



077. Mar. 24/April 6, 1971.

Categories : [Letters](#)

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Dear Elena Yurevna,

You know how upset we have been in the past few months over the status of our Brotherhood and the whole future of our missionary work in the Church. Unfortunately, Father Herman's letters to you seem to have communicated more our present feeling of disturbance than the basic principles that have inspired us and continue to inspire us; and from this you have come to believe that we have a revolutionary or reformist idea of monasticism.

Please believe us that nothing could be farther from our intention. In order to explain this, I am writing you this letter in English in an attempt to avoid some of the emotional overtones that we seem to become involved with when we write in Russian, and to give you in this way as clear and brief a picture as possible of our present situation and our hopes for the future. After Vladika John, it is you and Ivan Michaelovich who have helped and inspired us on this path, and nothing would cause us more sorrow than for you to become convinced that our Orthodoxy was in danger, or that our missionary work is about to come to an end.

It is true that we are presently threatened, and we take this threat very seriously. But the cause of this threat is not difficult to understand, and it does not in itself place us in any uncanonical position. In a word: our bishop does not understand us or our work, and he is trying to “use” us for his own plans. Spiritually and canonically, we are in the right: it is absurd and impossible to “establish a monastery” against the wishes of the only monks in that monastery; the very “Decree on Monasteries” of our Synod of Bishops sets forth the right of monks to elect their own Head; and the very idea of monasteries in Orthodox history is clearly that of independent spiritual centers that have their own autonomous life and are not subject to interference from bishops unless they try to introduce novelties in dogmas or church life. This is the ideal, and this is the way Jordanville and Father Panteleimon's monastery in Boston are operated today; and this is why monasteries can be inspirers for the rest of the Orthodox people — because they offer the possibility to preach and live Orthodox Christianity free from all external influences — whether the cares of parish life, the whims of bishops, or whatever.

In our present case, we have a fundamental disagreement with our bishop over the organization of our monastery: we wish to be independent and continue the tradition of Jordanville and Father Panteleimon, while our bishop wants to control everything himself which would mean the end of our missionary work (as you yourself very well realize). Therefore, the question of “obedience” does not enter in at all, and it is spiritually illegitimate for our bishop to try to impose his ideas concerning the organization of our monastery by this means. When Fr. Panteleimon was received into the



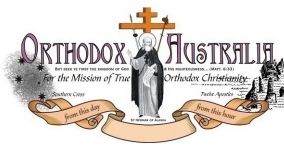
Synod, no bishop appointed himself “Head” over his monastery; and we have exactly the same right to independence. Our mistake was that we did not in the very beginning stand up for this principle, and this allowed our bishop to believe that we were weak and that he could do whatever he wanted with us. We misplaced our trust in him, and we confess that you were right all along about him. But now we are prepared to stand up and fight for the independence which the Church and its canons guarantee to monasteries.

Monastic obedience cannot possibly be “slavery”; if that were true, then the Church would be divided up into “slaves” and “tyrants.” Some people in the Church at various times have tried to enforce this perverted concept, but it does not come from the Church or from monasticism. All Orthodox Christians, and especially monks and nuns, are trying to cut off their own will and lead a God-pleasing life; but to meekly bow down to tyranny, most especially when this tyranny only destroys a God-pleasing work and extinguishes the Christian and monastic spirit in its victims — is certainly only a parody and mockery of Orthodoxy and monasticism.

We are absolutely resolved, in all obedience to the Church and lawful ecclesiastical authority, not to become a part of any such mockery. We pray that our firmness will not lead to any scandal, and that we can proceed according to the letter as well as the spirit of all the Church’s canons. But we know also that the canons were made for man, and not man for the canons, that above the canons is the spirit that inspired them, and that to preserve this spirit we are prepared even to go against the letter of separate canons, if these are enforced in order to crush our spirit. In actual fact, no one would dream of trying to enforce the letter of every canon today, for then there would be no Orthodox Christians left at all! Our own bishop is in San Francisco “uncanonically,” for it is against the canons to transfer bishops from one Diocese to another (this canon has caused considerable fighting recently in the Church of Greece); it is also against the canons to ordain a deacon before the age of 25, or a priest before 30 (this is strictly enforced in the Greek Church, and one of our priest correspondents in Africa wrote us a year or two ago that a priest was desperately needed for Tanzania, but the only candidate there was 25 years old and under no circumstances could he be ordained before 5 more years — but according to the letter of this canon most of our Russian priests are “uncanonical”. etc.

Please believe that despite our recent trials we are not crushed in spirit. In fact, on the contrary, now that our very existence is being attacked, we are more persuaded than ever that the path on which Vladika John blessed and inspired us to go, is correct, and that by his prayers, and in accordance with God’s will, we will go on this path through every suffering, all the way to martyrdom, if God calls us to this. The fact that such a severe attack has come upon us only persuades us that the devil wishes us to give up this path, because it is right.

You seem to believe that we cannot continue the path we have begun as monks. But we believe, on the contrary, that only in monasticism, with all the suffering and trials that this choice must inevitably bring upon us, can our work spread and bring the maximum good. While we were “in the world” everything came easy to us — we had much work but no great trials and attacks — but now



everything is difficult, on every side we are attacked, trials and temptations are many. But these are spiritual proofs that our path is right, even more right now than it was before.

We are weak and sinful, and what we have undertaken is far, far beyond our strength and our spiritual talents. Nonetheless, God multiplies His favors to us, and we go forward with difficulties and sorrows, yet certain that He is with us, and Vladika John also. The form which our future existence will take is still uncertain. We always thought that to be a “monastery” was beyond us, but in principle the Synod has blessed this and the only problem now is one of organization and independence — and this has happened without our own will being involved at all, in fact it has been forced upon us. If our work so far has pleased God, then surely He will not leave us now or abandon us to the path of pseudo-Orthodoxy!

Glory be to God for everything! Do not believe for a moment that we are abandoning the path we began with Vladika John's blessing. We go forward with absolute trust in God, on the straight monastic path which Vladika John foretold to us when he called our Brotherhood a “reflection of Valaam” and when he told me, when I told him of our hopes for a missionary monastery away from the city: “I too believe that there will be such a missionary monastery in California.”

Only pray for us, dear Elena Yurevna, and do not lose hope in us; and do not cease to tell us what is right!

With love in Christ our Savior,
Sinful Monk Seraphim

P. S. After I had written the above, Father Herman read the address of Vladika Vitaly (the elder) on the occasion of his consecration as bishop. One paragraph in it tells of what inspired the great accomplishments of his younger years, what his basic spiritual orientation was. It is precisely the same as ours, and even if we never accomplish a fraction of what he accomplished, this attitude is worthy of imitation, and we are both absolutely convinced that only by its means will we be able to bring forth any fruits at all in the Church of Christ. The Pharisees will doubtless find that these words of Vladika Vitaly are full of “self-will” and “disobedience,” but following them he accomplished great things in and for the Church, and they burn with the very spirit that is so needed in the Church today, the same spirit we long to burn with!

[quote in Russian follows]