

Documents

On Taking Monastic Vows

Monasticism continues to thrive in the U.S.S.R. Between 1959-62 the Soviet authorities closed about 40 monasteries. Anatoli Levitin in 1966 claimed that only four monasteries for men still existed. A report for 1971, however, stated that 20 monasteries still functioned. The following chapter is taken from a samizdat history of the Pskovo-Pechersky Monastery which is flourishing today.

My dear friend, you ask me to share with you the feelings which I experienced before taking monastic vows, and subsequently. Joyfully I comply with your request, although it is not easy to do so. How can I express what my soul experienced then and that by which it now lives? What words can I use to describe what filled and now fills my heart?

I have been made so infinitely rich with an abundance of heavenly treasures given to me by God that I am not able to count them. I am now a monk, however strange that may be, however incomprehensible. New attire, a new name, a new feeling which I had never known nor experienced before, a new inner peace, a new mood, everything is new – the whole of me has been made new.

Oh what a glorious, supernatural action of grace! It has completely melted me, completely transformed me. You understand me, my dear, as the former Nicholas. (How I dislike repeating my worldly name.) He no longer exists, he has completely disappeared; he was taken somewhere and buried deep in the earth, so that not even the smallest trace remains. Sometimes I have a desire to picture the former Nicholas, but no, it never works; my imagination is stretched to its limit, but I can never imagine the former Nicholas. It is as if I fell into a deep sleep . . . Then, roused from it, I look round, I want to recall what happened before I was lost in sleep but I cannot remember my previous condition, as if someone had wiped it from my consciousness and in place of my former condition had put something new, something completely new. Only a new present remained, one hitherto unknown to me, and a distant future.

A child born into the world does not remember its life in the womb. That is what I am like. Thanks to taking monastic vows I felt like a baby and now I cannot remember my secular life. It is as if I have now been born into the world, and all the past was as a dream. Isolated recollections of the past, fragments are preserved but not the former essence of my being; my soul has become completely different.

I will tell you how I gradually approached or, rather, how gradually God's grace drew me to my present position. To remember this is also useful for me personally, for it strengthens, encourages and inspires me. In moments of musing on the transitory nature of all things worldly, an awareness that you have dedicated yourself to the service of the Lord God, that you belong to no other than the Lord God, can provide a flow of fresh strength for future

podvigi (spiritual feats), can encourage and make one spiritually happy. A sign of such happiness is love of God and one's neighbour; in the attainment of humility, not to notice when you are offended, hurt and humiliated is also a sign.

From the age of eight, by the inscrutable paths of the Most-High Providence, the grace of God was calling me to that exalted end – to a monastic life, but I only took monastic vows considerably later. Many Holy Fathers who have experienced a call and the moment of conversion, have found difficulty in describing the ways in which God leads man. No less a danger awaits me, as I try to communicate in words that which defies description, to express in everyday concepts that which cannot be contained by them. Looking steadily at the past, I can firmly tell you, my friend, that time has not wiped away the indelible; on the contrary, it has polished it, revealing the secret action of Divine Providence. It is made manifest in everything: through the formation of my character (due to the influence of specially designed circumstances), the development of spiritual qualities, and also through the appearance of one persistent thought – to find the true meaning of life. In my soul, the process of inner maturing for my new life was completed in a way which is beyond understanding. I felt the invisible hand of the Great Artist drawing heavenly images in my heart by the grace of the Holy Spirit, images which drew me towards a new life. My heart was filled with the hidden action of God's grace. And from here I heard the wonderful sounds of heavenly harmony, from here the stern voice of denunciation sounded, pointing to my unworthiness and sinfulness. Here in my heart a fierce struggle began between the new and the old man. Mysterious states, which I had never experienced before, took hold of my being. My reason was puzzled. "What is happening to me?" Often under the influence of passions my reason rebelled against those new things my heart was experiencing, inflicting blow after blow at my heart with lightning speed. But my poor heart, fighting and suffering, believed. In moments of exhaustion, it felt the mysterious power of grace flowing into it, transforming the bitterness of suffering into a source of unearthly joy. The Holy Spirit the Comforter Himself revealed His power in weakness. Then my proud mind was humbled, recognizing the greatness of the spiritual world revealed to it.

Such, my friend, are the true reasons which led me to my new life. I do not think they are convincing for everyone, in the same way as the mysteries of the spiritual world are not revealed to everyone. I do not consider it necessary to trouble you with a chronological account of the events of my life, therefore I shall proceed to the most fundamental: an account of my feelings when I took monastic vows.

On entering the Monastery of St. Sergius it was suggested that I ask for permission to become a monk. It was arranged that I take monastic vows on 25 October (old calendar) 1948, during the all-night vigil, on the eve of the Feast of the Holy Martyr Dmitri Solunsky (Mirotochiv). I went to confession. It was a very detailed confession, covering my whole life from the age of six. After confession I attended the whole Liturgy, went to my cell and experienced something which one only knows perhaps on the verge of death. The clock in the monastery struck midday. A few hours more and the ceremony must begin. Oh, if you only knew how precious each minute was to me, how I tried not to vainly lose these minutes. I filled them with prayer, with thought

and with reading the Holy Fathers. I read, thought and remembered especially the words of the Holy Fathers: of St. Sergius of Radonezh, Serafim of Sarov, Archpriest John of Kronstadt, *Ieroskhimonakh* (priest-monk and solitary) Ambrose of Optina, Bishop Theofan the Hermit.

It is said that a man involuntarily recalls the whole of his past life. And so it was with me; in one moment my entire life rose before me in clear pictures. And what did I feel! What did I experience! God alone knows! . . . The self-sufficient world will never and on no account understand these experiences, unless it is touched by the grace of God.

Before dawn I began to experience an agony of soul, and what a terrible agony – it is fearful to recall. It was some kind of total depression as if something was sucking my heart, oppressing me, gnawing at me; something dark and hopeless – and nowhere was there help, nowhere consolation. It will be like this again only before death. Then the devil fought its last and most fearful battle. And, believe me, if it had not been for God's help, I would not have endured that battle. But the Lord is always close to man. He watches the struggle and, the moment He sees that man is exhausted, immediately sends His gracious help. Thus in the most decisive moments I too was allowed to experience a sense of being completely abandoned, but then suddenly support was given to me. My soul was filled with unusual tenderness and grace-given warmth: in utter exhaustion I fell face downwards before the holy icon and began to weep sweet tears. Overjoyed and in rapture I began to read the Gospel.

A bell chimed, indicating the beginning of the evening service. After a short prayer in my cell to the Saviour and to the Mother of God, tenderness filled my soul. If you only knew what happened to me . . . There was a quiet knock at the door of my cell. A monk entered, saying: "The time has come, let us go." I rose and once more, together with the monk, prayed to the Saviour and to the Mother of God, and bowed to the Saviour, the Mother of God and the icon of St. Nicholas the Miracle-worker.

We went into the church. It was dark in the entrance to the church, the icon-lamps were flickering quietly. I remained alone at the side where the icon-stand (*analoï*) stood, separated by a curtain; there was an icon of the Saviour on the icon-stand, with a candle burning before it. On a small table I saw a hair-shirt, stockings . . . I had to change. I took off all my old clothes, discarding the old man, and, having put on the hair-shirt, took the form of the new man. Dressed in the hair-shirt and stockings, I stood throughout vespers behind the curtain in front of the icon of the Saviour. With longing and faith I gazed at the Divine Face; and He, Jesus Christ, gentle and meek of heart, looked at me. It was good then: peaceful and joyous. You look down at yourself – you are completely white, the hair-shirt down to your ankles, you stand unclothed aware of your insignificance before your Creator. You fall before the icon, seize your head in your hands . . . and sink into contemplation of God . . . "Holy Lord," the choir sings for the last time, softly and smoothly as at a burial, "Holy and Strong, Holy and Eternal, have mercy upon us." With measured solemn steps an host of monks drew near me, dressed in *klobuki* (monk's head-dress), long robes, with candles alight in their hands; they came up to me and led me to the dais (before the iconostasis). The Father

Archimandrite, the superior of the monastery, stood in front of the royal gates beside the icon-stand with a cross and a Gospel.

"Oh Father, open Thou Thine arms to me," the choir sang softly and mournfully.

Covered in robes, I entered the *pritor* and prostrated myself, touching the very floor with my face; I stretched out my arms in the form of a cross; I do not remember very well what happened, everything grew dim . . . I fell again . . . Suddenly, when I was lying on the dais, I heard the special reading, given on taking one's vows. "God is merciful, like a Father who loves his children; child, He sees your humility and genuine repentance, and He accepts you, who repents like the prodigal son, and falls before him in sincerity of heart." The Father Archimandrite, the superior of the monastery, came up to me and raised me to my feet. Then I made publicly, before the face of God, the magnificent and difficult monastic vows. After that they clothed me in a monk's habit, putting on my shoulders a black *paraman* with a white cross; around it were written the marvellous words: "For I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." At times I feel these words so strongly. On my breast they placed a wooden cross as an eternal reminder of the suffering and destruction, the humiliation, the abuse and insults, the crucifixion and death of our Lord Jesus Christ. I was dressed in a cassock; a leather belt was put round my waist; then I was clothed in a mantle and *klobuk*. Then they handed me a burning candle and a wooden cross.

Thus I was buried for the sake of the world. I died and moved into a spiritual world, although physically I still remain on the earth. What I felt and experienced when, dressed as a monk, I stood at the iconostasis before the icon of the Saviour, with a cross and a candle in my hand, defies description. My soul felt that in Jesus Christ was hidden the source of eternal blessing. And the aim of the monastic life is to be a participant in these heavenly blessings through continually calling on the saving name of our Lord Jesus Christ. For five days and five nights I did not leave the church, every day I partook of the Holy Sacraments of Christ. During that time I pondered over and experienced so much which I will probably never again experience during the rest of my life. Everything was there: the bliss of heaven and the agony of hell; but chiefly bliss.

My friend, I will tell you briefly about my present new life as a monk. I will tell you in the words of one Church father, a monk: "If people in the world knew all those joys and spiritual consolations which a monk experiences, then no one would remain in the world; but if people in the world knew in advance of those sorrows and torments which befall a monk, then no human would ever dare to take monastic vows, no mortal would ever decide on this." What a deep and great truth. In 1949, on the day of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin, the Patriarch ordained me as priest-deacon, and later as priest-monk by the laying on of hands. In 1954 His Holiness Alexis, Patriarch of All-Russia sent me to the Pskovo-Pechersky Monastery, where I still am, obeying the holy duty of a monk. At the Liturgy, with love and joy, with godly fear, I hold in my unworthy hands "He Who upholds all things". I partake of the Everlasting Banquet. For me every day is a holy day. While performing my priestly duties at the table (*zhertvennik*) in the Sanctuary and taking elements of the host on behalf of all those near to me, both the living and the

dead, I ask God's forgiveness for all their sins and for my own personal sin. During the Sacrament of the Holy Mysteries of Christ, being in a state of special grace, abiding in the shadow of heaven, worshipping the Lord who draws near to us and having the honour of being united with Him, my heart overflows with a joy which is not of this world, and is ready to call out like the Apostle Thomas: "My Lord and my God." Oh what happiness and, at the same time, what a great and long *podvig* (spiritual feat).

Such, my friend, were the feelings and experiences I went through before and after taking monastic vows. When I recall all this, I am shocked by the realization that but for the help of God's grace, I would not have endured the experiences of those days – days which I will never forget. "Look, brother, arm yourself," a certain *starets* was gently trying to persuade a newly-confessed monk, "arm yourself now for your entire life. What you are now experiencing will never be repeated. Sorrows will come; recall these minutes then – they are sufficient to last your whole life." Lord, what a deep, glorious truth! Praise be to God for everything!

Complying with your wishes, my dear friend, I have revealed to you the experiences of my heart – my feelings on finally taking my vows. A providential event helped me in this – I got hold of the manuscript of the Most Holy Serafim Zvezdinsky, in which His Grace shared his experiences when taking his vows. The marvellous agreement between the Most Holy Serafim's description and my personal experiences, plus the fact that we took our vows in the same place, we stood at the altar for the same amount of time, we even shared the same name prior to taking our vows – all this not only increased my resolution to set forth my experiences, but also resurrected my past feelings in their former strength. Impressions which poured down upon me filled my heart and now I have told you, my friend, of those great blissful experiences.

I ask the blessing of God on this small work and ask that the grace of God will open the hearts and minds of those who read it, those seeking salvation, and those who are concerned to fulfil His Holy will, as it is written: "Show us Your ways, O Lord; teach us Your paths."

With childlike trust and boldness of faith in simplicity of heart, we will wholeheartedly follow Christ along the way to the Heavenly Kingdom.

Sakharov Appeals for Vins

Andrei Sakharov, the well known nuclear physicist, has been involved in the Soviet civil rights movement since 1970 when he and others formed the "Committee of Human Rights". He has now taken up the case of the imprisoned Baptist pastor, Georgi Vins.

TO THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES – AMSTERDAM

I ask you to intercede for Georgi Petrovich Vins, the well known Baptist religious figure, who was elected by his fellow-believers as Secretary of the Council of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches.

Vins, like other members of his family, has several times been arrested and subjected to other illegal persecutions. Recently he has been compelled to hide from the threat of another arrest. In March 1974 Vins was arrested in Kiev