



158. June 24/July 7, 1974b. Nativity of St. John the Forerunner

Categories : [Letters](#)

Date : September 2, 2016

Dear Sister in Christ, Nina,
Greetings in our Lord Jesus Christ.

We (at least I) have still not recovered from the events of the last two weeks or so. Wednesday Vladika Nektary came to us with the Kursk Icon, a moving experience for us all; and then I accompanied the Icon to Etna, where it was well received and everyone sang in English. Little by little, it seems, this barren American land is being sanctified.

It's obvious that Vlad. Anthony's chief concern these days is the "priest shortage." Is it possible that some people now will begin to think of why? It is not merely because "the salary is low"! — that affects only those who haven't much interest in the priesthood anyway. The better candidates are repelled precisely because the "priesthood" is presented as such a boring thing — as "filling a hole" in the church organization wherein everyone, from hierarchy to laymen, takes the Church and the sources of spiritual life for granted. Get yourself inspired by the lives of Saints, try to be a zealot, express your veneration for the Wonderworker of San Francisco — and see how soon you will be squashed! Everything that rises above the "norm" of unconsciousness is labelled "prelest." Who with any spiritual vitality is interested in such a "church career."

The situation seems really desperate. Perhaps it is no accident that the "clergy crisis" seems to be striking S. F. most severely. Fr. Mitrophan well said in his sermon that "it is a shame to us Russians to be so lukewarm to our Wonderworker, Archbishop John, when the Greeks have printed his icon and glorified him!" (Such words haven't been spoken publicly before!) Here we have such a source of inspiration and grace, and those who revere him are virtual outcasts. No wonder grace is being taken away from this diocese!

Forgive the bluntness. We ourselves are peaceful and are quite resolved to keep our fragile little foothold of spiritual life against the attacks and temptations which will doubtless get worse. "Wasting their time," "pleasing themselves," "prelest." Glory be to God for everything!

The congregation of "ex-novices" in the Sepulchre was also not a very gratifying sight. What an abyss between the older generation which is trying so hard (literally killing themselves) just to "keep the ship running," and the young ones who are not so interested in the Church that they will abandon the pleasure of pleasing themselves and leading fruitless lives. The approaching Sobor comes at a critical time, but who really sees what the crisis is? Perhaps near-anarchy is ahead,



when Church life will be restricted to small cells of believers.

V. Derugin left a very bad impression — pompous, vain, empty, an intellectual shell with no spiritual content. But Vlad. Danilevich is just the opposite! May God preserve those who, through suffering, have learned the great secret that Orthodoxy is in the heart or not at all!

Don't worry if Gulag deprives you of "peace" for a while. "Spiritual" life in modern conditions without a sober awareness of this other side of 20th-century life — is prelest! An awareness of this is a part of the suffering which is so necessary for real spiritual life. In any case, the overall impression of Gulag, once all the harrowing moments have been passed — is inspiring. The devil has done his worst with human nature — but now the truth is being told about it, and it turns out that Orthodoxy is not irrelevant to 20th-century life after all.

Concerning reading of the Gospel: the Optina-Sarov rule is: every day when the cell rule is performed (i.e., except eves of Sundays and great feasts, and Nativity and Pascha weeks), read one chapter of the Gospels and 2 chapters of the Epistles, beginning with Matthew and the Acts. If the last 8 chapters or so of the Apocalypse are read 1 a day instead of 2, the Gospels and Epistles will be finished the same day. We read them here aloud after Compline (as Starets Leonid did — usually the reading is individual, in the cell), although in the last 6 months or so we have cut the reading in half, which means we hardly get through the New Testament more than once a year.

Doubtless it would be good for you to write Matushka Lambros, if you can give her a word of consolation.

Concerning the Arena, p. 52, the "moral, hidden obedience, performed in the soul" seems to refer to our obedient orientation to God in general, which we should not think is satisfied if we are merely outwardly obedient to monastic or church authorities. It can happen that outward obedience is so over-emphasized that it becomes a mechanical substitute for the genuine voluntary inward giving up of one's own will and understanding* The distinction can be felt in the heart: sooner or later an unsound, mechanical obedience will produce a feeling of oppression and tenseness, which are signs that something is wrong. Genuine inward obedience is accompanied by the joy of being relieved of trusting only oneself. This subject is extremely deep and is closely bound up with the whole subject of genuine vs. false Orthodoxy in the 20th century, most acutely in "Sergianism," where obedience indeed becomes slavery to men and the human church organization. True obedience is accompanied by inward freedom, without which there is no Church life.

Yes, Vlad. Anderson has had difficult times with discouragement; pray for him. Pray for us all.

With love in Christ,
Seraphim, monk

I. M. Kontzevitch has written well on this subject in ch. 1 of the Optina book.