priest! The next thing was to go to each of the serving priests, from the oldest to the newest ordained, to share the traditional threefold liturgical “kiss of peace.” Hesitantly, I crossed the altar, my eyes on the priest’s cross on my chest with its reverse inscription: “Be an example for the faithful in word, life, love, spirit, faith, and purity.”

The first to approach me was my sponsor-guardian Archimandrite Evlogy. He opened his arms wide to embrace me with words that rushed to my heart: “Father Artemy, mind you, Nativity is a minor Pascha!” My dear friends and readers, I had never told anyone of my wish to be ordained as a priest on Pascha, so how did Fr. Evlogy know? He didn’t, I think. God Himself, knowing our innermost desires, put such words in his heart.

“What did you feel in those first moments after you were ordained?” you may ask. I distinctly remember feeling in my heart: “That which was meant to be has happened!” A ship had been fashioned plank by plank, nail by nail, and now is launched. The sails have unfurled and we are at sea. Where will the voyage take us?”

After the transformation of the Holy Gifts, I was again led to the bishop, who ordered me to bow before the altar, my hands stretched out cross-wise. “Receive this pledge, Priest Artemy, for which you will be judged on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” With these words he placed in my hands a piece of the Holy Lamb with the name of Jesus Christ imprinted on it, adding: “Say Psalm 50 quietly: *Have mercy on me, O God, according to Thy great mercy; and according to the multitude of thy compassions, blot out my transgression....*”

Watching with awe as the Life-giving Body of Christ was placed in my hands, I obediently said the words of the psalm like the prodigal son returning to his Father's house: *And the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let us have a feast and celebrate...."*

What I have related is only a brief description of what passes through the mind and heart of a newborn servant in the Lord's altar, a shepherd of Christ's sheep. The great bounty and mercy given by the Lord at a priest's ordination settles deep within the heart, to be explored until the end of one's life.

X. After the Nativity Liturgy

Traditionally, after the dismissal, a newly ordained priest comes out of the royal gates to hold the cross for those in church to venerate. I had looked forward to this moment for there were many relatives and friends at my ordination, but as it drew near my joyous expectation was mixed with the sudden thought, "But the parishioners will also be kissing my hand, and with so many young women, what will happen to me?" I do not have to tell you how difficult the struggle against the flesh is. Being chaste requires constant attention and one incautious touch can set us aflame. Carnal temptations are unknown only to babies and to very old people. As St. Ignaty Bryanchaninov wrote, "Presumption can ruin all of the virtues gained."

However, as I went out onto the solea to face the human sea, I could not but smile as hundreds of people, their eyes full of joy, came up to me one by one to venerate the cross. Finally, the girls from the lavra's singing school where I taught Church Slavonic approached. And what happened? My hand seemed to be made of marble! I did not feel a single urge and the reality turned out to be different from what I expected. That was how I first felt the grace of priesthood making the priest a new person and the Lord's strength manifesting through an imperfect pastor.

When there were still many people in line, several men led a middle-aged woman with a strangely dull expression in her eyes up to venerate. Half a meter away from the cross, her whole body began to shake and she shrank away as if pushed back by an unknown force. Those with her seemed to anticipate this, because they simply took hold of her and led her to the cross

Opposite: Priest Artemy Vladimorov on the day of his ordination: Nativity, Dec. 25/Jan. 7, 1988.





again. I understood the matter quickly and again held out the cross, but this time she went completely limp and fell to the floor. She immediately regained consciousness, rose with her relatives' help, and moved towards me on her own. I quickly put the cross up to her lips. Upon touching it, she fainted again into the men's arms, who revived her and led her away. Anything can happen in spiritual life, and I thought about the power and grace that Christ gives to priests at ordination, and which had allowed me to stay calm.

After the all-night service, I took my wife and her mother over to the seminary dining room. Elena's mother, here for the first time, gazed wide-eyed at the academy territory. Early that morning I saw them off on the train to Moscow, for I was to stay at the lavra for a week to serve daily in the Church of the Protection of the Mother of God where I had been ordained.

After the morning liturgy I went to rest. I took the priest's cross from around my neck and, as I put it on the small table by the bed, I kissed it where the engraving read: "Be an example for the faithful in word, life, and love." My mind returned to the events of the night, with Archimandrite Evlogy's striking words ringing in my ears: "Father Artemy, Nativity is a minor Pascha!" As I closed my eyes, the morning sun flashed across my priest's cross – the cross that I would put on every day for the rest of my life. ✦

Opposite: Fr. Artemy and Matushka Elena Vladimirov a few months after his ordination to the priesthood.