

## Metropolitan Philaret of New York



That blessed day will come when the Lord will have mercy on the Russian land and Russian people, and piety will be enthroned there, as once it had been in Holy Russia. But while we live this lot in exile, while we belong to this Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia, I repeat again, let us thank the Lord for this and try to be true to Her in every way.

*Faithfulness to the Truth in  
Sermons and Teachings of His Eminence Metropolitan Philaret (Vol. 1).*

### **Introduction**

On Sunday 21 November 2010, all churches of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) commemorated the twenty-fifth anniversary of the repose of Metropolitan Philaret (Voznesensky), her third First Hierarch. Metropolitan of ROCOR, he was also a priest of the much-suffering Patriarchal Church for sixteen years between 1945 and 1961, and so is a bond of unity between the two parts of the Russian Orthodox Church. Moreover, he also represents hope for the future of Orthodoxy in China, where he lived for over forty years.

A priest for thirty-one years and a bishop for twenty-two years, he is venerated by many as a holy man. Indeed, there are those who believe that one day, just like St John of Shanghai, he will be canonised by the whole Russian Orthodox Church, both in New York and in Moscow. We know that within ROCOR a service has already been composed to him and there are those who are now collecting testimonies about him. Let us look at his life and achievements.

### **Russia and Exile to Manchuria (1903-1943)**

The future Metropolitan Philaret was born George Nikolaevich Voznesensky (his surname means 'Ascension') in Kursk on 4 April 1903 into the family of Fr Nicholas Voznesensky. In 1909 the family moved to Blagoveschensk in the Far East. From here, in 1920, like many, many others, the family fled the Revolution and Civil War to Harbin in Manchuria.

Here, as everywhere outside the borders of the Soviet Union, Russian churches passed into the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR), which had been founded by Patriarch Tikhon for the purpose of administering churches abroad in 1920. In 1921, George's mother, Lydia, died. After this his father, Fr Nicholas, became a hieromonk with the name of Dimitri and later became Bishop and then Archbishop of Hailar. The author of a series of books on Church history and other subjects, he died in 1947, shortly after he had been repatriated to the Soviet Union.

In 1927 George graduated from the Technical Institute in Harbin as an electro-mechanic engineer and went to work as a teacher. About this time he was struck by the words of St Ignatius of the Caucasus: 'My grave! Why do I forget you? You are waiting for me, waiting, and I will certainly be your inhabitant; why then do I forget you and behave as if the grave were the lot only of other men and not of myself?' The young student began to obtain a deeper Christian understanding of life and death, of the meaning of life and the significance of death. A new inner life began for him and he began to study pastoral theology in what later became the Theology Faculty of St Vladimir's University.

In 1930 he was ordained deacon and in 1931 he graduated. Now he was tonsured a monk with the name Philaret, in honour of St Philaret (the name means 'virtue') the Merciful and in 1932 he was ordained hieromonk. During this period he taught new testament, pastoral theology and homiletics. In 1933 he received the title of abbot and in 1937 that of archimandrite. In 1936 his book, *An Outline of the Law of God*, was published in Harbin. In his early years as a priest, Fr Philaret was greatly helped by the advice of the then First Hierarch of ROCOR, Metropolitan Anthony of Kiev (+ 1936), with whom he corresponded for several years. He also studied the writings of the holy fathers and learned by heart all four Gospels. One of his favourite passages of the Scriptures was in chapter three from the Book of Revelation concerning the lukewarmness of men, their indifference to the truth.

Fr Philaret was very active in pastoral and preaching work. Already in the first years of his priesthood he attracted many through his kindness and accessibility. In imitation of his patron saint, he was generous not only in spiritual but also in material alms. He secretly gave help to the needy and many homeless turned to him. He did not teach others what he himself did not do. Like the saints, whom he called on people to imitate, he took what was written in the Holy Scriptures and the writings of the Fathers as a guide to life. He was very strict with himself and led an ascetic way of life. He loved music, showed astute judgement and had a rare memory not only for the words of the Gospel and the Fathers but also for the sorrows of his flock.

### **The Japanese Persecution (1943-1945)**

Between 1931 and 1945 Manchuria and its capital city of Harbin had been occupied by the Japanese invaders. Towards the end of this period Russian Orthodox were called on to confess their faith. The Japanese placed a statue of their pagan goddess Amateras, who according to them was the foundress of their imperial race, directly opposite St Nicholas Orthodox Cathedral. In May 1943 they demanded that Russians going to church should first make a 'reverential bow' to their goddess. It was also ordered that on certain days Japanese

temples should be venerated, while a statue of the goddess was to be placed in Orthodox churches.

The Russian Orthodox bishops in Harbin responded to this with a pastoral letter, in which they wrote: 'Since any kind of veneration of pagan divinities and temples is forbidden by the commandments of God..., Orthodox Christians, in obedience to the will of God and His Law, cannot and must not carry out this veneration, for such veneration contradicts the basic tenets of the Orthodox Faith'. An important influence on the Japanese in their eventual climbdown in this matter was the courageous confession of Fr Philaret. The Japanese seized him and subjected him to torture. His cheek was torn and his eyes were almost torn out, but he suffered this patiently.

Then they told him: 'We have a red-hot electrical device here. Everybody who has had it applied to them has agreed to our requests. And you too will agree'. Fr Philaret prayed to St. Nicholas. The torturer began his work, stripping the confessor to his waist and burning his spine with the iron. Then a miracle took place. Although Fr Philaret could smell his flesh burning, he felt no pain. Instead he felt joy in his soul. The torturer could not understand why he was silent and did not cry out or writhe from the unbearable pain. Turning and looking at Fr Philaret's face, he was amazed, waved his hand, muttered something in Japanese and fled, conquered by the confessor's endurance. Fr Philaret was taken, almost dead, to his relatives. There he passed out. When he came to, he said: 'I was in hell itself'. Gradually his wounds healed. Only his eyes were slightly distorted. And the Japanese no longer tried to force Orthodox to bow down to their idol.

### **A Priest of the Patriarchal Church (1945-1961)**

In 1945 the Red Army defeated the Japanese Army and the Chinese Communists began to take control of Manchuria. All Russian Orthodox automatically passed from the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia to the Moscow Patriarchate, whose administration was then controlled by Stalin. Stalin offered Russian émigrés the opportunity to take Soviet passports and return to Russia, which they began to do en masse. But it was a trap. 50,000 Russian citizens of Harbin and every third young person fell into this. The reality was soon revealed to them. At Atpor Station 14,000 were shot and the remaining 36,000 were deported to concentration camps, where many starved or died of other privations. As a result most decided to stay in Manchuria.

At this time Fr Philaret was the rector of the church of the Iveron Icon in Harbin in the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. When a reporter from a Harbin newspaper asked for his opinion about the Soviet government, he said that he categorically refused to take a Soviet passport, since he knew of no ideological changes in the Soviet Union. In particular, he said that he did not know what Church life was like there, but he did know a lot about the destruction of churches and the persecution of the clergy and believers. Such a firm position towards the atheist authorities and their persecution of the Church could not remain unnoticed. Fr. Philaret was often summoned by the Chinese authorities for interrogation, at one of which he was beaten.

In October 1960 they finally tried to kill him. As he himself recounted the story, at two o'clock on a Sunday morning he got up because of a strange smell in his house. He went to the living room, in the corner of which was a larder. Smoke was coming from under the larder door with a pungent smell. Opening the doors, he threw water in the direction of the smoke. Suddenly there was an explosion and a flash. The fire burned him while the shock wave of the

explosion lifted him up and hurled him with enormous force across the length of the living room and against the door leading out.

Fortunately, the door opened outwards: from the force of his flying body the hinges were broken and he fell on the ground, deafened but alive. On coming to, he saw the whole of the house on fire. He understood that the explosion had been caused by a bomb set to go off and burn down the house at a precise time. In the morning some people coming to the Sunday service early saw that the church was closed and the house in which Fr Philaret had lived was burned to the ground. Fr Philaret was exhausted and ill and his burned cheek was dark brown in colour.

As a result of the interrogations and burns he suffered, for the rest of his life Fr Philaret had a small, sideways inclination of his head and a certain distortion of the lower part of his face; his vocal chords also suffered. Two months passed. Fr Philaret again began to serve and within six months he was able to live on his own in a separate flat above the church. Once, after he had gone into his cell after a service, but saw two big boots sticking out from under a curtain. Understanding that an assassin was standing there, he went to a chest of drawers, took something out to divert attention and then quickly left the cell, locking it behind him.

### **Bishop and Metropolitan (1961-1974)**

In 1961, after almost all his flock had left Harbin, mainly for Australia, Archimandrite Philaret also left China. The Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia was able to acquire a exit visa for this priest of the Moscow Patriarchate and this allowed him to reach Hong Kong. On 29 March 1962 the ROCOR Council of Bishops received a letter from Archimandrite Philaret (Voznesensky) and a request that he be received back into the clergy of the Church. From Hong Kong Fr Philaret flew to Australia, where the ruling ROCOR Archbishop of Australia greeted him with joy and appointed him to Brisbane, where many of his former flock from Manchuria had settled. Now his followers petitioned the ROCOR to appoint him their bishop. Very quickly, on 26 May 1963, he was consecrated Bishop of Brisbane by Archbishop Sava of Sydney and Bishop Antony of Melbourne.

In 1964, having served as First Hierarch of ROCOR for 28 years after Metropolitan Antony, Metropolitan Anastasius petitioned the Council of Bishops for retirement on grounds of extreme ill health and his great age. The question arose who would be the third First Hierarch. Some members of ROCOR wanted to see Archbishop, now Saint, John (Maximovich) as their next First Hierarch, but others were opposed to this and wanted Archbishop Vitaly (Ustinov). To avoid a division, Archbishop John removed his candidacy and suggested making the youngest among them, Bishop Philaret, First Hierarch. (According to one source, the suggestion was also made by Archbishop Sava). This choice was supported by Metropolitan Anastasius.

And so Bishop Philaret was elected First Hierarch of ROCOR and enthroned on 14 May 1964. Very soon, in a first Epistle of 1965 'to Orthodox Bishops and all who hold dear the destiny of the Russian Church', Metropolitan Philaret made clear his rejection of compromises in Church life, especially regarding atheist persecution of the Church inside Russia and ecumenism. In the first of a series of 'Sorrowful Epistles', on 15 December 1965, he wrote to Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople protesting against ecumenical compromises. He wrote: *No union of the Roman Church with us is possible until it renounces its new teachings.*

In a second Epistle, written in 1969, Metropolitan Philaret turned with great respect to all Orthodox bishops, 'some of whom occupy the most ancient and most glorious sees', because, in the words of St. Gregory the Theologian, 'the truth is betrayed by silence', and 'it is impossible to keep silent when you see a deviation from the purity of Orthodoxy'. The Metropolitan quoted various declarations of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and showed, on the basis of the teaching of the Church Fathers and the canons, that it had nothing in common with Orthodoxy. He called on all Orthodox bishops to stand up in defence of Orthodoxy.

In 1972 he wrote a third 'Sorrowful Epistle'. His aim in writing this Epistle was to show that compromise was 'against the very concept of the Church into which all the participants in the ecumenical movement are being drawn'. A fourth Epistle, written in 1975, was devoted to the now forgotten 'Thyateira Confession', the eccentric personal views of the late Archbishop Athenagoras of Thyateira, the Exarch of the Patriarchate of Constantinople in Western Europe. At this time Metropolitan Philaret also encouraged missionary work among Non-Russians and later, like St John of Shanghai, he was to encourage the veneration of local saints, such as St Edward in England. He also encouraged Greek Old Calendarists to return to canonicity through communion with ROCOR. In this, however, he was unsuccessful and he later declared that the Old Calendarists were in fact Donatists or sectarians.

### **The Third Council and the Canonisation of the New Martyrs and Confessors (1974-1982)**

In 1974 the Third All-Diaspora Council took place at Holy Trinity Monastery in Jordanville, New York. This attempted to define the Church's attitude to the ecumenical movement and to Russian dissidents. Here Archbishop Anthony of Geneva, Archbishop Philotheus of Germany, Bishop Laurus of Manhattan and Bishop Paul of Stuttgart, in particular, all defended the Church and Metropolitan Philaret from politically-motivated isolationist tendencies. These were being advanced by Greek Old Calendarists, who were trying to influence the Council of Bishops, though with little success.

Defending Metropolitan Philaret, the ever-memorable Archbishop Antony of Geneva declared: 'Through the example of our First Hierarchs, we must carefully preserve those fine threads which bind us to the Orthodox world. Under no circumstances should we isolate ourselves...Through gradual self-isolation we would fall into the extremism which our Metropolitans have wisely avoided and we would reject that middle, royal path which until now our Church has travelled...'. The dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who had been expelled from the Soviet Union in 1974, attended the Council at the invitation of Archbishop Antony. He also supported ROCOR's traditional stance.

At this time, given the atheist captivity of the Patriarchal Church inside Russia, Metropolitan Philaret and the Council of Bishops canonised many saints from Russia. These were: St John of Kronstadt (in 1964), St Herman of Alaska (in 1971), Blessed Xenia of St Petersburg (in 1978), the New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia (1981) and St Paisius Velichkovsky (1982). Of these canonisations the most significant was that of the New Martyrs and Confessors. Its influence in Russia was huge. Indeed, nineteen years later, in 2000, the by then largely free Church inside Russia confirmed the canonisations that had taken place under Metropolitan Philaret.

Metropolitan Philaret wrote of this unique event: 'Orthodox Russia has been on Golgotha and the Russian Church on the Cross....The Russian Church and people have given an uncounted multitude of cases of martyric endurance of persecutions and death for faith in Christ...not

merely hundreds or thousands, but millions of sufferers for faith - an unheard of and shocking phenomenon! But at the same time the Russian land is being purified of this defilement by the sacred blood of the New Martyrs who have suffered for faith and righteousness. The Russian land has been abundantly watered by this blood - watered, hallowed and cleansed from the senselessness of the atheists and those who fight against God...’.

‘The day draws near for the canonisation and glorification of the innumerable host of martyrs and confessors of the faith which the Russian Church and people have shown to the world. This will be a day of the greatest solemnity for the Orthodox Faith - not only in Russia and in the Russian diaspora, but all over the world, wherever there are faithful children of the Orthodox Church....Great and numerous is the host of the Russian New Martyrs...Members of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia! We are preparing for a great solemnity – a solemnity not only for the Russian Orthodox Church, but also for the whole Universal Church, because the whole Orthodox Church in all its parts is one and lives a single spiritual life’.

### **Metropolitan (1982-1985)**

In answer to the politically motivated who criticised ROCOR for its canonisation of saints, in 1982 a miracle of Divine mercy was revealed. This was the Wonderworking Montreal Icon of the Mother of God, which for fifteen years unceasingly travelled the world and gave out myrrh until its disappearance in 1997 and the murder of its guardian, the righteous Joseph.

On 27 October 1983 the Synod of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia issued a condemnation of the branch theory. Rejecting this most extreme manifestation of ecumenism, it declared: ‘To those who attack the Church of Christ by teaching that Christ’s Church is divided into so-called ‘branches’ which differ in teaching and way of life, or that the Church does not exist visibly, but will be formed in the future when all ‘branches’ or sects or denominations and even religions will be united into one body...Anathema. It is noteworthy that once the Church inside Russia was free to do so in the Year 2000, it too issued the same condemnation. Thus, once again, Metropolitan Philaret’s work found its highest expression in acts which had universal significance for World Orthodoxy.

Metropolitan Philaret, the earthly angel, passed away at approx. 6.30 a.m. on 21 November 1985, the feast of the Archangel Michael and all the Bodiless Hosts. He had been suffering from cancer. After his repose, a sheet of paper was found in his typewriter with the following words of the Lord, addressed to the angel of the Church of Philadelphia: ‘Hold fast that which thou hast, that no man take thy crown’ (Revelation 3, 11). Truly, Metropolitan Philaret was an angel of the Philadelphian Church, of the Orthodox Church.

Nearly a thousand people attended the Metropolitan’s funeral, which took place at the Cathedral of the Mother of God of the Sign in New York on the Sunday after his repose. Eight bishops, thirty-one priests and eight deacons led the service. At the end of the ceremony, when the faithful had given their Archpastor the last kiss, his relics were taken to the Novo-Diveevo Convent in Spring Valley for the night. In the early morning they were taken to Holy Trinity Monastery at Jordanville. After the Divine Liturgy, they were laid to rest there in the crypt of the cemetery chapel.

### **His Relics Found Incorrupt (1998)**

Thirteen years passed. In 1998 it was arranged that the earthly remains of Metropolitan Philaret should be transferred from the burial-vault under the altar of the cemetery chapel in

Jordanville into a new burial-vault behind the monastery's main church. In connection with this, it was decided to open the tomb. On 10 November 1998 Archbishop Laurus, the future Metropolitan, served a panikhida in the burial vault together with many clergy; the coffin of Metropolitan Philaret was placed in the middle of the room and opened.

The relics of the Metropolitan were found to be completely incorrupt, they were of a light, bronze colour and the skin, beard and hair were completely preserved. The vestments and the Gospel Book were, except for the metal clasps which were rusted through, completely preserved, even though they had lain thirteen years in a very damp basement crypt. It is noteworthy that the metal clasps of the Gospel in the coffin fell into dust on being touched; this witnessed to the damp in the tomb and yet in such conditions nothing except these clasps had suffered any damage. Even the white cloth that had covered his body had preserved its whiteness, which amazed the undertaker who was present at the opening of the coffin – he said that this cloth should have turned black after three years in the coffin.

Later, the coffin was carried into the main monastery church in a new coffin covered with his original blue mantle, which itself was incorrupt. After the Liturgy on 21 November 1998, the remains were lowered into a new, deeper grave that had been dug to a depth of nine feet in the north-western crypt under the altar. The grave was not filled in, instead, only a small amount of soil was placed on top of the coffin.

To the Ever-Memorable, Most Reverend Metropolitan Philaret – Eternal Memory!

For a sermon of Metropolitan Philaret on the New Martyrs and Confessors, see:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IBk7IA7-jCM>