

THE TRADITION OF ELDERS (*STARTSY*) IN 19TH-CENTURY RUSSIA

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The study of elders in the Russian Church entails numerous considerations. In varying degrees these reflect historical permutations of Russian piety and spirituality as well as the relationship of the elders to monasticism, society, and administrative structures, both ecclesiastical and secular. Not least is their influence on their many spiritual sons and daughters, both lay and monastic. It is clear that despite differences of style, character, education, and impact, there are similarities among many elders in the latter part of the 18th century and throughout the 19th. This is the period of their true efflorescence through the 1830s, when Fr. Leonid's eldership at Optina Pustyn' takes on a large popular dimension, signaling the onset of the most prominent phase.¹

¹ My discussion will not treat the history of elders prior to this time frame. Though the concept of an elder, especially as spiritual father (*pater spiritualis*) exists by the fourth century, and substantive stress on asceticism and theosis was evidenced in the monastic setting, the practice of eldership found limited expression on Russian soil. It is not seen in the Kievan period, is sometimes attributed to St. Sergii of Radonezh, and then, with the major exception of Nil Sorskii, who is universally seen as a great elder, goes into quiescence until the 19th century and a generation

It is a striking phenomenon. Monks, anchorites, hegumens, hieromonks, and bearers of the schema, from whose ranks most elders derived, often became associated with the public projection and force of piety. These were, after all, men who spearheaded the contemplative revival,² men for whom, in the words of Feofan the Recluse (1802–1894), the “interior hermitage” was paramount, for whom the silence of the heart was a living source: “Simplicity and calm, purity of heart and restraint, inner balance and, on the other hand, constant spiritual tension, sober and courageous virility, and finally gentleness and profound humility.”³ These efforts, these solaces, the inner struggles, the absence of pretension, the life of constant prayer are common particularizations of elders.

Faith was a gift, as the great Optina elder Makarii (1788–1860) said, but it did not abolish freedom or responsibility.⁴ And freedom and responsibility were invariably applied by the elders in a spiritual framework to reinforce their own religious path. It heightened personal spiritual vigilance or watchfulness. “Watchfulness is a spiritual method that, if sedulously practiced over a long period, completely frees us with God’s help from impassioned words and evil actions. It leads, in so far as this is possible, to a sure knowledge of the inapprehensible God, and helps us to penetrate the divine and hidden mysteries.”⁵

Makarii, like most elders, consistently alluded to and cited the early Church Fathers (or Holy Fathers as the elders preferred to call them). The principle lessons of spiritual life were to be learned from them for the ultimate wisdom was to be found in their writings. This was made possible by the appearance of *The Philokalia (Dobrotoliubie)* in Russia in 1793, abetted greatly by Metropolitan Gavriil of St. Petersburg. Other editions appeared throughout the 19th century.

or so preceding it. This is not to imply that aspects of eldership such as asceticism, mysticism, hesychastic prayer, and spiritual direction were not in evidence.

² The term “contemplative revival” appears frequently; e.g., Nichols, “Orthodox Elders,” passim; and Meehan, “Popular Piety,” 85.

³ Arseniev, *Russian Piety*, 118.

⁴ Macarius, *Russian Letters*, 57.

⁵ *Philokalia: Complete Text*, vol. 1. St. Hesychios the Priest, “On Watchfulness and Holiness,” 162.

The enormously seminal work of the elder Paisii Velichkovskii (1722–1794) in translating this collection from the Greek into Slavonic provided the impetus for not only the study and absorption of the texts of the Church Fathers, but also affected the recrudescence of monasticism in a substantial number of cases. In his work on Paisii, Chetverikov notes additionally that the excellence of Paisii's translations was not a negligible factor. Nor was the training in translating, asceticism, and a strict monasticism that Paisii gave to numerous monks.⁶ Chetverikov ends his work on Paisii with a long chapter on Elder Paisii's pupils (whether on Mt. Athos, in Moldavia, or in Russia) and their effect on "Orthodox *starchestvo*."

It is an impressive list and no attempt to cite from it is made here for the author's concluding phrase in his discussion provides the clue: "To this brief list (which is far from complete) of Starets Paisii's pupils, we consider it necessary to add a list of lavras, monasteries, convents, hermitages, sketes, and communities that received from him or his pupils their statutes, startsy, or superior, or that had his pupils and followers among their brethren. Again, we caution that this list is far from complete."⁷ Chetverikov then proceeds to list 107 monastic establishments.

Paisii's institutive and unprecedented influence is increasingly being documented and now constitutes axiomatic significance. The large body of writings by the Church Fathers proved spiritually and intellectually invigorating. John Meyendorff wryly noted that there were actually more works of the Fathers translated into Russian than into any other European language.⁸ Many elders possessed a large number of books. Elder Antonii Optinskii, who served as hegumen of St. Nicholas Monastery in Maloiaroslavets from 1839 to 1853, donated his collection of 2,000 volumes to the Optina library while in retirement.⁹ Makarii, who also had a large collection of books, was famous for the directorship of the patristic books publishing project at Optina Pustyn'. Fr. Leonid Kavelin, himself Makarii's disciple and one of the principal assistants in this

⁶ Chetverikov, *Starets Paisii Velichkovskii*, 233. The discipline was even applied to the question of cleanliness, for which Paisii's monasteries in Moldavia were known. Such was the case later for Optina Pustyn' and other well-ordered monasteries.

⁷ Chetverikov, *Starets Paisii Velichkovskii*, 316.

⁸ Meyendorff, *Orthodox Church*, 107.

⁹ Sederholm, *Elder Anthony*, 99.

project, understandably devoted attention to this subject in his well-known biography of Makarii.

This publication of patristics is also intriguing for the links of the elders to the external world that it exhibits. Natalia Petrovna Kireevskaia had been Makarii's spiritual daughter since 1838. In 1845, her husband, Ivan Kireevskii, the editor of *Moskvitianin*, published an article by Makarii on Elder Paisii Velichkovskii. While visiting the couple on their estate in 1846, Makarii was enjoined to commence the publication of patristic texts. The three obtained the blessing of Metropolitan Filaret of Moscow and in 1847 the first volume in the series was published. It was a life of Paisii. By the time Makarii died, a total of 16 volumes had appeared, including treatises by Nil Sorskii, Isaac the Syrian, Symeon the New Theologian and Abba Dorotheus. Makarii's principal assistants in the editing and publication process were, in addition to Kavelin, other brethren of the Skete of St. John the Forerunner at Optina: hieromonk Amvrosii (1812–1891), the future great elder; monk Iuvenalii, later to be archbishop of Vilnius; and Palladii, who would become a hierodeacon at Optina. Interestingly, even the publication of the Holy Fathers had to be cleared by the censors.¹⁰ Thus we have the factor of the two greatest elders, Makarii and Amvrosii, being involved in the editing, publication, and dissemination of patristic texts.

The texts published under Makarii's direction were translated either into Slavonic or Russian (though he favored Russian, it was not always allowed). By the 1860s, however, most texts issued were being translated into Russian. The question of language aside, we still are presented with a picture of the overwhelming influence of major treatises from the Orthodox tradition. So, the Fathers and their teaching are unquestionably paramount and it is their dictums that serve as guideposts to the spiritual children and disciples of the elders.

The writings of St. Tikhon Zadonskii (1724–1783) were well received and disseminated; they also stressed reliance on patristics. Elders reading Tikhon would see many recognizable modes in his writing; many mystical and ascetical overtones were present. In a meditation titled "The Waters That Flow By," his thought turns to time: "We see the water of a river flowing uninterruptedly and

¹⁰ Kavelin, *Elder Macarius*. Chapters four and five are devoted to the publication of the patristic texts.

passing away, and all that floats on its surface, rubbish or beams of trees, all pass by. Christian! So does our life....” Completing the meditation, he notes several points that all Christians should embrace: 1) have a detached attitude toward life; 2) take no pride in passing honors; 3) do not fall into despondency; 4) suffer reproach and calumny gladly; and 5) bear life’s troubles, for such acceptance brings peace and joy.”¹¹

The life and writings of St. Tikhon strongly suggest that he was an elder in thought and practice. But the term “elder” is not necessarily precise. Smolich notes its frequently polysemous nature and use in Russia.¹² My usage prefers to define an elder as a monastic (be it one who is cenobitic, or a skete dweller, or an anchorite) with strong elements of asceticism, mysticism, engagement in spiritual direction (guiding disciples and spiritual children), continuous prayer, humility, and even the periodic specific designation as elder granted or imposed by his monastic house.

Elders came from many backgrounds. The various *sosloviia* were well represented. Merchants, the military, the nobility, peasantry, townsmen, workers, and the clerical calling all made contributions. In embarking on the rigorous ascetic monastic path, which sometimes led them to eldership, the principal motivation was the attainment of rigorous spiritual goals. There were many impediments along the way, including those imposed by vicissitudes of character or circumstance. There were also obstacles that came via prescription by higher authorities. Elder Antonii had to leave his beloved Optina skete in 1839 to take on the abbacy of St. Nicholas Monastery in Maloiaroslavets. The nobly born Ignatii (Brianchaninov, 1807–1867), who had been the disciple of Elder Leonid and elders Feodor Svirskii and Kleopa Valaamskii (the latter two were direct disciples of Paisii) went through a bitter period of dejection in having been forced to become the hegumen of the St. Sergii Hermitage near St. Petersburg in 1834. His appointment resulted from the personal order of Nicholas I and Ignatii was to remain at this post until 1857. His spiritual discomfort is seen as he routinely

¹¹ Gorodetzky, *Saint Tikhon*; the translation is provided on pp. 72–74; the five points on p. 74.

¹² Smolich, *Russkoe Monashestvo*, 328. Smolich provides specific usages of the word “starets” (elder). Thus, a starets was periodically simply an older monk (who was not a hieromonk). There were “sobornye startsy” (council elders) who helped the superior run the monastery. And the word was applied even to the superiors themselves, among other examples.

petitioned to be freed from his appointment so he could devote his time to repentance and preparation for death.¹³

Repentance and death appear quite often in the writings of this remarkable ascetic; in fact, Ignatii was to write much on asceticism. His *Ascetical Experiences* (in six volumes) often address the issue of death. “My Lamentation,” from the first volume, is a good example for many of his prevailing themes that appear here: the condition of fallen man, the transitory nature of the life of this world, love for the teachings of the Holy Fathers, repentance, remembrance of death, and the desire for solitude and stillness.¹⁴ A highly educated person, Ignatii was passionate in the need to be inspired by the writings of the Holy Fathers. This is, as he states, to “study faith in the sources.” He asks himself: “What was it that above all struck me in the works of the Fathers of the Orthodox Church? It was their harmony, their wondrous, magnificent harmony. Eighteen centuries, through their lips, testified to a single unanimous teaching, a Divine teaching!”¹⁵ Ignatii proceeds to discuss how this teaching is never false, that this is the tradition that nourishes the Church.

The spiritual aims and trajectories of the elders were multi-form but subsumed in the broad attributes of 19th-century monastic revival. Smolich unequivocally links this to elders (as the force coming from within monasticism itself) and the combination of asceticism and mysticism.¹⁶ Elder Agapit (1838–1905) of Valaam, among many others, also believed that the essence of eldership was closely linked to monasticism. Spiritual work on one’s passions was at the root of monastic aspiration after all.¹⁷ Agapit’s own

¹³ Monk Nicolas, “Works of St. Ignatius Brianchaninov,” 5 (1 Cor. 15:26 states: “The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.”—N.L.).

¹⁴ Monk Nicolas, “Works of St. Ignatius Brianchaninov,” 7. “The Lamentation” appears on pp. 8–31 in the same issue of *Orthodox Word*. It is an interesting piece which opens with the words of St. Andrew of Crete: “What word shall I set at the beginning of my lament? What first thought from among my sorrowful thoughts shall I express in words?” There is a powerful mystical strand in Ignatii that is also expressed here: “My mind reverently gazes upon the judgments of God; it does not comprehend them. It does not dare to test them, but it sees and is amazed by them, and glorifies the incomprehensible, unfathomable God” (ibid. 11).

¹⁵ Brianchaninov, “My Lamentation,” 18.

¹⁶ Smolich, *Russkoe Monashestvo*, 322–324.

¹⁷ “Agapit,” 275. Also, *Valaamskii Paterik*, “Skhimnik Agapit Slepets,” 341–366.

eldership bore the Valaam tradition since Hegumen Nazarii's re-introduction of eldership in the 1780s and 1790s. He liked the strict ascetic rule there (derived from Sarov) as well as the austere Valaam chant. Blind for the last 23 years of his life, he accepted infirmity spiritually. "From my twenties afflictions came upon me—some for my sins, some to test me, and some for my preservation."¹⁸ He was a fervent practitioner of the Jesus Prayer, which was strongly maintained there, and which had been taught to him by his own elder, Fr. Antipa (d. 1882). Agapit also consulted with Feofan the Recluse regarding the Jesus Prayer.

Agapit felt great anxiety when formal eldership was assigned to him. His intense humility and feelings of unworthiness made him fearful of taking on this obedience. He also wrote to Feofan concerning this and the scholar-mystic-ascetic replied: "Eldership is difficult by its very nature, but help from on high is always inherent to it, and it is essential to call upon this help. No word will remain fruitless, but the fruit will not appear right away. If you will, with love, say all that is fitting, you will have done your work." And a pointed reminder was added: "You say that you're not capable. It is not for you to judge this...."¹⁹

Valaam Monastery's recrudescence is ascribed to Hegumen Nazarii (1735–1809). He had entered the Sarov Monastery at age 17, was ordained hieromonk in 1776, and spent some years in seclusion. An ascetic from the very beginning, he was confirmed hegumen of Valaam in 1782. Valaam, despite its magnificent location on Lake Ladoga, was in horrendous disrepair. Nazarii, with the blessing and sometime participation of Metropolitan Gavriil of St. Petersburg, totally rebuilt the monastery, outwardly and inwardly. Gavriil insisted that the Sarov typikon be instituted minutely along with a strict order of church services. Nazarii introduced the three basic monastic forms at Valaam as well—the cenobitic, the anchoritic, and the skete dwelling.²⁰ In addition to monastic buildings, a number of sketes were also built. In his 20-year governance of Valaam, Nazarii quickly raised its prestige to a high level, even beyond Russia. It is reputed that even some Athonite monks came to Valaam.

¹⁸ "Agapit," 270.

¹⁹ "Agapit," 282.

²⁰ *Little Russian Philokalia*, vol. 2, *Abbot Nazarius*, 20–22. The text uses Nazarius whereas I use the direct transliteration from the Russian, Nazarii.

The Sarov-Valaam connection is an interesting one. When Nazarii retired from his position as hegumen, he decided, in 1804, to return to Sarov, his original monastic home. He took with him Ilarion, who had been his secretary at Valaam. It is often stated that St. Serafim Sarovskii received *The Philokalia* from Nazarii.²¹ After Nazarii's death in 1809, Elder Ilarion became the leading father confessor at Sarov. St. Serafim himself sent all people to Ilarion for confession. Ilarion was also involved with textual matters. He compiled a book of Elder Nazarii's counsels as well as some of his own spiritual instructions.²² Presumably he headed the Sarov "scriptorium." Here monks worked on and copied patristic as well as new religious books. Ilarion died in 1841 leaving spiritual letters that bear the influence of Serafim.²³ The excellence and strictness of the Sarov Hermitage is extolled;²⁴ and a further example of how contact and interchange took place among the leading monasteries follows: "One of the Sarov abbots was blood brother to the Optina founders, Moses and Anthony, who themselves were close to Sarov; the former began his monastic life there and was guided in the practice of the Jesus Prayer by St. Seraphim himself. The latter was in close contact at Optina with Barlaam, formerly abbot of Valaam, a disciple of Blessed Nazarius."²⁵

It is common in studies of Russian popular piety to advance the notion that the gulf between people and priest or monk, especially those with even a touch of recognized spirituality, was very small or non-existent.²⁶ These persons were living, approachable embodiments of a multiplicity of spiritual ideals and emotions. The elders fit this pattern far better than most. They were guides. They taught many things in clear fashion. "The prayers of the poor

²¹ *Little Russian Philokalia*, vol. 2, *Abbot Nazarius*, 24.

²² An engraving of Nazarii shows him holding a scroll which reads: "Humility is firmness; and patience a rampart; while love is protection; and where there is love there is God; and where there is God—there is all goodness." This sounds like some of his counsels in tone. *Little Russian Philokalia*, vol. 2, *Abbot Nazarius*, 18. The "Counsels" of Elder Nazarii appear on pp. 41–81.

²³ As more work is done on Russian monasticism and eldership in the 19th century, one would hope that truly active and significant figures like Ilarion get scholarly attention. For the present, the great names of elders like Makarii, Amvrosii, and Serafim continue to receive overriding attention. Elder Iosif Optinskii (d. 1911) is another exceptional figure.

²⁴ E.g., in Smolich, *Russkoe Monashestvo*, 340–345.

²⁵ *Little Russian Philokalia*, vol. 2, *Abbot Nazarius*, 99. The names in this citation also should read: Moisei, Antonii, Serafim, Varlaam, and Nazarii.

²⁶ Pascal, *Religion of the Russian People*, 49.

are powerful,” says Feofan. “You, too, go and multiply your alms; wipe the tears of the unfortunate, shelter if you can the destitute.”²⁷ Feofan, in his great work, *The Path to Salvation*, tells people that they can do much on their own; they have the freedom to choose good. And if one is weak in struggling against the passions, he counsels “do not fail to lay your sorrows on the living God, Who says: *I am with you in an evil day—do not be afraid*” (italics mine).²⁸

The multitudes of thousands who streamed to the doors of the elders’ cells also spoke to the unusual circumstance that Russia’s common people, and gradually even some of the intelligentsia, believed that the elders, too, were with them in an evil day—and they were not afraid. The behavior, attitude, and spiritual achievement of the elders warranted this belief in the popular mind. Elder Leonid, who, as we have seen, extended eldership into the external world so to speak, is an excellent example. He spoke simply, sometimes brusquely, always to the point, always understandably. As with other significant elders, clairvoyance was ascribed to him. The unending daily stream of people to his cell did not always sit well with eparchial or synodal authorities. What was a schema monk (a *skhimnik*) doing with all those people? (On the other hand, the Synod even had a hard time agreeing to the canonization of St. Serafim of Sarov in 1903). Leonid was moved several times in the last six years of his life because of “troubles” resulting from extensive contact with the people (in less sanguine analysis we confront the time honored practice here of the “donos” or denunciation). Drawing crowds of people was not limited to the luminaries. Even simple elders who sought ultimate seclusion, like Naum Solovetskii, were beset with visitors.²⁹

²⁷ Theophan, *Path to Salvation*, 145.

²⁸ Theophan, *Path to Salvation*, 282.

²⁹ *Solovetskii Paterik*, 161. Not only secular authorities could be petty and callous. Naum was a very simple man of great asceticism, labor, and dedication to Solovki. But he was twice sent from Solovki because of paperwork and administrative callousness. By 1834, he had resided there for 40 years. During the census of that year, according to the “Life,” Naum’s discharge papers from his village were not found, though they were in the monastery’s possession somewhere. Not wishing to engage in correspondence on his account with government personnel, the Solovki authorities shipped Naum out on Holy Thursday. Fortunately for him, citizens and merchants of the town of Kem’, where he had been shipped, obtained a formal release document for him and in two weeks’ time they brought him back to his beloved monastery.

The well-known elders were also masters at giving practical advice. There are hundreds of examples of this in pronouncements, letters, and descriptive stories. Part of this ability might be ascribed to their flexibility. They spoke to the needs and sorrows of each individual. Their disciples and cell attendants noticed this periodically and might be generally told that the capacity of the person addressed to understand and partake had to be taken into account. Furthermore, many people came back regularly, especially the spiritual sons and daughters, and thus could be enlightened more systematically. The lessons were there in the Holy Fathers. St. Peter of Damascus, in *The Philokalia*, cites St. Gregory the Theologian who “observes what is said should be commensurate to the capacity of those to whom it is addressed.”³⁰

Perhaps as important as anything else was the elders’ ability to reach into the heart and mind of the individual facing him. Disciples continually marveled that someone like Amvrosii or Makarii, in poor health, after seeing people non-stop for hours, would still exhibit a remarkable gentleness, a visage and language that consoled and gave hope, a capacity to instruct and care, and to be unwaveringly attentive. The people carried to him “only their sorrows and took away only gladness.”³¹ It is not remiss to suggest that seeing the world in a positive light, as many elders like Amvrosii always did, was imperative in maintaining such constancy of spiritual consolation. Elder Leonid was routinely described as constantly joyful.³² The early Fathers had considered joy, and Peter of Damascus makes “Joy” one of his *Twenty Four Discourses*: “Through the things that bring him pleasure, he is made humble and grateful; through trials and temptations his hope in the world to come is consolidated; in both he rejoices, and naturally and spontaneously he loves God and all men as his benefactors. He finds nothing in the whole of creation that can harm him” (emphasis mine—N.L.).³³

Even in the middle of an exhortation on the need for strict asceticism, there is room for gladness. “Open your spiritual eye to the contemplation of God and recognize the delightfulness of the Lord from the beauty of creation” writes Nikitas Stethatos; and, “To

³⁰ *Philokalia: Complete Text*, 3: 265.

³¹ Zyrianov, *Russkie monastyri*, 119. The quote is used in reference to Hieromonk Amfilokhii of the Rostov Spaso-Iakovlev Monastery. Though the author does not indicate the source of the quote, it is quite apt for elders in general.

³² Sederholm, *Elder Leonid*, 103.

³³ *Philokalia: Complete Text*, 3: 261.

become a monk does not mean to abandon men and the world, to renounce the will of the flesh, to be destitute of the passions.”³⁴ The elders, in their ministrations to their people, proved that they were not abandoning this world. Broadly viewed, “faith has to do with attitudes of trust, assurance, confidence, reliability, and loyalty to someone or something that we think is worthy and deserving of those sentiments” and “the power of faith blossoms in relationship, mutuality, reciprocity.”³⁵ These attributes stood the elders in great stead. “In the presence of Elder Iosif,” writes his biographer, “there was no room for boundless sorrow nor perpetual despair.”³⁶

The Elders and Humility

Humility is indisputably a tenet of Christianity. It was a precept, an article of faith that was suavisly stressed in monasticism. St. Anthony pointed the way early when he wrote: “Come to love humility for it will cover all of your sins.”³⁷ It was clear to the elders that humility had to be central to the spiritual struggle for the ineffable peace and the light sought was impossible without it. “When we are incapable of scaling the peaks of virtue,” wrote Elder Makarii, “all we have to do is to descend into the ravine of humility. Our humility is our surest intercessor before the face of the Lord. It is by dint of humility and penance that the last shall be first. Therefore take courage.”³⁸ Feofan the Recluse, replying to a letter from Elder Agapit of Valaam, wrote: “Remembrance of God, remembrance of death, a contrite and pained spirit falling before God; O Lord save me! O Lord, come to mine aid! This is the straight path.”³⁹

Elder Leonid cited St. Isaac the Syrian (one of the Fathers most quoted by Russian elders): “The assembly of the humble is beloved of God...”⁴⁰ And St. Isaac, in his *Directions on Spiritual Training*, had also said: “Fear of God is the beginning of virtue; it is

³⁴ *Philokalia: Complete Text*, vol. 4, par. 74 and 76. The paragraphs here are part of Nikitas Stethatos, “On the Practice of the Virtues: One Hundred Texts,” 98–99.

³⁵ Stylianopoulos, “Reflections on Faith,” 3.

³⁶ Zyrianov, *Russkie monastiri*, 208 (who cites that biographer).

³⁷ *Dobrotoliubie*, 1: 110.

³⁸ Macarius, *Russian Letters*, 36. This was in a letter to one of his spiritual children but the idea was a constant element in his thought.

³⁹ “Agapit,” 283.

⁴⁰ Sederholm, *Elder Leonid*, 53.

the offspring of faith and is sown in the heart...”⁴¹ Further, St. Isaac was clear in stating that the divine mysteries would be revealed to the humble. St. Anthony had also addressed this centuries earlier. “The Lord did not say to us that our reward would be reaped here; rather here we will have temptation and pressure, needs and sorrows, and receive the rewards in the hereafter. This life is a road of temptation and struggle.”⁴²

Elder Amvrosii understood humility to be the basis for ascetic life and he asked: “How can you obtain humility in an undisturbed life?”⁴³ The many temptations in life were disturbances and only in the depths of humility could one hide from them, noted Elder Makarii.⁴⁴ One of the great temptations was the exercise of one’s will that could not be done indiscriminately (and in certain contexts, not at all): “Only, as has been said, in all things we ought to renounce our own will so as to attain the goal God has set for us and pursue whatever He wishes. Unless we do this we can never be saved.”⁴⁵ Abandonment of the will also meant sacrificing the right to one’s own judgment (we will see an extension of this when discussing spiritual direction below).

An impediment to humility was the normal human tendency to self-love (*samougodie*), a state that Symeon the New Theologian had identified with turbulence.⁴⁶ Maximus the Confessor referred to self-love as “that mother of vices,” which he linked to gluttony, avarice, and self-esteem.⁴⁷ Elder Antonii Optinskii was ceaselessly aware of the gravity of humility. While still a young man he had already written in his diary: “I saw that only when I think poorly of myself am I found to have a true opinion of myself, but when I think well of myself, then I fall into delusion.”⁴⁸ That delusion stemming from self-love was a warning to elders when they saw it in their disciples and Elder Leonid, for example, was not particularly delicate with them on this issue, as his biographer tells us. Humility

⁴¹ *Early Fathers from the Philokalia*, 183.

⁴² *Dobrotoliubie*, 1: 578.

⁴³ Chetverikov, *Elder Ambrose*, 220.

⁴⁴ Kavelin, *Elder Macarius*, 214.

⁴⁵ *Philokalia: Complete Text*, 3: 77.

⁴⁶ Symeon, *Discourses*, 22 (the reference is made by George Maloney, S.J. in the “Introduction”).

⁴⁷ *Philokalia: Complete Text*, 2: 75. This appears in “Four Hundred Texts on Love” in the section titled “Second Century.”

⁴⁸ Sederholm, *Elder Anthony*, 207.

could not be faked as the elders knew. Even good deeds without humility were minimized. Elder Makarii states: "Humility, even without works, brings forgiveness. But works without humility are quite useless."⁴⁹ Elder Antonii, who, incidentally, always read holy texts standing up, wrote: "Without humbling oneself in spirit one cannot be saved. Humility cannot be learned from mere words; it is necessary to practice it, and someone has to hammer us flat."⁵⁰

Many other elements entered into the practice of humility. A monk should be a perfect novice even with full maturity. Spiritual attainment should not be flaunted. Elder Leonid is known to have never expected anything from anybody—a mark of humility. In conducting his voluminous correspondence, he did not even sign his letters singly; as a disciple of the Paisian elder Feodor, Leonid refused to countenance the possibility that anything could be truly done by oneself. His deflection from the self also projected into prayer, for was it not St. Basil the Great who said: "He who prays for others, prays for himself."⁵¹

Two specific terms widely used in ascription to elders need mention. *Smirenomodrie*, linking strong connotations of humility and wisdom is a rich concept that was distinctively applied to elders. *Umilenie* appears very often as well and is also best seen in the context of humility. Arseniev provides a highly applicable description: "At the heights of religious experience in the lives of saints, spiritual tenderness (*umilenie*) can attain a great degree of purity and humble, sober illumination; it can become a permanent state, a sort of deep background or constitutive element nourishing the whole spiritual life."⁵²

The Elders and Asceticism

The pursuit of the ascetic ideal was quite universal among the elders. The varying elements of asceticism such as self-abnegation, fasting, withdrawal from the world, seclusion, among others, found great resonance in their lives. They were familiar with the early history of monasticism where asceticism originated and certainly

⁴⁹ Macarius, *Russian Letters*, 102.

⁵⁰ Sederholm, *Elder Anthony*, 46. A number of elders who, like Antonii, only stood while reading holy texts, coupled with long hours at services, often wound up, as he did, with suppurating legs.

⁵¹ Sederholm, *Elder Anthony*, 48.

⁵² Arseniev, *Russian Piety*, 132.

were cognizant of the great stress placed on it by Paisii Velichkovskii and his disciples. It is safe to say that asceticism was also at the very basis of the spiritual guidance offered by the elders.

There is much commentary on and exhortation to asceticism in *The Philokalia* and personal ascesis is certainly a desired norm and standard.⁵³ Mark the Ascetic clearly linked asceticism to adversity, a natural sequence. “Do not claim to have acquired virtue unless you have suffered affliction, for without affliction virtue has not been tested.”⁵⁴ Elder Amvrosii felt that testing was beneficial and unavoidable; affliction, temptation, pain, discipline—all built the novice spiritually. Elder Ignatii (Brianchaninov) stresses this as well: “For attributes of the Gospel to be made stronger and more mature in a monk, afflictions and trials are absolutely necessary. His meekness must be tried; his faith and patience must be tested.”⁵⁵ Without such trials and afflictions, a monk would be poorly armed for the continuum of internal spiritual battles.

With their great sense of measure, the Optina elders generally decried excessive asceticism as did, perhaps surprisingly, St. Seraphim of Sarov who cautioned not to undertake ascetic labors beyond one’s capacity.⁵⁶ So did Paisii who taught: “If you cannot labor as the Holy Fathers did, then at least begin according to your strength.”⁵⁷ Individuals could take pride in their ascetic feats. Or, asceticism might be taken up from despondency and depression. Or people just wished to run away from themselves.⁵⁸ The Optina elders frequently warned against despondency and despair, which can occur, as Mark the Ascetic had noted long before, even from wounded self-love. Elder Amvrosii “persuaded those who sought his advice that they must never, under any circumstances of life or unpleasantness, be depressed, but they must always hope in God’s Providence.”⁵⁹ Elder Antonii, who became dejected when forced to accept an abbacy, received a

⁵³ *Philokalia: Complete Text*, 3: 71. The reference here is interesting because Peter of Damascus, who is cited, says little about other serious matters like the liturgy, communal aspects of monasticism, or visitors. He consistently stresses personal asceticism and prayer.

⁵⁴ *Philokalia: Complete Text*, 1: 114.

⁵⁵ Brianchaninov, “My Lamentation,” 24.

⁵⁶ *Little Russian Philokalia*, vol. 1, *St. Seraphim*, 51.

⁵⁷ *Little Russian Philokalia*, vol. 4, *St. Paisius Velichkovsky*, 65.

⁵⁸ This interesting suggestion comes from a scholar of mysticism. Fanning, *Mystics of the Christian Tradition*, 66.

⁵⁹ Chetverikov, *Elder Ambrose*, 157.

letter from his brother, the Elder Moisei, which read: “spiritual dejection is unavoidable; only patience and prayer can overcome it.”⁶⁰ Antonii liked to quote St. Isaac the Syrian, who taught Christians to treat despondent people as infirm, to comfort them, and not engage in accusation. Interestingly, the elders generally also favored the view that asceticism was open to all, not just monks, a point that Feofan routinely supported and advanced.

A word is in order regarding hesychasm (stillness, repose) and the Jesus Prayer, which, in its longest form, reads: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” The practice and theories of this prayer have a long history. We know many of the aims, the spiritual benefits, the methods of teaching it, the uses and misuses, the efficacy ascribed to it, and the danger. It is important to realize, however, as our monk of the Eastern Church points out, that the two elements of hesychasm and asceticism are not coeval.⁶¹ There are great links for as he points out, the history of the Jesus Prayer in the 19th century is interwoven with the *Dobrotoliubie* (the *Philokalia*, itself clearly linked to asceticism).

The invocation of the Jesus Prayer is a monologic exercise. The underlying conviction is that the repetition of Christ’s name in a continuous or semi-continuous manner helps to lead one’s thoughts to the divine. This spiritual labor helps to cleanse and elevate one’s internal state, and once adept at the prayer, through proper training by an elder or other religious figure, a mystical interconnection can be attained. The Jesus Prayer is recited or mentally articulated by its practitioners throughout the day, frequently even in the midst of other activity and engagement. Thus, the mind and the heart can undergo a transmutation to the subliminal and the Jesus Prayer stays with the person who has perfected it permanently. One did not have to attend the liturgy or vespers to partake of it. “The Jesus Prayer is a book to be opened....”⁶² states the Monk (Lev Gillet), but the pages cannot be turned in an article that is not devoted strictly to the prayer. A large proportion of elders practiced the Jesus Prayer in some form and frequency, though specific dissection of who and how could prove anarchic.

⁶⁰ Sederholm, *Elder Anthony*, 79.

⁶¹ A Monk of the Eastern Church, *Jesus Prayer*, 74–76.

⁶² A Monk of the Eastern Church, *Jesus Prayer*, 78.

The Elders and Spiritual Direction

In one of his letters, Elder Makarii wrote that prayers without moral improvement were useless.⁶³ That moral improvement, or at least the path toward it, could be attained with the help of spiritual direction, a spiritual father. Some elders, like Nektarii of Optina, tested the hearts of those who came to them “and did not so much console them as point out a path of struggle.”⁶⁴ Prayer may, perhaps, be an obvious area for spiritual direction. But for the monks, and especially the elders’ disciples, there was much more. A disciple had to undertake total obedience to his elder. Obedience made up a very important component of spiritual direction.

It should be noted that obedience was most often seen to be total and unreserved, for otherwise humility could not be achieved. The future elder, Feodor Svirskii, who was to become a disciple of Paisii and was present at his deathbed, entered the Ploshchansk Hermitage in his youth. The hermitage was under the direction of Elder Serapion and there “he entered the arena of monastic obedience in order to gain inward freedom by outward slavery, to earn inner nobility of spirit by external abasement.”⁶⁵

The disciple or novice would have to confess with contrition rather than complexity, something that elders like Nektarii tended to stress.⁶⁶ Thoughts and words, not just deeds, were scrutinized. There is a specific edge to this because many of the famous elders required their disciples to confess their thoughts daily (*otkrovenie pomyslov*). Formal confession, when it occurred, thus took on an added dimension. And the elders were the teachers of asceticism, humility, mystical components (where applicable and if they had that inclination), and daily spiritual comportment.

⁶³ Macarius, *Russian Letters*, 55.

⁶⁴ Kontzevich, *Elder Nektary*, 163.

⁶⁵ Sederholm, *Elder Leonid*, 212. Elder Antonii, who was extremely conscientious regarding obedience, provides an interesting entry in his diary for 1 December 1823. “Out of self-will, I made a prayer rope out of string without the blessing of the Elder and, seeing my mistake, I threw it into the stove as a demonic work. A thought said to me at the time: although you began a good deed by your own will, without the counsel and blessing of the Elder, consider it all a demonic activity.” Sederholm, *Elder Anthony*, 208.

⁶⁶ Kontzevich, *Elder Nektary*, 172.

One of the great founders of monasticism, St. Basil the Great, considered spiritual direction to be the foundation of monastic asceticism as well as the elder-disciple relationship. The latter was seen as beneficial for the elder and the disciple both. If willing and able to undertake the rigorous mental and physical journey, the disciple would, at some point, begin to absorb the extensive spiritual discernment and grace of his elder. Elders themselves made sure they had their own spiritual fathers (elders) for they always predicated their behavior on their own need for spiritual direction as well. Elder Amvrosii, often cited as the greatest of the elders, always had one. At Valaam, every monk was required to have his own elder (not a routine practice).

This tradition of spiritual direction and obedience was keenly and resolutely sustained by a pleiad of Church Fathers. Peter of Damascus continually emphasizes the need for spiritual direction. Symeon the New Theologian implores for it. His disciple and biographer, Nikitas Stethatos, does the same, as does John Climacus. And, of course, so do Barsanuphius and John (sixth century). Jaroslav Pelikan observes: "Unquestioning loyalty to the fathers was a continuing characteristic of Eastern thought."⁶⁷ This is certainly applicable here.

Spiritual direction was extraordinarily broad in its scope. The elders were entrusted with it for their disciples. They engaged in it with the multitudes of people who came to their door. They wrote letters by the score that, as in the case of the six volumes of Makarii's extant letters, provide unparalleled entry into their thought. They taught, cajoled, exhorted, pleaded, and set their own trusted example. And they unceasingly used the early Fathers as guides.

Mark the Ascetic wrote: "Failure to do good that is within your power is hard to forgive. But mercy and prayer reclaim the negligent."⁶⁸ Maximus the Confessor: "Do not befoul your intellect by clinging to thoughts filled with anger and sensual desire. Otherwise you will lose your capacity for pure prayer and fall victim to the demon of listlessness."⁶⁹ Maximus was widely cited by the elders for he touched on many concerns: "He who believes fears; he who fears is humble; he who is humble becomes gentle and renders inactive those impulses of insensitivity and desire which are contrary to nature. A person who is gentle keeps the commandments;

⁶⁷ Pelikan, *Spirit of Eastern Christendom*, 9.

⁶⁸ *Philokalia: Complete Text*, 1: 114.

⁶⁹ *Philokalia: Complete Text*, 2: 57–58.

he who keeps the commandments is purified; he who is purified is illumined; he who is illumined is made a consort of the divine Bridegroom and Logos in the shrine of mysteries.”⁷⁰ This epigrammatic staccato style made it simpler for elders to compress their thoughts and ideas for they could not possibly enter into detailed discussion with the thousands who came to them. St. Isaac the Syrian was quoted even more often because of his famous and paradigmatic treatise, “Directions on Spiritual Training,” a sophisticated and detailed study. The letters and commentaries of the elders utilize and reference such works extensively.

As in our prior themes, and so in questions of spiritual direction, the elders hold to no single method, intellectual and theological disposition, or emotional tone. Their flexibility is profound and generous. Whether the words of edification are simple or complex, they are colored by the personal charisma of each elder.⁷¹ Being outside the mainstream of organized religion anyway, the power of personal style and emphasis frequently could make the difference as to whether the heart and mind of a supplicant was reached. This is difficult, nay impossible, to quantify. But an interesting question should be asked: without the spiritual charisma we know so many elders possessed, how many people would have gathered at their cells? Would eldership itself have undergone its remarkable efflorescence?

Remarks

In the context of an article, a complete summation of the history and impact of elders in Russia is unworkable. But some elements, perhaps we can call them reference points, must be undertaken. “It is not accidental that no institutional structure emerged around the function of elders in the monasteries where they lived, for the elder’s authority was always personal, non-institutional.”⁷² Leonard Stanton states this important truism. The administratively cumbrous Church had difficulty understanding this. The philosopher Mikhail A. Novoselov, whose own path took him from Tolstoyanism to Orthodoxy to the founding of the Religioznofilosofskaja biblioteka series in 1902, believed only in the authority

⁷⁰ *Philokalia: Complete Text*, 2: 117.

⁷¹ Dunlop, *Staretz Amvrosy*, 20, uses the term “the charisma of spiritual direction.” I am sure this notion of charisma in this context has ancient roots.

⁷² Stanton, *Optina Pustyn Monastery*, 44.

of the elders. "He had no use for the bishops whom he viewed as bureaucrats of synodal rule, groveling to the government."⁷³ This was not exactly a unique position. "Truly," writes Sergei Firsov, "the hierarchy was crushed by secular power, but strangely, it was often charmed by it and attempted to copy the manner of the grandes." ⁷⁴ It was not uncommon to assert that the "unconditional adherence to Orthodox tradition was supplanted by forcibly imposed ecclesiastical conventionalism which, in turn, engendered protest and repulsed the most educated segment of society from the church."⁷⁵

Support or understanding of the elders' work was hardly forthcoming from these quarters. The list of aggravations, petty administrative incursions, provocations, and disciplinary measures is shamefully long. These ranged from accusations of excessive fraternization (what is a schema monk constantly doing in a crowd of people?), lack of proper clericalism, unease with elders being outside the system, or a myriad of other allegations. In the pre-war years of the 20th century, eldership was being pressured by the Holy Synod (Stanton uses the term "under attack"). A 1911 commission headed by the acquiescent Bishop Serafim was sent to inspect Optina. The commission, having unceremoniously transferred Elder Varsanofii to the distant Golutvin Monastery, then raised the issue of possibly abolishing eldership altogether.⁷⁶ This has a bizarre ring to it, though Optina's popularity and uniqueness made its position tenuous in the eyes of official ecclesiastical bodies.

Stanton is very forceful in stating that "Makarii and the other Optina elders were figures who never fit well into any institutional niches. Their spirituality caused nervousness in the Church's monastic hierarchy.... They were looked upon with deep suspicion by many members of the married parish clergy."⁷⁷ The frequently raised question of how much moral authority was left in the Church in the turbulent pre-revolutionary years devolves partly on matters like this, where even the purest exemplars of the spiritual life, who

⁷³ Novoselov, *Pis'ma*, xxx.

⁷⁴ Firsov, 76. Discussion of this apprehension continues to p. 85.

⁷⁵ Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Akademiia, 51.

⁷⁶ For a good discussion of this, see Stanton, *The Optina Pustyn Monastery*, 69.

⁷⁷ Stanton, *Optina Pustyn Monastery*, 141.

were able to touch thousands of people, were mistrusted. It is almost as if church officialdom was looking at elders as holy fools.⁷⁸

Also in 1911, in contrast to the commission sent to investigate Optina Pustyn', a meeting of various monastic representatives took place at the Troitse-Sergieva Lavra. It was resolved there that "the most important task of monasteries was the preservation of eldership. This included attention to the spiritual welfare of monks-novices and loyalty to the ancient ascetical traditions."⁷⁹ Smolich preceded this observation by noting that the meaning of eldership for monasteries and interest in ascetical writings led to an increase of study in these subjects. "*Even in the Moscow Theological Academy,*" he states, "some students were choosing eldership and its history as dissertation topics"⁸⁰ (italics mine). Competing perspectives led to competing tensions.

Curiously, there was considerable dissatisfaction with eldership even within monastic establishments and efforts to curb it were not uncommon. Hegumen Innokentii of Valaam Monastery (confirmed in that position after Nazarii) mistrusted the elders, and Feodor and Kleopa, disciples of Paisii himself, did not meet with much welcome there. Innokentii found it difficult to comprehend the spiritual freedom of the elders even though he was familiar with *The Philokalia*. His position changed very gradually.⁸¹ Before the change occurred, however, he had filed a complaint with the eparchial hierarch, Metropolitan Amvrosii, who then conducted an investigation of the elders (they were exonerated). A later Valaam hegumen, Varlaam, who himself became a notable elder, was "perplexed at how these Elders, who spent whole days talking and giving spiritual counsel, remained undisturbed."⁸² And the several persecutions of Elder Leonid are notorious. Even the saintly Elder

⁷⁸ Ewa Thompson, I believe, is accurate in her portrayal of 19th-century holy fools with their eccentricities, aggressiveness, and paranormalcy, noting that they were increasingly subject to mockery. I also agree with her judgment that historically the vast majority of Russian holy fools "had little to do with Christian sainthood." Thompson, *Understanding Russia*, x. For her general discussion of holy fools, see especially the first section of the book.

⁷⁹ Smolich, *Russkoe Monashestvo*, 365.

⁸⁰ Smolich, *Russkoe Monashestvo*, 365.

⁸¹ "Innocent," 204.

⁸² "Varlaam," 296.

Amvrosii did not escape suspicion and indignity at the hands of the authorities.⁸³

The failure in varying degrees to understand the inner life of struggle and the capacity of the elders to then project the spiritual benefits there from derived were fairly prevalent. This certainly did not apply to those for whom the elders were a living symbol of true spirituality. These were the people who came to the elders' cells, who dropped to their knees en masse when an elder appeared, who made the funerals of elders veritable feasts of faith.⁸⁴ This did not apply to those who were totally comfortable with the elders' unique, personal ways of reaching them. Even in confession, one did not have to go by the book and no one felt traumatized as a result.⁸⁵ And the elders were intimately humanized in their names—Anatolii the Comforter, Feodosii the Wise, and Wondrous Nektarii.⁸⁶ Perhaps it was the humanizing factor that led Voloshin to write his substantial poem about Serafim of Sarov in the heat of the Civil War. The poet traces the whole life and spiritual labor of the saint.⁸⁷

There is much work on the elders that needs to be done. One area that should prove fruitful would be a detailed look at their concern for the growth and well-being of convents, women's spiritual communities, and spiritual daughters. Almost every major elder not only spoke of this but acted on it in some way. Amvrosii was known to have been especially mindful of this because he felt women in general were seriously disadvantaged. The place of elders in monasticism needs more extensive elucidation. A recent book on monasticism attempts this, but does it sketchily since this is only one issue of many treated.⁸⁸ The question of how the elders looked

⁸³ The bishop of Kaluga, Vitalii, was sent to Shamordino Convent where Amvrosii was deemed to have stayed too long (despite the fact of severe illness). Vitalii's injunction was to forcibly return Amvrosii to Optina. But he arrived just in time for Amvrosii's funeral. This pathetic story is excellently told in Chetverikov's biography of Amvrosii, ch. 10.

⁸⁴ I borrow this phrase from the description of Makarii's funeral, which was described as a "feast of faith." Kavelin, *Elder Macarius*, 197.

⁸⁵ There is an entertaining description by a Muscovite, V. V. Yasherov, of how unusual his confession to Elder Amvrosii was. Chetverikov, *Elder Ambrose*, 280–289.

⁸⁶ The text cites the name in Anglicized form. Kontzevich, *Elder Nektary*, 94.

⁸⁷ Boris Sosnovskii's analysis of this poem can be seen in *Russkaia Mysl'*, no. 4408–9, and no. 4410 (2002).

⁸⁸ Zyrianov, *Russkie monastyr'i*.

upon the growing issues connected with social outreach in the political framework needs a survey. This could be linked to an even larger issue: the overarching question of just how much impact they had on society's mores, ideas, religious outlook, and political agendas. In the context of the prevailing assumptions regarding the failure of the Russian Church to provide a genuine and resolute counterweight to the ideological currents of the time, this is a meritorious question. Of course, the very fact that, by definition, a group of elders could not be numerically large needs always to be kept in the foreground. From that perspective, their influence exceeded the most optimistic assessment. Finally, scholarly studies of many individual elders, especially of the lesser known, would be very beneficial.

A viewpoint such as the following by Stanton generally finds a strong measure of approval: "No matter how badly the Synod and the parish clergy might botch the work of saving souls on earth, the Church as a whole could not fail, for it was still home to the elders; and of their intimate spiritual communion with the Holy Spirit there could be no doubt."⁸⁹ It is fair to say that interpretations of the lives and work of the elders are fundamentally favorable. Their uniqueness and individuality stand out, and their efficacy in reaching people and answering their spiritual needs is not really open to challenge. So they occupy a hallowed position (especially when contrasted with the hierarchical and institutional structure), which is all the more ascertainable given the mixed (or perhaps often negative) assessments of the Church as a whole in this time frame. Clearly, the long overdue re-evaluation of Russian Church history in the 19th century must take place and, in fact, is well under way. Many American scholars of Russian religion and the church are in the forefront here. The correctives that are appearing regarding the institutional church are not negating the role of the elders. The ultimate experience of spirituality is individual, and therein lies the elders' paramount fullness and strength.

⁸⁹ Stanton, *Optina Pustyn Monastery*, 44.

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