

1. ST. AMBROSE, ELDER OF OPTINA

Elder Ambrose is the most famous disciple of Elder Macarius, and his sanctity has been universally recognized. He was by far the most famous of all the Optina Elders. He achieved his holiness through his self-sacrificing wisdom and miraculous power, which he inherited from Elder Macarius and multiplied. There exist several major biographies that emphasize various aspects of his extraordinarily holy personality: (1) A brief but precise account, published in 1904, written by a lay spiritual disciple whom Elder Ambrose had converted, and who became a tireless ecclesiastical writer on a popular level, Eugene Poselyanin, the co-editor of the *Russky Palomnik* weekly. (2) The longest and most comprehensive biography, published in 1900, written by his own closest spiritual son, Fr. Agapitus. The latter was groomed to be an elder himself, but out of humility he declined the office, and in nine years he followed his Elder to the other world. (3) Another biography introducing new material, based on surviving letters to and from the Elder, by priest Sergei Chetverikov, who was also the compiler of his letters (1912). Fr. Sergei, working with the nuns of Shamordino, unearthed many letters of several Optina Elders, and published them in serial form. After the Revolution, he emigrated to France where he wrote a book on the Optina Elders, two volumes on St. Paisius Velichkovsky and, in collaboration with Abbot Chariton of Valaam, a two-volume compendium on the Jesus Prayer. He died as a monk in the Czechoslovakian Monastery of St. Job of Pochaev. (4) A recent biography published by Valaam Monastery written by the grandson of the Optina defender St. Paul Florensky, Fr. An-

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dronicus, Abbot of Valaam (1993, ninety years after the original Optina publication).

Elder Ambrose was born in 1812, and he arrived at Optina in 1839, when Fr. Leonid was the Elder. It is said that the latter summoned Elder Macarius to himself and said, looking at the future Ambrose: "This man clings to us Elders. I am an old man, I am going away, and I am handing him over to you. Govern him as best you know. He will be of help to you." Elder Macarius took maximum care of him, instilling in him the wisdom of humility, and keeping him in the Skete until his death. After the death of Elder Leonid, it was quite apparent that Ambrose would succeed Macarius, because his sharp mind, loving heart, and refined discipline opened to him the secret of the power of obedience. He was clothed a ryassophore monk only a year and a half after entering Optina Monastery. The following year he was tonsured a monk, and in one more year ordained a priest. When Ambrose became Elder, he increased his predecessor's activity, spiritually guiding various convents, and eventually founding his own convent, Shamordino, wherein he died in 1891.

Elder Ambrose was a man of practical mind, who, due to the mystical input he received from both Elders Leonid and Macarius, was also not a stranger to mystical realities. This was abundantly apparent when, though staying in his cell in Optina, he could see troubled people miles away and appear to them in dreams to give instructions, or heal them spiritually or physically. Cases of his clairvoyance and miracles occur even today, in spite of the fact that the Communists levelled his grave and built a garage over it in order to discourage his popular veneration. Only after freedom came to Russia in 1988 was he unearthed and canonized, and now he is widely venerated as a Saint. He rests in the main church in Optina Monastery, which is functioning once again, populated by one hundred monks.

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Almost at the begining of his monastic life, Elder Ambrose fell ill with some strange sickness that enfeebled him for the rest of his life. Either before or after his illness—we do not know—he had a near-death experience, in which the reality of eternal rest was revealed to him. The remembrance of this glimpse into eternity, we believe, was a God-sent source of strength for his subsequent self-sacrificing, self-crucifying care for people, which duly earned him “rest with the Saints.” Elder Macarius asked his disciple to write this vision down. Such was the custom of the monks of Optina Monastery—to keep spiritual diaries—and hence it was recorded for posterity.

The relatives of Elder Macarius, the Glebovs, often visited Optina Monastery and kept close to this Elder and his world. Once when they visited Optina Monastery they were granted to acquaint themselves with the account written by Macarius’ disciple, Ambrose, which years later, after Ambrose’s death, S. Glebov published in the magazine *Russky Palomnik (Russian Pilgrim)*. Subsequently it did not appear in any biographies of Elder Ambrose. Yet it indeed provides a very revealing witness into Ambrose’s inner world and his awareness of spiritual phenomena, and is very characteristic of that *monastic silence* so real in Optina. This short glimpse of the other world is quoted here in full, since, according to Mrs. Helen Kontzevitch, it is unquestionably authentic and not foreign to Orthodox mysticism:

THE ACCOUNT OF S. GLEBOV

In the late 1860’s, I was travelling to various Holy Places throughout Russia with my elderly mother, who in her old age desired for the last time in her life to venerate the holy relics of saints of God at the places of their eternal rest. We stopped for a few days in Optina Monastery in the Kaluga region with the

definite intention of visiting there the local ascetic Fr. Ambrose, well known for his holy life. He lived not far from the monastery in his own little desert-skete, where he received weary pilgrims who would come to him, some for advice, others for the consolation of their sorrowing hearts.

The beautiful location of Optina Monastery, surrounded on all sides by evergreen forests, luxurious monastic orchards, delightful spacious ponds filled with leisurely swimming fish of various kinds—all this never leaves the memory of a pilgrim who has been there even once.

Fr. Ambrose received us kindly and invited us to his log-cabin cell, which was surrounded by an orchard and in which he usually received all his visitors, who were always thirsty for his soul-profiting talks and spiritual instruction. Our talk with Fr. Ambrose was a very long one and highly beneficial for our souls.

Anyone who saw him at least once found it impossible to forget his meek face with smooth parchment-like white skin, a face which reminded one of something sacramental in all of his actions. Having found out about the purpose of our pilgrimage throughout Russia, the good Elder invited us to stay in Optina for ten days or so. Blessing our stay in the Monastery, the holy Elder said: "In our Monastery life is like in paradise, and you will never be able to fill yourself to satiety—so much grace is here. The services in our temples here are so solemnly beautiful that they draw one involuntarily to God by their holy teaching and compunctionate church singing."

Taking advantage of Fr. Ambrose's blessing, we stayed in Optina for seven days. During that time we visited the Elder several times and heard his wise Gospel teaching on life. Having found out that I take part in various periodicals of the "secular type," Fr. Ambrose handed me his short manuscript and offered it to me to look at it. This was the content of this manuscript:

[SILENCE, OR A VISION OF ETERNAL REST:
A MANUSCRIPT BY ELDER AMBROSE OF OPTINA]

It was a wonderful time in spring.... I could not resist its allurements to throw myself into nature's embrace, and that paradise of spring, which I chose as a place of my daily visits, was the dark, thick forest situated on the high bank of a big, wide river (the Oka) that washes with its milky waters several central Russian provinces.

Giving myself over to this blessed state in the bosom of nature, I drank in its aromatic breath and went deeply into the spiritual apprehension of the Creator, Who is too immense to behold....

The surrounding world from which I came forth then retreated from me to somewhere far away, and disappeared into the realm of concepts foreign to me....

I was alone. Around me there was only the slumbering forest. Its ancient giants stretched far into the skies. They searched for God. I also was in search of Him.

But suddenly, I am outside of the forest, somewhere far away, in another world, quite unknown to me, never seen by me, never imagined by me.... Around me there is bright white light! Its transcendence is so pure and enticing that I am submerged, along with my perception, into limitless depths and cannot satisfy myself with my admiration for this realm, cannot completely fill myself with its lofty spirituality. Everything is so full of beauty all around. So endearing this life ... so endless the way. I am being swept across this limitless, clear space. My sight is directed upwards, does not descend anymore, does not see anything earthly. The whole of the heavenly firmament has transformed itself before me into one general bright light,

pleasing to the sight.... But I do not see the sun. I can see only its endless shining and bright light. The whole space in which I glide without hindrance, without end, without fatigue, is filled with white, just as is its light and beautiful beings, transparent as a ray of sun. And through them I am admiring this limitless world. The images of all these beings unknown to me are infinitely diverse and full of beauty.... I also am white and bright as are they. Over me, as over them, there reigns eternal rest. Not a single thought of mine is any longer enticed by anything earthly, not a single beat of my heart is any longer moving with human cares or earthly passion. I am all peace and rapture. But I still am moving in this infinite light, which surrounds me without change. There is nothing else in the world except for the white, bright light and these equally radiant numberless beings. But all these beings do not resemble me, nor are they similar to each other; they are all endlessly varied, and compellingly attractive. Amidst them, I feel myself incredibly peaceful. They evoke in me neither fear, nor amazement, nor trepidation. All that we see here does not agitate us, does not amaze us. All of us here are as if we have belonged to each other for a long time, are used to each other and are not strangers at all. We do not ask questions, we do not speak to each other about anything. We all feel and understand that there is nothing novel for us here. All our questions are solved with one glance, which sees everything and everyone. There is no trace of the wars of passions in anyone. All move in different directions, opposite to each other, not feeling any limitation, any inequality, or envy, or sorrow, or sadness. One peace reigns in all the images of entities. One light is endless for all. Oneness of life is comprehensible to all.

My rapture at all this superseded everything. I sank into this eternal rest. No longer was my spirit disturbed by anything. And I knew nothing else earthly. None of the tribulations of my

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heart came to mind, even for a minute. It seemed that everything I had experienced before on earth never existed. Such was my feeling in this new radiant world of mine. And I was at peace and joyful, and desired nothing better for myself. All my earthly thoughts concerning fleeting happiness in the world died in this beautiful life, new to me, and did not come back to life again. So it seemed to me at least, there, in that better world.

But how I came back here—I do not recall. What transitory state it was, I do not know. I only felt that I was alive, but I did not remember the world in which I lived before on earth. This did not seem at all to be a dream. Actually, about earthly things I no longer had the least notion. I only felt that the present life is *mine*, and that *I* was not a stranger in it. In this state of spirit I forgot myself and immersed myself in this light-bearing eternity. And this timelessness lasted without end, without measure, without expectation, without sleep, in this eternal rest. Thus it seemed to me that there would not be any kind of change....

But then suddenly, the thread of my radiant life was cut off and I opened my eyes. Around me was the familiar forest, and a beam of spring sunlight was playing on its meadows. I was seized with terrible sadness. "Why am I here again?" I thought. And that radiant, light-emanating world which I had experienced with all its hosts of numberless visionary entities, vividly remained impressed before my mental eyes. But my physical vision did not see it any longer. This terrible and tearful sorrow I could not endure and I began to cry bitterly.

Only after that experience did I believe in the concept of the separation of the soul from the body, and understood what the special spiritual world was. But the question of what is the meaning of life still remained a mystery for me. And in order to penetrate into this mystery I left this world into which I was born, and embraced the monastic life.

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“Oh, Father, then that must have been your dream?” I asked Fr. Ambrose, pointing to his manuscript.

“I do not know whether it was a dream or whether it occurred in reality,” answered the righteous Elder with concentration. “I still have not solved that mystery for myself, but I believe that my spirit lives separately from my body; otherwise it could not have seen that which my physical vision does not know. After all, one cannot perceive the light of day with the tips of the fingers on one’s hand. So also, I think my soul cannot visualize that which is not in God’s world. And if the soul sees this world, which my eyes do not see, then it must be that it factually does exist as something real. And I believe in this absolutely....”

With these words, the thoughtful glance of the Elder prayerfully rose to the icon of Christ, and he reverently crossed himself.

With such universal mysteries was the soul of this highly-revered Optina Monastery Elder, Ambrose, filled. With such an outlook on God’s world he directed all believing pilgrims who used to come to Optina to him to get a holy blessing for their lives. And precisely in this transcendent spirit he greeted all people who were suffering in heart and soul, who sought in his holy guidance healing of their infirmities. And how many living examples there were of the miraculous spiritual transformations of many people, who were truly partaking of the good counsel of Elder Ambrose....

*I knew a man in Christ ... (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth) such a one caught up to the third heaven (II Cor. 12:2).**

* S. Glebov. From *Russky Palomnik*, 1904, no. 17, pp. 286-288.