

In Memory of Archimandrite Panteliemon

On Thursday, 14/27 December 1984, at approximately ten o'clock in the morning, the founder and builder of Holy Trinity Monastery, Archimandrite Panteleimon, reposed. He had lived at the monastery for about fifty-six years.

Not everyone is capable of founding and building a monastery - such is the lot of the elect of God; and this is all the more true in a land far removed from true Christianity. With the help of God, Fr. Panteleimon organized the monastery, courageously enduring all the tribulations and temptations to which founders are subjected, and they were not negligible. His healthy peasant nature, so patient and industrious, played a role in his success, and his faith all the more so.

Archimandrite Panteleimon was born into a simple peasant family in the village of Rechitsa, in the Province of Grodno in Belorussia, on January 16, 1895 (O.S.). His family was large, and to feed it, the father of the young Peter (Fr. Panteleimon's secular name) had to work hard. Peter himself, from his earliest years, was accustomed to the hard work of the farmer and labored all his life, almost to his very end, indefatigably. He loved to work and worked tirelessly, so that few were able to match his tempo.

Yet Fr. Panteleimon did not live for work alone; from his childhood he was inculcated with love for God. His mother, a pious woman, imparted to her son a simple faith and was sincerely grieved when she learned that the eighteen-year-old Peter intended to travel to faraway America in order to make money to send home for the support of the family. She knew that many had returned from America having lost their faith, and she wept much over this. Unable to hear the sight of his mother's tears, Peter asked why she wept so uncontrollably. Through her tears his mother replied: "My son, do not lose God!" "These words of my mother remained in my heart and my memory all my life". Fr. Panteleimon was to say in later life. His mother's fears notwithstanding, the eighteen-year-old youth did journey to the half-pagan world, far from the Truth and the Church. But could his mother have known that her son would become the founder of a monastery which would become the foundation of Russian Orthodoxy in a land of sectarianism and materialism, her heart would probably been more at ease.

After his arrival in America, Peter worked first in a sugar factory near Chicago. He had to work on Sundays and feastdays, and this weighed heavily upon the conscience of the young man. He thus began to consider how he might escape this, and addressing God, he asked Him: "Tell me what was I am too take, O Lord!"

The year 1917 arrived, with all the bloody horrors which inundated the Russian land. Peter's native village was put to the torch, and his family scattered all over Russia. Another year passed, full of doubts and spiritual anxieties. Peter's mind and heart inclined towards monasticism, but opposing thoughts of diabolic origin whispered to him of worldly happiness. "The inner voice of my guardian angel", said Fr. Panteleimon, "gave me the courage not to fear the devil's enmity, and to put out of my mind the illusion of attaining any ephemeral earthly prosperity".

Thus, in the year 1918, the twenty-three-year-old man entered the Monastery of St. Tikhon of Zadonsk in South Canaan, Pennsylvania, which had been founded by St. Tikhon the Confessor, Patriarch of Moscow, while he was Archbishop of the Aleutians and North America. In 1920 Peter received the monastic tonsure, being given the name Panteleimon, and was ordained to the rank of hierodeacon; and in 1921 he was ordained a hieromonk.

He served often, labored greatly for the good of the community, and diligently read the works of the holy Fathers. His personal piety, and the grace of God, which always "fulfills that which is lacking", helped him to lead an ascetic life within the monastery. But soon, within ten years of his arrival at the Monastery of St. Tikhon, Fr. Panteleimon reached the conclusion that he could no longer live in a monastery where spiritual decay reigned without endangering his own soul. Many monks who had been ordained to the priesthood went out to service parishes, but Fr. Panteleimon did not consider this a legitimate solution to the situation; he still longed for a strict monastic life.

"They that inhabit the wilderness have a continuous desire for God, being outside the vain world" (Hymn of Ascents. First Tone, Antiphon 1, troparion 2). Thus does the holy Church chant on Sundays at Matins concerning the hidden aspiration of those who love the wilderness. And Fr. Panteleimon likewise burned with such a desire and began also to seek out a solitary place for himself, somewhere in a forest, near a spring, where he could "build a chapel in which to pray and live independently, far from the vanity and tumult of the world".

A place was found - in size slightly more than three hundred acres, in New York State, near the town of Herkimer. In order to pay off even as little as half of the cost of the land, he had to work first for two years in Igor Sikorsky's aeronautics factory.

On leaving St. Tikhon's Monastery, Father Panteleimon also left the jurisdiction of the usurper Metropolitan Platon, and allied himself with Bishop Apollinary, the only bishop of North America who remained loyal to the Supreme Ecclesiastical Authority Abroad. Thus, when he had found a parcel of land in New York State suitable for the building of a monastery, and had come into contact with a number of men eager to commit themselves to the Orthodox monastic ideal, he wrote to Bishop Apollinary for a blessing on the endeavor.

LETTER FROM HIEROMONK PANTELEIMON (NIZHNIK) TO ARCHBISHOP
APOLLINARY

To the Right Reverend Apollinary, Bishop of North America, The most humble petition of Hieromonk Panteleimon (P. Nizhnik)

I ask Your Grace to intercede for us with the Supreme Ecclesiastical Authority Abroad, the Synod in Karlovtsy and its President, Metropolitan Anthony, that we may obtain a blessing for the construction of a Russian Orthodox cenobitic community dedicated to the Holy, Consubstantial, Life-creating and Indivisible Trinity; and we likewise request that you ask His Eminence Metropolitan Anthony to send us as a spiritual father and elder, either a hieroschemamonk or a hieromonk; and if possible, two elders. We now have six men who wish to found a holy monastery. A large parcel of ground has been purchased in New York State: 320 acres. Asking Your Grace's archpastoral blessing and holy prayers with my most profound respect, I have the honor to remain Your Grace's, my most merciful Archpastor's, most humble servant, sinful Hieromonk Panteleimon

8/21 November 1928

Permission was readily granted by the saintly archpastor, on the condition that the monks serve the full daily cycle of monastic liturgical services. Still, Fr. Panteleimon had to labor hard in the aeronautics factory of Igor Sikorsky in Stratford, Connecticut for two years in order to earn enough money to pay off the initial expense of the land. While he labored, Archbishop Apollinary assigned him as first pastor of the newly-founded parish of St. Nicholas in Stratford, Connecticut. He held this position until the arrival of Archpriest Stephen Antoniuk, who was transferred to America from Harbin, Manchuria. With the arrival of Fr. Antoniuk in 1930, Fr. Panteleimon was able to retire to the land he had bought with such hard labor. In the spring of 1930, after Pascha, as Fr. Panteleimon relates, "I arrived alone on my own land. Everything was in a state of neglect. There was tranquility all around. Not a soul. I climbed a hill several times in the forest, delighting in the surrounding peace, and was able to see my own farm from there. There was a little old two-room cabin, without any windows, and a well nearby. On other portions of the farm there were four wells. That was all there was. All around there was the forest and silence - a real wilderness. My first purchase for the farm was, I remember, a little metal tea kettle. I used to leave the house and go out to the farmyard, kindle a fire between three stones, and set the kettle, filled with water, over it; then I would go to the store in Jordanville for supplies. By the time I would return, the kettle would have boiled and breakfast would be ready".

At first Fr. Panteleimon lived as a complete hermit. He preserved the memory of that peaceful time all his life. Not long before his death, he asked a certain seminarian to buy him something in the city, and then added: "I won't go myself; I'm a hermit". In this he was absolutely serious.

Apparently this feeling remained with him until his repose.

Gradually, brethren began to gather around him. His cell in the wilderness began to develop into a skete. In 1935, after Vladyka Vitaly (Maximenko) arrived in America, the consecration of the new church was to take place. On the feast of the Holy Spirit, the divine services were celebrated with great solemnity, presided over by Vladyka Vitaly, culminating in the consecration of the church. All went well, until suddenly, at the end of the liturgy, someone noticed that a fire had broken out on the second floor. The wind soon fanned the blaze, and within a few hours the new church had burnt to the ground before its founder's very eyes. It was difficult to bear this loss. But the brethren did not despair. They continued to labor, never losing hope that a church would be erected. In 1945, a new foundation was laid for the future Cathedral of the Holy Trinity. The following year, the brotherhood was augmented by monks originally from the Monastery of St. Job of Pochaev in Ladomirova, Czechoslovakia. The monastery began to grow, and Fr. Panteleimon contributed much to this growth by his own labors. He could be seen working at every phase of its construction. He built many things simply relying on his eye; yet the projects he undertook turned out to be quite durable. He cleared forested areas by himself, excavated ponds and lakes with a bulldozer, worked at typesetting. He managed to publish many books himself, including a twelve-volume set of the Lives of the Saints in Russian, a book on the lives of the ascetics of the 19th century, a handbook for the study of sacred history, and many others. Fr. Panteleimon outlived all the old monastics of his time. When he reached the age of eighty-five, his personality began to undergo a transformation from a strict monastery founder to that of a child-like elder. His pure soul then opened up in all its fullness.

May his memory be eternal!

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