Contemporary Luminous Faces:
Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, Part One
By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

> *"Consciously and at every hour I wish to take part in the redemption of the world, remaining a light amongst the storms, to be one of Thy beacons.*
>
> *I go, O Lord, into the world to do Thy will. My only desire is to stand firm as a faithful servant at the post to which Thou didst appoint me, in order to meet Thee worthily."* – Metropolitan Anthony Bloom (1914-2003)

A brilliant contemporary witness to the work of Christ in the hearts of His devoted followers, Metropolitan Anthony Bloom was a man of prayer and spiritual insight of the highest caliber. He embodied unwavering faith in Christ, a profound insight into humanity, especially the modern individual, refined theological scholarship and language, and a steadfast, boundless compassion. A master of dialogue and conversation, he was renowned for his sharp insight, analytical clarity, and ability to grasp reality before expressing any judgment or opinion. No one crossed his path without being deeply and positively moved by him.

The son of a Russian diplomat, he was born in Switzerland and named Andrei. His family later relocated to Iran for his father's post and eventually settled in France following the Communist Revolution.

His father had to give up his diplomatic career and took up jobs in various places, which plunged the family into financial hardship. Yet, his distinctive personality left a lasting impact on Andrei. His father once told him: "Never forget that it doesn't matter whether one lives or dies. What matters is what we live for and for which we are prepared to die." These words indicated the spirit that prevailed in their home and the deep sense of life's meaning that profoundly shaped Metropolitan Anthony from an early age.

His sharp intellect enabled him to continue giving private tutoring in mathematics and in any subject his students struggled, and that he had mastered. This covered his living expenses and allowed him to continue his studies, though not without hardship and struggle.

Tutoring consumed all his evenings, leaving only the weekends for his own studies, which took a toll on his health. Nevertheless, he managed to complete his education. Reflecting on that period, he said: “My life was very different from that of today’s student; at times, I was harsh, hungry, and rough, and I was incapable of preaching a gentle and warm sermon.”

He pursued studies in physics, chemistry, and biology at the Sorbonne, and later enrolled in medical school, earning his doctorate at the outbreak of World War II in 1939. By then, he had acquired French citizenship and served as a military surgeon in the French army at both the beginning and end of the war.

Until the age of fifteen, he did not believe in God. In fact, he hated and harbored a strong sense of hostility toward the Church. The idea of God stirred no interest in him; he even despised everything associated with it, whether directly or indirectly.

However, he experienced two spiritual events that deeply affected him. The first occurred when he was around eleven years old, during a summer camp, where he met a priest in his thirties whose gentle and unconditional love for the children stirred Andrei’s (Anthony’s) curiosity, prompting him to wonder about the source and secret of such love.

The second experience occurred after he returned home from boarding school and was reunited with his family under one roof for the first time in years. This brought him immense happiness, so much so that he realized that if happiness is aimless, it is unbearable. He decided to give himself one year to discover whether life had any meaning. If he found none, he resolved that he would no longer continue living.

Months passed without any sign of meaning on the horizon, until one day, the leader of a Russian youth group invited him to attend a lecture by a priest hosted by the youth organization. Anthony vehemently refused, saying: "I don’t care about the Church, and I don’t believe in God." But the leader persuaded him to attend out of respect for the organization: "Just show up physically; you're not required to actually listen." Thus, he went but soon discovered that the priest was a remarkable man.

When he got home, he asked his mother for a Bible so he could verify the priest’s words for himself. He began reading the Gospel of Mark, as it was the shortest. He described his experience as follows:

> *"I do not know how to tell you what happened. I will simply describe it, and those who have had a similar experience will understand. While I was reading the beginning of the Gospel of St. Mark, before reaching the third chapter, I became aware of a Presence but saw nothing. It was not a hallucination but rather a quiet certainty that the Lord was standing there, and I was in His presence. This, even though I had begun reading His life story out of an impulsive reaction and with a bad will."*

From that moment on, he read the Gospel in the light of the Resurrection, which for him became a firm conviction and a reality beyond any doubt.

Since Christ was alive and sat in his presence as he described, he could establish with absolute certainty that the Gospel's account of the crucifixion of the prophet from Galilee was true, and that the Roman centurion was not mistaken when he cried out, "Truly, this was the Son of God" (Matthew 27:54).

Thus, he became certain that Christ is alive and there was no doubt of His existence. He trusted that in his journey of seeking to understand life more deeply, he would eventually be given the answers to his many questions. This quest pushed him to keep asking, keep exploring, and keep moving forward in his search for meaning.

After practicing medicine for some time, he took monastic vows, taking the name of Saint Anthony. However, due to the war and the shortage of priests at the time, he lived his monastic life in secret. After his monastic tonsure, he told his spiritual father: "You tonsured me as a monk, but you never gave me a rule of prayer!" To which his spiritual father replied: "What rule of prayer do you need? You are a monk now; pray at all times." His monastic commitment became publicly known only when he was ordained a priest in 1948.

He went on to live the rest of his life as a priest, a bishop, and a true monk. In response to a journalist who once asked him how he could be a monk while living such a public life as priest and bishop, he said:

> *"It is all the same to me, whether I live among people or in the desert. In some ways, it is easier to be materially poor than to be poor in one's inner life. I am indebted to the vow of poverty, for it has allowed me to truly evaluate everything. But for that to be possible, one must first be free within."*