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Bishop Kallistos (Ware)

# The Spiritual Guide In Orthodox Christianity

## More important than all possible books

If we are climbing a mountain for the first time, we need to follow a known route; and we also need to have with us, as companion and guide, someone who has been up before and is familiar with the way. To serve as such a companion and guide is precisely the role of the "abba" or spiritual father — of the one whom the Greeks call *geron* or *geronta* and the Russians *starets*, a title which in both languages means "old man" or "elder."<sup>1</sup>

The importance of obedience to a *geron* is underlined from the very first beginnings of Eastern Christian monasticism. It is clearly evident, for example, in the sayings attributed to St Antony of Egypt:

I know of monks who fell after much toil and lapsed into madness, because they trusted in their own works and did not give due heed to the commandment of him who says, "Ask your father, and he will tell you" (Dent 32:7). If possible, for every step that a monk takes, for every drop of water that he drinks in his cell, he should entrust the decision to the old men, to avoid making some mistake in what he does.<sup>2</sup>

The need for spiritual guidance is a master-theme throughout the *Apophthegmata* or *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*:

The old men used to say: "If you see a young monk climbing up to heaven by his own will, grasp him by the feet and throw him down, for this is to his profit... If a person places his faith in someone else and surrenders himself to the other in full submission, he has no need to attend to the commandment of God, but he needs only to entrust his entire will into the hands of his father. Then he will be blameless before God, for God

This figure of the *starets*, so prominent in the first generations of Egyptian monasticism, has retained its full significance up to the present day in Orthodox Christendom. "There is one thing more important than all possible books and ideas," states a Russian layman of the nineteenth century, the Slavophil Ivan Kireyevsky, "and that is the example of an Orthodox *starets*, before whom you can lay each of your thoughts and from whom you can hear, not a more or less valuable private opinion, but the judgement of the Holy Fathers. God be praised, such *staretsi* have not yet disappeared from our Russia."<sup>4</sup> And a priest of the Russian emigration in the twentieth century, Father Alexander Elchaninov, writes: "Their field of action is unlimited... they are undoubtedly saints, recognized as such by the people. I feel that in our tragic days it is precisely through this means that faith will survive and be strengthened in our country."<sup>5</sup>

### **The spiritual guide as a "charismatic" figure**

What entitles someone to act as spiritual guide? How and by whom is he or she appointed?

To this there is a simple answer. The elder or *starets* is essentially a "charismatic" and prophetic figure, accredited for her or his task by the direct action of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual guides are ordained, not by human hands, but by the hand of God. They are an expression of the Church as "event" or "happening," rather than of the Church as institution.<sup>6</sup>

There is, however, no sharp line of demarcation between the prophetic and the institutional elements in the life of the Church; each grows out of the other and is intertwined with it. The ministry of the *starets*, itself charismatic, is related to a clearly-defined function within the institutional framework of the Church, the office of priest-confessor. In the Orthodox tradition, the right to hear confessions is not granted automatically at ordination. Before acting as confessor, a priest requires authorization from his bishop; and in the Greek Church, at any rate, only a minority of the clergy are so authorized. Yet, although the sacrament of confession is certainly an appropriate occasion for spiritual direction, the ministry of the *starets* is by no means identical with that of a confessor. The *starets* gives advice, not only at confession, but on many other occasions. Moreover, while the confessor must always be a priest, the *starets* may be a simple monk, not in holy orders, or even a layman; the ministry of eldership may also be exercised by a nun or a laywoman, for in the Orthodox tradition there are spiritual mothers as well as spiritual fathers.<sup>7</sup> The *starets*, whether ordained or lay, frequently speaks with an insight and authority that only a very few confessor-priests possess.

If, however, spiritual fathers or mothers are not appointed by an official act of the hierarchy, how then do they come to embark on their ministry? Sometimes an existing *starets* will designate his own successor. In this way, at certain monastic centers such as Optino in nineteenth-century Russia, there was established an "apostolic succession" of spiritual masters. In other cases, the *starets* emerges spontaneously, without any act of external authorization. As Elchaninov says, they are "recognized as such by the people." Within the continuing life of the Christian community, it becomes plain to the believing people of God—which is the true guardian of Holy Tradition—that this or that person has the gift of spiritual

It will be noted that the initiative comes, as a rule, not from the master but from the disciples. It would be perilously presumptuous for someone to say in his own heart or to others, "Come and submit yourselves to me; I am a *starets*, I have the grace of the Spirit." What happens, rather, is that — without any claims being made by the person himself — others approach him, seeking his advice or asking to live permanently under his care. At first, he will probably send them away, telling them to consult someone else. Eventually the moment comes when he no longer sends them away but accepts their coming to him as a disclosure of the will of God. Thus it is his spiritual children who reveal the elder to himself.

The figure of the *geronta* or *starets* illustrates the two interpenetrating levels on which the earthly Church exists and functions. On the one hand, there is the external, official and hierarchical level, with its geographical organization into dioceses and parishes, its great centers — Rome, Constantinople, Moscow, and Canterbury — and its "apostolic succession" of bishops. On the other hand, there is the inner, spiritual and "charismatic" level, to which the *startsi* primarily belong. Here the chief centers are, for the most part, not the great primatial and metropolitan sees but certain remote hermitages, in which there shine forth a few personalities richly endowed with spiritual gifts. Most *startsi* have possessed no exalted status in the formal hierarchy of the Church; yet the influence of a simple priest-monk such as St Seraphim of Sarov exceeded that of any patriarch or bishop in nineteenth-century Orthodoxy. In this fashion, alongside the apostolic succession of the episcopate, there exists also the apostolic succession of the saints and Spirit-bearers. Both types of succession are essential for the true functioning of the Body of Christ, and it is through their interaction that the life of the Church on earth is accomplished.

### **Flight and return: the preparation of the spiritual guide**

Although spiritual guides are not ordained or appointed for their task, it is certainly necessary that they should be *prepared*. There is a classic pattern for this preparation, a movement of flight and return such as may be clearly discerned in the lives of St Antony the Great and St Seraphim of Sarov, to take but two examples separated from each other by fifteen centuries.

St Antony's life falls sharply into two halves, with his fifty-fifth year as the watershed. The years from early manhood to the age of fifty-five were his time of preparation, spent in an ever-increasing seclusion from the world as he withdrew further and further into the desert. According to his biographer, he eventually passed twenty years in an abandoned fort, meeting no one whatsoever. When he had reached the age of fifty-five, his friends could contain their curiosity no longer, and broke down the entrance. St Antony came out and, for the remaining half century of his long life, without abandoning the life of a hermit he made himself freely available to others, acting as "a physician given by God to Egypt," to use the phrase of his biographer, St Athanasius. "He was beloved by all," Athanasius states, "and all desired to have him as their father." Observe that the transition from enclosed anchorite to spiritual father came about, not through any initiative on St Antony's part, but through the action of others. It should also be noted that Antony was a lay monk, never ordained to the priesthood.

St Seraphim followed a comparable path. After sixteen years spent in the

monastery, as a recluse enclosed in his cell. During part of these twenty years he met occasional visitors, but at other times his isolation was almost total: at the start of his time in the forest he spent a thousand days on the stump of a tree and the thousand nights of those days on a rock, devoting himself to unceasing prayer; for the last three years in his forest hut he spoke to no one; and during his three years of enclosure in the monastery he did not go to church even to receive Holy Communion, but the sacrament was brought to him at the door of his cell. Then in 1813, at the age of fifty-three, he ended his seclusion, devoting the last two decades of his life to the ministry of *starchestvo* (eldership) and receiving all who came to him, whether monks or laypeople. He did nothing to advertise himself or to call others to him; it was the others who took the initiative in approaching him, but when they came — sometimes hundreds or even thousands in a single day — he did not send them empty away.<sup>9</sup>

Without this intense ascetic preparation, without this radical flight into solitude, would St Antony or St Seraphim have been able to guide and inspire their contemporaries to the same degree? Not that they withdrew with the specific and conscious purpose of becoming the teachers and guides of others. They fled, not in order to prepare themselves for any such task, but simply out of a consuming desire to be alone with God. God accepted their love, but then He sent them back as instruments of healing in the world from which they had withdrawn. Even had He never sent them back, their flight would still have been supremely creative and valuable to society; for nuns and monks help the world not primarily by anything that they do and say but by what they are, by the state of unceasing prayer which — for some at any rate among them — has become identical with their innermost being. Had St Antony and St Seraphim done nothing but pray in solitude they would still have been serving others to the highest degree. As things turned out, however, God ordained that they should also serve them in a more direct fashion. Yet this direct and visible service was not their original aim: it was a side-effect that they had not themselves intended or initially envisaged, an outward consequence of the inner and invisible service which they were already rendering through their prayer.

"Acquire a peaceful spirit," said St Seraphim, "and then thousands of others around you will be saved."<sup>10</sup> Such is the pattern of spiritual fatherhood or motherhood. Establish yourself in God; then you can bring others to His presence. Each must learn to be alone, and so in the stillness of their own heart they will begin to hear the wordless speech of the Spirit, thus discovering the truth about themselves and about God. Then their word to others will be a word of power, because it is a word out of silence.

Shaped in this way by the encounter with God in solitude, the *starets* is able to heal by his very presence. He guides and forms others, not primarily by words of advice but by his companionship, by the living and specific example which he sets. He teaches as much by his stillness as by his speech, by his very presence as much as by any word of counsel that he utters. That is why Abba Pambo saw no reason to say anything to Archbishop Theophilus of Alexandria: "If he isn't edified by my silence," observed the old man, "then he won't be edified by my words."<sup>11</sup> A story

remained completely silent, without putting any questions. After a long while, Abba Antony said to him, 'See, you have been in the habit of coming to me all this time, and yet you do not ask me any questions.' And the other replied, 'Father, it is enough for me just to look at you.'" <sup>12</sup>

The real journey of the *starets*, however, is not spatially into the desert, but spiritually into the heart. External solitude, however valuable, is not indispensable, and a person may learn to stand alone before God while yet continuing to pursue a life of active service in the midst of society. The story of the Alexandrian doctor who was the equal of St Antony, and who all day long sang the Thrice-Holy Hymn with the angels, <sup>13</sup> shows us that the mystical and "angelic" life is possible in the city as well as the desert. Unceasing prayer of the heart is no monopoly of the eremitic solitary; for people such as the Alexandrian doctor have accomplished the inner journey without severing their outward links with the community.

This pattern of flight and return, then, is not to be understood in too literal and clear-cut a way. The two stages need not necessarily be expressed in external and spatial terms; and by the same token the flight and return are not always sharply distinguished in temporal sequence. Take, for example, the case of St Seraphim's younger contemporary, St Ignaty Brianchaninov. Trained originally as an army officer, he then withdrew to a monastery; but after only four years in monasticism he was appointed at the early age of twenty-six to take charge of a busy and influential community close to the heart of St Petersburg. After twenty-four years as abbot, he was consecrated bishop. Four years later he resigned, to spend the remaining six years of his life as a hermit. Thus in St Ignaty's case a long period of active pastoral work and spiritual fatherhood preceded the period of his anachoretic seclusion. When he was originally made abbot, he must surely have felt ill-prepared. His secret withdrawal into the heart was undertaken continuously during the many years in which he administered a monastery and a diocese; but it did not receive an exterior expression until the very end of his life. The life of St Theophan the Recluse followed the same pattern: first an active pastorate, then the hermit's cell. <sup>14</sup>

St Ignaty's career may serve as a paradigm to many of us at the present time, even though we are conscious of falling far short of his level of spiritual achievement. Under the pressure of outward circumstances and probably without clearly realizing what is happening to us, we assume the responsibilities of teaching, preaching and pastoral counseling, while lacking any deep knowledge of the desert and its creative silence. But through instructing others we ourselves perhaps begin to learn. Slowly we recognize our powerlessness to heal the wounds of humanity solely through philanthropic programs, common sense and psychoanalysis. Our self-dependence is broken down, we appreciate our own inadequacy, and so we start to understand what Christ meant by the "one thing that is necessary" (Lk 10:42). That is the moment when a person may by the divine mercy start to advance along the path of the *starets*. Through our pastoral experience, through our anguish over the pain of others, we are brought to undertake the journey inwards and to seek the hidden treasure-house of the Kingdom, where alone a genuine solution to the world's problems can be found. No

fatherhood or motherhood. Perhaps we shall never outwardly lead the life of a monastic recluse or a hermit — that often rests with circumstances outside our own control — but what is supremely important is that each should see the need to be a hermit of the heart.

### **The three gifts of the spiritual guide**

Three gifts in particular distinguish the spiritual guide. The first is *insight and discernment (diakrisis)*, the ability to perceive intuitively the secrets of another's heart, to understand the hidden depths of which the other does not speak and is usually unaware. The spiritual father or mother penetrates beneath the conventional gestures and subterfuges whereby we conceal our true personality from others and from ourselves; and, beyond all these trivialities, she or he comes to grips with the unique person made in the image and likeness of God. This power of discernment is spiritual rather than psychic; it is not simply a happy knack of hitting the nail on the head, nor yet a kind of extra-sensory perception or clairvoyance, but it is the fruit of grace, presupposing concentrated prayer and an unremitting ascetic struggle.

With this gift of insight there goes the ability to use words with power. As each person comes before him, the *starets* or *geronta* knows immediately and specifically what it is that this particular individual needs to hear. Today, by virtue of computers and photocopying machines, we are inundated with words as never before in human history; but alas! for the most part these are conspicuously *not* words uttered with power.<sup>15</sup> The *starets*, on the other hand, uses few words, and sometimes none at all; but, by these few words or by his silence, he is often able to alter the entire direction of another's life. At Bethany Christ used three words only: "Lazarus, come out" (Jn 11:43); and yet these three words, spoken with power, were sufficient to bring the dead back to life. In an age when language has been shamefully trivialized, it is vital to rediscover the power of the word; and this means rediscovering the nature of silence, not just as a pause in the midst of our talk, but as one of the primary realities of existence. Most teachers and preachers surely talk far too much; the true *starets* is distinguished by an austere economy of language.<sup>16</sup>

Yet, for a word to possess power, it is necessary that there should be not only one who speaks with the genuine authority of personal experience, but also one who listens with attention and eagerness. If we question a *geronta* out of idle curiosity, it is likely that we will receive little benefit; but if we approach him with ardent faith and deep hunger, the word that we hear may transfigure our whole being. The words of the *startsi* are for the most part simple in verbal expression and devoid of literary artifice; to those who read them in a superficial way, they will seem jejune and banal.

The elder's gift of insight is exercised primarily through the practice known as the "disclosure of thoughts" (*logismoi*). In early Eastern monasticism the young monk used to go daily to his spiritual father and lay before him all the thoughts which had come to him during the day. This disclosure of thoughts includes far more than a confession of sins, since the novice also speaks of those ideas and impulses which may seem innocent to him, but in which the spiritual father may

so deprives them of their power to harm. The purpose of the disclosure is not juridical, to secure absolution from guilt, but its aim is self-knowledge, that we may see ourselves as we truly are.

The principle underlying the disclosure of thoughts is clearly summed up in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*: "If unclean thoughts trouble you, do not hide them but tell them at once to your spiritual father and condemn them. The more we conceal our thoughts, the more they multiply and gain strength... [But] once an evil thought is revealed, it is immediately dissipated... Whoever discloses his thoughts is quickly healed."<sup>17</sup>

If we cannot or will not bring out into the open a *logismos*, a secret fantasy or fear or temptation, then it possesses power over us. But if with God's help and with the assistance of our spiritual guide, we bring the thought out from the darkness into the light, its influence begins to wither away. Having exposed the *logismos*, we are then in a position to deal with it, and the process of healing can begin. The method proposed here by the early monks has interesting similarities with the techniques of modern psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. But the early monks had worked out this method fifteen centuries before Freud and Jung! There is, of course, an important difference: the early monks did not employ the notion of the unconscious in the way that modern psychology does, even though they recognized that with our conscious understanding we are usually aware of only a small part of ourselves.

Endowed as he is with discernment, the spiritual father does not merely wait for a person to reveal himself, but takes the initiative in revealing to the other many thoughts of which the other is not yet aware. When people came to St Seraphim of Sarov, he often answered their difficulties before they had time to put their perplexities before him. On many occasions the answer at first seemed quite irrelevant, and even absurd and irresponsible; for what St Seraphim answered was not the question his visitor had consciously in mind, but the one which the visitor ought to have been asking. In all this St Seraphim relied on the inner light of the Holy Spirit. He found it important, he explained, not to work out in advance what he was going to say; in that case, his words would represent merely his own human judgment, which might well be in error, and not the judgment of God.<sup>18</sup>

In St Seraphim's eyes, the relationship between *starets* and spiritual child is stronger even than death, and he therefore urged his children to continue their disclosure of thoughts to him after his departure to the next life. These are the words which, by his own instructions, were written on his tomb: "When I am no more, come to me at my grave, and the more often, the better. Whatever weighs on your soul, whatever may have happened to you, whatever sorrows you have, come to me as if I were alive and, kneeling on the ground, cast all your bitterness upon my grave. Tell me everything and I shall listen to you, and all the sorrow will fly away from you. And as you spoke to me when I was alive, do so now. For to you I am alive, and I shall be forever."<sup>19</sup>

The second gift of the spiritual father or mother is *the ability to love others and to make others' sufferings their own*. Of one elder mentioned in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, it is briefly and simply recorded: "He possessed love, and many

loving compassion, would not be creative but destructive; if we cannot love others, we will have little power to heal them.

Loving others involves suffering with and for them; such is the literal sense of the word "compassion." "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal 6:2): the spiritual father or mother is the one *par excellence* who bears the burdens of others. "A *starets*," writes Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*, "is one who takes your soul, your will into his soul and into his will."<sup>21</sup> It is not enough for him merely to offer advice in a detached way. He is also required to take up the soul of his spiritual children into his own soul, their life into his life. It is his task to pray for them, and his constant intercession on their behalf is more important to them than any words of counsel.<sup>22</sup> It is his task likewise to assume their sorrows and their sins, to take their guilt upon himself, and to answer for them at the Last Judgment. St Barsanuphius of Gaza insists to his spiritual children, "As God Himself knows, there is not a second or an hour when I do not have you in my mind and in my prayers... I take upon myself the sentence of condemnation against you, and by the grace of Christ, I will not abandon you, either in this age or in the Age to come."<sup>23</sup> In the words of Dostoevsky's *starets* Zosima, "There is only one way of salvation, and that is to make yourself responsible for the sins of all ... to make yourself responsible in all sincerity for everything and everyone."<sup>24</sup> The ability of the elder to support and strengthen others is measured exactly by the extent of his willingness to adopt this way of salvation.

Yet the relation between the spiritual father and his children is not one-sided. Though he takes the burden of their guilt upon himself and answers for them before God, he cannot do this effectively unless they themselves are struggling wholeheartedly on their own behalf. Once a brother came to St Antony of Egypt and said: "Pray for me." But the old man replied: "Neither will I take pity on you nor will God, unless you make some effort of your own."<sup>25</sup>

When considering the love of the guide for the disciple, it is important to give full meaning to the word "father" or "mother" in the title "spiritual father" or "spiritual mother." As the father and mother in an ordinary family are joined to their offspring in mutual love, so it should also be within the "charismatic" family of the elder. Needless to say, since the bond between elder and disciples is a relationship not according to the flesh but in the Holy Spirit, the wellspring of human affection, without being ruthlessly repressed, has to be transfigured; and this transfiguration may sometimes take forms which, to an outside observer, seem somewhat inhuman. It is recounted, for example, how a young monk looked after his elder, who was gravely ill, for twelve years without interruption. Never once in that period did his elder thank him or so much as speak one word of kindness to him. Only on his death-bed did the old man remark to the assembled brethren, "He is an angel and not a man."<sup>26</sup> Such stories are valuable as an indication of the need for spiritual detachment, but they are hardly typical. An uncompromising suppression of all outward tokens of affection is not characteristic of the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, still less of the two Old Men of Gaza, Barsanuphius and

possessed by so many of the *startsi*, is one aspect of this power. More generally, the *starets* helps his disciples to perceive the world as God created it and as God desires it once more to be. The true elder is one who discerns the universal presence of the Creator throughout creation, and assists others to discern it likewise. He brings to pass, in himself and in others, the transformation of which William Blake speaks: "If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite."<sup>27</sup> For the one who dwells in God, there is nothing mean and trivial: he or she sees everything in the light of Mount Tabor. A momentary glimpse of what this signifies is provided in the account by Nicolas Motovilov of his conversation with St Seraphim of Sarov, when Nicolas saw the face of the *starets* shining with the brilliancy of the mid-day sun, while the blinding light radiating from his body illuminated the snow-covered trees of the forest glade around them.<sup>28</sup>

### **Obedience and freedom**

Such are, by God's grace, the gifts of the *starets*. But what of the spiritual child? How does he or she contribute to the mutual relationship between guide and disciple?

Briefly, what the disciple offers is sincere and willing; obedience. As a classic example, there is the story in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* about the monk who was told to plant a dry stick in the sand and to water it daily. So distant was the spring from his cell that he had to leave in the evening to fetch the water and he only returned in the following morning. For three years he patiently fulfilled his abba's command. At the end of this period, the stick suddenly put forth leaves and bore fruit. The abba picked the fruit, took it to the church, and invited the monks to eat, saying, "Take and eat the fruit of obedience."<sup>29</sup>

Another example of obedience is the monk Mark, who while copying a manuscript was suddenly called by his abba; so immediate was his response that he did not even complete the circle of the letter O that he was writing. On another occasion, as they walked together, his abba saw a small pig; testing Mark, he said, "Do you see that buffalo, my child?" "Yes, father," replied Mark. "And you see how elegant its horns are?" "Yes, father," he answered once more without demur.<sup>30</sup> Abba Joseph of Panepho, following a similar policy, tested the obedience of his disciples by assigning paradoxical and even scandalous tasks, and only if they complied would he then give them sensible commands.<sup>31</sup> Another *geron* instructed his disciple to steal things from the cells of the brethren;<sup>32</sup> yet another told his disciple (who had not been entirely truthful with him) to throw his son into the furnace.<sup>33</sup>

At this point it is surely necessary to state clearly certain serious objections. Stories of the kind that we have just reported are likely to make a deeply ambivalent impression upon a modern reader. Do they not describe the kind of behavior that we may perhaps reluctantly admire but would scarcely wish to imitate? What has happened, we may ask with some indignation, to "the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom 8:21)?

is to be obeyed without any further discussion? To interpret the mutual relationship between the disciple and the spiritual mother or father in such a manner as this seems dangerous for both of them. It reduces the disciple to an infantile and even subhuman level, depriving her or him of all power of judgment and moral choice; and it encourages the teacher to claim an authority which belongs to God alone. Earlier we quoted the statement from the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* that someone under obedience to an elder "has no need to attend to the commandment of God."<sup>34</sup> But is such an abdication of responsibility desirable? Should the *geronta* be allowed to usurp the place of Christ?

In response, it needs to be said first of all that "charismatic" elders, such as St Anthony the Great or St Seraphim of Sarov, have always been exceedingly rare. The kind of relationship that they had with their disciples, whether monastic or lay, has never been the standard pattern in the Orthodox tradition. The great *startsi*, whether of the past or of the present day, do indeed constitute a guiding light, a supreme point of reference; but they are the exception, not the norm.

In the second place, there is clearly a difference between monastics, who have taken a special vow of obedience, and lay people who are living in the "world." (Even in the case of monastics, there are extremely few communities where the ministry of eldership is to be found in its full form, as described in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* or as practiced in nineteenth-century Optino.) A contemporary Russian priest, Father Alexander Men — himself much revered as a spiritual father before his tragic and untimely death at unknown hands in 1990 — has wisely insisted that monastic observances cannot be transferred wholesale to parish life:

We often think that the relation of spiritual child to spiritual father requires that the former be always obedient to the latter. In reality, this principle is an essential part of the monastic life. A monk promises to be obedient, to do whatever his spiritual father requires. A parish priest cannot impose such a model on lay people and cannot arrogate to himself the right to give peremptory orders. He must be happy recalling the Church's rules, orienting his parishioner's lives, and helping them in their inner struggles.<sup>35</sup>

Yet, when full allowance has been made for these two points, there are three further things that need to be said if a text such as the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* or a figure such as *Starets* Zosima in *The Brothers Karamazov* are to be interpreted aright. First, the obedience offered by the spiritual child to the abba is not forced but willing and voluntary. It is the task of the *starets* to take up our will into his will, but he can only do this if by our own free choice we place it in his hands. He does not break our will, but accepts it from us as a gift. A submission that is forced and involuntary is obviously devoid of moral value; the *starets* asks of each one that we offer to God our heart, not our external actions. Even in a monastic context the obedience is voluntary, as is vividly emphasized at the rite of monastic profession: only after the candidate has three times placed the scissors in the abbot's hand does the latter proceed to tonsure him.

This voluntary offering of our freedom, however, even in a monastery, is

increasing degree of our self-giving. Our freedom must be offered anew each day and each hour, in constantly varying ways; and this means that the relation between *starets* and disciple is not static but dynamic, not unchanging but infinitely diverse. Each day and each hour, under the guidance of his abba, the disciple will face new situations, calling for a different response, a new kind of self-giving.

In the second place, the relation between *starets* and spiritual child, as we have already noted, is not one-sided, but mutual. Just as the *starets* enables the disciples to see themselves as they truly are, so it is the disciples who reveal the *starets* to himself. In most instances, someone does not realize that he is called to be a *starets* until others come to him and insist on placing themselves under his guidance. This reciprocity continues throughout the relationship between the two. The spiritual father does not possess an exhaustive program, neatly worked out in advance and imposed in the same manner upon everyone. On the contrary, if he is a true *starets*, he will have a different word for each; he proceeds on the basis not of abstract rules but of concrete human situations. He and his disciple enter each situation together, neither of them knowing beforehand exactly what the outcome will be, but each waiting for the illumination of the Spirit. Both of them, the spiritual father as well as the disciple, have to learn as they go.

The mutuality of their relationship is indicated by stories in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* where an unworthy abba is saved through the patience and humility of his disciple. A brother, for example, has an elder who is given to drunkenness, and is sorely tempted to leave him; but, instead of doing so, he remains faithfully with his abba until the latter is eventually brought to repentance. As the narrator comments, "Sometimes it is the young who guide their elders to life."<sup>36</sup> The disciple may be called to give as well as to receive; the teacher may often learn from his pupils. As the Talmud records, "Rabbi Hanina used to say, 'Much have I learnt from my teachers, more from my fellow-students, but from my pupils most of all.'"<sup>37</sup>

In reality, however, the relationship is not two-sided but triangular, for in addition to the abba and his disciple there is also a third partner, God. Our Lord insisted that we should call no one "father," for we have only one Father, who is in heaven (Mt 13:8-10). The abba is not an inerrant judge or an ultimate court of appeal, but a fellow-servant of the living God; not a tyrant, but a guide and companion on the way. The only true "spiritual director," in the fullest sense of the word, is the Holy Spirit.

This brings us to the third point. In the Orthodox tradition at its best, spiritual guides have always sought to avoid any kind of constraint and spiritual violence in their relations with their disciples. If, under the guidance of the Spirit, they speak and act with authority, it is with the authority of humble love. Anxious to avoid all mechanical constraint, they may sometimes refuse to provide their disciples with a rule of life, a set of external commands to be applied automatically. In the words of a contemporary Romanian monk, the spiritual father is "not a legislator but a mystagogue."<sup>38</sup> He guides others, not by imposing rules, but by sharing his life with them. A monk told Abba Poemen, "Some brethren have come to live with me;

Poemen, "be an example to them but not a lawgiver."<sup>39</sup> The same moral emerges from a story told by Isaac the Priest. As a young man, he remained first with Abba Kronios and then with Abba Theodore of Pherme; but neither of them told him what to do. Isaac complained to the other monks and they came and remonstrated with Theodore. "If he wishes," Theodore replied eventually, "let him do what he sees me doing."<sup>40</sup> When Barsanuphius was asked to supply a detailed rule of life, he declined, saying: "I do not want you to be under the law, but under grace." And in other letters he wrote: "You know that we have never imposed chains upon anyone... Do not force people's free will, but sow in hope; for our Lord did not compel anyone, but He preached the good news, and those who wished hearkened to Him."<sup>41</sup>

*Do not force people's free will.* The task of our spiritual father is not to destroy our freedom, but to assist us to see the truth for ourselves; not to suppress our personality, but to enable us to discover our own true self, to grow to full maturity and to become what we really are. If on occasion the spiritual father requires an implicit and seemingly "blind" obedience from his disciple, this is never done as an end in itself, nor with a view to enslaving him. The purpose of this kind of "shock treatment" is simply to deliver the disciple from his false and illusory "self," so that he may enter into true liberty; obedience is in this way the door to freedom. The spiritual father does not impose his personal ideas and devotions, but he helps the disciple to find his own special vocation. In the words of a seventeenth-century Benedictine, Dom Augustine Baker: "The director is not to teach his own way, nor indeed any determinate way of prayer, but to instruct his disciples how they may themselves find out the way proper for them... In a word, he is only God's usher, and must lead souls in God's way, and not his own."<sup>42</sup>

Such was also the approach of Father Alexander Men. In the words of his biographer Yves Hamant, "Father Alexander wanted to lead each person to the point of deciding for himself; he did not want to order or to impose. He compared his role to that of a midwife who is present only to help the mother give birth herself to her baby. One of his friends wrote that Father Alexander was 'above us yet right beside us.'"<sup>43</sup>

In the last resort, then, what the spiritual mother or father gives to the disciple is not a code of written or oral regulations, not a set of techniques for meditation, but a personal relationship. Within this personal relationship the abba grows and changes as well as the disciple, for God is constantly directing them both. The abba may on occasion provide his disciple with detailed verbal instructions, with precise answers to specific questions. On other occasions he may fail to give any answer at all, either because he thinks that the question does not need an answer, or because he himself does not yet know what the answer should be. But these answers — or this failure to answer — are always given within the framework of a personal relationship. Many things cannot be said in words, but can only be conveyed through a direct personal encounter. As the Hasidic master Rabbi Jacob Yitzhak affirmed, "The way cannot be learned out of a book, or from hearsay, but can only be communicated from person to person."<sup>44</sup>

the letter of the law. He learns the way, not through external conformity to written rules, but through seeing a human face and hearing a living voice. In this way the spiritual mother or father is the guardian of evangelical freedom.

### **In the absence of a starets**

And what are we to do, if we cannot find a spiritual guide? For, as we have noted, guides such as St Antony or St Seraphim are few and far between.

We may turn, in the first place, to *books*. Writing in fifteenth-century Russia St Nil Sorsky laments the extreme scarcity of qualified spiritual directors; yet how much more frequent they must have been in his day than in ours! Search diligently, he urges, for a sure and trustworthy guide. Then he continues: "However, if such a teacher cannot be found, then the Holy Fathers order us to turn to the Scriptures and listen to our Lord Himself speaking."<sup>45</sup> Since the testimony of Scripture should never be isolated from the continuing witness of the Spirit in the life of the Church, we may add that the inquirer will also want to read the works of the Fathers, and above all the *Philokalia*. But there is an evident danger here. The *starets* adapts his guidance to the inner state of each; books offer the same advice to everyone. How are we to discern whether or not a particular text is applicable to our own situation? Even if we cannot find a spiritual father in the full sense, we should at least try to find someone more experienced than ourselves, able to guide us in our reading.

It is possible to learn also from visiting *places* where divine grace has been exceptionally manifest and where, in T S. Eliot's phrase, "prayer has been valid." Before making a major decision, and in the absence of other guidance, many Orthodox Christians will go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem or Mount Athos, to some monastery or the shrine of a saint, where they will pray for illumination. This is the way in which I myself have reached certain of the more difficult decisions in my life.

Thirdly, we can learn from *religious communities* with an established tradition of the spiritual life. In the absence of a personal teacher, the monastic environment can itself serve as abba; we can receive our formation from the ordered sequence of the daily program, with its periods of liturgical and silent prayer, with its balance of manual labor, study and recreation. This seems to have been the chief way in which St Seraphim of Sarov gained his spiritual training. A well-organized monastery embodies, in an accessible and living form, the inherited wisdom of many *startsi*. Not only monks but those who come as visitors, remaining for a longer or shorter period, can be formed and guided by the experience of community life.

It is indeed no coincidence that, when the kind of "charismatic" spiritual fatherhood that we have been describing first emerged in fourth century Egypt, this was not within the fully organized communities under St Pachomius, but among the hermits and in the semi-eremitic milieu of Nitria and Scetis. In the Pachomian *koinonia*, spiritual direction was provided by Pachomius himself, by the superiors of each monastery, and by the heads of individual "houses" within the monastery. The *Rule* of St Benedict also envisages the abbot as spiritual father, and there is virtually no provision for further direction of a more "charismatic" type.<sup>46</sup>

direction is provided by the corporate life pursued under the guidance of the monastic rule.

Finally, before leaving this question of the absence of a *starets*, it is important for us to emphasize the extreme flexibility in the relationship between spiritual guide and disciple. Some may see their spiritual guide daily or even hourly, praying, eating and working with him, perhaps sharing the same cell, as often happened in the Egyptian desert. Others may see him only once a month or once a year; others, again, may visit an abba on but a single occasion in their entire life, yet this will be sufficient to set them on the right path. There are, furthermore, many different types of spiritual father or mother; few will be wonder-workers like St Seraphim of Sarov. There are numerous priests and laypeople who, while lacking the more spectacular endowments of the famous *startsi*, are certainly able to provide others with the guidance that they require. Furthermore, let us never forget that, alongside spiritual fatherhood and motherhood, there is also spiritual brotherhood and sisterhood. At school or university we often learn more from our fellow students than from our teachers; and the same may happen also in our life of prayer and inner exploration.

When people imagine that they have failed in their search for a guide, often this is because they expect him or her to be of a particular type; they want a St Seraphim, and so they close their eyes to the guides whom God is actually sending to them. Often their supposed problems are not so very complicated, and in reality they already know in their own heart what the answer is. But they do not like the answer, because it involves patient and sustained effort on their part; and so they look for a *deus ex machina* who, by a single miraculous word, will suddenly make everything easy. Such people need to be helped to an understanding of the true nature of spiritual direction.

### **Contemporary examples**

In conclusion, I wish to recall two elders of our own day, whom I have had the privilege and happiness of knowing personally. The first is Father Amphilochios (†1970), at one time abbot of the Monastery of St John on the Island of Patmos, and subsequently *geronta* to a community of nuns which he had founded not far from the Monastery. What most distinguished his character was his gentleness, his humor, the warmth of his affection, and his sense of tranquil yet triumphant joy. His smile was full of love, but devoid of all sentimentality. Life in Christ, as he understood it, is not a heavy yoke, a burden to be carried with sullen resignation, but a personal relationship to be pursued with eagerness of heart. He was firmly opposed to all spiritual violence and cruelty. It was typical that, as he lay dying and took leave of the nuns under his care, he should urge the abbess not to be too severe on them: "They have left everything to come here, they must not be unhappy."<sup>47</sup>

Two things in particular I recall about him. The first was his love of nature and, more especially, of trees. "Do you know," he used to say, "that God gave us one more commandment, which is not recorded in Scripture? It is the commandment *Love the trees*." Whoever does not love trees, he was convinced, does not love Christ. When hearing the confessions of the local farmers, he assigned to them as a penance (*penitimon*) the task of planting a tree; and through his influence many

A second thing that stands out in my memory is the counsel which he gave me when, as a newly-ordained priest, the time had come for me to return from Patmos to Oxford, where I was to begin teaching in the university. He himself had never visited the west, but he had a shrewd perception of the situation of Orthodoxy in the *diaspora*. "Do not be afraid," he insisted. Do not be afraid because of your Orthodoxy, he told me; do not be afraid because, as an Orthodox in the west, you will be often isolated and always in a small minority. Do not make compromises but do not attack other Christians; do not be either defensive or aggressive; simply be yourself.

My second example of a twentieth-century *starets* known to me personally is St John Maximovitch (+1966), Russian bishop in Shanghai, then in Western Europe, and finally in San Francisco. Little more than a dwarf in height, with tangled hair and beard, and with an impediment in his speech, at first sight he seemed to possess more than a touch of the "fool in Christ." From the time of his profession as a monk, except when ill he did not lie down on a bed; he went on working and praying all night, snatching his sleep at odd moments in the twenty-four hours. He wandered barefoot through the streets of Paris, and once he celebrated a memorial service in the port of Marseilles on the exact spot where King Alexander of Yugoslavia had been assassinated, in the middle of the road among the tram lines. Punctuality had little meaning for him. Baffled by his behavior, the more conventional among his flock judged him unsuited for the public position and the administrative work of a bishop. But, if unpredictable, he was also practical and realistic. With his total disregard of normal formalities he succeeded where others, relying on worldly influence and expertise, had failed entirely — as when, against all hope and in the teeth of the "quota" system, he secured the admission of thousands of homeless Russian refugees to the USA.

In private conversation he was abrupt yet kindly. He quickly won the confidence of small children. Particularly striking was the intensity of his intercessory prayer. It was his practice, whenever possible, to celebrate the Divine Liturgy daily, and the service often took twice the normal space of time, such was the multitude of those whom he commemorated individually by name. As he prayed for them, they were never mere entries on a list, but always persons. One story that I was told is typical. It was his custom each year to visit Holy Trinity Monastery in Jordanville, NY. As he made his departure after one such visit, a monk gave him a slip of paper with four names of those who were gravely ill. St John received thousands upon thousands of such requests for prayer in the course of each year. On his return to the monastery some twelve months later, at once he beckoned to the monk and, much to the latter's surprise, from the depths of his cassock St John produced the identical slip of paper, now crumpled and tattered. "I have been praying for your friends," he said, "but two of them" — he pointed to their names — "are now dead, while the other two have recovered." And so indeed it was.

Even at a distance he shared in the concerns of his spiritual children. One of them, Father (later Archbishop) Jacob, superior of a small Orthodox monastery in Holland, was sitting at a late hour in his room, unable to sleep from anxiety over the financial and other problems which faced him. In the middle of the night the phone rang; it was St John, speaking from several hundred miles away. He had

Such is the role of the spiritual father. As St Barsanuphius expressed it, "I care for you more than you care for yourself."

## Notes

1. On spiritual fatherhood in the Christian East, the standard work is by Irénée Hausherr, *Direction spirituelle en Orient autrefois*, Orientalia Christiana Analecta 144 (Rome: Pont. Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1955); English translation, *Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East*, Cistercian Studies Series 116 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1990). Consult also I. Hadot, "The Spiritual Guide," in A. H. Armstrong (ed.), *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality: Egyptian, Greek, Roman* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 436-59; Graham Gould, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), especially 26-87; Stephan B. Clark, *Unordained Elders and Renewal Communities* (New York/Paramus/Toronto: Paulist Press, 1976); John Chryssavgis, *Ascent to Heaven. The Theology of the Human Person according to Saint John of the Ladder* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1989), 211-30; H. J. M. Turner, *St. Symeon the New Theologian and Spiritual Fatherhood* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990). For a comparison between Climacus and Symeon, see my introduction to the English translation of Hausherr, *Spiritual Direction*, vii-xxxiii. On the Russian tradition, consult J. B. Dunlop, *Staretz Amvrosy: Model for Dostoevsky's Staretz Zossima* (Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1972); I. de Beausobre (ed.), *Macarius, Starets of Optino: Russian Letters of Direction 1834-1860* (Westminster: Dacre, 1944); Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *Saint Silouan the Athonite* (Tolleshunt Knights: Monastery of Saint John the Baptist, 1991). For modern Greek examples, see Elder Paisios of Mount Athos, *Athonite Fathers and Athonite Matters* (Thessalonica: Holy Convent of the Evangelist John the Theologian, Souroti, 1999). On Romania, see [Hiermonk Seraphim Rose], *Blessed Paisius Velichkovsky* (Platina, CA: Saint Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1976); Romul Joantă (now Metropolitan Seraphim of Germany and Central Europe), *Roumanie: tradition et culture hésychastes*, *Spiritualité orientale* 46 (Bégrolles: Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1987); English translation, *Romania: Its Hesychast Tradition and Culture* (Wildwood, CA: St Xenia Skete, 1992).
2. AP, alphabetical collection, Antony 37, 38 (PG 65:88B); tr. Ward, 8-9 (the translation needs correcting).
3. AP, anonymous collection, 244, 290: ed. Nau, ROC 14 (1909), 364, 376; tr. Ward, *Wisdom*, §§112,158 (34, 45).
4. Cited by Ivan Tschetwerikow, in Metropolitan Seraphim (ed.), *L'Eglise Orthodoxe* (Paris: Payot, 1952), 219.
5. Elchaninov, *The Diary of a Russian Priest*, 54.
6. I use "charismatic" in the restricted sense customarily given to it by contemporary writers. But if that word indicates (as properly it should) someone who has received the gifts or *charismata* of Holy Spirit, then the ministerial priest, ordained through the episcopal laying on of hands, is a

127 "abbas" there are three "ammas" or spiritual mothers: the women are in a minority, but they have their place in the *Gerontikon*. See Sister Benedicta Ward, "Apophthegmata Matrum," *Studia Patristica* 16:2, Texte und Untersuchungen 129 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1985), 63-66; Joseph M. Soler, "Les Mères du désert et la maternité spirituelle," *Collectanea Cisterciensia* 48 (1986), 235-50.

8. *Life of Antony*, 87 and 81; tr. Gregg, 94, 90.
9. I follow here the generally accepted chronology of St Seraphim's life. But there is evidence to suggest that he may have begun his ministry as *starets* at a much earlier point, before his withdrawal into the forest in 1794. Yet even so the pattern of flight and return still holds good in Seraphim's case, at any rate in general terms; for, prior to 1813, his ministry as *starets* was restricted and sometimes totally interrupted. See Vsévolod Rochcau, *Saint Séraphim: Sarov et Divyévo. Études et Documents*, Spiritualité Orientale 45 (Bégrolles: Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1987), 53-84.
10. Archimandrite Lazarus Moore, *St. Seraphim of Sarov*, 126.
11. *AP*, alphabetical collection, Theophilus 2; quoted above, 89.
12. *AP*, alphabetical collection, Antony 27 (84D); tr. Ward, *Sayings*, 7.
13. *AP*, alphabetical collection, Antony 24 (84B); see above, 86.
14. On Ignaty and Theophan, see the introduction to Igumen Chariton, *The Art of Prayer*, 11-15. St Tikhon of Zadonsk is yet another example of one who, after many years of active pastorate, only became a recluse at the end of his life.
15. If the chairmen of committees and others in seats of authority were forced to write out personally in longhand everything they wanted to communicate, might they not choose their words with greater care?
16. See the perceptive discussion in Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), especially chapter 5; and compare Max Picard, *The World of Silence* (London: Flarvill Press, n.d.).
17. For the Greek text of this *apophthegma*, see *Evergetinos* 1.20.11, ed. Victor Matthaiou, 4 vols. (Athens: Monastery of the Transfiguration of the Savior at Kronize Kouvara, 1957-66), 1:168-9; French translation in Lucien Regnault (ed.), *Les Sentences des Pères du Désert, serie des anonymes* (Sablé-sur-Sarthe/Bégrolles: Solesmes/Bellefontaine, 1985), 227.
18. Archimandrite Lazarus Moore, *St. Seraphim of Sarov*, 217-20.
19. *Op. cit.*, 436-7.
20. *AP*, alphabetical collection, Poemen 8 (321C); tr. Ward *Sayings*, 167.
21. *The Brothers Karamazov*, tr. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Classics, 1991), 27.
22. See, for example, the story in *AP*, anonymous collection 293: ed. Nau, *ROC* 14 (1909), 377; tr. Ward, *Wisdom*, §160 (45-46). The monk is delivered as soon as he says "Lord, by the prayers of my father, come me in this hour!"

especially the quotations from Barsanuphius. In general, the 850 questions and answers that make up the Book of Barsanuphius and John show us, with a vividness not to be found in any other ancient source, exactly how the ministry of pastoral guidance was exercised in the Christian East.

24. *The Brothers Karamazov*, tr. Pevear and Volokhonsky, 320.
25. *AP*, alphabetical collection, Antony 16 (80c); tr. Ward, *Sayings*, 4.
26. *AP*, alphabetical collection, John the Theban 1 (240A); tr. Ward, *Sayings*, 109.
27. "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," in Geoffrey Keynes (ed.), *Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (London: Nonesuch Press, 1948), 187.
28. "A Wonderful Revelation to the World," in Archimandrite Lazarus Moore, *St. Seraphim of Sarov*, 197.
29. *AP*, alphabetical collection, John the Dwarf i (204e); tr. Ward, *Sayings*, 85-86.
30. *AP*, alphabetical collection, Mark the Disciple of Silvanus 1, 2 (293D-296B); tr., 145-46.
31. *Ibid.*, Joseph of Panepho 5 (229BC); tr., 103.
32. *Ibid.*, Saio i (420AB); tr., 229. The *geron* subsequently returned the things to their rightful owners.
33. *AP*, anonymous series 295: ed. Nau, *ROC14* (1909), 378; tr. Ward, *Wisdom*, §162,(47). Miraculously the child was preserved unharmed. For a parallel story, see *AP*, alphabetical collection, Sisoës 10 (394C-396A); tr. Ward, *Sayings*, 214; and compare Abraham and Isaac (Gen 22).
34. See above, first section.
35. Quoted in Yves Harnant, *Alexander Men: A Witness for Contemporary Russia* (Torrance, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1995), 124.
36. *AP*, anonymous collection 340: ed. Nau, *ROC 17* (1912), 295; tr. Ward, *Wisdom*, §209 (56-57).
37. C. G. Montefiore and H. Loewe (ed.), *A Rabbinic Anthology* (London: Macmillan, 1938), §494.
38. Father André Scrima, "La tradition du père spirituel dans l'Église d'Orient," *Hermès*, 1967, No. 4, 83.
39. *AP*, alphabetical collection, Poemen 174 (364C); tr. Ward, *Sayings*, 191.
40. *Ibid.*, Isaac the Priest 2 (224CD); tr., 99-100.
41. *Questions and Answers*, §§25,51,35.
42. Quoted by Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1960), 12.
43. *Alexander Men*, 124.
44. Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: The Early Masters*, 256.
45. "The Monastic Rule," in G. P. Fedotov, *A Treasury of Russian Spirituality* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1950), 95-96.

possessing spiritual gifts (*tantum abbati, aut spiritalibus senioribus*).

47. See I. Gorainoff, "Holy Men of Patmos," *Sobornost* 6:5 (1912), 341-44.

48. See my lecture, *Through the Creation to the Creator*, 5.

49. Bishop Sawa of Edmonton, *Blessed John: The Chronicle of the Veneration of Archbishop John Maximovich* (Platina, CA: Saint Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1979), 104; Father Seraphim Rose and Abbot Herman, *Blessed John the Wonderworker. A Preliminary Account of the Life and Miracles of Archbishop John Maximovitch*, 3rd edn. (Plating, CA: Saint Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1987), 163. I heard the story from Father Jacob himself.

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