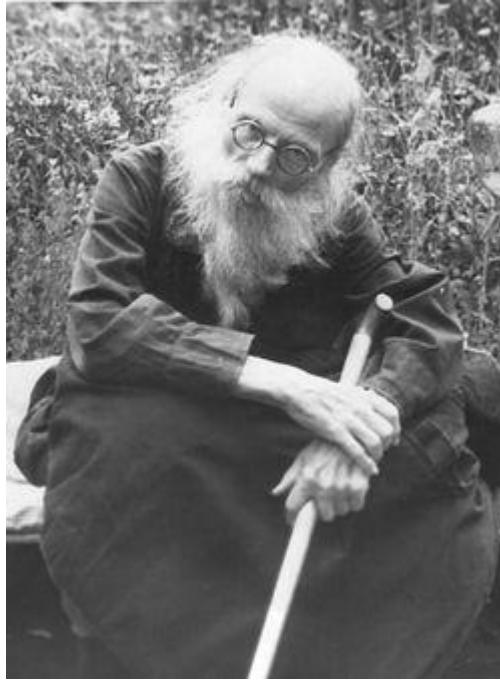


# A QUEST FOR TRUTH ON THE PATH OF REASON.



Igumen Nikon (Vorobev)

It is impossible that man should never be troubled, if only for fleeting moments in his life, by these questions: Why do I live? What is the meaning of all existence? Where does everything end up? What is truth? For many, these questions have been questions of life and death.

It was for one twentieth-century ascetic of piety, Igumen (Abbot) Nikon (Vorobiev, †1963).<sup>[1]</sup> His thirst for answers to these questions was so great that when he was a student he would spend his last dime, literally going hungry, in order to buy books. He was able to read only at night. At first he immersed himself entirely in science. He followed all of its latest achievements. He yearned for the moment when science would give the final word, and all truth would be revealed. But alas, the more he learned, the more disappointed he became in the ability of science to explain anything about the meaning of life. He found that science was not at all interested in this question.

He turned to philosophy. At one time he became particularly interested in Henri Bergson.<sup>[2]</sup> He studied the French and German languages. Thanks to his astounding intellectual stamina and talent, he attained such success in philosophy that even his teachers would sometimes come to him for consultation. Even so, his immersion in philosophy never brought him the desired results.

“The study of philosophy,” he said at the end of his life,

Showed me that each philosopher considered he had found the truth. How many philosophers have there been? But there is only one truth. My soul yearned for something else. Philosophy is but a surrogate; it is like chewing gum instead of bread. Can chewing gum satisfy your hunger? I understood that just as science says nothing about God or the future life, neither does

philosophy. It became perfectly clear to me that it was necessary to turn to religion.<sup>[3]</sup>

In 1914 he graduated brilliantly from *realschule* [secondary school emphasizing hard sciences —Trans.] and made a final attempt to find meaning in life without God, without the Church, entering the Petrograd Psychoneurological Institute. But there he met with no less disappointment. “I saw that psychology does not study man at all, only his ‘packaging’—the speed of mental processes, perception, memory.... Such nonsense; it was just as repugnant.” He left the institute after the first year. Soon he experienced a serious spiritual crisis. He began to have thoughts of suicide.

Then one day in the summer of 1915, in the town of Vyshny Volochok, when he suddenly felt a particular sense of total despair, a thought struck him like lightning about his childhood faith: What if God really does exist—shouldn’t He reveal Himself? But he was not a believer! From the depth of his soul, in his desperate state, he cried, “Lord, if You exist, reveal Yourself to me. I am not seeking You out of some earthly desire. I only need to know one thing—do You exist, or not?” And the Lord revealed Himself! He revealed Himself [so convincingly], that he said, “‘Lord, let anything happen to me, any sorrows, any tortures, only do not turn me away, do not deprive me of eternal life.’ With my whole soul, completely consciously, I said, ‘I don’t need anything, not family life, or anything else; only make it so that I should never fall away from You, that I should always be with You.’”

“It is impossible to relate,” said Fr. Nikon,

That action of grace which convinces a person of the existence of God with the power of something obvious, that leaves no room for the slightest doubt. The Lord reveals Himself as, for example, a bright ray of sun suddenly shines after dark clouds. You no longer doubt: was it the sun, or did someone shine a light? The Lord revealed Himself to me in such a way, that I fell to the ground with the words, “Lord, glory to Thee, I thank Thee. Grant me to serve Thee all my life. May all the sorrows and suffering on earth come upon me, only don’t let me fall away from Thee, or lose Thee.”

Then I heard the ringing of a large church bell. At first I paid it no attention. Then, when I saw that it was already almost three o’clock in the morning and the ringing continued, I remembered my mother’s words when she told me about the old people who would visit them and say that spiritual people sometimes hear bells ringing from heaven.

He was very unsure about this bell ringing, worried that it might have been a hallucination. He was reassured when he read the autobiography of Sergei Bulgakov, who related concerning his conversion experience that, “Not in vain did I hear the ringing of bells from heaven all that summer.” “Then,” remembers Fr. Nikon, “I also recalled Turgenev’s story ‘Living Relics,’ in which Lukeria also said that she heard ringing ‘from above,’ not daring to say, ‘from heaven.’” From this, Fr. Nikon came to the conclusion that “together with this spiritual experience, the Lord also allowed me to perceive my communion with heaven in a sensory way.” The Lord reveals Himself to some people in an internal way and at the same time, through special outward signs to assure and support them.

A radical change in world view happened in just one moment; it seems a miracle clearly occurred. Just the same, this miracle was the natural, logical completion of his search for truth on the path of reason. The Lord revealed the meaning of life to him, let him taste and see that the Lord is good, and let him know the Truth. This is what Fr. Nikon said about his first experiences after conversion:

After this, the Lord begins to lead a person along a complicated path, a very complicated path. I was amazed when I entered a church after this Divine revelation. I used to go to church earlier—out of compulsion; we were taken to church during high school also. But what did we do there? I would stand there like a pillar, without any interest, thinking my own thoughts.

But after my conversion my heart opened up a little, and the first thing I remembered when I entered the church was the story about Prince Vladimir's ambassadors [to Constantinople], who upon entering the Greek Church did not know where they were—on heaven, or on earth. So the first perception in the church after experiencing such a state is that you are not on the earth. The Church is not the earth—it is a little piece of heaven. What joy it was to hear, "Lord have mercy!" This had an amazing effect on my heart; all the Services, continual remembrance of the name of God in various forms, the singing, the readings. It evoked a sort of ecstasy, joy; it filled me....

When a person comes and falls down before the Lord, saying, "Lord, do as Thou wilt; I know nothing (and truly, what do we know?), do as Thou wilt, only save me," then the Lord Himself begins to lead that person.

That young man really didn't know anything about the spiritual path at that time, but he fell down with tears to God, and the Lord Himself led him. "He led me in such a way after this; I lived two years in Volochok, read books, and prayed at home." This was the period of his "burning" heart," as Fr. Nikon recalls. He did not see or hear what was happening around him. At that time he was renting half of a private house in Sosnovitsy (near Vyshny Volochok). He was twenty-two years old. On the other side of a thin dividing wall were dancing, song, laughter, and youthful games; they were having fun. They tried to invite him, too, for he was an interesting person—intelligent, attractive, and educated. But he had lost his taste for the world.

The next two years of his life were a time of unceasing spiritual labors, true asceticism. He was acquainting himself for the first time with the writings of the Holy Fathers, and reading the Gospels for essentially the first time. This is what he said about this period when he had reached the end of his life:

It was only in the Holy Fathers and the Gospels that I found something truly valuable. When a person begins to struggle with himself, when he tries to travel the path of the Gospels, then the Holy Fathers become something he needs, they become his family. A Holy Father becomes his closest teacher, who speaks to the soul; and the soul receives it with joy and is consoled. Those philosophers and various disgusting sectarian teachings evoked boredom, depression, and nausea; but I came to the Fathers as to my own mother. They soothed me, gave me wisdom, and fed me.... Then the Lord gave me the thought to enter the Moscow Theological Academy (in 1917). This meant very much to me.

### A Biography of Abbot Nikon

Abbot Nikon (in the world, Nikolai Nikolaevitch Vorobiev) was born in 1894 into a large peasant family, in the village of Mikshino, Tver Province. Ever since childhood, he excelled in seriousness, impeccable honesty, remarkable warmth, concern for everyone, and an unquenchable thirst for ultimate truth, a thirst to comprehend the purpose of human existence.

Like most ordinary people of that time, he was brought up with only external, traditional religiosity, with no firm spiritual foundation or clear understanding of the essence of Christianity. Such an upbringing could at best instill in one only a healthy sense of morality; the future spiritual struggler very quickly lost his childish faith. With true zeal, he immersed himself in the study first of science, then philosophy, in the naive belief that truth was hidden therein. He quickly came to understand that that was not the case. Later he confessed "I came to understand that, just as science tells [us] nothing of God, of the life to come, neither will philosophy give us anything. The conclusion became absolutely clear: I had to turn to religion." His education at the Petrograd Institute of Psycho-Neurology brought him nothing but disillusionment: "I saw that psychology studies not [the whole] man, but only his "skin" - the rate of processes, perception, memory ... It was such nonsense, that it was repugnant to me." After tortured searching, and already with a feeling of total hopelessness, the 20-year old suddenly remembered the faith of his youth and, from the depths of his being, began to call out, almost in despair, "O Lord, if You exist, show Yourself! I am not seeking You for some mercenary reason. I need [to know] but one thing: do You exist, or not?" The Lord mysteriously showed Himself, and from that moment on, everything in Nikolai Vorobiev's life radically changed: Years of constant spiritual struggle and true asceticism followed. Cautiously and carefully, he used the Sacred Scriptures, which had become a source of real joy and comfort for him, to guide him in his spiritual life.

At the age of 36, after most serious testing of his powers, Nikolai Nikolaevitch Vorobiev accepted monastic tonsure, taking the name Nikon. One year later, Nikon became first a Hierodeacon, and soon thereafter, a Hieromonk. On March 23, 1933 (the anniversary of his tonsure) he was arrested and sentenced to 5 years in a Siberian camp. For several years after his release, deprived of the possibility of continuing to serve as a priest, Fr. Nikon worked as a physician's assistant in Vyshnyaya Volotchka. During World War II, many church buildings were returned to the Russian Orthodox Church, and it once again became possible for him to serve as a priest. In 1944 Hieromonk Nikon was appointed rector of the Annunciation Church in Kozelsk, where he served until 1948. Thereafter, he was transferred, first to Belev, then to the town of Efremov, then to Smolensk, and finally, in what he considered to be exile, to a then impoverished and run-down parish in the town of Gzhatsk.

At his new post, he at first had to endure incredible social and material difficulties. Almost immediately after receiving any money, batiushka would distribute it [to the needy], so he never had any money at all. His only possessions beyond the barest essentials consisted of books, primarily the writings of the Holy Fathers of the Orthodox Church.

In the last years of his life, when already an Abbot, Nikon was afflicted with a multitude of sorrows, secular difficulties, and vanities. Before his death, he said "That vanity allowed me to see that we ourselves alone are incapable of doing anything good." By his own admission, during that period he came to understand and to experience the beginnings of Christian humility, to experience what shows us "...that in and of ourselves, we are nothing; we are merely God's creation. Thus, of what do we have to be proud, and what do we have to compare with God?"

Before his death, Nikon endured one final trial, that of severe illness. For over three months prior to his death he was unable to ingest any food other than milk. Yet, he uttered no complaint, remained ever calm and focused, and most of the time had a little smile on his face. Right up to his death, he remained fully conscious and lucid, and expended all his energies on instructing those around him. He adjured them to preserve the faith by keeping the commandments and repenting; follow in all ways possible the teachings of Bishop Ignaty Biranchaninov; and take special care to avoid the vanities, that utterly desolate the soul and draw it away from God. To the mourners around his bed he would say: "There is no reason to feel sorry for me. Thanks be to God that I have already completed my earthly path. I never wanted to live; I did not see anything interesting in this life, and I was always amazed that others would find something in it and cling to it with all of their might. Although I have done nothing good in my life, I have always sincerely striven [to move] toward God. Therefore, with all my soul, I place my hope in God's mercy. The Lord cannot spurn one who always did as much as possible to strive toward Him. I feel sorry for you. What else are you to face? The living will envy the dead."

Abbot Nikon (Vorobiev)'s peaceful end came on September 7, 1963. He was buried in the town of Gzhatsk (now called Gagarin).

In the minds of those contemporary Orthodox Christians who sincerely seek after salvation, Abbot Nikon has deservedly become one of the great teachers of repentance in recent history. "Here, as I am dying, is my last will: Repent, think of yourselves as that publican, as sinners, implore God for His mercy and take pity on one another."

[1] See Maria Naumenko, *Letters to Spiritual Children* (by Igumen Nikon) (Richfield Springs, N.Y.: Nicodemos Orthodox Publication Society, 1997).

[2] Henri-Louis Bergson (1859–1941) was a French philosopher, influential in the first half of the twentieth century.

[3] This and following quotes by Igumen Nikon are taken from tape recordings.