

## *Introducing the Newsletter*

Our community has been built on three simple things:

- a. the Russian Christian tradition, as it was given to us by Metropolitan Anthony
- b. the main use of the English language  
(but keeping some reminders of the language of those who taught us)
- c. our central location

These three things have proved important for many of the people across Scotland who are drawn to the Orthodox Christian way, and for this reason our community has always been scattered. Our people now stretch from Dumfries to Shetland, and from Musselburgh to Loch Shiel. In addition, many people have become less able to travel because of problems of health, family care, work or income. So it seems we should address the situation as it is, and find other ways of bringing us all together.

A newsletter is one way of doing this, bringing to everyone the experience and impressions of those able to attend occasions which others cannot get to. More particularly, we need a newsletter which also makes space for discussion of the problems people are facing in their lives. We begin in this issue with the spiritual problems of dealing with chronic illness. And I will be happy to hear your reactions to this, your suggestions, and your questions. Let's get conversations going.

I am very grateful to Sr. Elizabeth for agreeing to edit the newsletter. Previously an artist whose photographic installations were exhibited internationally and a university lecturer in graphic communication she is ideally suited for the task, and her study of desert fathers and mothers, with other Orthodox sources, will add many salty asides in which much is condensed in little. We hope that you will enjoy this first issue, and will contribute to the way future issues are shaped.

*Fr Alexander*

## *Why is our newsletter called 'The Vine'?*

The vine is used as a biblical symbol in both the Old and New Testament to convey spreading out and bearing fruit. Christ says 'I am the vine, you are the branches: he that abides in me, and I in him, the same brings forth much fruit: for without me you can do nothing.' (*John 15: 5*). This reminds us that if our branches bring forth fruit it will be through the grace of God.

The Lord also spoke to Saint Nicholas using the symbolism of the true vine. Saint Nicholas made a pilgrimage to the Holy land and was so moved that he decided to withdraw to the desert and live as a hermit, but he was stopped by a divine voice that told him to return to his native land.

He returned to Lycia and entered a monastic community of Holy Sion, founded by his uncle. But the Lord again indicated another path saying "Nicholas, this is not the vineyard where you shall bear fruit for Me. return to the world, and glorify my name there." So he left Patara and went to Myra in Lycia where he served as Bishop and became known for his compassion, miracles and witness against Christian heresy.

*Holy Father Nicholas, please pray to God for us!*

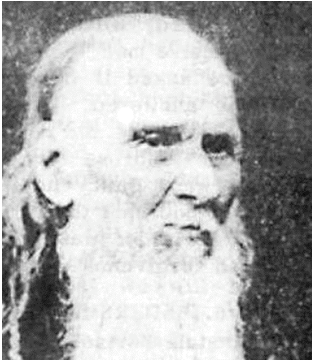
## Staretz Amvrosy of Optina on illness

*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 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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

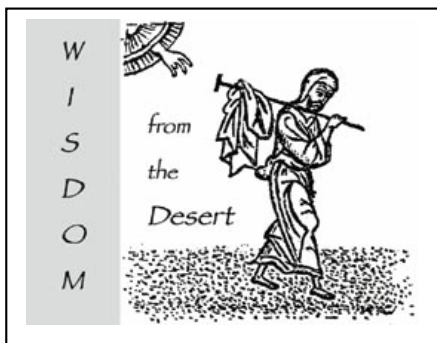
the same level, and lived in the same reality, as those he counselled.

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.

*(This book is part of the gift of David Walters, held for the community in Arranmhor).*





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.*

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.

'....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.

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.'

## **The Vicariate Clergy-Laity Assembly, 7 June 2008**

*Edited from an article by Graham Whitaker first published on the Vicariate website*

[www.exarchate-uk.org/Activities/Assembly](http://www.exarchate-uk.org/Activities/Assembly)

**The assemblies are held twice a year**, and currently take place in London. Inevitably at such meetings there are formalities that have to be observed both in the conduct of the meeting – to establish that it is properly quorate, for example – and in the framing of the agenda.

**The report given by Bishop Basil** forms a major part of the proceedings. He drew attention to four main matters. The first of these was the work being done by the Panel on Ordination. The second matter raised by Bishop Basil was the relationship with the Archdiocese. The third matter was the recent Conference, and Bishop Basil invited Barbara Bates to review this. She felt that there had been a welcome emphasis on practicality in some of the workshops and discussions. The development of the children's programme was widely welcomed and was now a vital adjunct to the summer camp. The final matter was the Chapel of St Seraphim at Walsingham. Bishop Basil reviewed the history that had led to a trust being formed to purchase and preserve it as an Orthodox presence in an important centre of pilgrimage. The work of the trust was supported by the local community but required further funding; the best form of support was however to go there and visit St Seraphim's.

**The finances of the Vicariate** are of vital importance at this stage in its existence. Seraphim Alton Honeywell was able to report that the appeal for monthly standing orders to be opened had been successful, to the extent that a regular income was now being received and that this would be boosted now that the Vicariate had been registered as a charity, and could therefore claim Gift Aid. More was needed however to achieve a working income that would fully meet running costs, and he urged members to give if they had not already done so, or to consider increasing their initial donations. A valuable feature of the Assembly is a themed discussion, since it gives both a focus to the meeting and a chance to speakers whose voices might otherwise not be heard to develop the theme in question. On this occasion Alexei Skorobogatov and Giles Milton spoke on what it means to be Orthodox in Britain today. Alexei drew on his experience of 'private' Orthodox practice under the Soviet Union. Giles talked about his experience of small communities faced with less frequent priestly visits.

**The lunch-break** provides a welcome opportunity to meet with friends from other parishes and communities and to learn about their current experiences or problems, or just to relax in the middle of what can be a lengthy meeting. We were also joined after the break by Father Leonid Kishkovsky, Moderator of the Religions for Peace network who was in London for a meeting at Lambeth Palace.





## Vicariate Conference



**"For the Life of the World: Communion and Community",  
All Saints Pastoral Centre, London Colney, St Albans May 23-26 2008.**

*by Briony Williams*

The Annual Conference of the Vicariate took place over the May Bank Holiday weekend, at a Roman Catholic Pastoral Centre near St Albans, Hertfordshire. The Community of Saint Nicholas was well represented: as well as Father Alexander and Matuska Julie, several members of the community also attended. The conference was led by Bishop Basil, and nearly all the clergy of the Vicariate were able to attend.

The theme of the conference was "For the Life of the World: Communion and Community". The focus on building ourselves up into a unified community followed on very well from the conference of 2007 (the first residential conference of the new Vicariate), where those attending had been tremendously encouraged by the sense of sharing, mutual strengthening and new beginnings.

In keeping with the theme of building up community, each parish and eucharistic community had been asked to provide pictures and posters about themselves for an informal exhibition in the cloisters. It was heartening to learn more in this way about the many congregations in the Vicariate that we normally see so little of.



The Pastoral Centre, originally an Anglican convent, had the advantage over last year's venue that it was more suitable for children's activities, and indeed a full children's programme was included this year. This made it possible for more young families to attend, and their presence was very welcome. There was a good mix of age groups, and representatives from all over the country, with a total of nearly two hundred people attending. We were even joined by friends from overseas, most notably Archbishop Gabriel of Comana,

who attended the entire conference and gave a welcoming address at the beginning.

The main building was ranged around a small quadrangle which contained a delightful garden with a pond, very conducive to reflection and quiet discussion. To one side of the building

was the Pastoral Centre's large chapel, designed in Gothic style by Sir Ninian Comper in the early twentieth century. It was here that all the services took place during the conference. The Pastoral Centre was surrounded by extensive grounds, featuring a Prayer Walk. They also contained "Chantry Island", a small knoll amongst woodland, surrounded by streams. A tiny stone monument at the highest point marks the site of the chapel where the priest lived for whom Saint Alban gave his life, in the third century. This significant association was a constant reminder of the antiquity of the Christian faith in the British Isles.

The weekend was a mixture of formal talks, practical workshops, discussion groups, worship, and free time. During the talks, translation into Russian was provided for those who needed it. Two of the talks were given by friends from abroad: Father Sergei Ovsiannikov, from the Netherlands, spoke on "Confession and Communion", while Father Boris Brobrinskoy, from France, spoke on "The Holy Spirit". This was a real link with other parts of the Archdiocese of Parishes of Russian Tradition in Western Europe. The theme of the conference (Communion and Community) was emphasised by Archbishop Gabriel, who commented in his talk: "This story is like an icon of our communities. Everywhere in Europe they are small, but they are real communities. Everyone has to do something, nobody can be there just as a consumer; everyone has to take part. That is how it should always be to be Orthodox, to be a community".

There were also discussion groups, on such subjects as "Conflict and Resolution", and "Living our faith in a secular world", while our own Father Alexander led a discussion group on "The Cosmic Eucharist: Human Responsibility for the Natural World". This latter theme chimes very well with the concern for the natural world held by the Ecumenical Patriarch. There were also practical workshops on "Liturgical singing and structure of services", and "The making and meaning of prosphora". The prosphora made in the latter workshop were used at the Liturgy on the Sunday morning: a very practical outcome indeed! The conference was also honoured by a visit from Archbishop Gregorios of Thyateira, who gave a talk in which he pointed out that we were continuing the work of all Christians who have gone before us, including the saints and martyrs, and so our community in the Church crosses the boundaries of both space and time.

According to the excellent summary of the talks by Candy Charters at the Vicarite website, another aspect of Christian community was the relationship between bishop, priests and laypeople. Wendy Robinson, in her talk on "Trust in God and working with each other", described how the Russian migrant tradition established "a committed, seeking, studying, serving laity", which did not seek "an over-clericalised Church but one in which all were responsible for the life of the Church". She contrasted this with the "post-Constantinian reaction", in which the laypeople relinquished their dignity as a universal priesthood. This "great betrayal of the laity" led to a negative definition of the laity as passive. All this was based on the writings of Paul





Evdokimov, and was reiterated by Father Sergei Ovsiannikov in his talk on "Confession and Communion", where he described the laity as becoming mere consumers.

The final talk, by Irina von Schlippe, was on "The Liturgy after the Liturgy". It focused on what she termed "applied religion", namely the many ways in which we can make present in the world, throughout the week, the Liturgy that we celebrate on Sunday. She described some simple steps that we can take, such as making greater use of traditional customs associated with church feasts. Her suggestions included:

- Help the clergy and those engaged in the permanent work of the Vicariate.
- Learn to delegate.
- Don't just donate to charities, leaving everything to specialists:  
do something yourself!

The conference included a bookstall containing several Vicariate publications, such as the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom, hot off the press. Since then, the Vicariate has published a booklet of "The Hours and Typika" for use by individuals and communities. It is clear that publishing is proceeding with great energy.

On the Sunday evening, the children treated us to an entertainment they had been preparing in the children's programme: the life and martyrdom of Saint Alban. The boy playing Saint Alban squeezed the last drop of drama out of his magnificent death scene! Later on the Sunday evening was a social gathering, where several people contributed musical or other offerings.

The conference organisers had, very wisely, allowed several gaps of free time in a very full programme. This made it possible to take a walk in the magnificent grounds, or to get to know other conference attendees in informal conversations. This strengthening of relationships is one of the main aims of a conference of this kind, especially where there are normally so few opportunities for interaction between congregations, and it fitted in very well with the conference theme of "Communion and Community". In all, it was a very enjoyable experience, and I am already looking forward to next year's conference.

Details of the talks can be found at the Vicariate website:

[www.exarchate-uk.org/Archive/Conference%202008/Account\\_Conf08.html](http://www.exarchate-uk.org/Archive/Conference%202008/Account_Conf08.html)

*(Quotes from the talks are taken from this web page)*



## Community News & Notices

It is with great regret that we bid farewell to **Father Timothy Curtis** of our diocese and his family. Father Timothy's chief source of income ended and he accepted the offer of a lectureship at Northampton University, and has already moved house. The help he has been giving the communities in Aberdeen and Inverness is at a standstill, and we wait to see if any possibility of resuming it will emerge.

Meanwhile **Father John Musther** of our diocese in Keswick has recently been ordained as priest to help the growth of the Orthodox communities in Cumbria. Those who remember our journeys down there in the past to put on liturgies for the local people will recall how fertile the soil seems to be for the Orthodox faith.

Here at home, the community meeting discussed the best way of sustaining active and constructive contributions from all members as equally as possible, and this theme of conciliarity or *sobornost* is one which will continue to be worked out in the detail of our practice. The meeting also agreed to commission a crucifix suitable for Passion Week from Patsy Fostiropoulos, who previously painted the main icons of Christ and the Mother of God. In June, suggestions were made for some two-day gatherings with a variety of things which we could do together, the details of which are still to be worked out, to draw in further some of the people who live at a distance.

### Holy Baptism

**Sophia**, infant daughter of Natalia Kovale and Bartosz Bonkowski, was baptised on 22nd March. She was brought to her first communion by her godmother Svetlana Haljavina and her godfather Vitalis Artamonovs on Sunday 23rd March.

*Keep her ever a warrior invincible in every attack of those who assail her and us;  
and make us all victors even to the end through thy crown incorruptible.*

### Eternal Memory

**Evangelia (Eve) Pease**, died at home on 21<sup>st</sup> January. Her funeral was at St Luke's in Glasgow on the 1<sup>st</sup> February, and she was buried in our Orthodox section of Dunblane cemetery, with four priests and a crowd of mourners attending.

**George Blair**, who designed our iconostasis, the grille over the north window, our wrought-iron gate and carved the two panels on either side of the Royal Doors, died in Leominster on the 31<sup>st</sup> March. His funeral on 11<sup>th</sup> April was organised by Andrew Morris of our diocese, and attended by family and friends.

**Sister Theodora** (Leybourne) died in Edinburgh on September 18<sup>th</sup>. Her funeral on September 29<sup>th</sup> was attended by her family from Northumberland. She was buried in our Orthodox section of Dunblane cemetery.

*Give rest eternal in blessed falling asleep, O Lord,  
to the souls of thy servants departed this life, and keep them in eternal remembrance.*