

Remembering our Leaders: 1957 - 1983

Very Reverend Thomas Hopko

As St Vladimir's celebrates its 60th Anniversary in 2003, Dean Erickson asked me to reminisce about my firsthand experience of the seminary's middle years. I do so, gladly and gratefully, inspired by the scriptural command to "remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God; consider the outcome of their life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:7-8).

by Fr Thomas Hopko, Dean Emeritus

2003 is a landmark year for St Vladimir's Seminary in several respects. Most significant is that October of this year marks the 65th anniversary of the seminary's founding. Other momentous anniversaries marked by 2003 are: the 20th anniversary of both the consecration of the seminary's chapel (in May) and Fr Schmemmann's death (in December). It is coincidentally the 40th anniversary of the first class to graduate at the seminary's Crestwood location, a class of which I was a member in June of 1963. Coming to the seminary

I heard about St Vladimir's in 1956 from a friend, Frank Kulik, now a psychiatrist in Jackson, Mississippi and a staunch seminary supporter. Frank was a freshman at Drew University in New Jersey while I was enrolled at a small college in upstate New York. He phoned to tell me of a seminar he attended at Drew on the theme of Russian Orthodoxy. He was particularly impressed by one of the speakers, a young priest named Fr Alexander Schmemmann, a teacher at St Vladimir's Seminary in New York City. He suggested that we travel to find out more about St Vladimir's during our Easter vacation in 1957.

Driving to New York City in my father's black and white Chevy, (which unfortunately, by the conclusion of our trip, needed a new clutch) we approached the seminary's neighborhood, Morningside Heights, looking for golden cupolas. Instead we found a six-story tenement on the corner of Broadway and 121st street. The seminary was housed in several apartments while its classes were held in rooms (usually the boiler room) at Union Theological Seminary. After locating the office and chapel on the second floor, we found Fr Schmemmann's apartment on the fourth and rang his bell. A gray-haired woman with black wire frame glasses informed us that Father would be back later. I said to Frank, "I thought you said that Fr Schmemmann was young. His wife sure looks old!" However this wasn't his wife, but a woman named "Vava" who helped the Schmemmann household -- its young working "matushka," three children and several seminarians.

Later that day we met with Fr Schmemmann, Fr Daniel Hubiak and Nicholas Ozerov (all of whom, I noted, smoked Camels.) They assured us that we would be most welcome at St Vladimir's but needed to enroll in a bachelor's program at an area college. This requirement suited me since my father insisted that I obtain a college degree. He wanted people to know that if I became a priest it was "by choice," and not because I was "too dumb to study or too lazy to work." Such was a widely held view in those days when, as my schoolmate, the late Fr John Psinka, would say, "few were called and all were chosen."

When I arrived at the seminary the fall of that same year, the door was opened to me by another entering seminarian named Frank Lazor, later to be known as Metropolitan Theodosius of the Orthodox Church in America. After spending my first night, I was awakened by Kostya Kallaur (now a university professor and faithful seminary supporter) who told me that we had work to do: Union Seminary was discarding old beds, tables and lamps which would be useful in our apartments. I'll never forget my first day in seminary, pushing a heavily loaded dolly many times across Broadway while cars screeched by, blowing their horns.

The seminary had no refectory so we ate as we could, mostly cooking for ourselves in our apartment kitchens. I (happily) lost thirty pounds my first semester. You can imagine my joy in going home for winter break with my new "ascetical seminarian look." The seminary There were about twenty-five seminarians in 1957. Around half of us were "pre-theological" (sometimes referred to as "pre-logical"). Approximately ten were Antiochians sent by Metropolitan Anthony Bashir. Two part-time students were women, a Copt from Egypt and a convert called "Lady Pepys" from England. Frank Kulik and I shared apartment sixty-three, along with a Japanese, a Serb, a Romanian, a post-WWII Russian refugee and a couple of "Americans" like ourselves. I learned to imitate each of their signatures in order to sign everyone's name on the "sign-in sheet" that we slipped under Professor Serge Verhovskoy's door at ten o'clock each night -- proof that we were home by curfew. Professor Verhovskoy (then written and pronounced Ver-hov-sky, with the accent on the second syllable) was the provost and also the de facto dean of students. (In my very first student meeting he informed us that fornication, including homosexual activity, was not permitted at the school.) The seminary rector was Metropolitan Leonty, primate of the Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church in North America; since 1970, the "OCA." He had assigned himself to this position after Fr Georges Florovsky left St Vladimir's to go to Harvard and Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Seminary in 1955. Metropolitan Leonty

Metropolitan Leonty, while still a young archpriest in the 1910s, had been dean of an Orthodox seminary in Minneapolis, Minnesota. However from 1923 to 1938 the Russian government confiscated many properties belonging to what was then considered the "American mission" and no Orthodox theological schools in North America existed during this interval. It was after this period, in 1938, that both a graduate school in New York City and a pastoral school at St

Tikhon's Monastery in Pennsylvania opened. 1938 happened to be the 950th anniversary of the baptism of Kievan Rus by Prince Vladimir. Appropriately, the school was dedicated to St Vladimir both to honor the anniversary and emphasize the school's missionary character.

I remember well Metropolitan Leonty's visits to the seminary, and our visits to his cathedral on Second Street where we seminarians would go to serve, read and sing. He was a majestic man of striking spiritual nobility, dignity and humility. He loved to joke, asking us, with a sly smile and twinkling eyes, if we could read Hebrew and Greek, taunting us with feigned severity that it was impossible for us to understand the holy scriptures without such knowledge. He would say that when he retired he would come to the seminary to teach Hebrew.

Metropolitan Leonty laid the foundation for the seminary library by securing at his own expense the thousands of books and journals collected by Fr Anthony Repella. I cataloged many of them during the summer of 1960, and afterwards, as my seminary job. This gave me an air of knowledge of Russian theological literature that was quite deceiving since all I did was skim each volume to determine, quite unprofessionally, how it should be identified and shelved.

Metropolitan Leonty died in 1965 after having officially appointed Fr Alexander Schmemmann, whom he deeply admired, as seminary dean in 1962. I was blessed to see him on his deathbed. I think he should be canonized a saint. Fr Schmemmann and Prof Verhovskoy

Under Fr Alexander's leadership, St Vladimir's came to be so joined with his person and work that it was known, affectionately and not so affectionately, as the "schmemannary." The connection, almost identification in some circles, of St Vladimir's with Fr Alexander was understandable but also seriously misleading in that many others played enormous roles in the life of the school. First among them was the aforementioned Professor Sergei Sergeevich Verhovskoy whom everyone at the school called "Prof."

"Prof" was the seminary's bulwark and anchor. He lived at the school from his arrival from France in 1951 until his death in 1986. He loved meeting with the seminarians, favoring especially the women students and seminarians' wives, of whom he was the most devoted advocate. In addition to his teaching he was the seminary's provost and financial officer, largely involved in finding the property in Crestwood that the seminary occupied in the fall of 1962. He loved the Crestwood campus. Woe to the member of the grounds crew who trimmed a tree without "Prof's" approval!

Prof. Verhovskoy taught dogmatic and moral theology (which he pronounced "feeology"), and lots of other things as well. He clearly considered himself the strongest (if not the sole) defender of Orthodoxy on campus. As his handpicked successor I met with him for several hours every week, even after I began teaching in the graduate division with him in the early 1970s. "Prof" wanted me to know his thoughts and convictions about everything, most of which I heard many times, before finally turning things over to me. He threatened me with his "eternal malediction" if I ever taught any of my own ideas as Church doctrine. He promised me the same "malediction" if I ever allowed the seminary to cut one minute of the six semesters of required dogmatics. I think I'm still out of harms way in regard to the former threat. Dr Arseniev, Dr Kesich and Fr Meyendorff

Prof. Nicholas Arseniev taught from the mid-1950s until shortly before his death in 1977. He was almost totally blind until near the end of his life when he had corrective surgery. We couldn't bear to watch him cross the New York City streets in traffic not only because of his terrible eyesight, but also because he usually walked in a state of mystical ecstasy. He knew about fifteen languages, ancient and modern and once asked me in all seriousness if I knew Sanskrit! I replied that I hardly knew English. He quoted the Greek New Testament from memory (often holding the book upside down because of his poor eyesight), Dante in Italian, John of the Cross in Spanish, Goethe in German and Pascal in French. When I was in college at Fordham, doing philosophy and Russian studies, and not yet in the seminary's graduate program, I was allowed to take Dr Arseniev's elective courses on mysticism, Russian religious literature and comparative religions. I heard many of his lectures before ever having exposure to the lectures of Fr Schmemmann, Professor Verhovskoy or Fr Meyendorff. His lectures were always charged with the power of the boundless love of God given to us lavishly, freely, pressed down and pouring over in Christ.

The young Dr Veselin Kesich taught New Testament with Dr Arseniev, as well as Greek, early Christianity and Serbian subjects. He was the first St Vladimir's alumnus to get a doctorate in America and then join the seminary faculty. Over the years he became an "SVS institution." That is, one could not imagine St Vladimir's without him. Sadly, because of scheduling, I took only one New Testament course from Dr Kesich. His presence at the school during my student years, and since, has been one of God's great graces in my life.

Fr John Meyendorff came to the seminary from France in 1959 and played an enormous role in the life of the school. He was dean from 1984 until 1992 when he retired and unexpectedly died. Fr John suffered much over us -- his rough and uncultivated students -- and yet how he loved us, cared for us, and inspired us not only by his extraordinary learning, but by his childlike love for liturgical worship and wholehearted devotion to the service of the Church.

Fr John helped me personally in countless ways. He was my professor both at the seminary and during my doctoral studies at Fordham. He was also my confessor, advisor, mentor, friend and (sometimes, sadly for me) my severest critic.

I babysat his children and, with other seminarians (and my future wife), often had coffee at his apartment with Matushka Maika after liturgies. (I never had the courage to tell him, while working under him in the library, that the first syllable of the word "duplicate" does not rhyme with "cup.")

These five men were as different from one another as could be found on the face of the earth. God truly had a sense of humor and divine purpose in bringing them together. They didn't always like each other and sometimes sharply criticized one another in both theological and practical matters. None was without his personal limitations, weaknesses and sins, but they worked together marvelously, with dignity. They were able to do so, by God's grace, because whatever their clashes in temperament, formation, manner and conviction, they were in complete solidarity about the essentials of Orthodox Christianity and the mission of St Vladimir's Seminary. Others of our leaders I also recall with gratitude others of our teachers during the middle years of the seminary's history: Fr Paul Schneirla, Fr Paul Shafran, Fr (later Bishop) Firmilian Ocokoljich, Prof Alexander Bogolepov, Mrs Sophie Koulomzin, Nicholas Ozerov, Prof Boris Ledkovsky and Metropolitan Andrei of the Bulgarian Church were among those who led us.

In 1961 Prof Bogolepov, our Canon Law professor who also taught Russian and Church Slavonic, published his book (recently reprinted by SVS Press) about establishing a self-governing Orthodox Church in North America. Mrs. Koulomzin, who taught Fathers Schmemmann and Meyendorff as youngsters in France, is world renowned for her work in Orthodox Christian education. Prof. Ledkovsky, who directed the choir at the ROCOR cathedral in New York, directed our seminary choir and produced the first SVS recordings of liturgical music. (He once told me that I chanted Church Slavonic with a "Japanese accent.")

Three of our teachers each exercised the task of expelling me once from their classroom for being disrespectful and rude. Two others had the kindness to allow me to graduate from the seminary (with appropriately lowered grades) when they discovered shortly before commencement that I had not fulfilled requirements for their classes, including attendance. (I was given exams and assignments to do after graduation.) And I cannot forget that Professor Verhovskoy called my first sermon in church "impudent and impertinent," and made me apologize to the pastor after the liturgy.

My purpose in sharing these memories is not merely to show that, by God's grace and the guidance of compassionate and wise elders, there may be hope for everyone. It is more to convey a sense of the seminary during these years and honor its leaders. I write to proclaim the extraordinary love, commitment and sacrifices of these exceptional people who, in the humblest of human conditions, gave their lives to a motley gang of political refugees, war veterans and workers' kids in order to equip them for service in Christ's Church. No words will ever suffice to hymn the wonders of their countless gifts to us, their spiritual children.