



235. Aug. 10/23, 1976B Archdeacon Laurence

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Date : October 10, 2016

Dear Brother in Christ, Nicholas,

Greetings in our Lord Jesus Christ. Thank you for your letter. I appreciate the seriousness of what you have written, and I will reply with the same seriousness.

I must tell you first of all that, to the best of our knowledge, there are no startsi today—that is, truly God-bearing elders (in the spirit of the Optina Elders) who could guide you not by their own wisdom and understanding of the Holy Fathers, but by the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. This kind of guidance is not given to our times—and frankly, we in our weakness and corruption and sins do not deserve it.

To our times is given a more humble kind of spiritual life, which Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov in his excellent book *The Arena* (do you have it?) calls “life by counsel” that is, life according to the commandments of God as learned in the Holy Scriptures and Holy Fathers and helped by those who are elder and more experienced. A “Starets” can give commands; but a “counsellor” gives advice, which you must test in experience.

We do not know of anyone in particular who would be especially able to counsel you in the English language. If this is really needful for you, God will send it to you in His own time, according to your faith and need, and without your making too deliberate a search for it.

Since you have written me, I will venture to give you a word or two of general advice, based on what you have said in your letters, as derived from the experience of our small monastic community and our reading of the Holy Fathers.

(1) Learn first of all to be at peace with the spiritual situation which has been given you, and to make the most of it. If your situation is spiritually barren, do not let that discourage you, but work all the harder at what you yourself can do for your spiritual life. It is already something very important to have access to the Sacraments and regular church services. Beyond this you should have regular morning and evening prayers with your family, and spiritual reading—all according to your strength and the possibilities afforded by your circumstances.

(2) Among spiritual writings you should read especially those addressed to people living in the world, or which give the “ABC’s” of spiritual life—such as St. John of Kronstadt’s *My Life in Christ*, St. Nikodemos’ *Unseen Warfare*, the *Lives of Saints* in general, and Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov’s *The Arena* (this book, while addressed to novices, is also suitable for laymen in



so far as it gives in general the “ABC’s” of spiritual life as applied to modern times.)

(3) To help your spiritual growth and remind you of spiritual truths, it would be good to keep a journal (the hard-bound “record” books sold in stationery stores are good), which would include excerpts from the writings of spiritual books which you find especially valuable or applicable to you, and perhaps comments of your own inspired by your reading and reflection, including brief comments on your own shortcomings which you need to correct. St. John of Kronstadt found this especially valuable, as can be seen in his *My Life in Christ*.

(4) Don’t criticize or judge other people—regard everyone else as an angel, justify their mistakes and weaknesses, and condemn only yourself as the worst sinner. This is step one in any kind of spiritual life.

I offer this for whatever help it may be to you. I would be glad to try to answer any specific questions you might have, especially on the teaching of the Holy Fathers, almost all of which we have access to in Russian-language editions.

Asking your prayers.

With love in Christ,
Seraphim, monk