

THE 'REBEL' NUNS OF SHAMORDINO: THEY SHAME US ALL!!

by

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All those who protested against the Declaration of Metropolitan Sergius were arrested by the Soviet regime as 'counter-revolutionaries'; they were *shot* or *sent to concentration camps* and exile. At interrogations the jubilant Chekist-interrogators with sarcasm and evil joy would prove the 'strict canonicity' of Metropolitan Sergius and his Declaration, which has 'not altered either canons or dogmas'. The *mass executions, persecutions and tortures which descended upon the faithful of Christ's Church are beyond description*. (all emphases supplied)

For the True Orthodox Church there was left no alternative but to *go into the catacombs* (emphasis in the original).

...

... the significance of the Catacomb Church does not lie in its 'correctness'; it lies in its preservation of *the true spirit of Orthodoxy* (emphasis in the original), the spirit of freedom in Christ.

[I.M. Andreyev, "active participant in the Church events of 1927" and author of *Russia's Catacomb Saints*, see his *Introduction*.]

Solovki Prison was one of the infamous places where the godless Bolsheviks sent Orthodox clerics and laity who stood fast for the pure Faith and did not 'cooperate' with Sergianism. The latter encouraged all to deny Christ and be an agent for the villainous revolutionaries. In July of 1927, Metropolitan Sergius issued his spiritually-deluded "Declaration" in which he unconditionally submitted the Church of God to the atheists. Vladyka Victor, Archbishop of Vyatka, was the first bishop to officially break communion with the apostate Sergius. He wrote these words of agonising eloquence to him:

I am writing to you out of sorrow for the Holy Orthodox Church.... You know, everywhere the Church is being destroyed, and this 'by administrative means'. What is this? Why? Has the Holy Church suffered only a little from 'outsiders'? What can be the use of these destructive measures which are ruining our peace?...

(and in a second letter):

... This sin, as the Word of God witnesses, is not less than any heresy or schism, but is rather *incomparably greater* (emphasis supplied), for it plunges a man immediately into the abyss of

destruction, according to the unlying word: ‘Whosoever shall deny Me before men...’ (Matthew 10:33) etc....

The enemy has lured and deceived you for a second time with the idea of an organisation of the Church. But if this organisation is bought for the price of the Church of Christ herself no longer remaining the house of Grace-giving salvation for men, and he who received the organisation ceases to be what he was – for it is written, ‘Let his habitation be made desolate, and his bishopric let another take’ (Acts 1:20) – then it were better for us *never to have any kind of organisation* (emphasis supplied).

[*Hieroconfessor Victor, Archbishop of Vyatka* in I.M. Andreyev’s *Russia’s Catacomb Saints* (tr. And ed. by Fr. Seraphim Rose), St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, Platina, CA, 1982 (out of print), see <http://www.orthodox.net/russiannm/hieroconfessor-victor-archbishop-of-vyatka.html>.]

The viciousness of the Sergius renovationists resulted, again and again, in the martyrdoms of large numbers of catacombniks, including the leader of the faithful into the catacombs, Metropolitan Joseph of Petrograd, who in 1938 “was executed by firing squad for the ‘crime’ of giving encouragement to wandering priests”. [*ibid.* see *Metropolitan Joseph of Petrograd And The Beginning Of The Catacomb Church*, <http://www.sisqtel.net/~williams/rcs/metropolitanjoseph.html>.]

The saga of the 30 nuns, most being from the monastery of Shamordino, near the spiritually famous Optina Hermitage, graphically illustrates the Godly strength of passive resistance. The nuns endured repeated attempts to bring them to heel with “silence, simplicity, humility and an extraordinary meekness”. [*id.*, *The Nuns Of Shamordino In Solovki Prison And The Miracle Of Their **Manliness*** (**bold** emphasis supplied), <http://www.sisqtel.net/~williams/rcs/shamordinonuns.html>.]

They refused to answer any personal questions about their names, birthdates, education et al. They were shouted at, threatened, beaten, placed in solitary confinement, and “tortured by hunger, thirst and deprivation of sleep”. To no avail. They still refused to do any forced labour.

Their ‘masters’ couldn’t see what the fuss was about. The nuns, unlike others in the camps, simply refused to do any work in support of their godless jailors. Any work... There hadn’t been a situation like this before, so their masters were quite perplexed. They believed the nuns were fanatical martyrs who wished for their suffering, yet they felt “inexpressibly sorry for them”. The camp doctors were ordered to examine the nuns in order, and, to find them unfit for physical labour. This was to justify the officials looking the other way apparently in their cases.

In past instances of prisoners refusing to work, the camp administration had acted very cruelly, seriously beating recalcitrant workers and sending them “to the punishment island of Anzersk, from where no one ever returned alive”. [*ibid.*] No one understood why these nuns weren’t sent there as the others had been. The chief of the camp’s Sanitary Division offered the view that the nuns’ silent passive protest was not the kind the administration was used to handling.

The nuns refused to do any work, difficult or easy, it didn't matter. Their reason: "because we do not wish to work for the regime of Antichrist". It was pointed out to them that many bishops and priests work, as each is able. Their response: "But we are not going to work under compulsion for the regime of Antichrist." They were then offered a diagnosis with conclusion that they were not able to do hard physical labour. Response: "No, you needn't do that. Forgive us, but we will be obliged to say that this is not true. We are well. We can work, but we do not wish to work for the regime of Antichrist and we shall not work even though they might kill us for this." They were reminded that they would be tortured to death:

"God will help to endure the tortures also," said one of the nuns.

A short time later, however, the nuns agreed to do some work on condition that they do it together and sing quietly. The camp commander allowed this, but the nuns managed to contact the spiritual father of some of them and asked him if their working in this way was acceptable. He said no'. Thereafter, they refused any kind of work. The priest was discovered and shot. Subsequently, the nuns were separated and taken elsewhere.

At the end of this account of the nuns in Russia's Catacomb Saints, their tale is taken up and viewed through the lens of an American prisoner in a slave-labour camp [see John Noble, *I found God in Soviet Russia*, Zondervan, Michigan, 1971, pp. 112-117). It was the November of 1950, after the American prisoner's arrival at Vorkuta "that three nuns reached the camp under the sentence of hard labour". They were assigned to make bricks "for construction work throughout the Arctic area of Russia".

They refused to do this work stating to the foreman that any work for the Communists was for the Devil. Their punishments:

punishment rations – black bread and rancid soup every day;

backbreaking assignments in the clay pits of the brick factory;

due to their obstinacy, put in straitjackets with their hands tied behind them and the rope from their wrists tied around their ankles and then tightened to pull their legs up behind them "with their shoulders wrenched backward and downward into a position of excruciating pain"; and

water was poured over them so the straitjackets would shrink.

What did the nuns do? They didn't scream but just moaned softly and lost consciousness.

So their captors loosened their bonds and then awakened them, trussed them up again, and they fainted once more. After two hours, the persecutors began to fear that their inputs (slaves) might die.

They didn't want this, production would fall. They wanted the slaves to work for at least six years before life in this world was taken from them. So the commandant had decided to torture these nuns until they said they would work. But he was getting fed up; now it was either, work, or die:

He directed that they again be assigned to the outdoor work detail and, if they still refused, that they be taken up to a hummock in the bitter wind of the early Arctic winter, and left to *stand there immobile all day long to watch the other women work*. They were treated to this torture, too. When the pale light of the short Arctic day at last dawned, they were seen kneeling there and the guards went over expecting to find them freezing, *but they seemed relaxed and warm*.

At this, the commandant ordered that their gloves and caps be removed *so that they would be exposed to the full fury of the wind*. All through the eight-hour working day they knelt on that windy hilltop in prayer. Below them, the women who were chipping mud for the mud ovens were suffering intensely from the cold. Many complained that their feet were freezing despite the supposedly warm boots they wore. When in the evening other guards went up to the hill to get the nuns and bring them back to the barracks, they expected to find them with frostbitten ears, hands and limbs. *But they did not appear to have suffered any injury at all*. Again the next day they *knelt for eight hours in the wind, wearing neither hats nor gloves in temperatures below zero*. That night they still had *not* suffered any serious frostbite and were still resolute in their refusal to work. Yet a third day they were taken out and this time *scarves too were taken away from them*.

By this time, news of what was happening had spread throughout all the camps in the Vorkuta region. When at the end of the third day, a day far colder than any we had yet experienced that winter season, the bareheaded nuns were brought in *still without the slightest trace of frostbite, everyone murmured that indeed God had brought a miracle to pass....*

By the fourth day, the guards themselves were afraid of the unearthly power which these women (note: only three remember) seemed to possess, and they flatly refused to touch them or have anything more to do with them. The commandant himself was afraid to go and order them out onto the hill. And so they were *not* disturbed in their prayers, and were taken off punishment rations. When I left Vorkuta four years later, those nuns were still at the brick factory compound and *none of them had done a day's work productive for the Communist regime. They were guarded with awe and respect*. Their guards were under instructions *not* to touch them or disturb them. They were preparing their own food and even making their own clothes. Their devotions were carried on in their own way and they *seemed at peace and contented*. Tough prisoners, they were

spiritually free. No one in the Soviet Union had such freedom of worship as they... (all emphases supplied)

On Saturday, February 5, 2005, Fr. John Whiteford posted on his blog an interesting Reuters press release of December 1995 under the title “It Was Total Cruelty”. [<http://fatherjohn.blogspot.com/2005/02/it-was-total-cruelty.html>.] The Russian Presidential Commission had certified that 200,000 clergy had been systematically murdered under Soviet rule. In addition, 500,000 religious figures had been persecuted in the decades after the Bolsheviks seized power. (note: these are probably conservative figures.) Before 1917, there were 48,000 Churches in Russia, by 1969 only 7,000!

Documents revealed that the grisly methods used on clergymen, monks and nuns included

- crucifixions on royal gates;
- shootings in the basements of the Cheka (secret police);
- scalping;
- strangling;
- drowning;
- priests turned into “columns of ice” in the winter; and
- other “bestial tortures”.

The Commission Chairman commented: “It is a tragic story which has *not provoked repentance and which has not been properly heard*” (emphasis supplied).

God will remember His spiritual heroes of the grisly catacombs. He will also not forget to render justice due to those not only who actively persecuted clergy and laity in the Soviet period and persecute True Orthodox today in the resovietisation era, but also those who eagerly join with the unrepentant in the contemporary period.. He will remember...

What A Spiritual Example These Nuns Are For All of Us!

Who knows for sure what we would do if and when confronted by such inhumane methods as occurred in the Soviet Union? We can only pray to God to give us the strength to hold fast and not deny our Faith. The nuns’ spiritual examples stun us in our cushy, comfortable twenty-first-century secular setting. Yet, their stories are true, attested to by many. And, there are a great number of others who demonstrated similar spiritual fortitude (called “guts”) in the Soviet-era and in Russia even today. The persecution is far from over.

Have we ever thought about how and why unyielding spiritual witness not only survived but blossomed in a country whose leaders were committed to the genocide of any and all Christians? We thank God that we were born in the United States where we can be and are free (at the moment). But secular freedom contributes negatively to true spiritual witness. Just look at the verbal and legal attacks against Christ's Church in the United States, United Kingdom, and the rest of Europe in particular. Pretty soon, the politically correct do-gooders will pass laws to bar priests/pastors from delivering homilies such as this one. Those laws when enacted should be passively disobeyed. If that day comes, we will all be in Christian jeopardy. Think about it.

Perhaps we should go to Russia and walk with the peasants, not the intelligentsia in Moscow, and see, plus, if God wills, experience, their struggles and inner spirituality. All of us in America need a bit, perhaps a lot more, Old Believer, in us!

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.