

## ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN CHURCH OF THE HOLY TRINITY

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### THY WILL GOVERNS ALL

*“Teach me to treat all that comes to me with peace of soul, and with the firm conviction that Thy will governs all.” (Morning Prayer of the monks of the Optino monastery)*

Among the multitude of monasteries in pre-Revolutionary Russia, Optino, in the south central region, was noted for having produced a series of elders [*startsi* in Russian, *geronda* in Greek] who had gone through decades of silent meditation and prayer, then for several years before their death would open their cells to permit pilgrims to visit and imbibe spiritual wisdom from them. There are none such in the New World as far as I am aware because such elders come only after all conditions for their existence are met. We Americans would not know how to appreciate their presence even if our monasteries were to rise to the means by which such elders, male or female, were to manifest themselves in our times. Those who have read the novel by Dostoevsky, Brothers Karamazov, will remember the elder Zossima who had an influence on the young hero Alyosha. The author based Zossima on an elder he had met on a visit to the Optino monastery with another intellectual famous in his own right, Vladimir Soloviev.

The two had set out for Optino as friends with different personal problems that troubled their souls. Dostoevsky had recently come from the funeral of his son and namesake, Fedya, just three years old. Only those who have buried their own children can know the depths of despair such tragedies inflict upon the parents. Why should it be? Where was God when heartfelt prayers were offered up with tears watering the faith of the believing souls? Why do the innocent suffer? Why do the good ones die too soon?

Soloviev was among the most brilliant thinkers Russia ever produced. He was among the most daring in the nation, matched only in recent times by Alexander Solzhenitzyn. And just as misunderstood. Soloviev called upon the emperor to give a universal example of true Christianity by pardoning rather than executing the assassin of his father, Tsar Alexander II. For that he was expelled from his position as lecturer at the Moscow University. He was obsessed with the vision of a united Christianity in which Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholics and Protestants would come together bringing their separate gifts to a universal Church of fellowship for all humanity. And he was summarily misunderstood, his good intentions misused or dismissed as naïve and impossible by all three major Christian expressions of Jesus Christ's gospel.

What message can an elder provide for such sufferers? He cannot restore life to the novelist's son, nor can he intercede with the emperor on behalf of the philosopher even if he sought to be restored to the university faculty. But he can comfort them and others with the warmth of his own soul. It helps immeasurably to know at such times of profound grief and spiritual confusion that God is not somewhere beyond the clouds, but within the souls of those who make a home in their hearts for the divine presence.

First comes the awareness of the Holy Spirit abiding within those who have overcome the darkness of alienation, which is the residue of sin. Those who have the light of Christ shining in their souls are capable of manifesting holiness and making it available to others. They beam a divine light toward those in the darkness of despair, alienation, and a false feeling of abandonment; and in that light, they share Christ's light.

Then appears the restored cosmic order within the soul of the sufferer. It was always there, only harmful depression disguised it and thwarted expression. God's will was being done despite evidence to the contrary. *“God is where He was,”* the saying goes. And even if we have not the joy of elders yet among us, nevertheless, we can be comforters to one another if we have sufficient faith to act as true Christians and let the light of Christ illumine all, as the Presanctified Liturgy reminds us.

*Father Vladimir Berzonsky*