

The Sanctifying Dimension, Part Three
By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

A True Story for Reflection

After I told one of my friends the story related below, he asked me, “Why do we not meet priests of this kind?” I will leave the answer to the reader.

While browsing an Orthodox website one day, I came across this story, rich with spiritual lessons for anyone willing to reflect. I wanted to share it briefly with my dear readers because I found in it a practical answer to what I had presented in the [previous two articles](#).

This story appeared in a recently published electronic book in Moscow, issued in Russian, English, and French, titled [Everyday Saints](#). It contains real stories as well as symbolic ones. Among them is the story of “the novice bishop.” The word “novice” here refers to monastic novitiate. (We have received a great blessing from this man in this Archdiocese, because he served as a bishop for several years in America.)

The story centers on Bishop Basil Rodzianko, who fell asleep in the Lord in 1999. He was born into a Russian aristocratic family. His grandfather was the president of the Imperial Duma, which forced the family into exile in 1920, when the bishop was still a child.

They ended up in Serbia. There he grew up, was educated, and came to know great church figures, among them the one who later became archbishop and then Saint John Maximovitch. Basil married a young woman whom he loved deeply, chose the priesthood as the path of service to his people, and took Saint Vladimir as his patron. After the communists came to power during and after the Second World War, he refused to leave Serbia, even though he faced the real danger of arrest as a priest.

And that is exactly what happened. Once the new Yugoslavia had become established, persecution against the Church intensified. He was sent to a prison camp for eighteen months. But the conflict that arose between the leaders of Russia and Yugoslavia at that time, Stalin and Tito, led Tito to release all the “White Russians” from the prison camps and expel them from the country.

Father Vladimir chose Paris because his spiritual father, the holy Archbishop John Maximovitch, was there. Saint John received him with joy and, after a time, sent him to London to serve a small Serbian parish. Father Vladimir was highly intelligent and distinguished himself in teaching and evangelism. He also knew Russian, Serbian, French, English, Bulgarian, and a little Romanian, which qualified him to present a weekly Orthodox religious program in Russian on the BBC.

In the 1960s, he passed through a painful period. After losing his wife, his grief drove him to vodka, to the point of addiction. The effects of alcohol did not outwardly appear on him because his physical strength enabled him to continue fulfilling his duties without visible failure. But one day, his wife appeared to him in a dream, reproached him sternly, and showed him her sorrow over what he was doing. He awoke from the dream and gave up alcohol once and for all, overcoming his human grief.

After the death of his previous spiritual father, he chose Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, the well-known Metropolitan of London, famous for his spiritual depth, as his new spiritual father. In time, Metropolitan Anthony recommended him to become a bishop in North America, since he had proven to be a successful missionary. According to Russian Orthodox tradition, a bishop must be a canonical monk before his episcopal consecration. And so it was.

When he made his confession before his monastic tonsure, he said to his spiritual father, "I understand well how I will live the vows of chastity and poverty, but I still do not understand how I will live the vow of obedience. A bishop is the one who gives directions, guidance, and instructions. He is the one who is obeyed."

Metropolitan Anthony was silent for a moment, then answered, "Always consider yourself a novice monk, and obey everyone who asks you for a service that you are able to fulfill." Father Vladimir took this counsel as a law of obedience and strove to live by it for the rest of his life. He was tonsured a monk, taking his new name from his new patron saint, Basil.

He used to visit his homeland, Russia, many times during his years as a bishop. On one occasion, he met an elderly woman on a street in Moscow. As soon as she saw him, thinking he was a priest, she said, "Please, father, bless my little home. For three years now I have been asking the priest of my parish to bless it, and he has not answered my request."

He accepted her request immediately based on his vow of obedience. His companion tried to dissuade him, saying he was under no obligation to do this. So, he asked her, “Where is your home?” She replied, “Not far. We take the bus from the outskirts of Moscow for only forty minutes!” Yet they were in the center of Moscow, which meant they first needed to take the metro for at least half an hour, and then the bus. Still, the bishop did not change his answer. First, they all went to the church to get the vestments needed for the house blessing. Then, they went to the woman’s home, which consisted of one room, eight square meters in size, on the ninth floor of a large, old building.

On the way, she told the bishop that her children and grandchildren never called her and paid no attention to her. After the blessing of the house, she served tea and cake to the bishop and his companion, and he accepted from her an old ruble, so as not to wound her feelings. She thanked him and said, “Now I can depart in peace, after my home has been blessed!”

Does not this elderly woman, who grew up under harsh religious persecution and was raised on atheist propaganda in school and society, show a profound and moving sense of holiness and reverence? And should not priests like this bishop abound in proportion to the many families who possess this sanctifying awareness of the importance of divine blessing?

In 1990, during another visit, Bishop Basil met a young priest who had graduated from the theological faculty with distinction, yet did not continue on to higher studies because he chose instead to serve a neglected parish in a village in the Kostroma region and restore its crumbling eighteenth-century temple. This priest asked the bishop to bless his church by celebrating the Divine Liturgy there. As usual, the companion tried to prevent the bishop from accepting. This time, the distance between where they were and the church in question was much farther—only six hundred kilometers! The bishop obeyed. He set out with the priest and his companion by car, after obtaining the episcopal vestments.

After several hours of travel, traffic came to a halt because of an accident between a motorcycle and a truck. The bishop learned that the motorcyclist had died. He got out of the car and went to the site of the accident, where he found a young man weeping bitterly over his dead father. He said to the young man, “I am an Orthodox priest.” Then he asked him, “Was your father a believer, so that I may read the

prayers for him?" The young man replied, "Yes, yes, certainly. Please read the necessary prayers. My father was a very faithful Orthodox man, and he had a spiritual father. But he did not go to church."

Bishop Basil asked in surprise, "How could he have a spiritual father and yet not go to church?" The young man answered, "My father had been an atheist. But he listened regularly to the weekly spiritual talks of Father Rodzianko (Bishop Basil himself) on the BBC. Through him, he came to faith, and he obeyed everything that this priest said, considering him his spiritual father."

Tears streamed from Bishop Basil's eyes as he put on his epitrachelion and began to pray for the soul of his spiritual son, who until that moment had been unknown to him.

Who could have imagined that God had arranged this meeting so that this man would not be deprived of the blessing of his spiritual father? These are the hidden purposes of God. They may not be revealed to us quickly every time, but the fact that they remain hidden does not mean that God is not following us in the details of our lives, leading us toward the salvation for which we hope.

O Lord, grant Your Church priests like these righteous ones. Forgive, and do not allow us to justify, our shortcomings.