

Staretz Amvrosy of Optina on illness

Staretz means 'elder', and we hope to have a series on the great elders of the Orthodox Church and the spiritual guidance they gave about the problems which we all encounter in our lives. St Paul entrusted his churches to 'elders' (*presbyteroi*) and their 'overseer' (*episkopos*), because *presbyter* was a term of respect for someone older, more experienced in the world.

But in the desert the monastics called themselves 'elders' in a different sense.

They said they were 'an old man' or 'an old woman' (*gerondas-gerondissa*), who are done with the world, who stand on the brink of death, and take only the minimum vantage needed to sustain their physical life. From this position, they turned out to have a unique vantage point from which to understand all that oppresses human nature, and its spiritual remedies.

It is the Greek word *geron* which is translated in Russian as *staretz*.



Staretz Amvrosy (born 1812, and now canonised as a saint) directed the spiritual life of Optina Pustyn from 1865 until his death in 1891, succeeding to a continuous line of startsy from the time that Avramy reorganised Optina and founded a skete there in 1821. Avramy was a disciple of Makary, himself a disciple of Paisy Velichkovsky, the great 18th century staretz and translator of the *Philokalia*, the collection of spiritual writings in the eastern tradition made by Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain and published in 1782. The *Philokalia* was the vehicle of a great revival of spirituality throughout the Orthodox world in the 19th century, and Optina was one of the centres of that revival.

The revival renewed Russian culture after the ruthless westernisation by Peter and the cynical rationalism of Catherine. The influence of its earlier phases was chiefly on the peasantry, as is attested by *The Way of a Pilgrim*, apparently the autobiography of a peasant who wandered from shrine to shrine in the manner later noted by Tolstoy, whose estate at Yasnaya Polyana was on the pilgrim route to Optina. But it was Amvrosy himself who went on to make a profound impact on the high culture of Russia as well. Tolstoy, among many other examples, visited Amvrosy in 1877, 1881 and 1890, and after the latter's death, when Tolstoy fled from the conflict between his wife and his disciples, it was to Optina he fled, and after that to his sister at Shamordino, the convent founded by Amvrosy. Accounts suggest that Tolstoy was deeply impressed by the staretz, but also deeply irritated by the rebukes he received from him. Dostoyevsky, who went in 1878, fared better, Amvrosy reportedly saying of him, "*There is one who repents;*" and Dostoyevsky in turn took Amvrosy as a model for the Elder Zossima in *The Brothers Karamazov*, putting into Zossima's mouth a consolation which Amvrosy had sent to Dostoyevsky's wife Anna on their child's death. (This is in the chapter on the encounter of elder Zossima with devout peasant women).

All the more astonishing, then, that this impression was made by a man who was chronically sick and permanently exhausted. After a medical crisis in 1846, at the young age of 34, when his life had been despaired of, he was dogged for the rest of his life by digestive and intestinal problems so severe, that accounts of his day refer to him as receiving people while lying down, and there is a portrait of him in this position.

Yet he continued to receive people and to answer their letters. *“Not to receive them is impossible, but there is no possibility of receiving them all, and I lack the strength.”* With these few words he summed up the task he felt he had been given. *“I cannot leave the people – you yourself see how many there are,”* was his reply to someone who found him exhausted and asked why he tired himself in this way. His day began at 4 a.m. with the morning prayers and the hours and typika, and when these were done he would begin dictating replies to letters or answers to questions from people outside which were relayed to him by his cell servants. At about 10 a.m. he would go out to the people waiting, and would be engaged with them with short intervals for food or rest until dinner at 8 p.m., after which, depending on his health and strength, he might continue with them until 11 p.m., midnight, or even 1 a.m., ending the day with the evening prayers. How did he manage this?

One of his sources of encouragement was St John Chrysostom: *“Finding myself in such a condition I take heart when I think that that great light of the Orthodox church St John Chrysostom was always in a condition of sickness,”* he wrote, *“.....He healed others who were sick but died himself in a feverish state...In our discomforts it is beneficial to remember St Chrysostom, how even while sick he did not cease to care for the affairs of the church.”*

For us, Amvrosy too must bring similar encouragement.

Continuous illness and exhaustion often seem to us to mean that God has rejected us. Amvrosy knew this temptation very well. One woman who was brought to him told her story: Seeing me weeping, Batiushka asked me, *“What are you crying about? Is it because God has visited you with such a sickness?...Don’t despair; God will not abandon you. But you will be sick for a long time...This sickness is given to you by God. But you will have the use of your hands.”*...The same day after having been to Batiushka’s, I received full use of both my hands.

Why then should God visit some people with sickness? Amvrosy’s answer was given with characteristic humility: *“There are not many people who bear misfortunes and persecutions simply for the reason that they live a pious life.....All the others bear misfortunes and sicknesses for the purification of their previous sins or for the humbling of a proud mind or for the receiving of salvation. I ask all of you for your holy prayers for my wickedness and incorrigibility, as the Apostle James commands: ‘Pray for one another that you may be healed.’*

Note that all three of the reasons he mentions look forward towards a blessing for the sick person, not backward towards an excuse to condemn. Amvrosy warred

constantly against our tendency to judge others: *"You look only at the bad side of a man and do not look at his good side,"* he told those convinced of their perceptiveness in this regard. So how can blessing emerge as the end of these three processes?

Purification, said Amvrosy, is something we need constantly. *"We live in a sophisticated modern age,"* he wrote, *"in which even small children receive spiritual harm from what they see and hear; consequently purification is required which is never accomplished without suffering, and spiritual purification is usually accomplished through bodily suffering."* Illness brings out all our faults and in addition often makes us unable to do what is good. But this he understood as the basis for the second reason why we may be given an illness to bear...*'the humbling of a proud mind.'*

This too Amvrosy applied directly and simply to himself.

"I do not cease to instruct others to live well, this way and that way! But I myself live only so-so. Often I recall the apostolic rebuke: you try to teach others and have not taught yourself."

He grieved about his inability to keep the fast, a direct result of his digestive troubles, and his lack of time for prayer and contemplation.

It was characteristic of him that he should long with tears for these things, and at the same time should understand that by being unable to do them he was brought to

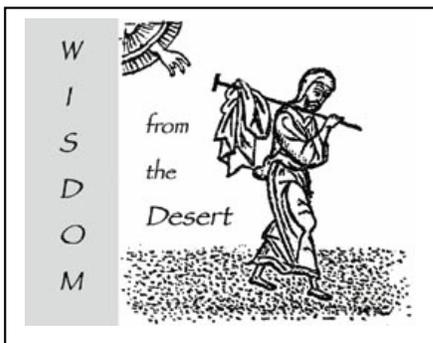
the same level, and lived in the same reality, as those he counselled.

Finally there was his third reason: *"for the receiving of salvation."* *"Let us suppose,"* he wrote, *"that there was no spiritual injury"* [ie which needed purification]. *"Even so you must know that the bliss of Paradise is given to no one without suffering."* Agapit, a monk of Optina who wrote a memoir of Amvrosy, records the story of a couple who came to keep an appointment with the staretz: *"The staretz was sitting on his bed in a white monastic mantle and cap. In his hands was a rosary. His face was transfigured. It was somehow particularly illumined and everything in the cell assumed an air of solemnity. The newcomers felt uneasy, but at the same time an unspeakable joy took hold of them. They were unable to utter a single word and stood for a long time oblivious to all else, contemplating the face of the staretz. Everything was quiet, and Batiushka was silent. They went up to him to receive his blessing. He made the sign of the cross over them without saying a word. They glanced once more at this scene to retain it for ever in their hearts. The staretz remained immersed in contemplation with the same transfigured face. Thus they left him without saying a word."*

John Dunlop, *Staretz Amvrosy*, Mowbray's, London and Oxford, 1972.

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Christ withdrew to the desert to pray and suffered temptation. In the 4th Century others followed; living alone, but meeting at the weekend to celebrate the Eucharist and share an Agape meal. Afterwards they might gather round an Elder to ask for advice; "Give us a word, Abba". And so arose the tradition of spiritual guidance from desert wisdom that still continues today.

Towards the end of the 19th Century Saint Theophan the Recluse, hermit monk of Vysha Monastery, received a request for guidance from a young woman, Anastasia Ivanovna Kugucheva. Some of his letters to her mention the wisdom of the early desert fathers such as Abba Poemen.

'...shunning of evil consists almost entirely in struggle with the thoughts. This is what St. Poemen talks about.

One of the brothers went to Abba Poemen and said, "Father! I have many thoughts, and I am in danger because of them.

" The old man took him outside and said, "expand your chest and do not inhale!" "I cannot do that," answered the brother, "If you cannot do that, then neither can you stem the flow of thoughts," said the old man. "But your job is to resist them." When maintaining vigilance over yourself, as soon as you observe the passionate, immediately pray and it will go away.

When, in this way, you do not yield to the passions on the one hand, and you cultivate the virtues on the other hand, the heart gradually softens, warms up and receives within itself the Divine flame, which you only have to look after to be safe.

Abba Poemen says concerning this, "When a pot is warmed by a fire, then no fly or other creature can touch it; but when it becomes cold, then they perch on it.

It is the same way with the soul. So long as it is in a state of spiritual activity (enthusiasm of the spirit for God)), the enemy cannot affect it.

'He also said, 'A man may seem to be silent, but if his heart is condemning others he is babbling ceaselessly. But there may be another who talks from morning till night and yet he is truly silent; that is, he says nothing that is not profitable.'