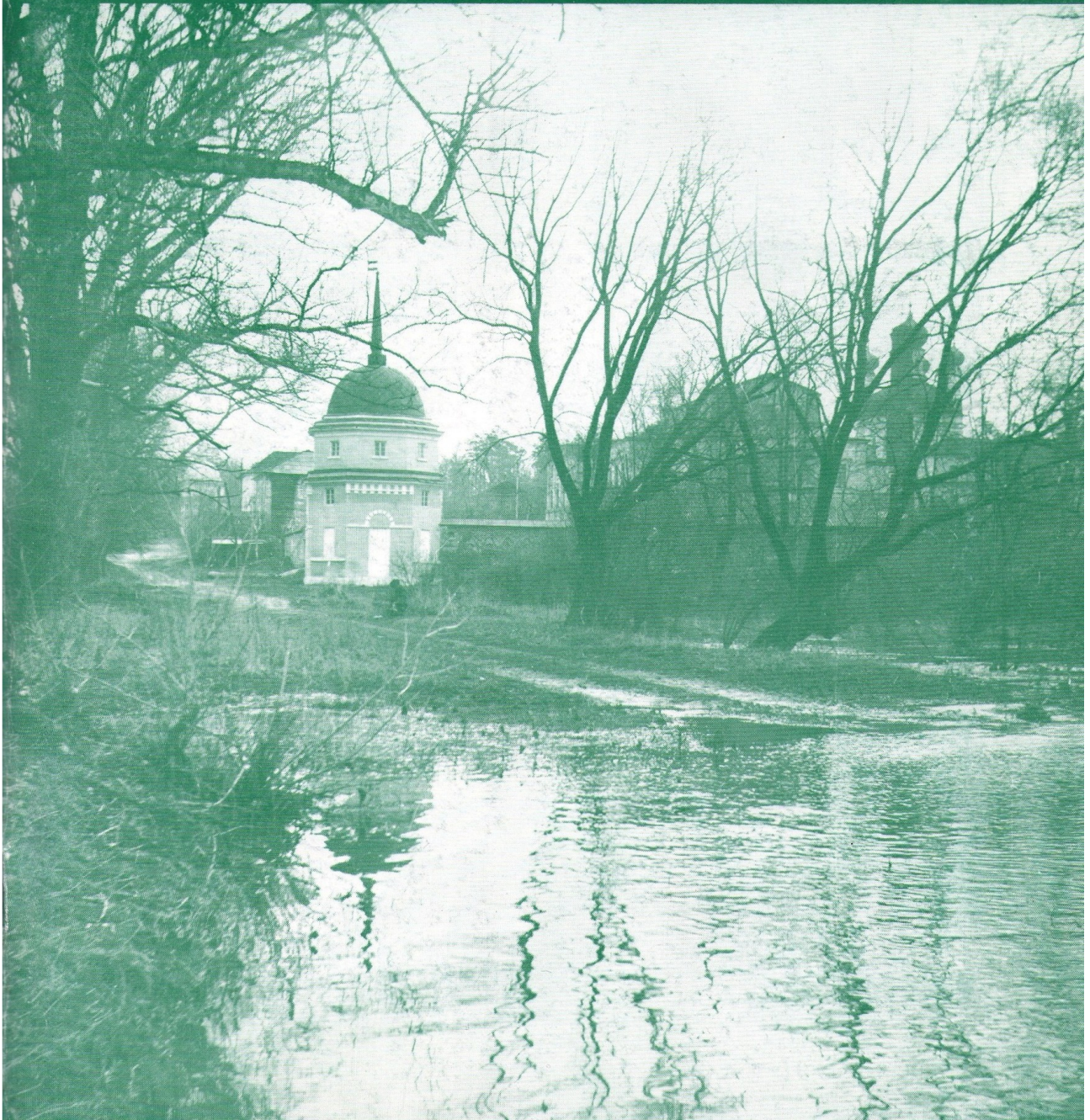


THE ORTHODOX WORD

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ST. NEKTARY OF OPTINA

Having endured imprisonment, torture and exile during the Soviet persecution of Optina, he was, according to the testimony of his disciple Bishop Nektary Kontzevitch, listed with the New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia who were canonized in 1981.



*From this day, from this hour,
from this minute, let us strive to love God
above all, and fulfill His holy will.*

THE ORTHODOX WORD

For the Mission of True Orthodox Christianity

*Established with the blessing of His Eminence
Archbishop John (Maximovitch)*

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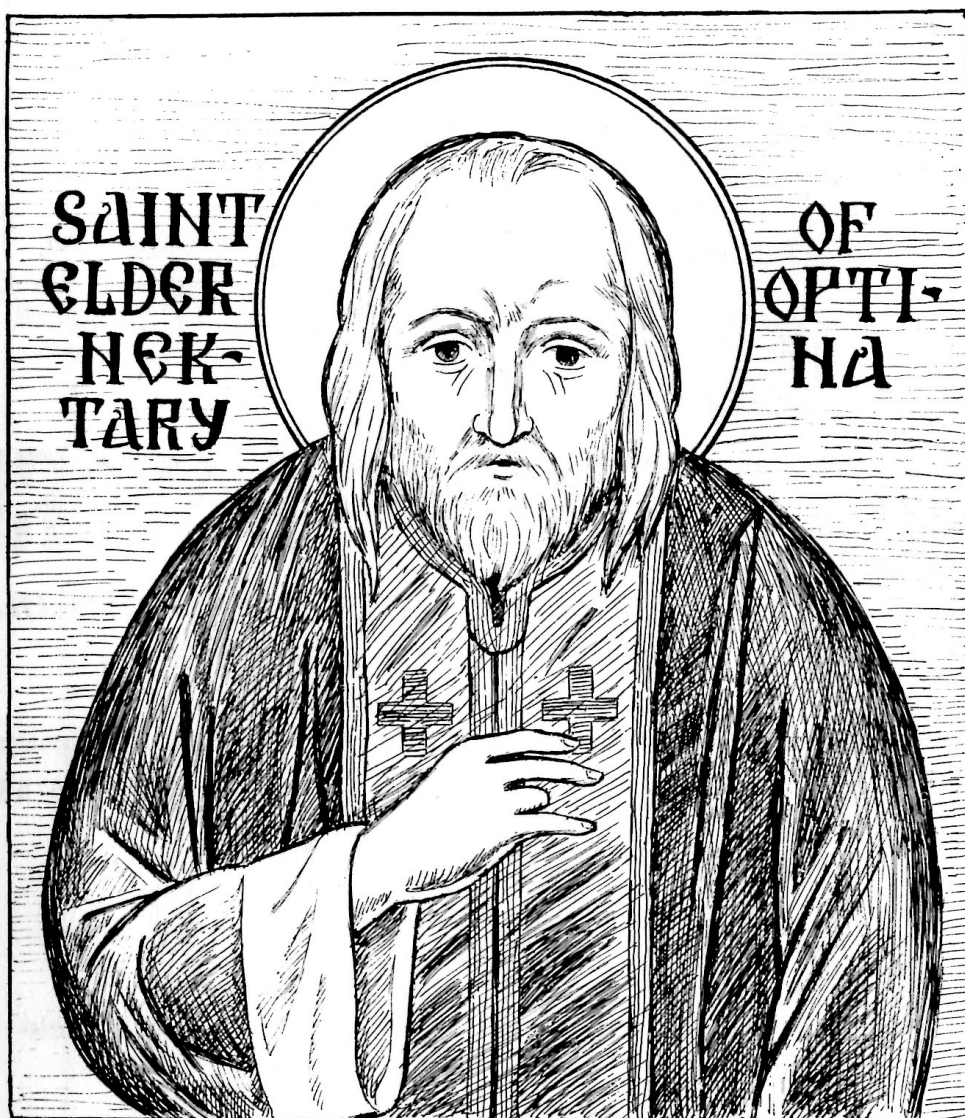
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Cover: A view of Optina Monastery from the waters of the Zhizdra River. In front is one of the towers which stand at the four corners of the monastery, and behind the trees is the monastery itself.

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A TROPARION TO ST. NEKTARY OF OPTINA, TONE 1

In being blessed with childlike simplicity and humility,
Thy virtuous soul didst attract the Grace of God.

Thy mind and heart illumined by the Creator,
thou couldst peer into the secrets of His creation,
lighting for all the path that leads unto His Kingdom,
our Holy Father Nektary of Optina.

Glory to Him Who hath bestowed on thee His wisdom;
glory to Him Who hath restored man's original likeness in thee;
glory to Him Who hath taught us of Himself through thee.

Optina Elders:

Elder Nektary of Optina

by Nadezhda Alexandrova

EDITOR'S PREFACE

Ten years ago, there were still alive several monastics and laymen who had been spiritual children of the great Optina elders. The St. Herman Brotherhood was able to obtain some of their reminiscences for publication, so that even in our time of spiritual famine the faithful could partake of some genuine source of refreshment, coming from those who were deemed worthy to behold the undistorted image of their holy teachers. Our Brotherhood now presents one such source, which we received from Archbishop Andrew, the builder of New Diveyevo Convent in New York State. He was my spiritual father, known to me as Fr. Adrian. For years I had been begging him to write for me his memoirs about his elder, Hieromonk Nektary of Optina. He kept prolonging my wait. Of course, I knew he was very busy and sick all the time, but that did not lessen my desire to have some of his own words on such a sensitive subject - a true-to-life portrayal of his holy elder -, especially because he was very touchy about the precise image being kept undistorted. When I saw him for the last time, feeling that it would indeed be our very last meeting, I

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repeated my request. He was willing to tell me anything I wanted to know, and I managed then to jot down a lot of priceless details as he expressed them from his heart. When I came home and began to work on my notes, however, I encountered a terrible need for more details and repeated again my old request. To this he wrote:

Dear Batiushka Father Herman,

You are giving me an absolutely impossible commission: "to give you Father Nektary," to give you not just his Life Story, but precisely that transcendence of life which we were experiencing being in communion with Batiushka Father Nektary. So that you will understand what I am saying, I will tell you what happened to us, students of the Christian Fellowship in Petersburg, when we, disillusioned with interconfessionalism, were seeking Orthodoxy. We turned to Professor John Egorov and asked him to tell us what Orthodoxy was. Then Elder Nektary smiled and said: "Orthodoxy is life; one cannot talk about it, one must live it." In the same way I will tell you: "In order to give you the full Batiushka Nektary, one must be in that same state in which was Evgenia Grigorievna, who in her memoirs did "give" (present) our Batiushka. To describe the everyday life of the elder? --It has already been written by Kontzevitch.¹ And to give the correct characteristics of his personality? --It is hard for me to do now. In order to describe all that by myself I need my memory, which has become weakened; and I am afraid to make a standard portrait of a man who for us was the image of "Light Invisible."² Bishop Nektary described various incidents which took place in the Kontzevitch family. But it was Evgenia Grigorievna who portrayed his image as it was. Do not be sad! May Christ protect you.

Archbishop Andrew, May 10/23, 1977

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A year or so later, however, he sent me a whole manuscript by one of his friends in Soviet Russia, Nadezhda Alexandrova. He stated that he was finally able to satisfy me, and blessed me to publish the manuscript. During our 1978 Summer Pilgrimage, while celebrating the 50th anniversary of the elder's repose,³ the text was read at one of the lecture sessions of our "New Valaam Theological Academy." Only now do we give the English translation in full. A slightly changed version was published in SAMIZDAT a few years ago. Even though the text was written by a person close to the elder, it still lacks what Fr. Adrian could have done: add further clues elucidating the enigmatic personality of the mystic that Elder Nektary actually was. But for us, unworthy ones, the following account provides plenty of insights by which we can see how God worked in this frail human being. Filled to the brim with Godliness, the elder, like the still waters of an azure lake, reflected the awesome mystery of God's closeness to humankind.

Abbot Herman
Great Lent, 1986
New Valaam, Alaska

NOTES

1. This is actually the definitive VITA PRIMA of the elder. It is found (in Russian) in *Optina and Its Era* (Holy Trinity Monastery, Jordanville, N. Y., 1971), which will appear in an enlarged edition, as Volume 10 of the Optina Elders Series of the St. Herman Brotherhood.
2. A reference to a famous book.
3. See *The Orthodox Word* no. 84.

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1. OPTINA

The last Optina elder was Schema-hieromonk Nektary. He was a disciple of the spiritual directors of the skete, Fr. Anatole Zertsalov and Elder Ambrose, and later of Archimandrite Agapit - a well-educated and spiritually experienced monk. He became an elder in 1913 and settled in the cell of Elder Ambrose by the entrance gates to the skete. During the period of his eldership in Optina, the Elders Barsanuphrius and Theodosius were still living, as well as Fr. Anatole who died a year before the closing down of Optina in the summer of 1922.

Batiushka¹ Anatole was unusually simple and kindly. Everyone who came to him experienced a joy as though he had come under a golden shower of grace. Even to come close to this elder gave one the wondrous opportunity of being cleansed and comforted. Batiushka Nektary was stricter, more penetrating and unique in his own way. He tested the hearts of those who came to him and, rather than consoling them, he would point out the path of podvig.² He humbled one and placed one in spiritually trying circumstances, not fearing and not pitying in the least because he had faith in the dignity and understanding of the soul and in the mighty power of grace, which helps those seeking the Truth. The main characteristics of Batiushka Nektary were humility and wisdom, and his light was like a sword of light piercing the soul. He approached everyone individually, in a personal way, and said, "You cannot demand from a fly the work of a bee. Each man must be given according to his own measure. You cannot give the same thing to everyone."

In appearance the elder was not tall, with a roundish face; long thin locks of greying hair curled out from under his tall cap; in his hands a prayer rope with beads. When giving Confession he would put on an old red velvet epitra-

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chelon with worn-out crosses of frayed braid. His eyes were evenly set and not large. His face was though ageless -- sometimes old, stern, as if a thousand years old; at other times youthful with a liveliness and animation of expression; or childlike in its purity and calm. Even six years before his death, despite his advanced years, he walked with a light and gliding step, as though not touching the earth. Later he moved about with difficulty; his legs, swollen like tree-trunks, constantly oozed. They testified to many years of standing at prayer.

At the end of his life his face lost its youthful glow, which had for so long rested upon him and which returned to him only at the time of illness preceding death. If in his last years his face shone, it was with a timeless light. The elder became decrepit, weakened. He would often doze off in the middle of conversations, but more often he would become immersed in deep mental prayer as though he had left the world, and returning once again he would be filled with renewed strength and clear-sightedness. The whole life of the elder, from childhood until the hour of his death, was marked by God's Providence.

2. CHILDHOOD

He was born in Yeltsa in 1857 or 1858 of poor parents, Vassily and Helen Tikhonov. He was baptized in the Yeltsa church of St. Sergius and given the name Nicholas. His godparents were Nicholas and Matrona. He always prayed for them and for his parents. His father worked at a mill and died when his son was only seven. The boy was bright and loved to learn, but being poor he was only able to attend the village school.

Only one incident is known from his early childhood. Once he was playing near his mother. Nearby was a cat whose eyes were shining brightly. The boy grabbed a needle and thought of stabbing the animal's eye to see what was making it shine, but his mother hit his hand: "Naughty boy! If you dare to poke out the cat's eye, you yourself

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will later be without an eye!"

Many years later when already a monk, the elder remembered this incident. He came to the skete's well where there hung a ladle with a pointed handle. Another monk, not noticing the elder, lifted the ladle in such a way that the pointed end came within inches of the elder's eye, and just in the nick of time was the elder able to push it aside. "If I had poked out the cat's eye at that time, I would now be without an eye," he said. "Obviously, all this had to be to remind me, unworthy one, that everything in life, from the cradle to the grave, is taken into serious account by God."

With his mother Nicholas had a close affinity. She was strict with him, but more often acted meekly and was able to touch his heart. She arranged for the 11 year old Nicholas to work in the shop of the merchant Khamov, and there until he was 17 he worked up to the position of youngest steward. The youth grew up to be quiet, prayerful and a lover of reading. He had a very handsome face with a rosy complexion and curly blond hair like a girl's -- so said the oldest Optina monks who remembered him in his youth.

At that time he did not know what the future was to bring. As soon as he turned 18 the oldest of Khamov's students thought of marrying off his daughter to him; and his employer supported this idea. The girl was very nice and Nicholas was drawn to her.

Even ten years later, remembering his bride-to-be, Batiushka would smile; and to one nun whom he used to receive very kindly, he said, "You remind me of my bride of long ago."

3. ELDER HILARION

At that time there lived in Yeltsa a righteous old woman already nearly 100 years old -- Schema-nun Theoktista, a spiritual daughter of St. Tikhon of Zadonsk. The Yeltsa inhabitants would go to her for advice. And the merchant counselled Nicholas to go to her for a blessing

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on his marriage. But when he came, the schema-nun said to him, "Young man, go to Optina to Fr. Hilarion and he will tell you what to do." She crossed him and gave him tea for the road. He kissed her hand and went to his employer. "Thus and thus," he said, "Matushka Theoktista is sending me to Optina." The merchant said nothing and even gave him money for the journey. Nicholas said good-bye to his bride and left; they never saw one another again.

It was summer when he arrived in Optina. In summertime, everywhere around Optina was indescribably beautiful. Amidst the meadows was the silver Zhizdra River, above which were willows and oaks and beyond which, on the other bank, were monastery orchards and the enormous Optina pine forest. The monastery was girdled about by a white wall with towers at its corners, and each tower was crowned by a weathervane in the form of an angel blowing a trumpet.

Nicholas entered the skete. There were many people, all going to the great elder, Schema-monk Ambrose, and he thought, "Lord, how beautiful it is here! The sun is here from the first rays of dawn, and what flowers! --Truly it is a paradise." Thus the elder recalled his first impression of Optina.

But he did not know how to find Elder Hilarion and did not even know who this Hilarion was. He asked a monk, who smiled at his ignorance and said, "All right, I'll show you Hilarion, only I don't know whether he is the one you need." And he led him to the skete superior, Hilarion. Nicholas related to him concerning Matushka Theoktista and asked his blessing for his future, but the superior said, "I myself can tell you nothing, but go to Batiushka Ambrose and do what he tells you."

At that time so many people went to see Elder Ambrose that they waited for weeks in his waiting room; but the elder saw Nicholas right away and spoke to him for two hours. Elder Nektary never revealed the content of



Optina as it looks today, over a half-century since its forced closure. A view from the Zhizdra River.

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their talk, but afterwards Nicholas remained in the skete and never returned home even for a day.

Once he saw that a pilgrim had the book, *The Life of Elder Hilarion*, and Batiushka remarked, "I am indebted to him for everything. He received me into the skete 50 years ago when I came not having a place to lay my head -- a total orphan, penniless, and many of the brotherhood at that time were well-educated. And so I was the least among them." Batiushka held his hand out a yard above the floor, indicating the measure of his poverty and nothingness at that time. Elder Hilarion had by then already experienced much and knew both the earthly and the heavenly. "The earthly is simple, but the heavenly..." and Batiushka said no more.

4. SPIRITUAL SONSHIP

The first obedience given to him at Optina was to gather flowers which he so loved; and then he was assigned the job of sacristan. In this obedience he was often late to church and went about with red, swollen, sleepy eyes. The brethren complained to Elder Ambrose of this and he replied in a rhyme as was his habit: "Just wait, for Nick will wake -- and all your burdens take!"

He became the spiritual son of Fr. Anatole Zertsalov, who later became skete superior, and for counsel he would go to Batiushka Ambrose. In *The Life in God of the Late Elder Schema-hieromonk Ambrose*, written by Archimandrite Agapit, there is mentioned the reminiscences of Batiushka Nektary: "I entered the skete in 1876. Within a year Batiushka Ambrose blessed me to have as my spiritual father the superior of the skete, Schema-hieromonk Anatole, which relationship continued until the repose of the latter in 1894. Only in rare and very special circumstances did I turn to Elder Ambrose. Nevertheless I cherished great love and faith towards him. It would happen that I would go to him and he, after only a few words on my part, would disclose the very depths of my heart and set aright any

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confusion, bringing peace and consolation. I was often amazed at the concern and love towards me, unworthy one, on the part of the elder, for I realized that I in no way deserved it. On my asking my spiritual father, Schema-hieromonk Anatole, about this, he replied that it was because of my love and faith in the elder and that, if he did not respond to others with such love as he did towards me, it was due to a lack of love and faith towards the elder on their part. The way in which a man relates to the elder, the same will the elder act towards him."

Further on, Batiushka Nektary remembers: "Unfortunately, among the brethren were some who grumbled against the elder. Sometimes I had to listen to the audacious and senseless talk of such ones, although I always tried to defend the elder. I remember that after one such conversation there appeared to me in a dream my spiritual father, Schema-hieromonk Anatole, who said to me sternly, 'No one has the right to judge the conduct of the elder, acting after their own senselessness and impudence. The elder will give account to God for his actions. We will never grasp their meaning.'" In such a lofty way did his spiritual fathers reveal to Fr. Nektary the lofty meaning of the spiritual laws of eldership.

Both Fr. Ambrose and Fr. Anatole were strict in leading him along the true monastic path. Batiushka Nektary described how the elders nourished him spiritually, having had this thought: "Some complain about the elder, that he doesn't involve himself in their problems and doesn't come out to receive them, but they don't turn to themselves and think, 'Aren't we sinners? Maybe that is the reason the elder doesn't receive me; he is awaiting my repentance and is testing me.' I will tell something of myself, a sinner. It would happen that I would go to Batiushka Ambrose and he would say to me, 'What are you doing, going about idle? It would be better for you to sit in your cell and pray!' I would be hurt but wouldn't complain and instead would go to my spiritual father, Batiushka Anatole.



"A heavenly man and an earthly angel" were the words which Elder Nektary used to describe his beloved abba, Schema-hieromonk Ambrose of Optina (+1891).

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But he would greet me sternly: 'Why are you hanging around idly? Did you come to waste time yakking?' And so I would drag myself back to my cell. There I had a full-length icon of the Saviour; I would fall down before Him and all night cry out, 'Lord, what a great sinner I am if even the elders don't receive me!'"

The elder was once asked if he ever rebelled against his teachers. "No!" he answered, "The thought wouldn't even cross my mind. Only once did I commit some offense and I was sent to Elder Ambrose for correction. And he had a stick. When you were guilty he would tap you (not as I do to you!). But of course I didn't want to be beaten. As soon as I saw that the elder was going after his stick, I ran... but later asked forgiveness."

5. ELDERSHIP

Concerning Fr. Anatole Zertsalov, the elder said, "For 20 years I was under his guidance and was the least of his sons and pupils, which makes me weep even now." And turning to one of his visitors he added, "So you see, my dear Matushka, if you want to become a nun consider yourself likewise as the last daughter and worst pupil. One must always think of oneself as being in the state of a novice."

This same nun relates: "Once the elder asked a nun, 'Well, Matushka, how is your spiritual life progressing?' 'Very well Batiushka!' she replied in all simplicity. 'Well!' he repeated. Then he went to his room and after some time returned, stern and angry. She asked him about various matters concerning which his advice was needed, but he was silent. Then, pointing to another priest, he said, 'Don't come to me. I refuse to have anything more to do with you.' She began to cry, but he didn't even look at her. She began to despair. Then he took her by the hand and led her to the icon corner. 'Tell me, do you want to enter the Kingdom of Heaven?' he asked sternly, as though he was about to hit her. She was silent. 'Speak up, do you

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want this?' 'I do!' she answered through her tears. 'Well then, don't expect anything easier. I don't know of any other path to get there. But if you want another, then look for it yourself.' And again he went away. She was so distressed that her head became clouded with sorrow. Then he softened a bit and gave her to read the Lives of two Sarov elders, one very stern, the other softer and more gentle: the stern one sent beginning novices to the less strict elder, knowing that they would not be able to bear his harshness and would fall away. With this same sternness did Batiushka Nektary's elders bring him up, and he likewise led his close disciples along this same path. He did not pull at the bit, but let up from time to time so as not to overstrain. He said to one of his spiritual daughters, 'I assure you that we will have examinations and maneuvers and afterwards we will have spiritual joy.' She objected: "Batiushka, I'm already grown up, what kind of examinations will I have?" Batiushka smiled: 'No, no! We will definitely have examinations and re-examinations.'

6. OBEDIENCE

The elder placed great importance on obedience. "The highest and primary virtue is obedience. Its attainment is man's primary objective. Out of obedience Christ came into the world, and man's life on earth is obedience to God. But there must be understanding of obedience; it must be properly valued, otherwise it can be destructive.

"Without obedience man is seized by impulse as if in a fever, but then there comes weakening, cooling off, numbness, and he is unable to move any farther. Obedience is at first difficult -- always periods and commas, periods and commas, but afterwards all is smoothed out, without any punctuations.

"Our forefathers were given the promise which they awaited since the days of Cain. Cain was the first-born, but they gave preference to Abel because he was meek, humble and obedient. Cain was the first-born but he was

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cruel, crude and did his own will. He was vexed that Abel was favored and he became sullen and hung his head. The Lord said to him, 'Cain, sin lies at the threshold. Take control of it or else it will turn and destroy you.' But he did not pay attention and did not obey God; sin lay at the threshold of his heart but he did not notice and looked at the entrance to his house. Seeing no one there, he thought no more about it and went and killed his brother. Turning from obedience to God, he fell into obedience to sin. And how he was tormented afterwards! Lord! He was always running away from everything and always in a state of fear and trembling."

Thus did the elder illustrate his teaching on discernment and heedfulness in obedience. He pointed out that one must not take spiritual instruction literally or superficially, limiting oneself to the outward aspect; one must not look only at the threshold of the house, but at what is most important, at the threshold of one's heart.

Taking some text or an example from Scripture, he would often speak about both its literal and its allegorical meaning. For example: "Blessed is the man who walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly." On the surface this means that a man is blessed when he avoids the company of the lawless and does not take part in heretical teachings. By "man" is also meant the mind when it does not accept thoughts coming from the enemy. It is impossible to forbid such thoughts to come, but one may refuse to confer with them or to entertain them and say instead, "Lord have mercy." One who acts in such a way is called a man.

In assigning a particular obedience, the elder was very clear and precise in explaining exactly how it should be carried out, measuring it against one's strength. Once assigned, however, he expected it to be speedily and unhesitatingly fulfilled. Once he sent one of his spiritual daughters on an errand. She lingered in the anteroom talking to someone. The elder came out and said, "Two minutes

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have passed and you're still here!"

7. MONASTICISM AND PRIESTHOOD

Entering the skete in 1876, Batiushka Nektary received the mantle³ in 1887. This brought him great joy. In his old age he would recall: "For a whole year afterwards I felt wings at my shoulders." Concerning his tonsure he told one novice at the convent, "When you entered the convent you gave a vow to the Lord and the Lord accepted everything and recorded all your promises. And thus you received monasticism. But this is only the monastic ceremony. When you will live as a monastic you will receive everything in the future life, but if you receive the mantle and do not live a monastic life, then in the future life it will be taken from you."

Having heard this instruction, Mother A. said to Batiushka, "I don't lead a very good life." He replied, "When one is learning any art, at first there are always failures, but later it begins to turn out better. You are grieved that nothing goes right with you. Well, Matushka, when the Lord will grant you the angelic habit, then Grace will strengthen you in everything." "But Batiushka," returned Mother A., "didn't you just say that one shouldn't strive for the mantle?" "Matushka," he said, "such is spiritual law; there is no need to ask or to refuse."

The elder esteemed monasticism very highly. To rhyasophore-monk Father Y. (later Father George) he said, "You have three fears: the first is to fear the renunciation of monasticism; the second - to fear one's elders; the third - to fear one's youth. Which must you fear the most? I would advise you above all to treasure monasticism. Even if they threaten you with a gun -- do not abandon monasticism."

In 1894, Fr. Nektary was ordained as a hierodeacon and in 1898 as a hieromonk by a Kaluga hierarch.

Concerning his ordination, he related to P. N.: "When I was ordained to the priesthood by our former honorable

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Bishop Macarius, he with the eye of a true pastor saw through to my unsettled spiritual state and gave me a brief and powerful word of exhortation. This was so powerful that I remember it even now - and many years have passed - and I will not forget it until my dying day. And he said so much to me! He called me into the altar and said, 'Nektary! When you will be grieving and despondent and beset by heavy trials, repeat this one thing: "Lord, protect, save and have mercy on Thy slave Hieromonk Nektary."' This was all he said, but his words saved me once, and up to this day they have saved me for they were said with power."

From precisely what misfortune this instruction saved him was never revealed, although the elder did once tell of some of the trials which befell him. One happened in the first years of his noviciate.

8. TRIALS

In his youth he had a wonderful voice, and even in old age he had a musical ear. In his first years in Optina he sang on the right kliros of the skete church and was even scheduled to sing "The Wise Thief." But in the skete there was a custom: once a year during Great Lent, the monastery's choir director would come to the skete and choose from among the singers the best voices for the monastery choir. This move from the skete to the monastery threatened Brother Nicholas and he did not want to be transferred. At the same time, to sing "The Thief" was both consoling and flattering. In spite of this, in the presence of the choir director he began singing off key to such an extent that he was shifted to the left kliros and of course there was no more question of his being transferred to the monastery choir.

A second trial befell him when he was already a hieromonk and semi-recluse. Having received the mantle, he almost never left his cell, let alone the confines of the skete. There were even years when the windows of his cell were



Optina Skete, the home of Elder Nektary about 12 miles from the main monastery. In the distance is the entrance as it looks from the inside, with a tower rising above the gate.

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covered over by blue paper. He himself liked to repeat that for a monk there were only two exits out of one's cell -- either to church or into the grave. But during these years he studied and read. He read not only the Holy Fathers and spiritual works but also occupied himself with science, mathematics, history, geography, and classical literature both Russian and foreign. He spoke to his visitors about Pushkin and Shakespeare, Milton and Krilov, Spingler and Hegart, Blok, Dante, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. In his only hour of rest after dinner he asked to be read aloud Pushkin or some fairy-tales -- either Russian or the Brothers Grimm.

He studied languages -- Latin and French (he even spoke French, having become acquainted with a Frenchman who had converted to Orthodoxy in Optina. He would often cite quotations in Latin.) He was a close friend of Constantine Leontiev, who, living in Optina, read to him the manuscripts of his work. He studied painting with the artist Bolotov who had become a monk. Bolotov, having finished the Petersburg Academy of Art together with Repin and Vasnetsov, founded an icon-painting studio in Optina in which he taught according to the methods of the Academy. Fr. Nektary never lost his interest in art.

When he was already a hieromonk, Elder Nektary was struck by the urge to travel, to see foreign lands. At this time there came to Optina a request for a hieromonk to be dispatched to a fleet going around the world, and the Archimandrite proposed this assignment to Batiushka Nektary. With great joy he began to prepare himself. Just before his departure he went to Elder Joseph for a blessing for the trip but it was not granted to him. And so Batiushka stayed in Optina.

A third trial came upon him when he was himself an elder. He was almost 70 years old, and he wanted to resign his position as elder and become a pilgrim. "But here I myself already realized that this was a temptation, fought with myself and stayed," he said.

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During these years of studying and spiritual growth, the elder began to take upon himself foolishness for Christ. He wore brightly colored sweaters over his cassock; all his food from trapeza [monastic table] he dumped together into one pot -- the sour, the sweet, the salty; he walked about the skete with a boot on one foot and a slipper on the other. He bewildered the monks even more, not only at this time but also as an elder, with all his toys. He had toy automobiles, boats, trains and later even airplanes. With these toys he created for himself a demonstration of modern technology. He even had music boxes and wound up a gramophone with religious records, but the skete administration put a stop to it.

9. LEARNING

It was characteristic of him to be interested in various aspects of life in general. Up until the last year of his life he acquainted himself with contemporary literature, asking to have news of books and inquiring about the state of education in the schools and colleges. He knew about everything that interested the intellectuals. But all this knowledge was necessary for his service to God and to people. He told how once before the revolution some seminarians came to him with their instructors and asked him for some words of advice. "My dear young men," he addressed them, "if will live and study in such a way that your intelligence will not spoil your morality, but rather that your morals affect your intelligence, then you will be successful in life."

Once one of his spiritual daughters was sorrowfully talking to her friend in his reception room: "I don't know, perhaps education is altogether unnecessary and only brings harm. How can it be reconciled with Orthodoxy?" The elder, coming out of his cell, rejoined, "Once a man came to me who simply couldn't believe that there had been a flood. Then I told him that on very high mountains in the sand are found shells and other remains from the ocean

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floor, and how geology testifies to the flood, and he came to believe. You see how necessary learning is at times."

Often Fr. Nektary would say how much respect he had for learning. Of history he would say: "It shows us how God rules through people and gives as it were moral lessons to the world." Speaking on mathematics, he loved to ask if perhaps a triangle was not equal to a circle, and often gave the example from the Holy Fathers: "God is the center of the circle and people are the radii. In drawing closer to the center they come closer to one another." Concerning outward activity he would say: "The outward belongs to you, but the inner activity is conducted by the grace of God. Therefore you must act, you must yourself conduct outward activity, and when all of that is in good order then the inner side will be cultivated. One shouldn't seek or wait for miracles. We have one miracle: Divine Liturgy. This is the greatest miracle and one must bow down before it and become a part of it."

He taught that attention must be paid to one's thoughts: "Stop thinking; start concentrating on thoughts." In other words, to think is to diffuse the thought so that it lacks proper direction. Put off thinking and start contemplating. "Once there was a Duma⁴ that thought but did not contemplate as a government should -- Napoleon thought, but Kutuzov contemplated. Contemplation is higher than thought."

About life he said: "Life is defined in three ways: measure, time, weight. The best, most wonderful action, if it is beyond measure will have no meaning. You are drawn to mathematics and you have a sense of measure. Remember these three meanings. They define the whole of life."

He used to relate that in his youth he spent much time observing the life of insects and animals.

Once the elder said, "God not only allows but requires of a man that he grow in knowledge. In God's creation there is no end; everything moves. Even the angels

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do not remain in one rank but go from one step to another, receiving new revelations. Even if a man were to study for a hundred years he must advance to still newer and newer discoveries... And you should work. While working, years fly by unnoticeably." At this time his face was unusually bright so that it was difficult to look upon him.

At another time he said, "One prophet had a vision of God -- not in a circle of light but in a triangle. This was a sign that man cannot approach and experience the impenetrable depth of the mystery of God. To man is given only to experience that which surrounds the Divinity; but if he makes bold to penetrate beyond these limits, he will perish from the sharp corners of the triangle."

10. PHILOSOPHY OF ART

The elder also spoke about art and literature: "One may occupy oneself with art just as any work, like being a cabinet-maker or herding cows. But everything must be done before God's eyes. There is great art and there is lesser art. One can define the lesser as follows: there exist sounds and lights. An artist is someone who is sensitive to these sounds and lights which others are unable to perceive. He takes them and puts them on canvas, on paper. They become colors, notes, words. It is as though the sounds and lights have dissolved. From light there remains color. A book, a painting -- these are the sarcophagi of light and sound. A reader or a beholder comes and, if he is able to creatively apprehend or read, a 'resurrection' of meaning takes place. And then the circle of art is completed. Light flashes in the soul of the beholder or reader, his hearing becomes awakened to sound. For this reason an artist or poet has no particular cause for pride. He is only doing his share of the work. In vain to they suppose themselves to be the creators of their works -- there is one Creator, and men only dissolve the words and images of the Creator and then revive them by the power of the spirit given by Him.

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"But there is also greater art -- the word of life and death (the Psalms of David, for example), but the way to this art lies in the personal struggle of the artist. This is the path of sacrifice, and only one out of many thousands reaches the goal.

All the poetic verses in the world are not worth one line of Holy Scripture. Pushkin was one of the most learned men in Russia and yet he couldn't handle his own life!"

The elder loved to quote from *Hamlet*: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in our philosophy."

One writer asked the elder his opinion on printing a poem directed against the monastery. "Print it," he said. "Milton wrote some frightfully bad, even terrible things, but as a whole he was a good writer. Creative works must always be taken as a whole."

He spoke of the need for writers to consider every word: "Before beginning to write, dip the pen seven times into the ink well."

Recognizing that the theater was a means of popular education and counselling actors to observe proportion in their playing, he once refused a blessing to a girl who was dreaming of going on stage. When asked why he replied, "She will not overcome and will become corrupted. Here strength is necessary. Modesty in our day is a great virtue. This is nothing less than purity. And to preserve purity (and among your intelligentsia this is easiest to lose) is to preserve all."

He was especially fond of painting and had an aptitude for it himself. "No longer is there any great art," he said. "Earlier, the artist would prepare himself for a particular painting, both in soul and outwardly. Before sitting down to work he would prepare everything: the brush, the paints. And he wouldn't spend just a few days on the painting, but years, sometimes an entire lifetime, like Ivanov in his *The Appearance of Christ to the People*. And great masterpieces were created. But now -- he sits down

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to paint without the appropriate brushes, or he has to go get some paints; it disrupts his work. He doesn't even get his materials together. And he paints everything hurriedly, without thinking it through, without feeling its every stroke..."

Once the elder remarked, "And when you paint an angel, the light must not fall upon him: rather, it must emanate from him."

The elder desired very much for someone to paint the Nativity of Christ. "The world must revivify this event. It only happened once! The shepherds in torn and ragged clothing stand with their faces to the light, their backs to the viewer; and the light is not white but slightly golden, without a hint of shadow, and not in rays or sheaves but in uninterrupted brightness; only in the far corners of the picture is a faint twilight to indicate that it is night. The light comes from the figures of the angels who are so fine as to be almost imperceptible; and so that it will be very evident that this was an unearthly heavenly beauty -- so that it will be altogether other-worldly!" he added with particular emphasis.

He asked one girl, "Why on that night did the shepherds see angels? Because they were keeping vigil through the night."

Once the elder was shown a beautiful icon of the Transfiguration in which the brightness of the light shining on Mount Tabor was sharply contrasted with the dark knotty trees in the foreground. The elder bade them erase the trees, saying that there where the light of Tabor shone was no darkness. So saying, he demonstrated: "When this light begins to shine, every tiny crevice in the table is illumined, and where there are shadows -- there is just a dimmer light."

11. ELECTION TO ELDERSHIP

All these remarks were the fruit of Fr. Nektary's inner spiritual experience. Now, fulfilling his duties as el-

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der, he shared his knowledge with others. But the transition from a solitary life in his cell to constant intercourse with many people was not easy for him. In 1913, at the insistence of Fr. Benedict, the abbot of Borovsky Monastery and dean of other local monasteries, the Optina monks gathered together to choose an elder. At first they offered the eldership to Archimandrite Agapit living in Optina in retirement. This was a widely educated man, deeply spiritual, the author of the best biography of Elder Ambrose. But he had resolutely declined the office of a bishop which had been offered him more than once. And he flatly refused the position of elder. He was leading a soul-saving life surrounded by only a few of his close disciples, one of whom was Hieromonk Nektary. When the brethren asked him to indicate a worthy candidate, he nominated Fr. Nektary. The latter in his humility was not even present at the meeting. When he had been chosen, Fr. Averky was sent to get him. Coming to him he said, "Batiushka, your presence is requested at the meeting." But Batiushka Nektary declined, saying, "They can choose whomever is needed without me." "The archimandrite sent me to get you and asks that you come!" said Fr. Averky. Then Batiushka immediately put on his ryassa [outer robe], and just as he was - one foot in a shoe, the other in a slipper - he went to the meeting. "Batiushka," they greeted him, "you have been chosen as the spiritual father and elder of the brotherhood." "No, fathers and brothers! I am stupid and cannot carry such a burden," said Batiushka, declining. But the archimandrite said to him, "Fr. Nektary, accept this obedience." And then Batiushka agreed.

Fr. Benedict supported this decision, but when Fr. Nektary was already an elder and had settled into Elder Ambrose's cell, he decided to test him. Arriving at the monastery, he sent someone to tell him that his presence was requested. But Batiushka Nektary did not go. "For years I have been living in the skete without leaving to go anywhere and I'm not fit to go," he said. Then Fr. Be-

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nedict sent for him a second time and bid them to say, "The provost of the monasteries summons you to himself." Then Batiushka immediately came to the monastery and prostrated himself before Fr. Benedict, who laughed and said, "As provost I won't bow down at your feet but I will bow down to the ground." Then they began to talk as friends.

12. HUMILITY

The elder always said to himself, "What kind of an elder am I? How can I follow in the footsteps of the former elders? I am weak and infirm. They had whole loaves of wisdom and I have but a slice."

Recalling Elder Ambrose he said, "This was a heavenly man and an earthly angel, but I am barely maintaining the glory of eldership." With subtle humor he would say, "I am an ant and crawl along the ground where I see all the ruts and ditches, but the brethren are way up high ascending to the clouds. 'Oh sluggard, go to the ant and imitate his life!' -- This was not said by a worldly writer, but is read in church. Did you hear the Old Testament readings? And who are we - Fr. Anatole [the Younger] and I - we are just ants. And you have come to us. Now Krilov - your Petersburg librarian - wrote about the ant, and how the dragonfly came to him. Do you know the story?" Batiushka began to smile as he told the end of the fable. But here he turned to the icons, said a short prayer and dismissed his visitors: "You are still only approaching the first step and have not gone up. But you still have to go through the door and no matter how hard you try, you cannot go through without God's mercy. For this reason, first of all one must ask: 'Lord, open to me the doors of mercy.' Everything is obtained by prayerful entreaty. Adam in paradise. The commandment: 'cultivate and guard' -- concerning prayer. But Adam heedlessly contemplated nothing but beauty. He was not thankful to God.



St. Elder Anatole the Younger (+1922), elder of Optina Monastery at the time when Elder Nektary was elder of the Optina Skete. He was canonized together with Elder Nektary, having also endured much suffering during the Soviet liquidation of Optina. He is not to be confused with an elder who came before him, Fr. Anatole Zertsalov (+1894), who was one of Elder Nektary's spiritual fathers.

Meekness, love for one's neighbor and repentance were regarded by Batiushka as of primary importance in spiritual life.

"The story of Job is a lesson for all men," he said. "While a man is rich, learned, enjoying happiness, God does not answer. When a man is on a dung hill, abandoned by everyone, then God appears and Himself speaks to him, but the man only listens and cries out, 'Lord, have mercy!' Only the measure of abasement is different.

The main thing is to guard oneself from judging one's neighbor. As soon as such a thought enters the mind, immediately and with attention turn to the Lord: 'Lord, make

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me to see my own faults and not to judge my brother."

Humbly the elder would say, "I feel poorly, but in my weakness is He made strong. This alone comforts me, that it is well with Him. And how amazingly well it is. When I look at myself and see that I'm in such a poor state, but that it is well with my brother -- this comforts me. I admit that I am wretched. But the grace of God is good, and this is given to my brother. And, since I am of one faith with my brother, the 'good' of my brother comes upon me as a blessing: not my goodness, but my brother's." Here the words "of one faith" are particularly striking, for this unity of faith provides a means as it were for the operation of grace.

13. FALSE MYSTICISM -- begins in mist and ends in schism

The elder would often caution those who came to him against straying from Orthodoxy, against the "living church"⁵ and false mystical currents.

He took a firm stand against the living church: "There is no grace there. Rebelling against the lawful patriarch, Tikhon, the bishops and priests of the living church deprived themselves of grace and lost, according to canonical ruling, their hierarchical office. Because of this, the Liturgy performed by them is a mockery." The elder forbade his spiritual children to enter the churches taken over by the renovationists. If there were wonder-working icons in such churches, the Iveron Mother of God, for example, he would instruct them in going to the church to go straight to the icon and neither by thought nor movement to participate in the service; candles to be placed before the icon were to be brought from home or from an Orthodox church.

But he did say if the renovationists repented to accept them into communion with the Church. About mysticism he said, "Mysticism is a multicolored rainbow. One end is hidden in the sea, the other in the earth, and mysticism

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itself is an arch. Those learned in mysticism say, 'We are resting on earth.' But what is there? Only dirt! -- and what remains for them at the other end is the sea -- a great expanse. Well, do you understand?" he asked his listeners. The image of the sea in Patristic literature is an image of uncertainty, wavering, turbulence.

The elder fought especially against the spread of spiritism: "Educated people are often captivated by the teachings of spiritism, sincerely thinking that this path leads to salvation. But no! From it flows only sickness."

Bikov, at one time a well-known spiritist, describes in his book *Quiet Harbors to Suffering Souls* his visit with Elder Nektary and quotes him on the subject of spiritism: "Oh, what a perditionous and terrible thing! Under the guise of a deep Christian teaching and through his demon-servants who appear invisible to man at spiritual seances, he, Satan, by means of the demonic lie of the ancient serpent, leads man into such pits and such thickets out of which it is impossible to extricate oneself, nor even to discern one's state. He takes possession, through this cursed activity, of the heart and mind of a man in such a way that what seems to a healthy mind to be a sin and crime seems to someone poisoned by spiritism to be perfectly normal and natural. Spiritists become filled with tremendous pride and often exhibit a satanic hatred towards their detractors. And in this way, gradually unnoticeable to himself - very subtly (nowhere does Satan act with more subtlety than in spiritism) - the man is drawn away from God, away from the Church, although -- notice! -- at the same time the spirit of darkness, through his servants, persists in sending the confused man to the churches of God to have Panikhidas and Molebens⁶ served, to read Akathists,⁷ to partake of the Holy Mysteries - all the while introducing thoughts into his head, that 'you could do all this yourself, at home, with greater fervor and reverence...' And in the same measure that the unwitting man falls deeper and deeper into the abyss, the more he becomes entangled in the intri-

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cate webs and labyrinths of the spirit of darkness, the Lord begins to step away from him. He loses God's blessing. If he were not already ensnared by Satan, he would run to God for help, to His saints and to the Queen of Heaven, to the Holy Apostolic Church, to its servants and priests, and they would help him with their holy prayers. But he goes with his sorrows to those same spirits, to the demons who plunge him still deeper into the mire of sin and perdition. Finally God's grace departs from him completely. Without any exterior provocation, his family begins to fall apart... his closest and dearest friends leave him... At last, when the unfortunate soul with Satan's help has reached the last step in leading himself astray, he either takes leave of his senses - the man becomes literally irresponsible - or he commits suicide. And although the spiritists say that suicide among themselves is rare, this is untrue. The very first one to call on spirits, King Saul, committed suicide because he did not keep God's words and turned to a sorceress."

This wise counsel of Elder Nektary could be applied to many deceptive mystical teachings which likewise lead the soul astray by appearing to have contact with the spiritual world (theosophy, for example.) Concerning other confessions of the Christian faith, the elder spoke thus: "Wisdom has built herself a house with seven pillars. Orthodoxy has these seven pillars.⁸ But God's wisdom has other dwellings -- they may have six pillars or less and accordingly a lesser measure of grace." He said, "In the last times the world will be girded about by iron and paper.⁹ But the days of Noah were such: the flood was drawing near. Noah knew about it and told the people, but they did not believe, for which reason they only received wages for their work and not salvation. Those days are the foreshadowing of our own days. The ark is the Church. Only those who are inside will be saved."

When asked, "But what about the millions of Chinese, Indians, Turks and other non-Christians?" the elder rep-

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lied: "God desires not only that nations be saved, but each individual soul. A simple Indian, believing in his own way in the Creator and fulfilling as best he can His will, will be saved; but he who knows about Christianity and follows the path of Buddhism or becomes a yogi -- I do not think so."

14. SPIRITUAL LIFE

Concerning wisdom in the human soul, the elder said that it is enkindled when the soul cries out to God: "My Father and the Lord of my virginity." Then God restores virginity to the soul of the harlot and she becomes "the bride of Christ, sister of the Word."

The elder described the path of spiritual life as "a tight-rope thirty feet above the ground. You traverse it -- everyone is amazed, but if you fall -- for shame!"

Once the elder said with a quiet sigh, "Worldly life measures years, centuries, milleniums, but what is most important is that 'morning comes, evening comes -- one day.'¹⁰ In the process there may be narrowing and widening, but no matter how long a man may live it will always be the same: 'Morning, evening -- one day.' The hardest object - stone; the most gentle - water. But drop after drop, the water pierces through the stone." "A man is given eyes in order to see aright."

He would speak of the gradual ascent of the spiritual path, that "one must force oneself in all things. If, for example, dinner is served and you want to eat, you smell something good but the spoon won't of itself bring the food to you. You must force yourself to stand up, go to the table, take up the spoon and only then begin to eat. And nothing is done at once, instantly -- in all things one must wait and be patient.

"Man is given life in order that it might serve him and not vice versa," i.e., man must not become a slave to circumstances; he must not sacrifice his inner life to the externals. "In serving life a man loses his sense of

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proportion, he works without any rationale and becomes sadly confused, not knowing why he lives. This is a very harmful state of doubt and it often happens that man, like a horse, plods under his load and suddenly finds upon himself such a...cataclysmic obstacle."

15. AN ALLEGORY OF PRAYER

Batiushka explained the symbolic meaning of the pelican and the phoenix: "The pelican feeds its young with its own blood -- this is symbolic of the Divine benevolence. The phoenix, sensing its approaching death, collects small twigs and branches into a pile and sits down upon it. The heat of its body becomes so great that a bonfire ignites and the phoenix burns in this purifying fire. Then having become purified by the fire, it is reborn from the ashes, young and beautiful."

Once Elder Nektary spoke about this cleansing fire in a commentary on the novel *She* by the English writer Hegart.

This legend tells the story of an enchantress who lived for several thousand years, preserving her youth and beauty because she had plunged into a flaming fountain of life hidden in a mountain cave. Having fallen in love with a mortal youth, she wanted to give him the same everlasting beauty and immortality. When he was frightened by the wave of flames, she boldly entered it herself a second time to demonstrate that the flames were harmless, and she was instantly punished by being turned into a haggard old woman and dying.

Batiushka gave a detailed account of the hidden and unattainable cave from which would periodically come forth a thunderclap, then a great crash; and then there would burst forth an unusual light, and whoever would enter into this light would receive youth and beauty. "To Hegart was given the opportunity to reveal a part of the knowledge of this light to the world," he stated. His listeners were perplexed, and in the evening they asked one another

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about the meaning behind Batiushka's teaching. In the morning, when they came to the elder for a blessing, he met them with the words: "The general meaning: 'O Lord!' -- there is thunder; 'Jesus Christ' -- there's a crash; 'Son of God' -- the light bursts forth; 'have mercy on me a sinner' -- the soul, if it so desires (here is total freedom), is allowed to step into this light and to be renewed. But the soul may become aged in a week, sometimes in one day. It happens that the Light itself comes to a man. St. Mary of Egypt described this to St. Zosima. She was lying in the sand like a corpse in the desert, and there appeared to her a quiet unearthly light."

In the evening of the same day the elder said, "A man belongs to two worlds, the visible and the invisible. Man is made up of a physical body, that of the soul and that of the spirit, or intellect. The body is given him for convenience, as a dwelling for the spirit so that it might function in the visible world. The visible world is reflected in the invisible world and vice versa. And the same cave described by the writer exists in the heart of man, but it is not given to every man to descend into this cave. There are some people who never enter it for it is surrounded by all kinds of dangers and precipices. The sound of thunder frightens the unclean spirits, and sometimes the soul itself. Crash! -- the appearance of the Saviour, as though the ordinary world has burst. And when the light sparks, the soul is allowed to enter it not once but even many times, and it receives youth, beauty and immortality. "She," the heroine of Hegart's novel, having entered a second time irreverently just to show that the fire was not dangerous, lost these gifts; this fire does indeed burn." The elder advised his disciples never to engage in the practice of the Jesus Prayer according to their own self-will. "Be aware that in the beginning it will be tiresome and difficult; one must enter the soul and there one encounters great darkness. Only afterwards, much later, the light begins to dawn. But one must wait and endure many afflictions."

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16. PRAYER

With love Batiushka often spoke about prayer: "According to the word of God, all impurities are cleansed through prayer. The soul cannot be reconciled with life, and can be consoled only through prayer. Without prayer the soul is dead to grace.

"The use of too many words is harmful to prayer, as the apostle said. The main thing is love and fervency towards God. It is better to say one prayer one day and another prayer another day than to say both, one right after the other. One is sufficient."

This does not mean that the elder limited the order of prayer or the daily rule to one prayer. He spoke of the capacity of beginners who only had concentration enough for one prayer and recited the rest absent-mindedly. The elder explained this allowance for such weakness by the following example: "The Saviour chose for Himself disciples from among simple, illiterate people. He called them and they cast aside everything and followed Him. He did not give them any rule of prayer -- he gave them complete freedom without any constraint, like children. But the Saviour Himself, when He finished His sermon, separated Himself into a desert place to pray. He called His disciples Himself; but to John the Baptist they came of their own will -- the Baptist did not call them, but they came to him. What rule of prayer he gave them remains unknown, but he taught them to pray. When John's disciples came to the Saviour, they told the apostles how they prayed and the latter were struck by the thought: here John's disciples pray and our good Teacher hasn't said a word about prayer. And they approached Him so seriously, as though to reproach Him: here John's disciples pray and we don't. But if John's disciples hadn't told them they wouldn't have thought of it." (The elder directed this last statement to one novice who had asked him for a rule of prayer when

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she learned that he had assigned a rule to his other disciples.) "The Saviour said to them: 'Our Father.' And thus He taught them, but He gave them no other prayer.

"There are people who never turn to God, who do not pray, but suddenly it happens that they become melancholy, troubled; the heart is heavy and the man feels that no other human being can help him out of such a wretched state. Someone can listen to him, but will not understand his misery. And then the man turns to God with a heartfelt sigh, 'Lord have mercy!' It seems that it is enough to utter the prayer once, 'Lord, have mercy!' but in church we say it three times, twelve, forty times. This is for those suffering souls who are unable to pronounce even 'Lord, have mercy!' and so the Church says it for them. And the Lord hears and at first there comes a small measure of grace like the flame of a candle, and then more and more and the soul feels relief."

Batiushka said to one of his spiritual sons, "I will light your lamp, but you must take care of the wick yourself."

About the Six Psalms¹¹: "The Six Psalms must not be read like kathismas,¹² but like prayers. The meaning of the Six Psalms is very deep; it is the prayer of the Son to God the Father."

Batiushka was asked how one should pray for those of whom it was not known whether or not they were still living. "You will not be amiss," he answered, "if you pray for them as living, because before God all are alive. All except heretics and apostates. These are the dead ones. If you please, you might as well remember them as something dead."

"Here is some instruction for you -- when you are preparing for Holy Communion, be a little less wordy and a little more prayerful."

One woman said to the elder, "Batiushka, I get terribly frustrated," and he replied, "When that frustration hits you, drill yourself with, 'Lord, have mercy!' Strengthen



The church of the Optina Skete.

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yourself with prayer and find comfort in working."

An elderly wagon-driver named Timothy fell on his knees before Batiushka, his face transfigured with faith, meekness and hope. "Batiushka!" he cried, "as an elder, instruct me so that your warm ray will pierce through my cold soul, and so that my soul will be enflamed towards the ascending mountain path." Then, after such a pedantic phrase, he said simply, "Batiushka, I have no tears." The elder, with a wonderful smile, gently leaned over to him and said, "That's all right. Your soul is crying, and such tears are worth much more than visible ones."

17. SPIRITUAL COUNSELS

The elder himself prayed with childlike faith and simplicity, sometimes stretching out his hands to the icons.

One of his spiritual daughters told how she once sat with him for a long time talking. Then he dismissed her. Taking her leave, she turned around and saw that he was quickly moving towards the icon corner, stretching out his hands to the icons. She left unnoticeably. Confessions with him were the most wonderful and the most awesome she had ever known. She always knew that even without her saying anything he knew not only what she was going to say, but things of which she was not even aware. He was very strict in Confession and pointed out the spiritual significance not only of deeds, but also of thoughts. Sometimes he was gentle and even joked. Once, for instance, he gave someone to read the prayer of Confession in the book. The penitent stopped at one point. "Well, what's the matter?" the elder asked. "I'm thinking whether I have sinned in this or not," the person replied. "Well, think hard! -- Or else maybe you'll cross it out of the book," said the elder, and smiled.

One woman gave a very good description of Confession with him. She had not been to Confession since her youth; she was far removed from Church and herself did not know whether or not she had faith. She came to the elder only



A sketch made in 1925 during a visit to Elder Nektary (lower left). Fr. Adrian stands in prayer while his wife and little son Seraphim, godchild of the elder, receive the elder's blessing. At right is Hieromonk Nikon, who later, upon the forced closure of Optina, became an elder and received a martyr's crown.

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because she was accompanying her sick husband. The elder made a great impression on her, and when he offered to confess her she agreed. "I entered," she related, "and he led me to the icons." "Stand here and pray!" he told her. He left her there and went himself into his cell. She stood and looked at the icons. She did not like them -- they were not artistic and even the lampada seemed odd to her. The room was quiet. Only behind the wall Batiushka was walking. He was rustling something. Suddenly she began to feel sorrowful and contrite, and involuntarily she began to cry. Tears clouded her eyes and she could no longer see the icons and lampadas, only an iridescent cloud before her eyes, behind which she sensed the presence of God. When Batiushka came out she was standing in tears. "Recite the Lord's Prayer," he said. Somehow she stumbled through it. "Recite the Creed," he continued. "I don't remember it," she responded. The elder himself began to read, and after each article he would ask, "Do you believe this?" In answer to the first two she said, "I believe." As it proceeded to the third part, she said that she did not understand anything there and felt nothing towards the Mother of God. The elder reproached her, bade her to pray for enlightenment to the Queen of Heaven, and said that She would teach her how to understand the Creed. And concerning the other parts of the Symbol of Faith, the woman said that she did not understand and never had thought about them, but she wept bitterly, feeling all the while that nothing should be concealed and there would be no sense in hiding anything. Now she felt before her the prefiguration of the Last Judgement. Batiushka asked her about her personal sins as though she were a child, so that smiling she began to answer him through her tears. Then he absolved her sins from her childhood to that very hour.

Once one of his spiritual daughters left in a vehicle but later missed him very much. Her friend told the elder, "She is very lonely now." "Is she receiving Communion?"

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asked the elder. "Yes," was the reply. "Then she's not alone," he said.

On the overcoming of unreasonable fear he said, "Just cross your arms over your chest and recite three times, 'Virgin Mother of God rejoice,' and everything will pass. And so it does."

Batiushka possessed great spiritual depth. Once on an autumn evening in the skete, as he was saying farewell to his spiritual children, he said, "The night is dark for unbelievers. But to the faithful everything appears in light."

He would say, "Don't be afraid! Out of the most wretched man can come the most beautiful. You know what earth is on the ground; it seems terrible to soil one's feet. But if you look, you can find diamonds in it. Here you are -- they can even adorn your neck."

Batiushka was strict, demanding and sometimes ironic with clergy and intelligentsia, and exceedingly kind and accessible to simple people.

One elderly peasant related: "My son disappeared in the war without a trace. I went to Batiushka. He blessed me and I asked if my son was alive. We wondered how we should pray for him -- we wanted to give his name to be remembered with the dead. But he straightaway said to me, 'No, your son is alive; have a moleben served to St. Nicholas. And always pray for your son as among the living.' I rejoiced, bowed down and gave him a rouble for candles. And he in turn humbly bowed down to me."

With the same simplicity Batiushka would give away money. Once one of his spiritual daughters was in need of money. She asked the elder. Smiling, he pulled out a crumpled packet. "Here," he said, "count these little rags."

He said that charity must be given with discretion or it may bring a person harm.

His cell-attendant said that he always wanted to know in detail a person's needs and did not like to give in vain,

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but that when he gave he was generous -- a pair of boots, even a cow or a horse.

He was particularly attentive to the more sinful of his visitors or to those of his spiritual children who were rebellious. That same cell-attendant said that he "would leave ninety-nine righteous to take one and save him."

When people were going through periods of disobedience and trouble he acted with fatherly kindness and called them not by name but "my precious child," "my little lamb," and the trouble was calmed. Even the most obstinate and unruly felt the sincerity of this great love, concerning which the elder himself once said, "My precious child! Love with a love which is changeless. Your love is the love of a moment; ours is the same today and for a thousand years."

Once one of his spiritual daughters asked him, "Must you take upon yourself the sufferings and sins of those who come to you in order to comfort them?" He answered, "You yourself have understood; therefore, I will tell you -- there is no other way. Sometimes you feel that a mountain of stones has fallen upon you -- so many sins and afflictions have been brought to you and you just cannot bear them. Then grace comes to your weakness and sweeps away this mountain of stones as if it were a mountain of dry leaves, and you can begin again" (to receive people in their sorrows.)

Many considered Batiushka Nektary to be clairvoyant; they gave a symbolic interpretation to his every gesture. At times he found this very burdensome. Once he told of the following incident: "Sometimes I have presentiments and the man's soul is opened up to me, but sometimes not. There was an amazing case. A woman came to me complaining about her nine year-old son, that he was unmanageable. And I told her, 'Have patience until he reaches the age of 12.' I said this not because I had any particular feelings, but just from what I had learned -- that at the age of 12 a boy often undergoes changes. The woman left

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and I forgot about her. In three years the mother came weeping: 'My son has died; he just turned 12.' People, of course, say, 'Look! Batiushka prophesied,' but it was just a simple calculation according to what I have learned. Later I asked myself -- did I have any premonitions or not? No, I felt nothing."

Sometimes Batiushka would come straight out and say, "To you it is only half-revealed, but I know it."

He possessed a wonderful simplicity of heart, a penetrating mind, and a gentle sense of humor. Even in old age he could break out into a child's laughter.

He loved animals and birds. He had a cat who always obeyed him and he loved to say, "Elder Gerasim¹³ was a great elder and therefore he had a lion. But we are small -- we have a cat." And he told a delightful story about how a cat saved Noah's ark when the devil entered a mouse and tried to gnaw through the hull. At the last minute the cat caught the wicked mouse and for that all cats go to paradise. This sense of humor was characteristic of Batiushka. As though in fulfillment of the words of St. Anthony the Great, that one must sometimes loosen up the bow-string, Elder Nektary would intersperse his teachings and commands with a joke or an historical anecdote or story. His stories were always very descriptive, lively and full of details, as though he himself was taking part or was an eye-witness even of events from Biblical history. His accounts of life in Optina were inexhaustible -- about glorious elders and wise archimandrites and skete superiors, about the need to strictly fulfill the obediences of the elders. According to age, Batiushka was one of the oldest inhabitants of Optina and was as it were a living chronicle of the monastery.

In him was developed to a high degree a spiritual sobriety -- no ecstatic emotions, no emotional displays of feelings, no sentimentality in his Christian love towards people. Himself a great ascetic, with love he would bless his spiritual children to marry and would speak about the

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secular education of children. When some parents were upset over the antireligious character of the Soviet schools, the elder said, "After all, your children will be Soviet citizens; they should go to the public schools. And if you want them to preserve Christianity, let them see a truly Christian life at home."

To art lovers he would say, "Love the earthly meadows, but do not lose sight of the heavenly ones."

He placed high value on human labor. When one of his spiritual daughters was in distress as to how she was going to live without guidance after he died, he answered, "Work! Work makes the years fly by unnoticeably."

One of his disciples wrote about his manners and conversations: "Batiushka's talks! The most brilliant lectures of the the best professors, the most eloquent sermons! The most extraordinary imagery, a picturesque and unique form of speech. Each word is examined from all sides. Ease and fluency of talking. Not one vain word, as though nothing comes from himself; coherence and continuity of thought. The central unifying thought is not always immediately apparent. Wealth of content, numerous profound thoughts. Each of them enough food for thought for an entire year. An invisible string of precious stones which has no end. A living fount of living water. The entire conversation is easy to take in and to retain. It is often tinged with a shade of humor.

"In the story of how mankind (in the person of Eve) first heard the word 'God,' Batiushka said that at noon Eve wanted a little nourishment as is common to our nature. And so she was walking about in paradise deciding which fruit to pick. As she was walking she happened to stop just opposite the tree of knowledge. She passed by so closely, within reach, although it was forbidden not only to pick the fruit, but even to approach it. And the evil one was able to take advantage of this."

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18. REPOSE

Elder Nektary died in old age on April 29/May 12, 1928, in the village of Kholmishcha in the province of Bryansk, where he was sent after the shutting down of Optina. Before he died he had Confession and received Holy Communion. One priest, his spiritual son Fr. Adrian, now Archbishop Andrew of Rockland,¹⁴ was present at his death and read the prayers for the dying. At the moment of death, he placed his epitachelion [priest's stole] over the dying elder. Batiushka Nektary died under this epitachelion. He reposed quietly. All in tears, Fr. Adrian was the only priest present at the time.

The elder foreknew his death and bid farewell to his close ones already two months before he died, blessed them for the last time, gave them some parting counsels and gave them over to the care of this or that spiritual father.

He was buried on a bright spring day to the singing of Paschal chants. A great joy was felt in the hearts of his weeping spiritual children.

He was buried in Kholmishcha. His grave still exists, and the memory of the last Optina elder is still alive and shining. Everything is in order, and a perpetual lampada burns there. A forest surrounds the grave, which the local inhabitants visit and his friends from afar do not neglect visiting.

19. INCORRUPTION

In the 1930's, about six or seven years after the elder's death, the village hooligans undug his grave one night. They tore the lid off the coffin and the covering from the face of the dead man, and then leaned the open coffin against a tree. In the morning, as little children were leading horses from their nightly grazing spot, they saw the coffin and galloped to the village, shouting: "A monk rose from the grave!" The collective farm workers



A photograph taken right after Elder Nektary's repose at Fr. Adrian's request. When he was alive, the elder never wanted his picture taken. Some pilgrims petitioned the abbot of Optina that the elder be photographed, and the elder was told he must oblige them since pictures were made of the other Optina elders. Elder Nektary accepted this as an obedience, but agreed only to have his picture taken with a group. When the group photo was developed, the faces of all the others turned out fine, but in the place where the elder's face should have been there was nothing but a white spot.

The elder's disciple, Bishop Nektary Kontzevitch, affirmed that no drawing or photo of the elder looks like him. "The grace which abided in him," the bishop said, "was so tangible and apparent that no one could make an accurate depiction of him. The elder was unportrayable."

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ran to the cemetery and saw that "the elder was standing uncorrupt -- his skin was wax-colored and his arms and hands were soft." One woman brought a white silk covering and with it they covered the face of the elder. Then they closed the coffin and lowered it into the grave, singing "Holy God."

They used to say that several days after that the body of the elder was exhumed, taken away and buried somewhere in a field.¹⁵ But in Kholmishcha up to today they still show his grave.

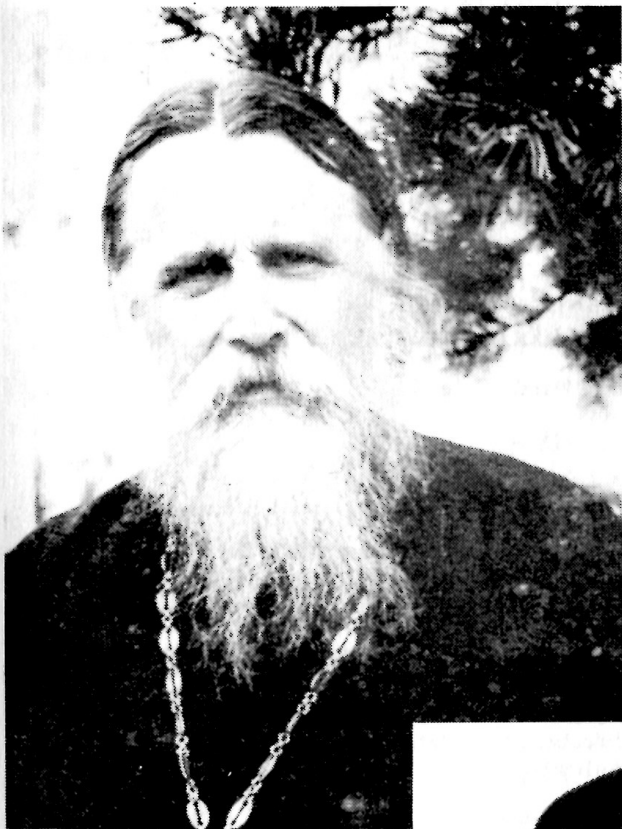


OUR HOLY FATHER NEKTARY OF OPTINA,
PRAY TO GOD FOR US!

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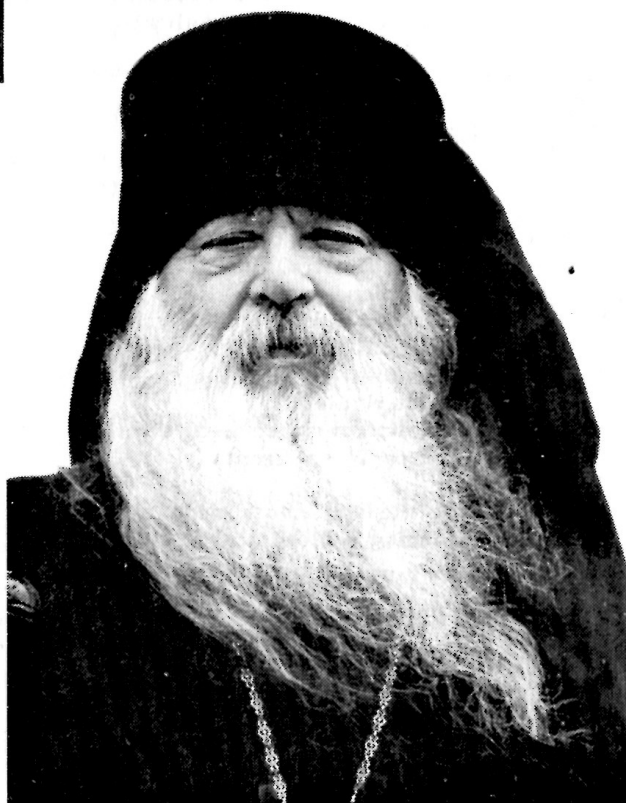
EDITOR'S NOTES

1. Batiushka: the Russian endearing term for "Father," referring to a priest or monk-elder. Likewise, "Matushka" is the endearing term for "Mother" and is used to address a priest's wife, an abbess or an eldress.
2. Podvig: spiritual struggle or ascetic endeavor.
3. Mantle: the cape given to tonsured monks and nuns.
4. Duma: Russian parliament.
5. "Living church": a "renovated" Orthodox church which was supported by the Soviet government in order to undermine Orthodoxy.
6. Panikhidas and Molebens: services for the commemoration of the dead and the living.
7. Akathists: special prayers to Christ, the Mother of God or the Saints, read or sung while standing.
8. Seven pillars: this can be seen as a reference to the Seven Ecumenical Councils.
9. Does not this remind one of modern-day computers, through which the world is now operated and as it were collectivized or "girded about?"
10. Cf. Genesis 1:5.
11. Six Psalms: selected Psalms read at the beginning of the early morning Mattins service.
12. Kathismas: divisions of the Psalter.
13. Elder Gerasim: a fourth-century Saint who was served by a lion in the wilderness of Palestine.
14. Who died on June 29/July 12, 1978, in New Diveyevo Convent in New York State, where he was also buried.
15. Since the elder himself predicted that he would not remain in the Kholmishcha cemetery, it is likely that there is some truth to this story.



*Two Disciples
of
Elder Nektary*

*Archbishop Andrew
(Fr. Adrian) Rymar-
enko (above), re-
posed in 1979, and
Bishop Nektary Kont-
zevitch (left), reposed
in 1983. They brought
Elder Nektary's spirit
of "down-to-earth,"
unpretentious Ortho-
doxy to modern
America.*



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Chronicle of Blessed John:

A Recent Miracle of Blessed John

64

Preservation of a Child's Leg

I feel close to Blessed John because every time I pray to him I feel an *immediate* warm and loving response of what I believe sincerely to be his spirit or presence from the place where Saints reside with God. The spiritual response I feel is very pure, holy and comforting as of course is the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ, Whom Blessed John must be very close to.

Recently, my five year old son jumped out of the back seat of our large Chevy wagon, and his entire left leg was pinned sideways under the back tire as the car rolled to a stop. He screamed, and my husband was stunned and afraid to back the car up until he could jump out and see exactly how he was trapped under the car. By the time he got to my son and I slid over to the driver's seat to back the car off of him, his leg had been completely under the weight of this 9 passenger vehicle almost a full minute.

We carried him gently in the house as he continued to scream, and somehow I was graced with a deep peace and calm as prayerful mothers sometimes are. I *immediately* felt moved to pray to Blessed John Maximovitch. I put my hands on his leg where the tire tread deeply marked his leg. We sat prayerfully for several minutes and our son became very calm. I felt completely reassured by Blessed

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John that "all was well;" yet as common sense dictates, we felt something in his leg or knee could be crushed or broken and decided to take him for an X-ray right away. Confident in Blessed John's *immediate* healing response that is there *every* time I pray to him for my children, I felt we'd be lucky if for the next 6 months his leg would be simply black and bruised and rotten looking -- I prayed intensely that no permanent damage had been done.

Well, the doctor found no bones broken or fractured at all, saying it was a miracle. When our son went to sleep, the tire tread marks had turned purple. (This all happened around 7 - 9 p.m. in the evening). By the next morning there was *nothing* (not a mark or bruise) on his leg whatsoever, and I was in wonderful spirits. He limped slightly that first day, and by late evening and the second day he was running and playing on it as though nothing had ever happened.... Blessed John had reached out and blessed my little boy and healed him completely with the love and gentleness of Christ. I am so grateful to Blessed John and am personally *convinced* he is a Saint that dwells in Heaven now regardless of formal canonization. I am only a mother with three children (and a fourth on the way). But I know that only a *Saint from God Himself* could bring so much love, kindness, comfort, warmth and immediate healing and joy to my children's little temples and spirits.

Blessed John has touched me in my heart, because no matter how great or small my need, when with a sincere heart I pray, *he has always responded*. A mother often needs a companion who dwells in Heaven, and I am humbly thankful to God our Father in Heaven for His wonderful servant, Blessed John, whom He obviously performs many miracles through.

Not long ago, when the other side of the duplex we were living in became available, we were very excited to move over to the other side for many reasons: it had more

A RECENT MIRACLE OF BLESSED JOHN

room for raising children, garden space, bordered a large park, etc., etc.. Little did we know that, since the whole building had just shifted owners, the new landlord intended to increase the rent quite dramatically so that we couldn't afford to live there. We informed him that we'd be looking for somewhere else to live. Well, we looked and looked and could find *nothing* up to our standards within the range we could afford. Finally feeling desperate since we had to be out of our side within another week, I prayed to Blessed John for a home for our family where our needs could be met. But I left the particulars completely in God's hands to know our needs, through His servant and miracle-worker Blessed John. Within 10 minutes of my prayer, our landlord knocked on the door and told my husband it was worth it to him to keep us (he could already see from visiting with us on several occasions that we'd take good care of his newly purchased "investment"), and he offered to lower the rent to what we could afford on the other side which we really wanted to live in. Not only that, the landlord filled the place with a brand-new carpet, and he and his son painted everything so it was quite lovely to move into.

These are such physical things I'm speaking of, yet as a mother and homemaker, for our home to be a place for the One True Church to manifest, and for it to be a place of prayer and worship - our cell - set apart for our family from the influences of the fallen world (at least to the extent that we don't allow that fallen world in), it is important to me that God would choose such an important place for us.

Thank you, Blessed John Maximovitch, for hearing my humble prayers. I trust so much this wonderful Saint! Glory be to our Loving Father.

Love to you in Christ our Lord,

Deborah Kuolt
Portland, Oregon
August 23, 1986

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