

Optina: the holy little corner

Fr. Basil Tigrov

Contents: [A Trip to Optina](#). [Elder Joseph](#). [Elder Barsanuphius](#).
[Grace-Filled Help](#).

The narrative of lay priest Fr. Basil Tigrov [published in Russian as "*Svyatoi Ugolok*," or *Holy Little Corner*, Petrograd, 1915] which follows, shows what Optina Monastery was for ordinary people in its day. It also shows how, despite the century of godlessness that lies between his visit and our times, the spiritual and emotional link to it remains unbroken. May this text, published here for the first time in English, serve to touch the new generation of Americans of the 21st century.

A Trip to Optina

O Holy Optina! What heart would not tremble, recalling you? O unforgettable days - the days of my stay in that holy monastery! Who will give me the power of creativity, so as to worthily and faithfully reproduce that whole picture, in all its artistic grandeur, which I contemplated there, which enraptured me there?

I acknowledge my feebleness beforehand. But, "*Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh*" (Matt. 12:34). And therefore, even I cannot restrain myself - though my pen is weak, though my tongue is feeble - from disclosing to others that which I saw with my own eyes, which filled my heart to overflowing, at the contemplation of the wondrous beauty of the new spiritual world which opened up before me, the recollection of which fills my heart even now with the loftiest thoughts and feelings and with ineffable joy.

For a long time I had been dreaming about Optina. For a long time I had yearned to go there. And, at last, the Lord blessed my dreams to come true. This took place at the beginning of September 1908.

Preparing for the trip, I chanced to meet a person in Tambov who had only just come from Optina. She spoke about Optina with such feeling and such love, that she was all aglow with joy and delight. "What Elders there are there!" she exclaimed. She was especially carried away by Elder Barsanuphius, who amazed her by his clairvoyance and his gift of the knowledge of the innermost secrets of the soul.

"I went up to him," she said, "and he turned to me and asked, 'Have you been to Confession?'"

"I replied: 'Yes.'"

"'And did you confess all your sins?'"

"I said, 'All of them, Batiushka.'"

"'No, not all,' he objected, 'remember.'"

"I tried to remember for a long time, but could in no way recall. Finally, he indicated a sin to me which I had never repented of."

She said many other things as well. She asked me to visit Shamordino without fail and see the sick Nun Matrona, whom she had met by chance in the cell of Fr. Joseph. "Without fail; without fail visit her - she's a slave of God. She is very sick and poor. She only goes to Optina once a year, to Fr. Joseph, and it was precisely there that I saw her and became acquainted with her."

Having thus made this contact beforehand, I prepared for the trip. On September 11 we boarded the train. I accompanied a family - a mother with her sick son and his tutor.

At Kozlov a mother and daughter whom I knew, who were also heading for Optina, boarded our coach. This was not the first time they were going there. They knew Optina, they spoke with pleasure about that wondrous monastery and the marvelous Elders who lived there. We spent the greater part of the day in these conversations.

At the Volovo station yet another young lady boarded, who was likewise traveling to Optina. Thus did our "regiment," so to speak, arrive. This young lady had a singular appearance: in her face and in all her movements there was expressed modesty and simplicity, and along with this there was a kind of quiet pensiveness and a dreamy immersion in the contemplation of something joyful. This joyfulness was her recollection of Optina. She stays there for entire months. She has a relative there; everything there is familiar and intimate. And it was with such excitement, such fervor that she spoke about that monastery, so dear to her...

Our conversation was just taking on the most lively character, but we had to interrupt it, since we had already arrived at Kozelsk, the station where we needed to disembark.

From the station it was three miles to Optina. I happened to ride in the same coach with the young woman, our new acquaintance. On the way I learned that she had read a plethora of spiritual books. I was surprised at her erudition in spiritual literature and her interest in questions concerning the spiritual world. Oh, if only God would grant us more such noble, modest and wise young women in our evil disordered, reckless times!

Due to our conversations we did not see how we had passed through the city and had arrived at the river. The river is crossed by use of a ferry. We crossed safely to the other bank, and there before us was the monastery.

We drove to Fr. Peter's guest house. In the courtyard of this guest house, in an apartment, lived the relative of the young woman I had been speaking with. It was already eleven at night when we - the Tambovites - settled down in our room, which had been joyfully offered to us by the host, Fr. Peter.

We had some tea and a bite to eat, and did not notice how the time passed during our snack and conversation - it turned out that it was already one o'clock. Soon the bells rang for Matins.

I couldn't wait - something urged me to respond to the summons of the bells. And so, without having rested from my almost twenty-four hours of travel, I went inside the monastery enclosure and into the church. Matins here lasts from 1:30 a.m. until 5 or 5:30. I stood through it until the end. Everything was somehow new; everything was interesting. I was immediately enveloped by a kind of special, desert spirit.

Yes, it is precisely here that the desert can be sensed. Imagine that you have traveled far, far from your own nook, and are standing here under these vaults in the semi-darkness of night, as if somewhere in another, special world. Around you are a few worshippers, but they are all in a particularly reverent frame of mind, and with deep attention are listening to the strictly prescribed Divine services. You hear the doleful, unhurried, truly desert singing, and you see how everything here is done decorously, in an orderly way, without rushing. Here there is none of the usual bustle of life. Each novice is permeated with a reverent attitude towards his work, and it can be sensed that he is not simply functioning, but serving. The very lighting of the church here is special - dim, attesting to the twilight night, and at the same time disposing one to a lofty, prayerful state. In a word, here there is truly another world, a world with a special order, and everything here truly reminds one of the desert. And so, with full interest and extraordinary attention, not feeling tired, I stood through Matins, and then the early Liturgy. After the Liturgy I served a Pannikhida at the grave of Elder Ambrose. Afterwards, after tea, we went to see Elder Anatole (Potapov).

We waited in the entrance room, where many people of every calling and station were already gathered. Out came Batiushka, short of stature, and so kind, joyous and bustling about. His face greatly reminded one of St. Seraphim, and straightway disposed one to him. He called us into his room, and conversed with us so affectionately and sympathetically. He spoke often and much; his speech was warm and heartfelt. His gaze was soft and kind, all aglow with joy. The soul of the one speaking with him would feel light and comforted from his glance and manner alone. At parting he gave us many leaflets, pictures and small icons. From Fr. Anatole we set out for the skete,

to Fr. Joseph.

Elder Joseph

Now this, in truth, is an elder; very old, emaciated, leaning with his whole body on his staff. His gaze is distinctive; his is an extraordinarily pure, heavenly gaze, filled with fatherly tenderness, affection, kindness and love. He speaks little, but powerfully, and each word of his falls deeply into one's soul and remains forever in one's memory. Even Fr. Ambrose said of him, "I have poured you wine diluted with water, but Fr. Joseph will pour you just pure wine." And in fact, Fr. Joseph's manner of speech, whether in writing or conversation, is always concise, short and curt. Here, truly, there is not a drop of water. Another characteristic feature of Fr. Joseph's speech is modesty. His counsels are always expressed in the optative [The grammatical verbal mood expressing wish or desire] mood: it would be good, or, it would be better if you did this; or, you might act thus, and so on. He avoided a firm tone, fearing, because of his modesty, to give himself away as clairvoyant when the one questioning him might wish to see him as such. Here, as an example, is an excerpt from a letter which I received from him:

"Let the widow Maria's son Sergei go to elementary school, and then she can keep him with her to work in the trade. He doesn't need to study much. It would be better if the maiden Syncletica lived with Maria. They would love one another, serve one another and bear one another's infirmities with patience. Here she would sooner receive salvation of soul than living alone. May the Lord have mercy on Peter and Melania and grant them a peaceful life. May the Lord reform Peter and help him in his business, and send patience to Melania. Let Peter pray to God, and then the Lord will help him..."

How briefly and concisely it is written, but at the same time, how powerfully! Someone has described it correctly, "Fr. Joseph says little, but in that little he expresses much."

I was only able to speak a little with Fr. Joseph, since at that time he was sick and it was beyond his strength to go out to see visitors. Among other things I told him that sometimes various thoughts attack me. He replied, "Pray to God: 'Lord Jesus Christ, drive away from me all indecent thoughts!' But don't fight against them yourself - place all your hope in the Lord. If you fall and grow faint, call out:

'Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am weak!' "I admit that this advice at first surprised me. I was bewildered - how is it that I am not to fight against thoughts? But after reflecting I understood the depth of wisdom in this simple counsel. Not to fight against thoughts means not to pay attention to them - let them leave just as they come. If you start to squabble with them, first, you'll lose precious time, and second, you'll be ensnared by them, since they'll take up arms against you in a whole regiment, surround you like a swarm of bees and wound you from all sides. But if, taking care of your business, you look to the Lord when faced with any temptation and call upon Him for help, you will be saved by this from entrapment by the enemy. This is how I understood the counsel of the wise Elder.

But now our dear Batiushka is no more. On May 9, 1911, he peacefully reposed in the Lord and departed to the heavenly abodes, leaving us who knew and loved him as orphans. How very many spiritual children he had in Holy Russia, whom he reared and nourished with his grace-filled words, whom he consoled, encouraged and strengthened in all of life's adversities, whom he healed from various wounds, both spiritual and bodily...

For example, one novice of the St. Isaac Convent of the Theotokos (in the Yaroslavl Province), Lydia Nedobrova, a spiritual daughter of Fr. Joseph, was dying. Before her death she was visited by a wondrous vision. She saw the Heavenly Queen and the Lord Himself with the choir of saints. But in an instant the joy that illumined her face was replaced by an expression of terror. The sick woman looked strangely upwards for a long time, as if waiting for something, and then joyfully crossed herself and said, "Glory to Thee, O Lord! Glory to Thee, O Lord! He entreated, he entreated - now I'm not afraid of anything; now I'll be all right."

When she was asked who was entreating, and for whom, she replied, "Fr. Joseph was, for me... Now I'll be all right, only I won't see the Elder here - I'm going to die soon. Write to him with my regards and thanks for everything." Then, gazing at a portrait of Fr. Ambrose, she added, "And this God-pleaser also prayed for me."

This is the kind of power Fr. Joseph's prayer had. Yes, prayer was his constant occupation; it was, one may say, his element. Despite the most serious illnesses, which confined him to his bed, he would fulfill his prayer rule without omissions. And, lying on his deathbed, to his

very last breath he did not cease doing the Jesus Prayer, fingering his prayer rope. His strength had already left him, the members of his body ceased to obey him, but he, dying, continued to make the effort to force his half-numb right hand to make the sign of the Cross over himself. This is why the prayer of this wondrous Elder had such miracle-working power.

This constant prayerful elevation of his mind and heart was clearly seen on the Elder's face, which was always so kind, bright and joyful, with an angelic smile. "It was enough for his bright face, with its angelic smile, to appear at the doorstep," related one of those close to the Elder, "for the wrinkles to disappear by themselves from my face, and my sorrow would cease before I could express it." "From the recollection alone of the expression on his face," said another, "my heart becomes more cheerful."

One priest (Fr. Paul Levashev of the Transfiguration Church in Gomel) testifies, according to his priestly conscience, that he saw the grace of God, in an overt way, resting upon the head and face of the Elder. Here is how he writes about this: "I entered his poor cell and saw that very old Elder, worn out by uninterrupted asceticism and prayer, barely able to raise himself up from his bed. At that time he was ill. We greeted one another, and an instant later I saw an unusual light around his head, about a foot in height, and also a broad ray of light which fell upon him from above, as if the ceiling of the cell had parted. The ray of light fell from heaven and was just like the light around his head. The Elder's face became filled with grace and he was smiling, so that I absolutely forgot all the questions which had been crowded into my head. Finally, I barely remembered what I had wanted to confess to him and I began, saying, 'Batiushka! I am a great sinner.' I hardly had time to say this, when in one moment his face became serious, and the light that had been pouring down upon him and surrounding his head vanished. This did not continue for long. Again the light began to shine around his head, and again the same ray of light appeared, but now several times brighter and stronger.

"I was unable to tear myself away from such a miraculous vision and said good-bye to the Elder ten times, and kept looking at his grace-filled face, illumined by an angelic smile, and by that unearthly light, with which I left him..."

"This light bears no resemblance to any kind of earthly light, such as sunlight, phosphorescent light, electrical light, moonlight, and so on. I have seen nothing similar in visible nature. I explain this vision to myself by the fact that the Elder had been in a strong prayerful state, and the grace of God had descended visibly upon His chosen one."

And now such a chosen one of God is no longer among us. Bitter tears were shed by all who surrounded the coffin of our dear Batiushka. All wept inconsolably. Especially bitter were the tears of the nuns of the Shamordino Convent, for whom the Elder had been a true comforter and a tenderly loving father, who took everything that concerned their convent to heart and always shared both their joy and sorrow. How good it had been for them with him! "Alas, now he's gone. We've lost him forever." Thus did one preacher conclude his remarkable funeral sermon, addressing the nuns. "Who will comfort you now; to whom will you disclose your sorrows; who will ease the grief of your hearts! Yes, your loss is great and incalculable, and only those who know what an Elder means in spiritual life can understand and appreciate it!" These words, addressed to the nuns of the Shamordino Convent, could be generally applied with equal force to all the spiritual children of Fr. Joseph. Truly, for all of them the death of such an Elder is an irreparable loss.

Elder Barsanuphius

After Fr. Joseph, we went to see Fr. Barsanuphius. This is a man of wisdom, a judicious counselor and a wise instructor. His face, with its radiant, candid, high forehead and penetrating gaze, testifies to his profound, sincere mind. He is highly educated and has a deep understanding of the works of the Holy Fathers. At the same time, he is endowed with a poetic gift - to his pen are attributed poems published in spiritual magazines under the pseudonym "The Pilgrim." In the world he held the rank of colonel, and was named Paul Ivanovich Plikhankov. When still in his prime, he suddenly forsook all the comforts of the world, disdained his brilliant worldly career, and exchanged his bright military dress uniform for a coarse cotton ryassa. For ten years he labored in stillness under the direction of the skete brethren. There was in the skete then a simple man who bore the obedience of gatekeeper. He was remarkable for his eternally good-humored nature, as well as for the fact that summer and winter he would sit at his post at the skete gates

without a hat. In the refectory he would mix all his food in one bowl, and would eat only for appearance's sake. They laughed at him good-naturedly, and he in turn accepted all their gibes amiably, while secretly always doing the Jesus Prayer. His name was Boris. This simple man was one of Fr. Barsanuphius' first teachers, who by his example gave him lessons in humility and obedience, which comprise the basics of monastic life.

At the time of the Japanese War, Fr. Barsanuphius was dispatched with the Tambov nursing detachment to the site of military operations. There he left behind a radiant memory, as a kind, selfless pastor and a wise guide in the matter of rendering salvific aid to the poor wounded soldiers.

After his return from the Far East, Fr. Barsanuphius was appointed skete Superior and raised to the rank of Abbot. From that time on, the doors of his cell were open to all who came, to all suffering and burdened by the afflictions and woes of life.

At first glance, Fr. Barsanuphius has an important and stern appearance, which suggests a certain inaccessibility. But it suffices only to hear his first words, and you immediately sense on his part the most intimate concern for you, as if he has known you for a long time and you are the closest, dearest person to him. And you straightway give yourself over entirely to him, frankly disclose to him all your afflictions, and without doubt trust him with your whole heart, with your whole soul. Yes, and he himself already knows your grief and sees your wound, and carefully, with the skill of an experienced physician, touches it with his healing hand.

Many, after just the first words of the Elder, throw themselves on their knees before him and shed bitter tears. They immediately feel in the depth of their heart that he has understood the whole abyss of their grief, and that only he - he alone - can understand them fully, sympathize with them and share with them all their unwept sorrow. Here words are no longer needed; here is a mysterious contact between souls which up to this time have been separated by both distance and situation, and by every other condition of life. These souls, which until now have not known one another, now live one through the other, one for the other, and intimately converse, comprehending one another perfectly.

Thus, all who come to Fr. Barsanuphius sense that before them stands a man made wise by much experience, capable of resolving all their doubts; a clairvoyant man, before whom are revealed all the hidden twists and the most elusive movements of the human soul, and all the most varied convolutions of the diverse paths of life. They say that once, several students came to Optina who did not believe in much, who doubted much, and who, naturally, did not believe the different stories about the Optina Elders, especially about Fr. Barsanuphius. And what happened? It was sufficient for them to visit Fr. Barsanuphius just once, to be absolutely charmed by him. Then they went to see him a second, third and fourth day - no longer out of idle curiosity, no longer to test him, but to receive edification, to hear his wise conversations, which resolve every doubt, and to learn that truth which reveals the real meaning of life.

Fr. Barsanuphius' reception room, like Fr. Joseph's, is divided into two halves: in one half women are received from the outside entrance, and in the other, from the inside entrance (through the skete gates), men are received. I had occasion to see Fr. Barsanuphius in both halves. I was summoned into the women's half by Fr. Barsanuphius himself, when the mother and daughter whom I accompanied went in to see him. Here I saw how the women, one after the other, each with tears in her eyes, revealed her sorrow before the Elder, and how his words, simple and sincere, were listened to by them with reverent attention, and how, like healing balsam, they softened and assuaged their sorrows. Here was the mother of a sick son standing before the Elder with her grief. The Elder consoled her and calmed her down, then picked up the boy and comforted him, embraced him, and pressed him to his heart. "Poor child! Poor child!" he could be heard to say. "How tormented you are! But the Lord will help. We have a doctor - he doesn't live far from us, only forty or fifty miles from here. Do you know who he is? It's St. Tikhon (of Kaluga). He has a spring, and in that spring all who come with faith receive healing from every infirmity."

Dismissing us, Fr. Barsanuphius wished to remain with the boy, and here, privately, he said a few words to him which will remain in the boy's memory forever, for the Elder touched upon that corner of his soul which he, to avoid a conflict with his conscience, tried to hide, not only from others, but even from himself - this was his sore spot.

This was enough to incline the boy to him and to awaken in him,

along with amazement, a certain sense of faith; for this boy, during the days of "the epidemic of liberation" [That is, the revolutionary disturbances of 1905], had been infected with the corrupt seed of religious unbelief and all manner of free thinking.

Thus did we visit the three chief Elders of Optina. With what feelings we left them! How pleasant our souls felt! Truly, these are wondrous Elders! These are three pillars by which the stronghold of the strict life of monastic asceticism is here upheld. These are three luminaries, lit by the Lord Himself, and set here upon a candle stand, so as to give light to the world and witness to the true light which shines in the holy Orthodox monasteries of Russia.

Grace-Filled Help

The Lord does wondrous works through His saints! All who come to the Elders receive here, in this holy monastery, either physical healing - in the sense of the alleviation of illnesses - or healing of soul, in the sense of spiritual renewal and rebirth, of spiritual illumination, enlightenment and consolation. And what incidents occur! We have heard how one novice, through a pre-death vision, was assured that Fr. Joseph had been interceding for her. But how many similar instances have been passed on by word of mouth when, by the prayers of the Elders, people have been delivered from misfortunes and dangers that threatened them, or even from certain death. As an example I shall present excerpts from a letter I received from a novice of the Shamordino Convent. Here is what she writes: "In the fourth year after I entered the convent, with the blessing of the Elder (Fr. Joseph) I left for my home to place my brother in a parish school and my mother in a convent. I wrote to the Elder from home, and he replied, 'Help your mother, finish your business, and come here with her.' But circumstances forced me to return alone. I came to see the Elder and told him everything, but he said, 'It's dangerous for her to live there.' And what happened? That very year, in our other home, four people were murdered. More than a year went by when one of the criminals was caught committing a petty theft and was sent to prison. There he confessed that he had been a participant in the murder of our four tenants. He was brought to our house and showed them everything - where they had cut through the door, where they had killed whom - everything was correct. In addition, he said, 'We went over to the widow Timoshchenkovas house and wanted to capture her while she was

asleep, but when we went over to the window we saw that she wasn't sleeping - she would either be sitting on the couch playing with a cat or doing something else, and we were seized with fear.' This was repeated several times, and they finally went over to our tenants.

"But it's amazing - my mother never liked to hold a cat in her arms. Obviously, that is how she looked to the thieves. Wasn't it the Elders prayers that protected my mother? There were four tenants, while my mother was alone with a little boy, and there were six thieves. Everyone was astonished."

Yet another Shamordino sister related the following incident: "Once, my son-in-law wanted to celebrate his nameday in Optina. Although his wife wouldn't let him, he stood his ground. On the eve of his nameday he came to see Fr. Joseph and talked to him about his desire to spend his nameday in Optina, but the Elder said, 'No - take the early train home, no matter what happens; there's a powerful storm.' He gave him a prosphoron that had the names of five women attached. My son-in-law didn't want to leave at all, but the Elder forcibly led him out. He arrived home. and his wife and guests were surprised, but he handed over the prosphoron and laughed that there were five women's names attached to it. But what happened? At midnight a fire broke out, and a powerful storm came up. Five women pounded at the door with all their might. Finally their knocking was heard. My son-in-law with his family jumped out in whatever they were wearing, but they managed to put out the fire and save their shop. If my son-in-law had not been home, the house probably would have burned down. But it's amazing - those five women who knocked on the door bore the same names that were attached to Fr. Joseph's prosphoron."

Here is something that was written by a greatly grieved mother, who, in all her sorrows, lived only for the consolation of the Optina Elders. Her beloved son fell hopelessly ill. All the doctors identified it as consumption in its last stages. "I said to the doctor," she wrote, "'For God's sake, help! In the spring you could send him for *kumiss* [a drink made from fermented mare's milk, which was used therapeutically in resorts], or, as a last resort, to some sanatorium.' 'No,' he said, 'nothing will help.' What was I to do? I became altogether exhausted from grief, but the Lord gave me strength. I concealed everything from my son. After arriving home, I left on the very next day for

Optina. At first I came to see Fr. Anatole, and related my grief to him. Of course, he began to console me, the sinner, and said, 'Go to Fr. Joseph.'

"I said to him, 'But he's sick and doesn't receive anyone.'

"'No, go! I myself will request that he see you.'

"He made his request. I came to Fr. Joseph, and he was utterly weak. I began to sob before him and told him about my grief. The Elder looked at me so affectionately and said, 'Consumption! Make him pills from black cobbler's pitch about the size of a pea and give him one every morning and evening. The Lord will help, and he'll get well.' All the grief simply flew from me. He blessed me, and I went away from him consoled. Fr. Anatole met me and asked, 'Well?' I recounted everything to him, but he said to me. 'Now see that you go to Fr. Barsanuphius.'

"I said to him, 'Batiushka, I'm so consoled now.'

"But he again said, 'No - go, go.' I didn't want to go to him, because I needed to go to my confessor, Fr. Sergius. My niece was with me, and I sent her to Fr. Barsanuphius, while I myself went to Fr. Sergius. When I left him I met my niece, and she said to me, 'Auntie, Fr. Barsanuphius is asking for you.'

"I said to her, 'But he doesn't even know me - how can he be asking for me?'

"She said, 'He asked, "Where is your relative? I need to have a talk with her.'" This surprised me. I went to the skete, but the reception of visitors had already ended. The cell-attendant advised me to come the next day. I came, but the Elder was busy. I came three times and left with nothing. I sat there for a long time, but without result, and at six the next morning I had to go home. I sat there, agitated, and thought, 'What am I waiting for? I've been to the other Elders, and it's enough.' As soon as I wanted to go, I looked and the door opened, and the Elder came out with the words, 'Well, my child, tell me your sorrow.' I started sobbing, and began incoherently to tell him about my son's illness. He took me into his prayer room and allowed me to calm down, and questioned me about my whole life. Then he said, 'Shame on you! The Lord is calling you, but you run away from him. That's not good.'

"I said, 'I admit that it's not good, but I don't have the strength.'

"He said, 'Your son will get well. Take some water from the springs of St. Seraphim and St. Tikhon and every morning let your son wash his chest and back with the water, with a prayer to the God-pleasers.' My son fulfilled all of this - both Fr. Joseph's advice regarding the pills and Fr. Barsanuphius' regarding the holy water. And, glory be to God, he became well, and recovered to such a degree that he soon married. I once went to see the doctor that had treated my son. During his conversation with me he made mention of my son as though he were dead, but I didn't understand him well and said, 'After we saw you I left for Moscow, and there they diagnosed consumption.'

"Yes,' he said, 'I just didn't want to worry you - it was impossible to help him, anyway.'

"I said to him, 'How was it impossible? He's well now, and married.'

"From surprise the doctor even jumped up from his chair, saying, 'Is it possible that he's alive?'

"Yes,' I said, 'and he's feeling fine.' The doctor then said that, aside from a miracle, there had been no hope at all. He asked who had treated him, and what had helped. I said, 'Optina.'

"Yes,' he responded, 'that Optina helps quite a few!'"

These are the kinds of wondrous miracles that are performed here in Optina! The remarkable thing about the last incident is the admission of the doctor himself, and his testimony that Optina helps many.

Thus passed the first day of our stay in the holy monastery - in visiting the Elders and conversing with them. This was September 12. In two days would be the Feast of the Exaltation of the Honorable Cross of the Lord. I had a desire to serve at the Divine Liturgy on the Feast, here in this holy place. For this I needed to ask the permission of the Archimandrite (Fr. Xenophont). I went to see him. He didn't force me to wait long. He came out unceremoniously, without any importance, like an ordinary monk. In appearance he was quite old, of medium height, his face a bit dark in complexion. His gaze was somewhat commanding, but at the same time simple

and good-hearted. It is said about him that he is a man of lofty life and secret *podvigs* [ascetic labors]; and, in fact, he is an example of the strict fulfillment of the monastery rule. It turned out that for an outside priest to serve is possible only with the permission of the diocesan bishop. I wrote a request to him and left money for a return telegram. The Archimandrite promised to send my request immediately with a novice who was going to Kaluga. After this I asked permission to give a sermon at the Divine services, to which the Archimandrite said jokingly, "Just don't scold us too much if you see something bad."

"What do you mean?" said I. "Is it possible that I could say something bad about your holy monastery? Yes, truly it is a holy monastery!" What modesty! - I thought. In actual fact, everything I saw here in the course of only one day made the highest impression. I was amazed and charmed by everything.

The entire order of monastic life here is distinctive. Here all the monks are always at their work - you won't see anyone spending time idly. Each one walks with a modest gait, his head lowered, not glancing to the side, immersed in himself - occupied with his own meditation, his own inward activity. When one meets either novices or monks, they make the same respectful low bow. They approach a priest for a blessing, courteously greeting him: "Bless, Batiushka!" Hieromonks address priests with the same greeting, exchanging a kiss in brotherly fashion. Both this affectionate, good-hearted greeting and this sincere, brotherly kiss are striking to the unaccustomed visitor. It seems as though everyone meets you and receives you here like an old acquaintance, like the most intimate and dear guest, and you don't even know how to respond to this courteousness, this sincere politeness, this heartfelt affection. You immediately feel as though you were in another, special world, as though a different atmosphere surrounded you. Here there is a different relationship between people, a different view of things...

On the eve of the Feast I entered the church right before the All-Night Vigil. Two ladies approached me for a blessing. A minute later I looked and they were coming over again, but with them there was another person, solidly built, with an intelligent, open face. "Here, Seryozha, is the Batiushka from Tambov," they said, introducing him to me. He asked my name, and then threw his arms around me, kissing my shoulders and face so strongly, so ardently, as

if we had once been the closest of friends and had suddenly and unexpectedly met after a long separation. "It was you who wrote 'Recollections of the Sarov Celebration?' Then allow me to kiss you again and again!"

"And allow me, at last," I said, "to know whom I have the honor of seeing before me."

"Sergei Alexandrovich Nilus," came the reply.

"In that case, allow me to express my deep joy on the occasion of our unexpected acquaintance, and to declare my deep gratitude to you for your feelings towards me. But where could you have gotten my little book?"

"I was at the Archimandrite's yesterday, right after you, and he offered me your book to read, which you had given him." There followed a further amiable exchange of ideas and a mutual outpouring of our sympathies and interests. An influx of new feelings filled my soul with fresh emotion.

Now the All-night Vigil began, and before me was revealed a new world, a world of new and better thoughts, a world of the very best feelings. An entire series of pictures unfolded, one more solemn than another, one more splendid than another. The interior appearance of the church and its magnificent beauty corresponded to the spiritual celebration that was taking place.

They began to sing "*Bless the Lord, O my soul.*" (Ps. 103) and my soul began to tremble; it stood as if at attention and came into an ordered state, in order to worthily glorify the Lord. The joyous and triumphant singing captured one's whole attention. "*Blessed is the man.*" (Ps. 1) was sung in Kievan chant. This was the same hymn and the same type of chant that I had heard sung by the metropolitanate choir in St. Petersburg. There had been such harmony and technique there... But here - here there was soul in everything, all aflame, all afire with love for the Lord. "*Serve ye the Lord with fear, and rejoice in Him with trembling*" (Ps. 2:11). How sincere this proclamation was on the lips of the singers! Yes, here they truly served the Lord, but they served with reverent attention, with fear and trembling.

The time arrived for the reading of the *paremia* [selections from the Old Testament or Apostolic Epistles read at Vespers on feast days]. At the

Archimandrite's suggestion I went up to read. How the contents of the reading corresponded to my own state! Therefore I read them with particular diligence and enthusiasm. *"Arise, shine forth, O Jerusalem; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and His glory shall be seen upon thee"* (Is. 60:1-2). Thus did I read. And I wanted to say, along with the Prophet: Arise, shine forth, O holy monastery, for the glory of the Lord has risen upon thee. And when darkness shall cover the earth and gross darkness shall cover the people, may the Lord preserve thee pure and unsullied, and may the glory of the Lord abide in thee unto the ages...

They began to sing *"Praise ye the name of the Lord"* (Ps. 134) in Kievan chant - lively, loudly, joyfully, triumphantly. The waves of festive sounds could be felt as they poured out throughout the whole spacious church and flew swiftly up to the very top of the vaults, reaching to heaven itself. And one's soul strained after them. How bright it was all around, and how joyful and pleasant one's soul felt. At that moment I happened to glance at Fr. Anatole. His face was extraordinary: radiant and changing expression every minute.

Now they sang the irmos of the Canon: *Inscribing the invincible weapon of the Cross upon the waters...* What a wonderful melody! - so ancient and reminiscent of the desert. How moving and touching it was when sung by the singers here! *Glory to God in the highest...* the heavenly, angelic hymn was heard. How well it was sung on earth, in this holy church, by the lips of these earthly angels! Then came the rite of the Exaltation of the Honorable Cross of the Lord, which is celebrated here so solemnly. Its solemn nature is expressed in the fact that everything here is celebrated with the most reverent attention to all the details of the rite. This deep reverence which permeated those who were celebrating the solemn rite was, in a mysterious way, transmitted or communicated to all those present. A picture of reverent quiet could be observed, a picture of profound stillness, as if it were the stillness of Golgotha itself. Now the cross was laid upon an analogion adorned with flowers, and everyone venerated it. I followed this wondrous picture from the altar, as the monks decorously and piously came up to the cross...

It was about one o'clock in the morning when the Vigil ended. I was to serve at the early Liturgy at 5:30. Not much time remained, and I

didn't feel sleepy. My soul was filled with holy impressions, and I wanted to talk and talk about all I had seen and heard. And [those of us in the room] talked, each sharing his impressions, until three o'clock. Now there was no time to sleep. However, without undressing I lay on my bed thinking to doze off, even for an hour. But I didn't doze off. Having lain there for a little while, I arose, fearing to sleep through the service. I washed, tidied myself up, and began to read the Rule before Communion. Praying along with me, listening to the rule, was one young woman who was preparing for Communion. She was an orphan. In her sorrows she lived only for Optina: here was all her comfort, all her consolation. How sweet the prayer was in this holy place, at such an unusual time, amidst the quiet of the night!

The Liturgy began. Need I say with what reverence, with what fervor I served the Divine service after all these impressions? At the late Liturgy I was to give a sermon. And so I went out. I wanted to speak out, to disclose to the whole world the impressions that seized me here in Optina. I could not restrain myself and spoke with unusual enthusiasm, concluding with this salutation: "Lift up thine eyes, O holy monastery, and see - for lo, they come to thee from the west and from the north and from the sea and from the east to behold thy spiritual goodness, to delight here in thy spiritual sweetness! Accept this salutation and gratitude from all these strangers, for all that Joy which has consoled us here, for all that good which we have received here. May the Lord preserve thee for many years to the joy and consolation of all Orthodox Christians!"

With these words I now conclude my narrative.

[Go to the top](#)

From "The Orthodox Word," # 211

Holy Protection Russian Orthodox Church

2049 Argyle Ave. Los Angeles, California 90068

Editor: Bishop Alexander (Mileant).

(optina_e.doc, 09-08-2000).

Edited by	Date
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Xenia Shin	09-01-2000