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THE EARLY PASTORAL YEARS: 1988-2000

I. A First Experience of Pastoral Care

I would like to share with you an extraordinary experience; one of my first attempts at pastoral care.

One day, as I was just beginning to settle into the duties of a parish priest, a tall stout woman with a somewhat heavy gaze came up to me. She looked at me unblinkingly, with a demanding expression on her face.

– “Father Artemy,” she began straight away, “Do you remember? It has already been two months and I’m still waiting for you to fulfill your promise!”

– “Excuse me, what exactly did I promise?” I asked, a little embarrassed by her vigor.

– “How do you not remember? It was the book by St. Theophan the Recluse: *What is Spiritual Life and How to Be Attuned to It*.

I have to remind the reader that in the late 1980s there was real spiritual hunger for samizdat books by the Church Fathers, which were passed from one person to another.⁴

– “Of course, I will fulfill my promise, although I admit that I had forgotten. And what is your name?”

⁴ Samizdat (literally “self-publishing”): Books that were banned in the Soviet times were printed secretly in small batches, or re-typed and even copied by hand.

Opposite: Fr. Artemy Vladimirov in front of the Icon of the Mother of God “In Search of the Lost,” in the Church of the Resurrection, Nezhdanova Street, Moscow. Circa 1990.

– “It’s about time you remembered my name, Batiushka. I am Margarita.”⁵

– “I will certainly bring you the book later this week, I just don’t have it with me.”

– “That’s fine, but I need it today. Now, in fact.” Margarita’s voice was firm; her tone did not allow for any objection. I was taken aback.

– “Well, I don’t know how we can arrange it. Let’s wait a bit.”

– “Let’s not! Are you going home after the service? Good, I will go with you.”

Confronted with an accomplished fact, I asked the persistent and spiritually hungry Margarita to wait while I finished my work.

– “I’ll wait, but don’t take too long.”

About three quarters of an hour later, she and I were walking towards the Boulevard Ring and I was telling her of the spiritual heritage of St. Theophan the Recluse. The bus carried us rather quickly to Ostozhenka Street and from Ostozhenka it was a few minutes’ walk to our flat on 2nd-Obydensky Pereulok. My mother welcomed us at the door.

– “Father Artemy, I’m glad to see you. How was the service?”

At this point, mother’s attention was drawn to the imposing lady who stood at my side in stony silence.

– “Do we have a guest? Good day, my name is Marina Pavlovna. I am Fr. Artemy’s mother.”

– “And I am Margarita, his spiritual daughter.”

Such words shocked me a little, but I dared not comment on them. Then mother addressed Margarita with the cordiality characteristic of well-mannered Russian people:

⁵ The name has been changed.

– “It’s nice to meet you, but why are you standing outside? Please come in.”

– “Mom, we’ll just be a minute. I’ve invited Margarita to give her a book that I promised.”

Looking around, our guest cast a glance down the long corridor and asked, “May I use the bathroom?” “Yes, of course, it’s there at the end of the hall,” mother replied readily. “And I will look for the book,” I said. “It must be somewhere on the bookshelf.” With those words, I went to my room.

A few minutes later, having found the book, I returned to where mother was waiting. “And where is Margarita?” I asked. “She is washing her hands.” “Alright.”

We stood there waiting for a moment or two. It was taking longer than expected. “Did Margarita find the bathroom?” I asked mother. “Yes, I saw her go in.”

I decided to check if everything was alright and went to the door. Inside, I heard water splashing, as if someone was taking a shower.

– “Margarita, is everything alright with you? Do you need help?”

– “I do, Fr. Artemy. Ask Marina Pavlovna to bring me her dressing gown. I’ve washed my hair and need to dry it. Let her also bring a clean towel.”

I was stunned. Without saying a word to Margarita about her praiseworthy pursuit of cleanliness, I returned to where mother stood, my eyes filled with horror. Mother was at a loss for a moment, as well; then she took all that was needed to the bathroom. Some minutes later my “spiritual daughter” emerged from the bathroom with a pink face, wearing mother’s dressing gown and the towel wrapped round her head like a turban. Smiling, she said:

– “So, Batiushka, you managed to find that book about how to get in tune with spiritual life? Now, who was the author, again?”

II. Oleg's Dilemma

The priesthood is a ministry of love, which is scarce in this cold and hungry world. Anyone will agree that by no means should a priest be hard-hearted and that his vocation is incompatible with neglect or callousness. For our Lord, who showers his abundant grace upon the priesthood, is not like this.

How often a dedicated young priest wants to help those who come to him for the first time, whatever the cost. The very fact that a request is addressed to us takes us hostage. We feel obliged to do our best to solve the problem because this person who stands in front of us is truly in need. This zeal to help is a reflection of God's love, it teaches a young priest to sacrifice himself for those he was ordained to serve. Truly, some people have nowhere else to turn.

As the years pass, experience also teaches us that in taking our neighbor's burden upon our shoulders we should not exceed a good measure, nor should we see the one in need as helpless. The art of striking a happy medium is not achieved at once, for life does not always fit the Procrustean bed of our assumptions.

One evening, long after the church service in Nezhdanova Street ended, I was still hearing confessions late into the night when I noticed an unknown man of about forty waiting – tall, unshaven, with expressive, kind and lively eyes. I could tell by his look that he was in need of something, but hesitant to approach.

– “How can I serve you?”

I liked to use these words because to me they seemed the most appropriate way for a priest to reach out to someone unknown – for they reflect a priest's attitude to life, our *modus vivendi*. Haltingly, he began his first confession, right from childhood. It was deep, with correct analysis and judgement and without any attempts to justify himself. I understood that he had prepared himself to talk to a priest.

About forty minutes passed. Oleg (that was his name) spoke at length, but with such feeling that I did not dare urge him to go faster. At 1 a.m., I finally interrupted him.

Opposite: Fr. Artemy and Resurrection Church parishioner.



– Excuse me, the subway is closing soon, I need to go. May we continue tomorrow?

– With pleasure, Batiushka, but I have nowhere to go. I’m just passing through Moscow.

What was I to do? I suggested that we should finish the confession at my family’s flat in 2nd-Obydensky Pereulok, and early next morning return for Divine Liturgy. Fortunately, there was a spare room and mother was at the dacha. He willingly agreed, apologizing for the inconvenience this would cause.

We finished the confession at 3 a.m. in my parents’ flat. Oleg was happy.

– “Batiushka, such a burden has fallen off my shoulders! My heart is singing.”

I made his bed, gave him all that he needed and went to sleep. In the morning Oleg, who had just been released from prison, received Holy Communion for the first time. I saw tears of gratitude on his face for the mercy the Lord had shown him. I too was happy.

– “Batiushka, I am so grateful to you for everything,” he said with a bright smile. “I’m going now to Vladimir region, to my relatives. I’m going to begin a new life with a clear conscience, thank God!”

– “Maybe you need help to make your way there?”

– “I will not refuse your help. They release people from prison with only a little money...”

I put money in his hand, and some apples and bread from the church table where people leave food for the church trapeza in memory of the reposed. We parted, pleased with each other.

A week later, he appeared again at the evening service.

– “What has happened?”

– “Can you imagine, Batiushka, my relatives don’t want me there. We live in such a cruel world. They told me to go back where I came from. Do I have to go back to the life I once led?”

- “No, God forbid! Do you not have any other relatives or friends?”
- “I have a friend from the old days, she lives in the Bryansk region. I called her and she said “Come, we will live a godly life here.”
- “You must have a church wedding!”
- “Yes, I know. I have serious intentions.”

I again supplied him with money, wishing him happiness.

- “I will never forget your kindness, Father Artemy.”

Two weeks later, he appeared again. Oleg looked thinner now and his face was covered with more prominent stubble. Reacting to my surprise as I greeted him, he lowered his eyes.

- “I’m in despair, Batiushka. She deceived me. She played with me and then drove me away. She said I was a jailbird and promised to put me back in prison if I didn’t leave.”

At that moment I had to leave to serve a baptism.

- “Oleg, dear, I don’t know what more I can do for you...”
- “Batiushka, I can no longer look you in the eye. I have only one more chance...”
- “Do you mean your old connections?!”
- “No, God forbid! I met a family at the railway station. They are arranging a farming settlement in Tver Region and they need workers. They’ve promised me board and lodging.”
- “This is wonderful! Here is all the money I have, take it. I have to serve a baptism – but I am afraid I cannot subsidize you any further.”
- “Batiushka, I know! I want to sink through the floor in shame.”
- “Well, go with God! Try to settle in Tver. Living and working in the countryside is a great thing.”

So, we parted again. He did not return to our church, and assuming that all had turned out rather well for him, my meetings with Oleg soon became a memory.

Three months later, however, someone brought a hand-written note to the altar. It was from Oleg, who was in pre-trial detention in Moscow's Butyrskaya Prison. He begged me in Christ's name to come visit him, insisting that he needed nothing but a blessing. The note also contained the address and telephone numbers of the prison administration.

Priests know well the twenty-fifth chapter of St. Mathew's Gospel with the parable of the Last Judgement and the need for works of mercy, so the next day I called and they permitted me to visit Oleg.

So, here I was in Butyrskaya Prison – my first visit to a correctional institution. I waited in the lobby next to a beautiful young woman who glanced at me from time to time and then dared to ask:

– “Are you a priest?”

– “Yes, is there anything I can do for you?”

Crying, she told me her sad story.

– “My husband is a military man. We love each other very much, and he is an absolutely honest man. He was falsely charged with stealing when he was in charge of military warehouses from which things were taken. Batiushka, I know my husband. It is easier for him to give away his own things than to steal those belonging to other people. He was made a scapegoat by his commanding officer to settle the matter.”

– “In this case you need a lawyer!”

– “We have a lawyer and have already paid him, but, you understand, everything was decided beforehand. The proceedings have been dragging on for half a year. I cannot bear to see my husband put in prison. He is not guilty!”

At that point, we were invited into the meeting room, which was divided into two parts by a transparent plastic wall. Each visitor was to take a seat on a chair equipped with an intercom system for speaking to the detained person.

The young woman's husband appeared, a handsome young man with a military bearing. It was not her first visit. They stood facing each other, paying no attention to those around them, with their palms pressed together on the plastic wall. My heart shrank and I looked away.

My Oleg finally came into the room, thin, and with the same expressive eyes as before.

– “Batiushka...”

There was a pause.

– “Oleg, tell me everything, just as it happened.”

– “Batiushka, I... I deceived you. I didn't go anywhere.”

– “Yes, I see. What happened?”

– “Please forgive me!”

– “I forgive you and God will forgive you, my dear – things do happen. God knows everything. It is important to be sincere with a priest, though.”

– “The thing is, Fr. Artemy, I love champagne, only champagne. I bought it in Tverskaya Street. With your money.”

– “The money was not mine; it belonged to the church.”

– “Yes, and this is why I am here again. God has punished me. The champagne made me dizzy. I lost any sense of reality and failed to cope with freedom.”

I assured him that God would accept him as He had many times before for every human being is weak and no one is proof against falling. Just take care that you no longer allow yourself to tell falsehoods. Let prayer always accompany you; God is always near.”

I never saw Oleg nor the spouse of the wrongfully charged military man again. A quarter of a century has passed since that day and I know I will meet them again, if not here on earth, then at God's throne.

III. Matushka Evdokia

I have a bitter-sweet feeling in writing about this amazing Russian soul who passed away long ago; perhaps writing about her will lessen the regret I still feel over my relations with such a kind person.

I did not just make friends with her – we were knit together spiritually in our service at God’s altar, although we were vastly different in age, background, and education. Matushka Evdokia (Kabatchikova) was seventy-five at the time I met her. Like many nuns tonsured after World War II, she had dedicated her life to serving in a parish. Resurrection Church, where I also served, became her convent, her God-given obedience. She never spoke much about her own life, but the adage, “It’s better to do well than to say well,” was certainly about her.

As a young woman she had had a spiritual father, a Priest Sergei, whom she always mentioned with awe as a great starets. At home she had beautiful icons with gilded and silver rizas, a blessing from her spiritual father, and once she gave me a pre-revolutionary edition of the priest’s prayerbook that had belonged to him. Although I was a young priest, I understood the meaning of the gift and the trust she placed in me.

A small woman with plain, typically Russian features, Matushka wore a dark podraznik, a headscarf, and a leather belt that she never parted with. I never saw her in a klobuk. Her close-set eyes watched you with attention, as if she was studying you. She had seen much in her long years of service and, knowing the reality of church life, she also knew how to hide her inner life from others.

Her outward life was in plain sight. She was in church from morning until night with almost no days off, in charge of all that was needed: altar preparation; caring for the analogions and covers, the vestments and sacristy; providing prosphora and wine for the liturgy – that is, everything pertaining to daily church practices. She helped with baptismal services: bringing and removing the buckets of water when there were no men around; processing around the baptismal font with the newly-enlightened children of God singing, “You who have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ...,” and handing out their white garments. For her it was not work, not even service, but her life.

I particularly liked watching her during the Divine Liturgy as she read the Epistles aloud. Her voice, usually a little sharp, changed as she read, acquir-

ing depth and substance. She read confidently in Church Slavonic, feeling the meaning of the text.

Having finished reading, Matushka Evdokia would close the book solemnly, raise it high above her head as deacons do, and carry it to the altar. In those moments her inner self was revealed: she seemed to have grown wings and turned into a prophetic bird, though once she left the altar she became her everyday self; an agile, efficient nun.

She received Holy Communion often, almost at every liturgy, and her confessions were quite common for the people of her generation. I would often myself enumerate for her the sins people commit who serve in the altar – the things God gave me to say.

– Well, Matushka, let us repent... We have perhaps lacked the spirit of prayer and grumbled, or were sometimes angry or annoyed, have over-eaten, and read less of the prayer rule than we should have....

– It is as you say, Batiushka. I repent, I repent, I repent. Please forgive my sinful soul!

Nevertheless, her confession was never formal. Each time I saw tears in her eyes, while, as for me, I almost never had tears at confession.

By and by, Matushka became disposed to me and modestly and unobtrusively took me under her wing. We became friends of one heart and mind. I visited her at home once with the director of our church choir, a young woman for whom Matushka was like a relative. She met us at the door, blushing with joy; her bright eyes warm with welcome. Serving slices of smoked salmon and cheese, she opened a small bottle of cognac. After a drink or two, our conversation became heartfelt, with kind jokes and laughter. It seemed to me that she probably missed such warm family-like communication. We are all human.

Then, in 1991 when I was appointed protopriest of the newly-reopened Church of All Saints in Krasnoye Selo, Matushka asked the starosta to give me a few sets of worn-out priests' and deacons' vestments, which we made good use of in the newly-opened church.

My new parish duties occupied me entirely and I visited the church in Nezhdanova Street less and less often. After several years I turned up on the church's feast day and, with a heavy heart, saw that Matushka had changed towards me. She was polite and estranged. "Why did I hurt her feelings? It

is me, not her who is to blame.” I tried to explain my rare visits, asking her forgiveness, and although Matushka Evdokia said she had forgiven me, I felt that she remained inwardly distant. Threads had broken that had once tied her heart to mine. Twice afterwards, I tried to restore our relations, but I did not succeed.

As time went by, Matushka became weaker and found it difficult to get to her beloved church. I suggested that she stay in our parish old folk’s home for some time, living on the church grounds as in a monastery, but each time she refused. “No, I’m here in my cell, I pray to God. I have no need to move.” Her neighbors must have signed a mutually-beneficial agreement with her, as often happened with elderly people who, lacking close relatives, can no longer take care of themselves. Friends or neighbors who know them well, who have often lived with them in the same building for decades, sign an agreement to care for them in their declining years, for which they will receive their flat after their repose.

The last time I saw Matushka stands out clearly in my mind’s eye. I visited her at home. Old and small, she sat on her untidy bed in a worn-out gown. Her liveliness and effervescence had disappeared and she sat staring fixedly ahead of her. I had the impression that she had retired into herself and, like a little hedgehog, had curled up into a prickly ball. She lived now in a world of her own, unconnected to the reality around her, and refused to accept any help: “No, I don’t need anything, I’ve got all I want, thank you very much. I’m grateful to God for everything!” Those words, though quite fitting a hermit, saddened me.

Blessing Matushka, I kissed her forehead, aware that I would probably not see her again. Unfortunately, they did not inform me of her repose. The neighbors must have kept it a secret, anxious to ensure that they received her flat.

It was then that I understood my mistake to the full. “Never part with those you love...” as the poem reads. I should have clung to our friendship without such a long lapse in communication. Yes, of course, I had mountains of work in reconstructing an entire church territory and pastoring hundreds of people. But what are those mountains compared to the luxury of friendship and human communication? What is more precious under heaven than the unity of souls warmed by mutual openness and love?

May the Lord accept my confession as I set down these lines, and may my readers offer a prayer for the repose of Nun Evdokia who, as I believe, has

forgiven me. I also believe that she, now young and beautiful, and together again with her spiritual father, glorifies the One Whom she came to love more than anything on earth, our Lord Jesus Christ.

IV. Archimandrite Ioann Krestiankin

God first brought me to Holy Dormition/Pskov Caves Monastery in the early 1980s, where I met Fr. Ioann (Krestiankin) who was “bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh” of the Russian people. His humility, truth and love drew many to him, and it was not easy to obtain an appointment because of the great numbers who wanted to see him. I was fortunate enough to meet him several times, both before and after my ordination.

It was a great consolation to watch Fr. Ioann, even from a distance. I remember serving with him once in the altar of an old monastery. Although already white-haired, he still seemed a child in Christ. His movements in the altar were unhurried and calm, a witness to his on-going prayer. Extracting particles from the prosphora as he prayed for the living and reposed, he would occasionally linger over a piece, evidently asking the Savior for special help for that particular soul before putting the particle on the plate. This was living prayer, as opposed to the almost mechanical *proskomedìa* that we ordinary priests see as normal, hardly different from other pastoral tasks. But for Fr. Ioann it seemed everything was alive, both the altar table and the chalice that he kissed with reverence after the remembrance prayers. I watched as he transferred the many particles from the plate onto the disks, pushing them off carefully with his finger as if contemplating each of the souls represented there. I was moved by his natural, or perhaps God-given, ability to contemplate the unseen in visible things and to put a portion of his soul into every outward action.

As the deacon began reading the Gospel passage of the day, Fr. Ioann went to stand beside the Royal Doors with his head bent and his hand to his ear, that he might hear better. With half-closed eyes he nodded in time to the words chanted by the deacon. Immersed in the service, he paid no attention to those around him, but I suspect I may not have been the only one secretly watching him at such moments.

On the following day, I had the good fortune to glance into the altar of the magnificent monastery church of St. Michael the Archangel, only to see Batiushka sitting there alone! There was no one inside, not even a cell-attendant



Archimandrite Ioann Krestiankin with novices of Pskov Caves Lavra.

to ward off untimely suppliants like myself. My first thought was that this was my chance to talk with him, and I started with joy like a lucky hunter who stumbles across a choice quarry in a thicket.

He sat by the altar window with a prayer-book, and although I felt that he saw me out of the corner of his eye, he made no sign and went on reading. His appearance reminded me of the kind, wise animal physician, Dr. Aybolit, from the famous storybook that all Russian children love. A natural courtesy kept me from entering the altar, but I waited patiently in case he decided to call me over. A minute passed, and then another as he continued turning the pages with his thumb and crippled index finger, broken by torturers in the gulag camps. Batiushka did not call me to him that day, but that small episode was a tremendous example for me of undistracted prayer.

Later, after I was ordained, I was there for one of the monastery's festal services, and we visiting priests were given the job of commemorating the large number of names submitted by the faithful by extracting particles from the ever-growing mountain of prosphora that was continually carried in, in large boxes. At one point, Fr. Alexander, the monastery confessor, approached to strictly reprimand me for a mistake: I had not attended closely to the imprint

of an icon of the Mother of God on one of the small prosphora, and had extracted a small particle from the edge of the image. The mistake frightened me. All of a sudden Fr. Ioann appeared. I shook like a young rabbit, but he hugged me, smiling gently. "That's fine, that's fine, Fr. Artemy. Just be more careful next time. Even small things are important."

After the service, Fr. Ioann allowed me to join him for a talk. Touching my hand like a loving mother would reach out to her child, at one moment he suddenly exclaimed with a warm smile, "No, no, don't you even think of 'Kronstadting!' Ardent young priests try to be ascetic by turning away from their matushkas, as if this is piety. Don't you do it! Be very considerate of your wife. Cherish her as the apple of your eye."

"However," he suddenly added with a keen look, "Reading the prayers before Holy Communion is a must. They contain holy thoughts and feelings that are very beneficial for a priest preparing to serve liturgy." Somehow Fr. Ioann knew that I often shortened the prayer rule, justifying myself with my heavy workload.

My wife and I also visited Fr. Ioann together in his cell. He usually received guests right before they were to leave the monastery, and you were notified of the time of the meeting by his strict elderly cell-attendant, a pious laywoman named Tatiana. When he spoke to us, we always felt that we were his nearest and dearest ones, while in reality, all of Orthodox Russia clamored to talk to him. Answering our questions, Fr. Ioann sometimes recalled his childhood in the cities of Orel and Elets where the old customs were kept. He also told us of his spiritual mentors, whose virtues shone forth in the years before the gathering storm of revolution. His richly-intoned speech, unique in its imagery and expressiveness, and his kind heart frequently prompted him to embrace us or to take our hands into his own warm palms. In Fr. Ioann's presence, we were protected from the tumult of the world.

Batiushka was an inexhaustible treasury of humor, which he used instead of the strict practice of "exposure" of some guides: "Yes, Father Artemy will arrive at the parish entrusted to him by His Holiness, the Patriarch, where good faithful women will greet the young priest with oh's and ah's of delight. Matushka, keep your eyes open! Some of these women can turn a poor priest's head with endless compliments. The consequences, however, can be serious." Batiushka looked into the distance, perhaps thinking of troubled priests' families he had known.

My pride would not let me bear this calmly.

– “Batiushka, I am not some mindless profligate!” I exclaimed in ill-hidden hurt.

– “God forbid! God forbid!” Fr. Ioann threw up his hands, his face again lit from inside with a bright smile. “But one needs to be careful, and what is even more important – to lay all of these things on the Lord and trust in his mercy. He will care for us.”

Another time, I came to the monastery without matushka and went to Fr. Ioann’s cell to ask for a talk. This time Tatiana half-opened the door to say that for some reason Batiushka was unable to see me, but to wait a bit as he wanted to give me a present through her.

I had three special desires at that time, a shortened epitachelion suitable for services in hospitals and other public places that would not attract anyone’s attention; a prayer rope with one hundred knots, a rarity at that period; and a newly-published book on the interpretation of the Gospel of St. John by St. Theophylact the Bulgarian that was nearly impossible to find.

The parcel that Fr. Ioann gave to Tatiana for me contained those very three things: a small spring-green epitachelion, a long prayer rope, and the book I so wanted. I was stunned. This was not a coincidence but a miracle, and only God and myself knew about it!

I still have the epitachelion and this old worn-out stole links the two centuries. For me it is a holy object, like a baton passed on by a giant of the spirit – Archimandrite Ioann Krestiankin who has left us for eternity.

V. Archimandrite Pavel (Gruzdev)

Archimandrite Pavel passed away long ago and now stands in front of his Lord whom he served faithfully and joyously here on earth. Like Fr. Ioann Krestiankin, he helped edify many priests and laymen. Father Pavel’s long life was absolutely unique and not long after my ordination I was blessed to visit him with a ‘squadron’ of Moscow priests.

After serving a long, hard term in a Soviet labor camp, he had settled in a remote place in the Yaroslavl Diocese in an old church dedicated to the Icon of the Mother of God “Meet It Is.” The church stood on a high bank of the Volga River, so dilapidated that one of its domes had fallen in.

Opposite: Arch. Pavel Gruzdev.



Traveling a long way on this warm summer morning to celebrate the church's feast-day, we arrived a little late, the church already full of villagers. Batiushka, who was almost totally blind by this time, greeted us simply and blessed us to go to the side altar to robe for liturgy. The vestments were stored in an old cracked chest dating back to pre-revolutionary years and the epitrachelions, epigonations, belts, cuffs and deacons' orarions were all jumbled together in huge drawers without any order, for the old priest had no assistants to help him care for the church items. It reminded me of a street bazaar where customers pull things they like out of immense piles of clothes. None of us priests received a whole set of the same color and I thought of Joseph in the Bible with his coat of many colors, and how for the Holy Fathers it signified the diversity and multitude of spiritual gifts.

Notably, there were twelve of us standing at the altar table round Fr. Pavel and we felt ourselves as young disciples facing this seasoned old warrior whose spirit had not been broken by the hardest trials of the twentieth century. I remember his face and eyes that seemed to look into eternity. Standing before the altar always reveals the order of a priest's soul. By subtle signs – the expression of the eyes, the bearing, the tone of voice – we quickly feel our brother's spiritual state. "Heart sends word to heart..."

Standing next to the venerable archimandrite, I felt the presence of the Lord Himself. During the Eucharistic Canon and the consecration that followed, Batiushka could hardly hold back his tears, and it was moving to see this almost blind, frail old priest being helped up to the altar to receive the Holy Blood from a big silver chalice.

I had never in my life heard a sermon like the one Fr. Pavel gave after liturgy. Instead of the habitual "Brothers and Sisters," he addressed his parishioners: "My own! My dearly beloved guys and gals!" There was so much simplicity and unfeigned love in his words that everyone beamed. Avoiding preachy admonitions, he used funny improvised sayings, such as: "Plant potatoes in the field and pray for them to yield," or "Put mushrooms on the table and priests' visits will be able."

Every person in the church was Fr. Pavel's child. Tough villagers, hardened by heavy toil, were like young children clinging to their father who understood and shared their everyday needs, joys, and sorrows.

After the service, Fr. Pavel sat resting in a simple arm-chair while we put away the vestments and tidied the altar before trapeza. As the priests came up to him one by one, he would grab hold of our cheeks with both hands,

holding one's face close to him, pull another's hair, or push someone off lovingly, saying: "Away with you, fluffy one..." He pronounced our names in a simple rustic manner, with the diminutive "k": San'ka, Mit'ka, Arkashka....

It was said that our well-known, pious and humble Fr. Arkady Shatov and his matushka, Sofia, received a larger apartment after Fr. Pavel prayed aloud: "Lord, give that Arkashka and Son'ka a spacious flat, and make sure it's with parquet floors so that they keep up with the neighbors..." There was nothing inappropriate or irreverent in this. It was the daring of a man of prayer who had stood for truth *sans peur et sans reproche* for decades, and had shed his blood to attract God's grace.

Father Pavel was in high spirits, a Paschal mood during trapeza. Hieromonk Evstafy from the Lavra attended to his needs like a loving son, putting small helpings of tasty food on Batiushka's plate while he amused us by telling jokes, and even humorous stories from his life in the camps.

Suddenly, I found myself profoundly shocked as bawdy, ribald words began pouring forth from his lips. Like the other priests, I was unable to choke back my laughter, so completely unexpected were the taboo phrases. Then Batiushka urged an elderly choir member to drink a glass of vodka and eat a huge, pickled cucumber, which took her considerable effort. As she worked away at it, he encouraged her by saying that one should always be prepared for trials. I found this hard to interpret within the usual framework of Orthodox piety, though I already knew that Church life did not always fit the Procrustean bed of my schoolboy notions.

On our way home, I had no desire to question my brother-priests – each of us had obviously received a spiritual impulse in meeting this luminary of the faith, who was now living his last days in the century that had changed the face of the universe, and especially of our motherland. Drowsy after swimming in the Volga, lulled by the warm summer evening, I fell asleep in the back seat of the car, recalling the miraculous Divine Liturgy and the other words so gracefully and powerfully uttered by the blind archimandrite: "Take this, and eat of it, for this is My Body... *Drink* of this, all of you; this is *My Blood*..."

Later I read that Blessed Maria of Diveyevo, a pre-revolutionary Fool-for-Christ, also once shocked a learned hieromonk of the theological academy when he came to visit. Having answered his questions, she suddenly broke into horrific and obscene swearing. Later, after the fall of the monarchy, waves of cruel satanic persecution rolled over the Russian Church and the theo-

gian (now a bishop) was arrested for his pastoral work and served his prison term in a camp at almost the exact place where he had spoken to Blessed Maria! He particularly remembered her through the long days and nights as he endured the criminals' swearing and mocking of the religious prisoners.

Memoirs have been written about Fr. Pavel Gruzdev that record his many-sided image, a personality that seemed to unite impossible contradictions, yet bore witness to his genuine, otherworldly love for God and man.

VI. A Sacramental Marriage

I continued serving at the Resurrection Church on Nezhdanova Street, and like most priests I was often asked to visit the sick at home, that they might confess and receive Holy Communion.

One day, an Orthodox woman asked me to visit an elderly architect friend. He was baptized, but apparently had never had a sacramental confession nor received Holy Communion. However, after having a remarkable experience that he had not shared with his friend, he eagerly demanded to talk to "Batiushka." Suffering from a brain tumor and unable to go out, he spent much of his time listening to the radio, including my evening program on Radio Radonezh, a new Orthodox radio station of the early 1990s. Orthodox broadcasting had just begun and, despite my youth, he told her that he trusted me, so I agreed to visit. This man has since reposed, so without identifying him, I am free to speak of this encounter.

I arrived at his apartment, a typical old-fashioned high-ceilinged Moscow flat filled with bookshelves, the books themselves spilling out everywhere. His spouse, a little younger than himself, greeted me at the door and showed me into a room where her husband was waiting. It was evident that they were not accustomed to meeting priests as they did not know to ask for a blessing but treated me with exaggerated reverence.

After a few moments we were left alone so that he could tell me what was weighing on his heart – essentially, to confess. He began his story:

"I am absolutely a secular worldly man, baptized in early childhood. I don't know much about Christianity, but because of my profession as an architect I deeply love Russian culture and church architecture. There is nothing mystical about me. I am a serious and down-to-earth Russian with sound intelligence and judgment, but a week ago an incredible event shook my soul and this is what I want to share with you.

“Late one evening, I was awake and absolutely alone when the walls of my room seemed to fall away and I saw before me the three angels that are depicted on Rublev’s Trinity icon, the very same image.” (I don’t remember all of the details because he related this so long ago, but I still have an impression that he felt they looked at him just as in ancient times they must have looked at our Forefather Abraham at the Oak of Mamre.) “I felt an unusual sensation, not fear, but awe and trembling, and then one of the angels spoke to me saying, ‘Be ready!’ I understood that this was about my approaching death, and as he addressed me, he gazed at me with such great love that I could only utter a single response:

‘And my wife? When I depart, what will happen to her?’

To which I heard: ‘She is not your wife, she is nothing to you!’”

These were the final words he heard from the angels before the revelation ceased, and he was left with two unshakable convictions: First, that he had very little time left, and second, that his spouse was not his wife, although they had lived together for thirty years in peace and concord. This congenial architect seemed to me to be the personification of cultured, erudite sobriety, and as a priest I invited him to formally confess, that I might better understand his situation.

As this was his first confession, I began with his early years. I discovered that he and his spouse had been baptized as children. As young adults both were young, beautiful, and married to other people, but upon meeting they fell so intensely in love that they decided to break with their spouses. This was a tragedy as neither of them wanted to devastate their family circles, particularly as they both had children. Being neither debauched nor shameless, they understood that their relationship did not shine with honor and grace, but they were engulfed with such passionate love and overpowering feelings that they deserted their families, merged their destinies and contracted a civil marriage.

I do not remember if there were children from this union, but it was clear to me that they had lived in harmony, their hearts united even in their final years. The oneness and companionship they had hoped for was completely realized, but now he understood – or more precisely, it had been shown to him – that she was “no one and nothing” to him, that her remaining alone after his departure had no meaning.

Having heard his confession, I spoke to him of repentance and about the Sacrament of Matrimony, although he already seemed to understand it.



I may have also confessed her that night as well, for they both knew that everything had begun with sin rather than virtue. Later, as we conversed, I told them about the marriage ceremony and how the hearts of Orthodox spouses are joined in eternity in mutual fidelity and love. If there is true repentance, age is no barrier to this union.

After my pastoral reflection he asked me, “Can you marry us?” I answered yes, if they were able to accept the sacrament with reverence and respect. Then his wife spoke up, “Forgive me, Batiushka, but he cannot go out, he can barely walk to the kitchen – a wedding is impossible!” I responded, “But it is possible to have the marriage performed at home. All that is needed is the desire, understanding, and willingness. “And what would we need for that to happen?” “You need icons of the Saviour and the Theotokos, a white cloth to symbolize the purity of your intent, and two rings – the image of the marital union. They answered, “We will be waiting for you, Batiushka. Whenever you say, we will be ready.”

This amazing meeting remained in my memory because this man was quite far from spiritual life or any mystical experience. He was not given to dreams or imaginings, rather he was a serious professional and his world was architectural drafting and house design.

When I returned a week later with the wedding crowns, candles, and Kagor (our sweet Communion wine), the couple was anxiously waiting. He wore a formal suit and she was wrapped in a stylish white shawl. They held lit candles, listening attentively as I read the traditional wedding prayers for the descent of the Holy Spirit into their hearts, blessing them in soul and body. At the end of the ceremony, as the priest leads the couple three times around the wedding icons, I joined their hands with my *epitrachelion* and, with infinitely slow steps, led them in the symbolic circling of the icons. Glancing back, I saw that the architect’s face was like a boy’s, suffused with reverence, awe, and trepidation – not as if we were at home in his office, but in a great cathedral at the Kremlin. As for myself as the officiating priest, I felt that the same angels who had appeared to him were invisibly present next to us, that the heavens had opened and the Lord’s grace was being poured out upon the husband and wife.

We know for sure that when two souls are joined together in the name of Jesus Christ, the Lord Himself is with them. After completing the sacrament and giving them Holy Communion, I congratulated them warmly and

departed, never to see them again. Later, I was informed that he had passed away soon after.

This experience became a cornerstone of my own pastoral life. Too often when the Orthodox marriage rite is discussed among pastors, the exchange centers around ancient canons, or how the rite developed in later centuries. Nevertheless, for both the Old and New Testament, there has always been a fundamental belief that in a godly marriage there is a blessing conferred, an outpouring of the Holy Spirit on those being wed.

For me, this experience was a vivid illustration of the difference between the earthly union of two baptized souls with only a civil legal tie, and the sacramental mystery that joins hearts and souls in eternity – a divine institution, not a human creation. It was the heavenly powers themselves who revealed to this man that thirty years of life together was only meaningful in heaven once he and his spouse had united their hearts in God.

VII. The Emergency Room

It is in the emergency room that some people discover for the first time in their lives that they have a soul. Whether it will remain in the body or pass on to eternity depends to a certain extent on the competence of the doctors, yet the mystery of life and death is ultimately in the hands of God's incomprehensible Providence.

Doctors and nurses can testify to many stories that bring up the question as to why one person, with every expectation of awakening from a coma, dies, despite the best efforts of his confident doctors, while another patient, whose case has been given up on, unexpectedly regains consciousness and recovers. This does not mean that doctors just passively await the outcomes. Certainly, they fight for the lives of their patients by all possible means, but only God knows how the struggle will end.

Emergency ward personnel are special people. For example, one must not wish them good night before their 24-hour shift, because these nights are never good and they will undoubtedly face grief-stricken relatives and have to answer questions filled with anguish and sorrow. Their work never stops, but in the quiet of the emergency ward is the One who is by their side, who knows each of us and has our life, death, and resurrection in His hands.

Once, when I was just beginning my work at the church in Nezhdanova Street, an unknown man ran up to me. Seizing me by the sleeve, he urgently

begged me to visit a nearby emergency room where the famous Leningrad film-director Arseny Sagalchik lay dying. It was thought that he only had hours to live and needed Holy Unction.

– “Is he baptized?” I asked?

– “I don’t know,” was the answer. “His wife just begged me to bring a priest immediately.”

I took all that was needed for both baptism and unction, and went straight to the hospital with the messenger. The director’s wife met me at the door. I remember her sad eyes, sunken from many sleepless nights.

– “Hello! Is your husband baptized?”

– “Batiushka, we were just about to do it in a village church. Arseny wanted to be baptized this summer in the countryside.”

– “What happened?”

– “You will not believe it!” she said crying. “He went out for a second for a smoke during a rehearsal. He had just put the cigarette to his mouth when a tile fell off the wall above him and the sharp edge struck him on the head. He has been unconscious ever since, and the doctors have no hope that he will regain consciousness. Even if he does, he will not have a normal life. We have been here almost two months, and now his condition is critical. I beg you, Batiushka, please, baptize him.”

– “How can I baptize someone who is unconscious?”

– “Believe me, this is what he wanted, we had been planning it!”

What was I to do? There was no time to lose and no one to turn to for advice. My conscience told me that I should fulfil the request. I did not think it appropriate to ask the spouse questions about her husband’s life, although the sacrament is preceded by a confession from the person being baptized. I put on the priest’s stole and began the sacrament.

The patient lay motionless with half-open eyes, his eyelids quivering slightly. He did not react to my questions or prayers, and when I came to the words of rejection of Satan and “all his works, and all his pride,” I pro-

nounced the rejection myself on Arseny's behalf. I baptized him by sprinkling, and then rubbed holy water three times over his motionless body in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Finally, I put a small cross on him and covered him with a white pillow-case as a semblance of baptismal clothes. Everybody felt relieved.

Arseny's spouse saw me off at the door of the ward with a grateful smile.

– “Tell me, Batiushka, will he recover now?”

– “Let us pray that he does, knowing that all is in God's hands. Doctors can say what they will, but everything is possible for the Lord.”

And so, we parted.

The following Sunday the incredible news reached me that Arseny Sagalchik had regained consciousness soon after the baptism and was on his feet within a week! I almost refused to believe it, so miserable and hopeless had his situation been, but a year later Arseny and his wife visited me in the Church of All Saints at Krasnoye Selo. Smiling broadly, he had come to thank the Lord for what had happened to him.

The final word belongs to us, however, for God's grace does not violate our will, and it is we who decide on the life we want to live after such an experience. Many people become conscious of their soul's ability to choose good as a testimony to the healing they have received, and are strengthened in this by their newly-awakened understanding of our common earthly end and our immortality in Christ.

VIII. Little Maria's Behest

Why must little children suffer? Priests are often insistently asked this question, as if they have access to the secret treasury of God's wisdom. When the enlightened St. Anthony the Great questioned God's providence in such a way, he heard, “Anthony, attend to yourself. These things are according to the judgment of God, and it is not to your advantage to know anything about them.” Yet, when we see the hard lot of these young sufferers, we ask again and again.

I well remember the family of Vladimir and Svetlana Kalistov, graduates of Moscow State Music Conservatory. They had three children, two of whom had inherited a condition from their father which caused brain tumors and

even in the early stages affected the eyesight. Vladimir, the father, was completely blind and in a wheelchair. Evgeny (Zhenya), a pre-school boy, already had an eye tumor, as did his youngest sister Maria (Masha). The older girl, Eunia, was healthy, and from an early age had helped her mother care for the rest of the family. Svetlana, a blond Russian beauty, selflessly cared for her husband and children, and her joyful compassion shone like the sun to warm their hearts. I understood that Vladimir, the father, had a complicated inner world. He belonged to the true Russian intelligentsia, was an expert in music theory, and had a sensitive character, as is often true of those who are blind.

I became acquainted with this family and visited them quite often. In time, the unusual inner world of Zhenya, the oldest child began to be revealed to me. Accustomed to suffering from his infancy (if one can get used to suffering at all), the young boy showed little interest in the light-hearted activities common to children of his age. Instead, this six-year-old was absorbed in spiritual life. Svetlana, although busy at home, managed to sing in the church choir and the family received Holy Communion every Sunday. Financially they lived in quite modest circumstances, making up for their lack of means by living a full creative and intellectual life, such as reading books aloud together and discussing them. Many people, including me, wanted to spend time with their family and were happy to bring them a little food and money.

It never occurred to me at the time, twenty years ago, to put down the impressions I received from these children who looked at the world with such wonderful curiosity.

– “Batiushka, why do women wear make-up?” Evgeny once asked me quite unexpectedly, turning his pale face with its gauze eye dressing to me. “Don’t they know it doesn’t make them beautiful? “...Besides,” he pondered, “it brings temptation.”

– “Why have such questions come to your mind?” I asked.

– “I feel sorry for people.”

Sometimes despondency overcame the boy, especially as his condition worsened, and then he wanted to hide from everyone, lying motionless with his face turned to the wall. At those times we could only pray for the little hero because in such circumstances words are useless.

Evgeny was the first to repose in the Lord. His funeral was served at the Church of the Holy Martyr Tryphon by the elderly Protopriest Sergei

Vishnevsky, who for years had guided this amazing family in their spiritual life. Even now I remember the funeral he served according to the rite for young children. He put all his soul into his chanting and for those listening, it was impossible to hold back the tears. The impression remains: "I am leaving you, my beloved parents as I depart to the throne of the Judge. Weep for me, your child, as I have not enjoyed the blossoming of life.... Rejoice, my father and mother, as the Lord has prepared the Eden of sweetness for me. Do not hinder my going to Him because the Kingdom of Heaven awaits those like myself." Evgeny had drunk his cup of suffering to the full and his soul flew upwards on the wings of God's love to the realm of unfading light. Vladimir sat in his wheelchair, grief-stricken and unmoving. Svetlana stood by his side with little Maria on her right arm, embracing Eunia with her left. They all felt that their beloved son and brother was now in Paradise, yet with them in spirit.

The Lord summoned Maria soon after her brother and blessed me to be a witness of her last days. On a late autumn evening, Svetlana took her to the hospital admissions room so that they would not disturb the other mothers who were spending the night in the ward with their sick children. Vladimir, Eunia and I came also. After receiving Holy Communion, Masha, wrapped in a white blanket, began to speak. It hardly seemed possible that such words could be uttered by a three-year old child: "Love one another," said the tiny voice from the blanket. "I don't want you to quarrel. Zhenya and I will be praying for you. Do not forget us – we will be together, we will be with the Lord." At that moment, I knew that the Holy Spirit was speaking through this innocent child.

We parted in silence. Svetlana kissed her husband and Eunia, and then carried little Maria away to the ward. As we walked slowly to the car that was waiting for us, the wind tore the last leaves off of the huge maple trees in the hospital yard. The prophetic words of the child resounded in my heart and she soon reposed quietly and, as it seemed, painlessly.

Afterwards, the Kalistovs went to live in Italy. A few years later I spoke with them on the phone and found that much had changed in their lives since that memorable night: I ask you, my dear readers, to sometimes remember Evgeny, little Maria, and their family in your prayers.

IX. Children's Confessions

Hearing children's confessions is a subtle art that requires a priest's attention and understanding.

Some parents still follow the custom that a child's first confession should be at the age of seven, but does this mean that a five-year-old has nothing to tell a priest? I don't think so. I'm not speaking here of holding little children responsible for their actions, but of helping them become aware of those actions. Experience tells me that nowadays even three-year-olds willingly share their "difficulties" in spiritual life with a priest.

But let me first retell two incidents as examples of mistakes that priests can make in their communication with children.

The first happened in the early twentieth century to my wife's grandmother, who told me this story of going to confession as a young girl:

"I was about eight or nine. We schoolgirls were to confess before Pascha, and I remember the experience as if it was yesterday: I am standing in front of a tall batiushka of immense size, with myself a small Thumbelina next to him. He is holding an old book in his hands and reading questions out of it in old-fashioned formal Russian:

– 'Tell me, child, didst thou judge any person?'

The question falls on me like thunder from on high, and I reply:

– 'I am guilty, Batiushka...'

– 'Didst thou steal?'

I repeat, just to be on the safe side:

– 'I am guilty, Batiushka...'

Then comes the third question, asked with the same dispassionate intonation as he enumerated the other sins:

– 'Didst thou commit adultery?'

Standing by the priest's side, only able to see the bottom of the wide sleeves of his podraznik, I answered:

– 'I am guilty, Batiushka...'

Listening to this story told by a ninety-five-year-old woman who had afterwards lived all of her life outside of the Church and its sacraments, I could only lament the habit of those pre-revolutionary priests who heard children's confessions in such a ritualistic, thoughtless manner.

The second story is about the sensitivity of children's hearts and the need to be extremely cautious in hearing their confessions. About a decade ago, a young priest in a Moscow church was hearing a little girl's confession when she told him that she was in the habit of stealing. Meaning nothing but good, but still unthinking, the priest took her right hand, raised it and said loudly enough for those around to hear: "Here is a hand guilty of stealing other people's things..." The psychological shock was so painful that the girl developed a stammer immediately afterwards.

We can only hope that she overcame the speech defect as she grew older, but I would not want to be in the shoes of this spiritual guide who had allowed himself such a blunder from the perspective of pastoral ethics and teaching. We priests must foresee how our words may echo in people's lives. A human soul is particularly fragile and unprotected when visiting a church, because it opens up under the invisible influence of God's grace.

A priest should help the child bring to his or her memory what has happened in their life, and he can do so by asking leading questions. His tone should be light and kind. "Well, what would you like to tell Batiushka today? Has everything been good with you? What would you like to improve?" The priest can embrace the child slightly, as a wise grandmother will do to make it easier for a mischievous child to tell the truth.

I hear children's confessions every week at the St. Elizabeth Gymnasium at the Martha and Mary Convent on Bolshaya Ordynka Street in the very center of Moscow. Young schoolchildren, and even their pre-school brothers and sisters, willingly come and await their turns in the long queue. How I enjoy seeing their bright eyes with their young souls shining through and the broad smiles with missing baby teeth. I rejoice at the girls' long golden or raven-black braids and sometimes, as I gather the little ones in a covey for confession, I ask them: "Tell me, my friends, will I have such beautiful thick hair as yours in Paradise?" They look at the pitiful remnants of former luxury on my own head and with truly divine generosity, grant the favor in advance: "Do not even doubt, Batiushka! In the Kingdom of Heaven, you will have the most beautiful hair! Please do not be upset, everything will be fine with you!"

Opposite: Fr. Artemy Vladimirov hearing children's confessions at Resurrection Church.



Let me give a few more examples of children's confessions. A first-grade schoolboy stands silent at confession, obviously finding it difficult to say anything at all.

– “Well, my dear, what would you like to share with Batiushka today?”

– “Yesterday,” the child says finally, “I nearly stepped on my cat's tail, a cat that I love very much.”

He inclines his head with a guilty look. Trying to conceal my surprise, for he did not actually step on the tail, I say mildly:

– “God will forgive you, and perhaps you might be a bit more watchful in dealing with the cat ... and be sure to give it Batiushka's regards.”

The boy brightens up, smiles, kisses the Gospels and steps aside. Another boy once confessed with a sorrowful look that he had not yet found out which of the school subjects was his favorite. The problem was that he liked mathematics, physical training, and writing equally. “God will help you, child. Try to do your schoolwork carefully and by the eighth grade you will see clearly whether you are ‘a physicist or a lyricist’.”

Another child, a girl from the pre-school group, wearing a beautiful Russian-style headscarf fastened with a pin on her chest as in the Nesterov frescoes in the Sts. Martha and Mary Church, comes up to the analogion with trepidation, raises her innocent eyes and stands looking at me without saying a word. I lean over the fairy-tale maiden and ask with a smile:

– “Well, my little rabbit, what drawbacks do you find in yourself, what sins might you have?”

Opening wide her beautiful eyes, which have not a trace of falsehood, she pauses and utters:

– “Pride!”

– “What?” I ask, not even trying to conceal my great surprise.

– “Pride,” the small penitent says again, contritely.

While some adults sincerely state that they do not have pride, thus revealing a lack of self-understanding, this “knee-high to a duck” testifies in a quite definite tone, without allowing for any argument, to be suffering from mankind’s initial spiritual wound, from which we all suffer after the fall of Adam.

“Here it is – Holy Russia!” I think to myself. And not on the canvases of Moscow’s post-modern artists, but in a child’s soul at the beginning of the third millennium.

Another schoolgirl, along with sins common to her age (“disobedience, being rude to my grandmother, quarrelling with my brother...”) confesses the following: “I’m looking for the ideal.”

In my heart I could see this young Moscow teenager walking the roads of life in search of an ideal like in Nikolai Leskov’s *The Enchanted Wanderer*. But why does she feel this is a sin? Because she has not yet achieved her goal? I try to explain that our living and unfading Ideal is the Lord Jesus Christ, the “fairest of the sons of men,” whose image is already inscribed within our hearts.

Of course, it is impossible to describe all that attracts a priest’s attention in children’s confessions, but no matter what they are, we are to deal with them with kindness, attention, and love.

X. Mephistopheles

Russian priests often visit their parishioners at home and the most frequent reason is to bless the flat. The service takes about half an hour and becomes a source of peace and harmony among the family members.

In my early years of pastoring, I received such a request from one of our Resurrection Church parishioners, Ekaterina Piskareva, a young woman whose father was closely related to the art world. Ekaterina and a friend of hers had recently joined the parish and, eager to have the family’s apartment blessed, we planned the meeting. The first thing that met the eye on entering the high-ceilinged nineteenth-century flat was the impressive array of paintings and books that lined the walls, witnessing to the family’s artistic interests. As it was summer and Ekaterina’s parents were away from Moscow, we were not a large party and so began the service soon after I arrived, followed by a meal to celebrate the blessing.

I drew small crosses on the four walls in each of the cardinal directions (at this time the neat stickers with stylized crosses for house blessings were not

yet available in church shops) and we began to unhurriedly read and sing the prayers. The girls' voices were pure and lovely and as this was a unique occasion and new to them, they switched on a large tape recorder to record the service.

So, we blessed the flat, sprinkling even the most hidden corners with holy water and singing, "*Let God arise, let his enemies be scattered...*" We finished in a festive summer mood and I took a seat in an armchair by the window, close to a small antique oval table that held the tape recorder. Above me on the wall hung a pair of heavy, richly-carved antique wooden shelves, the lower one lined with large volumes dedicated to art. Above that were vases filled with professional paintbrushes and (as it turned out later) special boxes with precious gold and silver powdered paints.

As I settled in the armchair for a short rest, I could hear the girls happily conversing as they finished the preparations. Ten minutes later, everything was ready.

– "Batiushka! We are waiting for you!" Ekaterina called.

– "I'm coming!" I replied, and went to the kitchen.

Neat and slender in their long skirts, the girls jokingly made sweeping bows inviting me to the table. We sang the "Our Father" and expectantly took our seats. However, just as Ekaterina picked up my plate to fill it with soup, from the living room came the terrible sound of heavy objects crashing to the floor. A snow-white cat shot into the kitchen and took shelter under the table. Turning pale, Ekaterina nearly dropped the plate and ran to the living-room. We followed her quickly, but none of us could have anticipated the scene before us.

The shelves that I had particularly noticed had inexplicably come off their hangers, and the heavy load of books, paintbrushes, and vases had collapsed directly onto the little antique table – the four legs of which lay flung to the four corners of the room. The rare volumes now lay in disarray in the center of the room, heaped over the table like the Great Pyramid of Cheops. The mayhem resembled the aftermath of a volcanic displacement of the earth's crust, particularly in regard to the thick veil of gold dust still hanging in the air as the precious paint settled slowly onto everything in the room. Buried under the massive books, the tape recorder with the recorded blessing

service had sustained the worst damage, but this was not the first thing to attract my attention.

There was something else. My gaze was drawn to only thing still moving – a large fancy bronze vase that lay where it had been thrown down, rocking from side to side. On its base I could clearly make out a sculpted classical figure of Mephistopheles. It was the traditional depiction: a slightly crooked nose, subtle demonic smile, and sinister little horns rising out of the curly hair – everything in its proper place. The only noise in the silence that reigned over the devastated room was the eerie sound of the rocking vase.

Ekaterina flung up her hands, wordlessly contemplating the devastation of a room that moments before had radiated order and harmony.

– “Batiushka! You are alive! If you had sat there a moment longer, the shelves would have killed you! They were reattached to the wall with reinforced steel clamps three days ago, and I spent the whole afternoon arranging father’s books and art materials. They were solidly affixed to the wall.”

– “And who is that?” I asked, pointing to the finally-stilled Mephistopheles, grinning at us with his cunning smile and malevolent curved lips.

– “Ah, Batiushka, Father’s colleagues gave it to him as a birthday gift some years ago. I didn’t want to keep it, but he said it was dear to him because it was from his co-workers. I beg you to take the loathsome thing away. I don’t want to stay here with it!”

Mephistopheles, who had listened silently but attentively to our conversation, now seemed to have a piqued, disappointed look on his malicious lips.

– “But how can I trespass on your father’s treasured memories?”

– He will understand! Imagine, you could have been killed in our home! What would I tell your family and parishioners?” She was on the verge of tears as she imagined the calamitous scene of the young priest’s untimely death.

– “God does not give horns to a crazy cow,” I said soothingly. “He whom God helps, no one can harm.”

– “Batiushka, take it away, I loathe the hideous thing!”

I made the sign of the cross over the wicked being, picked up the vase and left, for a parishioner had arrived to give me a lift to my next appointment.

But where to deposit Mephistopheles? I at once rejected the idea of throwing the vase into a trash bin. What if Young Pioneers found it and took it to their school to be displayed on the shelves with team trophies from sports competitions? Or if workers who clean the yards come across it, where will they take it? Perhaps home, or to a second-hand shop.

I was still pondering over this when we drew close to my destination on Bolshaya Dmitrovka in the very center of Moscow. As I got out of the car, I carefully held my priest’s case in my right hand and the vase with the image of Mephistopheles turned downward in the left, so that no chance passer-by would see the spiteful face. And then, what a miracle! Five steps away, I saw a Moscow rarity, an open drain. The heavy lid lay next to the opening and there was no one around! As I approached the hole, I saw dark turgid water swirling not far below the surface. Without another thought, I unclasped my hand and with a loud splash the heavy vase disappeared into the depths of the storm drain. “No one will find Mephistopheles there,” I thought cheerfully, and brushing the invisible grime off my hands I left.

I never did learn how Ekaterina’s father reacted to the loss of his vase.

XI. My First Funeral

Those of you who have read the recollections of my childhood and teenage years will remember my twin brother, Dmitry, who became a classical pianist in the 1980s.

He began performing professionally at quite a young age, and by the time he entered Moscow’s Tchaikovsky State Music Conservatory he had already given many public performances. His was a rare God-given talent and he never tired of playing. While I needed strict supervision (and was still unable to cope with the task), Mitya was entirely self-motivated. When he sat down at the piano, time stopped for him and he was absolutely happy just being with the instrument. Biting his lip with intense concentration, his eyes fixed on the keyboard, he practiced scales, simple and chromatic, for hours on end. As soon as his fingers felt a smooth surface (for example, the dinner table) they began running over it involuntarily, feeling out one of the compli-

cated classical pieces he was constantly learning. He was always pulling on his fingers, which produced a cracking sound that irritated me rather badly, but all of these peculiarities of behavior only reflected his strenuous unceasing mental effort. He was also ahead of me in physical development, and had a passionate nature easily aroused by whatever he took a fancy to.

My brother's judgements were always unique and he loved to demonstrate his independence to everyone. He converted to Orthodoxy as a student, at nearly the same time as myself, but we each followed our own path.

By the time I married and was ordained, he had long been an accomplished musician and gone through many trials. Misteps in his personal life had also had an impact on his creative and highly emotional personality for, spoiled by the attention of many women, Dmitry would often go out to meet the temptation halfway. His life was full of personal drama, aggravated by the hard realities of our Soviet times. The powerful 'Mosconcert' and 'Gosconcert' state organizations, which organized all performances, had the fate of every musician in their hands and often treated them harshly – not only over the money that was paid, but in their absolute power to authorize or deny the musician's opportunities, such as cancelling concerts, disallowing contracts, refusing invitations.

From his early years Dmitry loathed the godless ideology and cynical hypocrisy that permeated Soviet society, and indignantly rejected an offer by state authorities who promised rapid upward advancement in his musical career in return for unequivocal "cooperation," which would have included informing on his musical friends and colleagues.

As one might guess, with his youthful lack of compromise and calculation, he rather quickly cut off his own air supply. Left with no prospect of breaking through the gates of opportunity that were now closed to him, my brother was in fact deprived of any concert activity at all, either in Russia or abroad. He suffered greatly, and even when he received invitations from Paris, Tokyo and New York, what could he reply to the inviting side? There was no way to accept them. Even for those stronger than my brother, such situations often resulted in tragedy.

Even so, Mitya found it difficult to step firmly onto the path leading to the Church. It seemed to him that our mother, our elder brother Andrei, and myself were 'ultra-correct,' and he always suspected us, his relatives, of condemning his deeds. He said we were Pharisees, in contrast to the Lord, "Who did not despise harlots, tax-collectors and sinners."

The fact is that talented people are often hard to live with because, immersed in their own brilliant worlds, they do not see themselves as others see them and lack the habit of considering those around them. There was no way that our parents could have foreseen all that might befall a young person who was unprepared to resist the temptations that come with such early success. Incompatible traits seemed to be combined in Mitya: the ability to abandon himself to such exalted music, with each classical piece passing through his heart onto the piano keys; and on the other hand, his carelessness in his relationships and his attitude to his relatives.

I very much wanted Dmitry to see my spiritual father, whom I had found after so long a search, and in the end, he agreed. The meeting, which I have retold elsewhere, brought some relief to him, easing the frustration and despair that engulfed his heart.

Dmitry finally felt that the only way out of his situation was to emigrate abroad. The late 1980s already offered such opportunities, and his many friends and connections helped him. A young German woman, charmed by his unique, impressive personality, sent him an invitation to visit and promised to arrange a tour around Germany. Mitya went, and within a few months was already speaking rather good German. With his many talents, everything came easy to him.

We sometimes received letters from him with photos enclosed – comfortable, brightly lit concert-halls filled with people. I am looking at one of these photos as I write this: my brother, his jacket unbuttoned, is leaning over a white grand piano, his hands hovering over the keyboard. Behind him, the audience watches intently as they listen to the sublime music flowing from under his fingers.

However, despite our one-eighth German blood, Dmitry lacked the pragmatic determination to make this situation permanent. This may have been due to his “affairs of the heart” and the sorrows they brought upon him, but in the end, he had to return home. For this he was physically and morally unprepared.

During Passion Week of 1991 we were notified that Dmitry had taken ill on the train home and was in a hospital in Brest, on the border of Poland and Belarus. As I had just been appointed head of the half-ruined All Saints Church in Krasnoye Selo, I was unable to leave until after Pascha.

We found Mitya in a most unhappy condition. Although fully conscious, he could not move his arms or his legs. His doctors said that it was cata-



Fr. Artemy's twin brother Dmitry in concert.

tonia, muscle paralysis caused by an unidentified underlying neurological or physical condition – something that more often happens to women after childbirth due to the physical and nervous strain they have been through.

With considerable effort we brought Dmitry to Moscow, where he was admitted to the First City Hospital and I was able to hear his confessions and serve him Holy Communion. Mitya repented sincerely, without falsehood, concealing nothing. In his eyes, I could clearly see his belief in the Lord which had finally given him peace of mind. The dark cloud that had weighed heavily on his heart for such a long time seemed to have disappeared, leaving his soul as pure as a young boy's. Once again, he was my twin brother Mityen'ka with whom I had spent the marvelous years of our childhood.

Every time I had to depart his ward, leaving him there with the other patients – tough men engaged in idle talk – I could not hold back my tears. Mother spent most of her time at his bedside with the Gospels or a prayer-book. Although physically immobile, he readily shared his good impressions of Germany with her. Unfortunately, his body temperature increased steadily and the doctors' repeated attempts to lower it failed.

Mitya was conscious and understood everything. Surprisingly, he was not afraid to die. Even as the affliction of his body increased, his soul grew brighter. His subtle sense of humor did not leave him, even in the long last hours as he tried to cheer mother by talking to her with his placid smile. Mitya reposed in the Lord with a deep belief in His mercy. He was only thirty years old.

So, the first funeral I served in Krasnoye Selo was for my twin brother. I had never seen him look so beautiful. His austere, bright face seemed to be looking into heaven and eternity. Deep peace and tranquility descended on all those present, the peace that he had never found on earth except in those hours of inspired performance for audiences who appreciated his music.

The church, still bearing its traces of decades of neglect and desolation, was filled to capacity with many people, mostly young. There was a sea of flowers and Mother stood by the coffin, quiet and serene. To her alone was revealed the mystery of his departure to the other world. She had borne this child in her womb, given him life, raised him in kindness and love, and then prayed for many years for him to escape the enemy's snares.

Who can tell when and how God's Most Wise Providence will fulfil our prayers? Mother had often shared her sorrow for Mitya with me when he was altogether entangled in his feelings and passions, like a boy lost in the woods. No matter how she prayed, nothing seemed to change for him and I always tried to remind her of St. Ambrose of Milan's words to St. Monica: "It cannot be that the son of such tears will perish!"

We buried my brother in the Vostryakov Cemetery on the Sunday of the Myrrhbearers, carrying the coffin under barren birch trees, whose branches were framed against the high blue sky. The bright April sun warmed our hearts and turned our grief for our closest and dearest one into a sweeter sorrow.

The workers put up a cross over the grave and a headstone with the image of a piano keyboard and his name, Dmitry, engraved in German as he had wished.

I will see you again soon, my dear brother! ✦

The narratives of Fr. Artemy Vladimirov's pastoral years will be continued in upcoming 2022 issues....

