

Lesson 33 - Missionary to the Communist Russia

Missionary

One recent Orthodox missionary is Father Arseny; Russian monk and priest (1894 – 1975)

His mission field changed over the course of his life depending on the options available to him. He first served as a parish priest, and later, through the darkest times of communist oppression as a missionary to those in the cruel and merciless Soviet labour camps, from which few ever returned.

Later, on his release from camps, he was exiled far from his spiritual children, and had to travel around from place to place, receiving them secretly in small groups and sharing the blessing of Holy Communion with them in houses as he was not permitted to serve in a church. (1)

This short introduction to his life and service includes his calling, his suffering and adaptation to change and some of the many rich spiritual lessons he was able to pass on as he continued on his spiritual journey. Until he was released from prison camps, (and then he was suffering from intermittent sicknesses but still very active), he did not have a place to call his own; he worked and traveled and served wherever he found himself, putting others first, even in times of severe physical hardship. He found his rest and reward at the altar of God (Psalm 83[84] verse 4) like the psalmist and also our Lord (Matthew 8:20).

Many people who met him and were enriched by his faith collected memoirs and stories from their own experience and those of others they had met. These memoirs were carefully hidden throughout the times of oppression, and collected together and published after the demise of the Soviet Union.

Father Arseny was born to a Christian family and studied Russian history and art. He was renowned among his friends and family for spending great periods of time reading the Bible, the works of the church fathers and the history and art of the Russian Orthodox Church. Despite this, his mother initially protested at his desire to enter monastic life and serve the church full time, but she eventually accepted God's will, as she was a devout believer, and had taken time to instill a strong Christian faith in her children.

By 1919, Father Arseny had become a monk and a priest, and worked in the churches in Moscow until 1927.

This was in the early years of communism, and already by this time, apathy and compromise were working their way through the church; encouraged (according to Father Arseny's talks) by the love of science and money and the over intellectualisation of religion which was prevalent in the closing years of the 19th century, especially among the powerful classes. (1)

A bishop who felt compelled to confess his sins to Father Arseny when they were both later in labour camp explained how he had worked to destroy ('renew' in his opinion) the Orthodox Church during this time and in the 1930s.

This bishop (whose identity Father Arseny honourably conceals, as he reveals how much he detested his actions) explains that he and many others, in an attempt to modernise the Russian Orthodox Church worked together with the government against Patriarch Tikhon (who died in 1925 while serving liturgy, after a long and faithful service). This patriarch resisted communist and atheist infiltration in his church and had been a missionary in North America; being made a saint in the Russian church in 1989. The government and its allies replaced him with a more obedient patriarch who started the 'Obnovlentski' ('Living Church'), which was very inaccurately named watered down version of the church sanctioned by the state.

This bishop (and many others) actively collaborated with the state; even though they knew that many of the state appointed clergy were atheists and crooks who just wanted money and power. The bishop naively thought that the wicked ends justified the noble means of having a 'renewed' and modern church, which would not be fighting against the atheist government, but instead collaborating with it. He and the many others with him, soon found that one compromise lead to another; one lie lead to another; one act of treachery lead to another; and this bishop found himself being used by the government and not in a position of power as he had hoped.

So the government planned an elaborate charade, arresting the bishop and sending him to prison (so he would be seen as a 'martyr' by those in the church) and then 'repenting' to those who resisted communism and being accepted back among them in order to infiltrate them more deeply, report on church activities and give information to the government on who they could trust to be good communists within the Russian Orthodox Church.

Thus the church was slowly but surely poisoned, and even to this day, all the stories of extreme treachery have not yet come out into the open.

This bishop died in anguish in the labour camp, and only God knows how genuine was his repentance after all the evil he did to destroy the church.

Despite the extreme distress caused to Father Arseny by hearing all this man's evil deeds as he lay dying, Father Arseny listened to it all and promised to repeat it to a bishop after his death, so that the dying man would have someone to pray for him.

In 1927, Father Arseny was exiled to the North of Russia for 2 years, and after 2 more years working as a priest (during which he was not permitted to visit Moscow), he was exiled again in 1931 to the Vologda region (about 500 miles North of Moscow). In 1936, he spent 1 year in prison, and on his release, spent much time in exile or prison until he was sent to a labour camp in 1941.

In those days, the vast majority of those sent to labour camps instead of regular prisons did not leave alive, and the role of the camp guards was to make their life as difficult as possible until their inevitable death from the terrible living conditions. (1)

It is in this improbable mission field that Father Arseny notes he learnt the most about the human soul and developed the gifts that proved so valuable to his spiritual children on his release.

One account of how God worked through him to break up a deadly labour camp fight shows his deep faith, love and commitment to prayer:

"The weather outside was ferocious. Many prisoners froze to death and many new prisoners arrived to work in their stead. It was a difficult time for everybody, but the "political" prisoners had it worst of all. For two days in a row their rations were stolen by the prisoners who were criminals. That night, after roll call and the locking of the barracks, a large fight erupted between the two factions over these rations.

Avsenkov took the leadership of the "politicals." The criminals were headed by "Ivan the Brown." He was a hardened criminal, a good for nothing, and a murderer many times over. In camp he had also killed more than once; he liked card games in which the one who lost paid with his life.

The battle that evening was over the rations, which the criminals had taken. Laughingly they said that they were used to taking what did not belong to them. The camp administrators, for reasons of personal safety, were always on the side of the criminals.

The fight started with fists, and then logs, then knives appeared in the hands of the criminals. They were winning over the "politicals"; blood was flowing. Father Arseny ran to Sazikov and begged him, "Help! Please help, Ivan Alexandrovich! They are cutting people up. There is blood everywhere. I ask you in the name of God to stop this! The criminals will listen to you!" Sazikov only laughed and said, "Sure, they will listen to me, but why don't you help with your God? Ivan the Brown has already killed two of your friends, and now he is going to kill Avsenkov. Your God seems not to notice this!"

Father Arseny looked all around him. He saw blood on people, he heard screams, swearing, and moans, and his soul was full of pain for their suffering. He lifted his arms, went into the very midst of the heated fight and said in a clear and loud voice, "In the name of God, I order you! Stop this!" He blessed them with sign of the cross and said in a whisper, "Now, help the wounded," and he headed for his bunk. There he stood, as if in a different world, as if surrounded by light. He stood there, having receded into himself, praying.

All was quiet in the barracks now. You could only hear people getting into their bunks, and the moaning of a seriously wounded man. Sazikov came near Father Arseny and said, "Forgive me, Father Arseny. I doubted your God. I see now that He exists. It even scares me. A great power is given to one who believes in Him. Even I am frightened. Forgive me for making fun of you." came to Father Arseny after work and said, "Thank you. You saved my life! You believe in God unconditionally and, looking at you, I'm also beginning to understand that He exists."

In two days, Avsenkov

A person could be a believer, a Communist, a criminal, or any other kind of prisoner; Father Arseny always found the right words for each individual. These words went deep into one's soul and helped him live, gave him hope for the future and often helped him become a better person." (2)

There are many similar stories of people whose lives were touched by Father Arseny's selfless love and his gift, given by God to those specially humble people who serve him at great cost, of knowing what was in the heart of a man. Many people went to him to confess their sins, to find that he already knew their life, and would even add in to the confession the parts they had missed out, or were too embarrassed to reveal.

One of them, a lady called Kyra, fell into one night of sin during her husband's very long absence in the 1940s (people were often sent to work at the other end of the country away from their families if they had not adequately appeased the communist government). She was immediately contrite, and because of God's grace, her husband accepted her and her new daughter despite her sin. Father Arseny had been her spiritual father, and upon his release (miraculously still alive after more than 16 years in labour camps) in 1958, she and her family went to see him to make their confessions. Not only did Father Arseny listen to her and give her the absolution, but he also named the child's father, explained to her that he had come to God, and asked her to pray for him. Kyra was amazed as she had not disclosed the name of the father to anyone. (1)

From 1958, Father Arseny was able to live in the house of a true believer who took care of him, hosted all his spiritual children on their visits and distributed the gifts received from the visitors to all the guests and to other poor people as they needed. Her name was Nadezhda (it means 'hope') Petrovna. She was not young, but served those who came even though she was sometimes ill and tired herself.

When she grew old, Christians from the community took care of her and helped her in her work. Father Arseny lived there for the last 17 years of his life; during which time he worked tirelessly in prayer and service for those who visited them from all over the Soviet Union.

On one occasion, he was called to Moscow to pray for a young lady called Tania, who was sick and in pain from inoperable cancer. He stayed with her family, praying for several hours each day, then returned to his house. She became able to get up and walk around, and after a month returned to the hospital where she had been operated on and then closed up because the cancer was too widespread. The doctors examined her and confirmed that the tumour had disappeared. There are many other similar miracles recorded. (1)

Towards the end of his life, Father Arseny recalled for his spiritual children a conversation he had had with Bishop Ilarion of Verezh while he was still a young priest in Moscow. He explained that he wanted to introduce into the souls of his parishioners a faith in God and a love for others, so that they would be able to walk the way of faith and love among the sin, evil and violence that surrounded them during the cruel time of persecution. He wanted then to learn the monastic way of prayer, obedience and humility, which he had learned from the elders among the monks, and live it out in the cities and towns so that they would be

able to orient themselves in the face of evil. The bishop fully supported him, knowing that this was a different way than the more superficial church attendance and ritualistic worship without deeper explanation that was common in some parts of the church.

This bishop later died in prison, where he and another priest were given the special task (usually assigned to prominent political prisoners or clergy) of cleaning the toilets.

In Father Arseny's last talk, he urged his spiritual children not to let their faith and minds become clouded with the 'progress' of intellectualism, but instead to remember that their faith was the same pure faith handed down from the apostles. He asked them to remember the simple faith of their fathers and to stay true to that and to be open to their fathers of confession and obedient to their instruction. This way, believers can help those around them and show them the light of the love of God.

May the Lord repose his soul and reward his service and love towards all people. Pray for us before the throne of God, Father Arseny the monk and hegomen.

References:

1. Father Arseny: A Cloud of Witnesses

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2. Life of Father Arseny.

Excerpted from the Book: Father Arseny: Priest, Prisoner, Spiritual Father

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