

The Venerable Confessor Sebastian of Karaganda (Fomin)

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In October 1997, by decision of the Synodal Commission for the Canonization of Saints and with the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Alexy II, the local glorification of the Venerable Elder Sebastian of Karaganda, the Confessor, as a saint took place.

On October 22, 1997, the relics of the Venerable Sebastian were discovered. For half a year, the Elder's relics remained in the Church of the Nativity of the Most Holy Theotokos, which he had founded; and on May 2, 1998, during a solemn procession accompanied by Paschal hymns, the reliquary containing the Venerable One's relics was transferred to the Holy Vvedensky Cathedral, which had become the main church of Karaganda. The transfer was performed by Archbishop Alexy of Alma-Ata and Semipalatinsk, accompanied by the clergy of the diocese, Orthodox Christians from Karaganda, and numerous pilgrims from various cities in Kazakhstan and Russia.

The relics of the Venerable Sebastian have been placed for veneration on the right side of the central side chapel. The magnificent reliquary and the canopy above it, crafted from colored metals with inlays and resembling the reliquary and canopy of the Venerable Sergius of Radonezh, were created by artisans from Sergiev Posad.

In August 2000, at the Jubilee Bishops' Council, the Venerable Sebastian of Karaganda was included in the Synaxis of the New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia for universal veneration throughout the Church.

In August 2000, at the Jubilee Bishops' Council, the Venerable Sebastian of Karaganda was glorified among the ranks of the Holy New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia.

"The light of the monks," says St. John Climacus, "is the angels, and the light for all people is the monastic life." But the very essence of Christianity, the finest expression of monasticism, is the office of the spiritual father.

As a direct continuation of the prophetic ministry, the office of the elder arose in the early days of Christianity alongside the emergence of monasticism, serving as its guiding principle. It combined the ascetic feat of inner spiritual struggle with service to the world in its entirety—addressing both its spiritual and earthly needs.

In Russia, the Kozelsk Vvedenskaya Optina Hermitage was a particularly vivid embodiment of this spiritual feat. The heart of Optina—and the place where the pulse of its life beat, from which emanated the grace-filled power that sanctified the lives of the monastery's inhabitants—was the famous Optina Skete, the dwelling place of the Holy Elders of Optina.

The idea of establishing it belonged to Bishop Filaret, the patron of monasticism and the elderhood and future Metropolitan of Kyiv, who persuaded the ascetic disciples and followers of St. Paissius Velichkovsky, who lived in the Roslavl forests, to found a skete at Optina Pustyn. Thus, Father Moses (Putilov) arrived at Optina Pustyn with his brother Anthony. When Father Moses, after founding the Optina skete (1821), became the abbot of the entire monastery (1826), the godly and devout Father Leonid (in schema, Lev) (1829) arrived at the skete from the Alexander-Svir Monastery, and it was he who established the tradition of the elders there. Thus, he provided the impetus that inspired subsequent generations of elders for a full hundred years, right up until the very end of Optina Pustyn's existence and prosperity. The subsequent elders, Father Macarius and Father Ambrose—who were also great elders—were his close disciples.

From the time of Elder Makarii, who enlisted a number of individuals from the educated classes of society to translate patristic literature, Optina Pustyn became known among contemporary writers. From that time on, the intellectual elite of Russia began to visit Optina Pustyn and its skete. The many divine gifts of the elders and, no less importantly, the unbroken chain of succession among the Optina ascetics established Optina Pustyn's fame throughout Russia. Under Elder Ambrose—whom Father Lev, while still a novice, had entrusted "from one generation to the next" to Father Macarius before his own passing—Optina reached its zenith. The elder's fame resounded throughout Russia, and people flocked to him from all corners of the country. The subsequent elders—Father Anatoly (Zertsalov), a disciple of Elder Ambrose; Father Joseph; and Elder Varsonofy—were, by the grace of divine illumination, similar to their teachers.

Many illustrious names of religious figures, philosophers, and writers are associated with Optina Pustyn. Gogol, Dostoevsky, Vladimir Solovyov, its secret monastic initiate Konstantin Leontiev, and the Kirievsky brothers—who are buried within the walls of Optina alongside the elders—have all visited here; Tolstoy's final wish as he lay dying was deeply symbolic—to go to Optina, which for him meant entering the Church of Christ. "More essential than any books or any line of thought," wrote Ivan Vasilyevich Kirievsky, "is to find a holy Orthodox elder who could be your guide, to whom you could confide every thought of yours and hear not his opinion—however wise it might be—but the judgment of the Holy Fathers."

The last of these elders—Theodosius the Wise (†1920), Anatoly the Comforter (Potapov, †1922), and the wondrous Nektarios (†1928)—continue the same tradition. It fell to them to live to see the time when the

centuries-old edifice of the Russian state collapsed and a party of atheists and godless people seized power over the country. The Lord decreed that Elders Theodosius and Anatoly would pass into eternity before the closure of Optina Pustyn (1923) and be buried within the walls of the holy monastery.

Elder Nektarios, while in exile under strict surveillance in the village of Kholmishchi and bound by a ban on receiving visitors, remembered the words of the Gospel: “I will not cast out anyone who comes to Me”—and continued to quench the spiritual thirst of the people, who, in the midst of revolutionary godlessness, sought out the elder for spiritual support.

Gradually growing weaker, the elder quietly passed from this temporary and sorrowful life into eternal life on April 29, 1928, and was buried in a secluded village cemetery in the village of Kholmishchi, 60 kilometers from Kozelsk [On July 16, 1989, the relics of Elder Nektarios were transferred from the cemetery in the village of Kholmishche to the Cathedral of the Presentation in Optina Pustyn.].

One of the last All-Night Vigil services at Optina Pustyn was conducted by Hieromonk Nikon (Belyaev) on June 15, 1924, on the feast day of the Venerable Tikhon of Kaluga. Father Nikon, a beloved disciple and close companion of Elder Varsonofy, was young in years but surpassed other elders, graced with gray hair, in spiritual wisdom. By the will of God’s providence, it fell to him alone to be the last to leave the beloved monastery, to which believers still flocked, seeking spiritual comfort and counsel. And Father Nikon took upon himself not only the duties of a spiritual father but also those of an elder. The All-Night Vigil was no longer celebrated in the monastery church but in the hospital kitchen. And then, in anticipation of the coming calamities, a life full of sorrow, unfamiliarity, and hardship began for Father Nikon in Kozelsk, together with the Optina brethren who had settled there and the nuns from the ruined Shamordino Monastery. How and on what the Optina monks lived—only the Lord knows.

The first Optina elder, Hieroschemamonk Leo, once remarked that “the time will come when our Skete will fall into desolation, and only cats will live there.” And before his blessed repose (†1841), he offered this prayer: “I thank You, my merciful Creator, O Lord, that I have escaped the misfortunes and sorrows that the coming times hold. But I do not know whether you will escape them.” These last words were addressed to the elder’s cell attendant.

Long before the revolution, Elder Varsonofy, speaking to his disciple Father Nikon (then still Nikolai) as a father would to a son, said: “Here I am looking at you, the young and inexperienced, and I think that I will not live to see those terrible days, but you will. The monasteries will face great persecution and oppression... The time will come when things will be difficult at Optina... True Christians will huddle in small little churches... Perhaps you will live to see those days when Christians will once again be tormented. I am speaking of torments similar to those of ancient times... The persecutions and torments of the early Christians may well be repeated... You will live to see those times. Remember my words. Then you will say: “Yes, I remember—Father Varsonofy told me all this... How many years have passed since then!” Remember my words that you will see a “day of wrath.” And I repeat once again that you have nothing to fear. God’s grace will cover you.”

Father Nikon’s body lies in distant Pinega in the Arkhangelsk Region, where he was exiled by the Bolsheviks to “voluntary exile” in 1930. There he died of pulmonary tuberculosis on June 25, 1931.

One of the last elders [The following are also considered among the last Optina elders: Hieroschemamonk Makarii (Inozemtsev, † May 4, 1970, Old Style), in the town of Belev, Tula Region; Schemamonk Joasaph (Moiseev, † March 25, 1975, Old Style), Gryazi, Lipetsk Oblast; Schemaarchimandrite Ambrose (Ivanov, † October 2, 1978, Old Style), Balabanovo, Kaluga Oblast; Schema-Hegumen Paul (Drachev, † March 16, 1981, Old Style), Cherkassy village, Tula Region.], who grew out of the roots of pre-revolutionary Optina, is Schema-Archimandrite Sebastian (Fomin, † 1966), —a disciple of Elder Joseph and, after his death, of Elder Nektarios. Having absorbed the traditions and the grace-filled spirit of the Holy Fathers of Optina Pustyn and having been tested, like iron, in the crucible of fiery trials, enduring exile and imprisonment in Soviet camps, he, by God’s inscrutable providence, carried out his monastic ministry in the capital of the scorching steppes of Central Kazakhstan, in the long-suffering and blessed city of Karaganda, where, during the 1930s–1950s, one of the most tragic acts of our century’s godless drama unfolded. Like a continuous antimension, the boundless steppe of Kazakhstan—soaked with the blood of martyrs and sanctified by their prayers—stretches out, over which the Optina elder, the blessed memory of Schema-Archimandrite Sebastian, spread his mighty wings.

The Life of the Elder, Schema-Archimandrite Sebastian

The Blessed Elder, Schema-Archimandrite Sebastian (Stefan Vasilyevich Fomin), was born on October 28/November 10, 1884, in the village of Kosmodemyanskoye in the Oryol Governorate to a poor peasant family. His father's name was Vasily, and his mother's was Matrona. They had three sons. The eldest was Hilarion, born in 1872; the middle son was Roman, born in 1877; and the youngest was named Stephen at his baptism in honor of the Venerable Stephen Savvait, the creator of the canons, on whose feast day he was born.

In 1888, his parents took the children to Optina Pustyn to visit the elder Ambrose. Stephen was four years old at the time, but he remembered that visit well, along with the kind eyes of the blessed elder. The future Father Sebastian was orphaned by his father at the age of four and by his mother at the age of five. "When our parents died," recalled his older brother Hilarion, "I was 17 years old. We had nine desyatins of land, which had to be worked with our own hands; it was a small farm—who would run it? There were three of us brothers, and we quarreled and fought—who would pull us apart and reconcile us?" To strengthen the family, a year after their parents' death, the eldest brother, Hilarion, got married.

Five-year-old Stefan was very attached to his middle brother Roman because of his tender soul and gentle heart. But Roman chose the monastic life and in 1892 asked Hilarion to take him to Optina Pustyn, where he was accepted as a novice at the St. John the Baptist Skete.

Hilarion had a different temperament—he was demanding and unkind. Stefan learned early on the hardships of being an orphan. Recalling his childhood, Elder Sebastian said: "If only someone female had remained—a grandmother, a sister, or an aunt—who could have taken care of you at that age. It's hard without a mother, even with a daughter-in-law. I remember when I was about 8 years old. I asked my daughter-in-law for some milk, and she told me, 'Wait.' I got angry, went over, and threw the hemp cloths—which my daughter-in-law had bleached and was drying in the sun—onto the ground, and covered them with mud. My sister-in-law complained to my brother. My brother scolded me and beat me. There were people to beat me and scold me, but there was no one to take pity on me."

Stefan was a good student and graduated from the three-grade parish school. The parish priest let him read books. From birth, Stefan had been in poor health and did little farm work; instead, he spent most of his time as a shepherd in the pastures. He loved livestock, knew how to care for them, and the peasants held him in high regard. But most importantly, he had time to read books and pray. His peers disliked him because he was humble and meek. They mocked him and teased him, calling him a "monk." And it got even worse: knowing that he was compassionate not only toward people but also toward animals, they once took a cat and began throwing it at a pack of dogs until they tore it apart—Father Sebastian later recounted this with regret. A joyful consolation for Stefan during the winter months, when he was free from farm work, was visiting his middle brother at Optina Pustyn. These visits had a profound spiritual impact on Stefan, and when he grew older, he began asking Hilarion to let him go to Optina Pustyn. But his brother would not allow it. "What kind of monk would you make?" he would say. "You're no good for anything. And who's going to help me with the farm?" And Stefan stayed to help his brother.

In 1908, his middle brother, Roman Fomin, took private monastic vows due to illness, taking the name Raphael; and on December 16, 1908, in the monastery church dedicated to St. Mary of Egypt, he was vested in the monastic robe by the abbot, Father Xenophon.

By this time, the young family of his eldest brother had become established, and Stefan, having confirmed his desire for the monastic life, went to see Father Raphael at the Optina Pustyn skete, where on January 3, 1909, he was accepted as a cell attendant by the elder Joseph.

While living with the elder, Stefan found in him a great spiritual mentor. Later, he often recalled that time: "We (another cell attendant and I) lived with the elder as if he were our own father. Together with him, we prayed, ate, read, or listened to his teachings."

Elder Hieroschemamonk Joseph was the closest disciple of the great Elder Hieroschemamonk Ambrose. He was closest not only in appearance but also in spirit, in the strength of his obedience, devotion, and love. He was truly Father Ambrose's "beloved son," whom he spiritually reborn and raised within the walls of a humble, meager "hut," imbued with the teachings of the great elders Leo and Macarius. Here, in this cramped cell, which became a school of piety for Father Joseph, he mastered through practice the highest of all sciences—monasticism—and in time became a mentor to monks himself.

For twelve years he served as the skete superior and spiritual father of the Skete and the Monastery, but due to illness in 1905, he stepped down from this position. He was already in the twilight of his years, and his strength was noticeably waning. This lamp of monasticism was quietly fading, but while his body grew weak, his spirit remained alert and clear. By decree of the Holy Synod in 1905, Hegumen Varsonofy was appointed skete abbot.

In 1910, Leo Tolstoy arrived at Optina Pustyn after secretly leaving Yasnaya Polyana. Stefan witnessed this event.

Leo Nikolaevich arrived at Optina from Kozelsk late in the evening and spent the night at the monastery's guesthouse. Father Michael, who ran the guesthouse, later recounted that over tea, Tolstoy asked him about the elders, inquiring who was receiving visitors and whether Elder Joseph was receiving anyone; he said he had come to see and speak with the elders.

"And when they arrived," Father Mikhail recounted, "there were the two of them. They knocked. I opened the door. Lev Nikolaevich asked, 'May I come in?' I said, 'Please do.' And he said, 'Maybe I shouldn't: I'm Tolstoy.'" "Why not," I said, "we welcome everyone who wishes to visit us." He then said, "Well, hello, brother." I replied, "Hello, Your Excellency." He said, "You're not offended that I called you 'brother'? All people are brothers." I replied, "Not at all, and it's true that we're all brothers." So they stayed with us. I assigned them the best room. And early the next morning, I sent a servant to the skete's abbot, Father Varsonofy, to let him know that Tolstoy was on his way to the skete." Father Sebastian recounted what happened next as follows: "Elder Joseph was ill, and I was sitting by his side. Elder Varsonofy came in and told us that Father Michael had sent word that L. Tolstoy was coming to visit us. 'I asked him,' he said, 'who told you that? He said, 'Tolstoy himself told me.'" Elder Joseph said, "If he comes, let us welcome him with kindness, respect, and joy; even though he was excommunicated, since he came of his own accord—no one forced him—we have no other choice." Then they sent me to look over the fence. I saw Lev Nikolaevich and reported to the elders that he was walking close to the house, sometimes approaching, sometimes moving away. Elder Joseph said, "It's hard for him. After all, he came to us for living water. Go, invite him in if he's come to see us. Ask him." I went, but he was already gone—he had left. He hadn't gone very far yet—and since he was on horseback, I couldn't catch up with him. Later, the elders received a message from his sister, Sister Maria, stating that he had also left her in Shamordino. Then a telegram arrived for us from the Astapovo station regarding L.N.'s illness; in it, on his behalf, they asked the elder to come to him. Father Varsonofy set out immediately, but Tolstoy's entourage would not allow him to see Lev Nikolaevich. Father Varsonofy handed a letter to his daughter, Alexandra. He wrote to her that it was, after all, her father's will that I come. They wouldn't let him in anyway. And they wouldn't let his wife, Sofya Andreyevna, in either. She arrived in her own train car and stayed in it at the station. Father Varsonofy took all this very hard; he returned almost ill himself and was always distressed when he recalled it. And he would say: "Even though he was Lev, he couldn't break free from his chains. What a pity, such a pity." And Elder Joseph grieved for him. "As for the claim that someone sent me—that is not true. I went to Astapovo solely at the request of Lev Nikolaevich himself," Father Varsonofy asserted."

In April 1911, on the third day of Easter, Elder Joseph fell ill with a terminal illness. On May 9, his soul quietly departed from his long-suffering body, and at half past one in the morning on May 10, three tolls of the skete bell, followed by the monastery bell, announced the elder's passing. On May 12, the coffin containing his body was lowered into the grave—prepared near the grave of Elder Ambrose—by the hands of the brethren. The meek disciple, who had spent 30 years with the great elder, was laid to rest at the feet of his mentor.

Stephen's grief at the elder's passing was great. But the Lord did not leave him without comfort. Elder Nektarios (the spiritual son of Fr. Anatoly (Zertsalov) and Fr. Ambrose) moved into Fr. Joseph's cell. Stephen remained with him as a cell attendant and came under his spiritual guidance. In 1912, Stephen was tonsured a rasophore.

In April of that same year, as a result of intrigues and slander, Elder Varsonofy was transferred from Optina Pustyn to serve as abbot of the Staro-Golutvin Monastery. As he was leaving the skete, after a farewell prayer service, Elder Varsonofy said to comfort the grieving brethren: "Father Hegumen Mark, who recently passed away at the monastery, told me that when Father Makarii was dying, he predicted that after him the elders would be: Father Ambrose, Father Hilarion, and Father Anatolius, and that the Skete would not lack elders. Among the later elders there will be men even greater in spiritual gifts than the great elders: Fathers

Leo, Macarius, Ambrose, and Anatoly.” Following Father Varsonofy’s transfer from Optina, Father Nektarios was appointed by the council of senior monks as the brotherhood’s spiritual father and elder.

Father Nektarios lived a reclusive life; he knew how to keep a low profile and remain inconspicuous. He spoke in parables and riddles, with a touch of holy folly, often not without insight. The elder’s contemporaries assert that anyone who has not seen him in person will not be able to clearly picture him from stories alone, and will find it difficult to judge his character or his wondrous qualities: his embodied humility, extraordinary meekness and modesty, love, and the indescribable charm of his personality. Out of his profound humility, he did not consider himself an elder and always spoke of himself thus: “I am just beginning; I am learning; I have lost all understanding. How can I be the heir to the elders of old? They had grace in abundance, but I have only a sliver.” He also told visitors: “Ask my cell attendant Stephen about this; he will advise you better than I can—he is discerning.” Father Nektarios possessed a wonderful human simplicity, and even the most stubborn and indignant soul could sense the sincerity of his great love, about which the elder himself once said: “My child! We love with a love that never changes. Your love is fleeting; ours remains the same—today and a thousand years from now.”

Thus, under the elder’s guidance, in this quiet and peaceful haven for frail human souls, his disciple and future elder, Father Sebastian, grew spiritually, absorbing into his soul the love, wisdom, and humility of his wonderful mentor.

Elder Nektarios had two cell attendants. The senior cell attendant was Fr. Stephen, who was called “Summer” for his gentleness and compassion, and the junior one was Fr. Peter (Shvyrev) [the rasophore monk Peter (Shvyrev)—a former sailor who had traveled to Mount Athos before the revolution. He was Elder Nektarios’s junior cell attendant, to whom he was sincerely devoted and who was therefore beloved by him. He was simple-hearted and had a rustic, down-to-earth manner. He worked in the mines. He died in an accident.], and was called “Winter”; he was rougher and stricter. When the people in the hut began to lose heart and grumble from waiting so long for the elder, Father Nektarios would send Father Stephen to comfort them. But when those waiting became noisy, Father Peter would come out and, with sternness, pacify and calm the crowd.

And sometimes this is what happened (Father Sebastian himself recounted this). Usually, the elder, Father Nektarios, would leave his cell late, around 2 or 3 in the afternoon. The crowd would repeatedly send Father Stephen to tell the elder that they were waiting for him, that many needed to go home.

Father Stephen would go to the elder’s cell, and the elder would immediately say, “I’m getting ready now, getting dressed, and I’ll be right out”—but he wouldn’t come out. And when he did come out, he would turn to Father Stephen in front of everyone and say, “Why haven’t you ever told me that so many people are waiting for me with such impatience?” And Father Stephen would ask for forgiveness and bow at his feet.

On Holy Saturday, April 13, 1913, during the procession of the Shroud, Father Stephen’s brother, Father Raphael, died in the hospital of pulmonary tuberculosis after being ill for about three weeks. During his final days, he received Holy Communion daily, and the day before his death, he was tonsured a schema monk. As the skete’s chronicle recounts, Father Raphael served as the senior gardener and occasionally substituted for the choir director in the right choir. He was known for his silence and gentleness.

Father Stephen received the monastic tonsure with the name Sebastian (in honor of the Martyr Sebastian, commemorated on December 18/31) in the fateful year of 1917. The revolution erupted. The centuries-old edifice of the Russian state collapsed. A time of persecution against the Church of Christ began.

Anticipating the inevitable changes to come, the Optina monks continued to live quietly and unobtrusively in the monastery. News had already reached them of the closure of churches and monasteries and the confiscation of their property. And at Optina, an ominous, defiant inscription had already appeared on the monastery wall, threatening to come and plunder the monastery. Such statements were also heard verbally.

On January 10/23, 1918, Optina Pustyn was closed by a decree of the Council of People’s Commissars, but the monastery continued to exist under the guise of an agricultural cooperative. Many, especially the young novices, left the monastery, dissatisfied with the work in the agricultural cooperative, where strict demands were placed upon them. Those who remained—mostly elderly monks—were firmly resolved not to leave the monastery until the very last moment, until they were driven out. Everyone lived in fear, expecting expulsion, arrest, imprisonment, or death every day and every hour.

A museum called “Optina Pustyn” was established on the monastery grounds. The skete no longer existed, but Elder Nektarios remained living with his cellmates in the elders’ hut and, though worn down by the burden of his sorrows, continued to receive visitors.

In 1923, at the end of the fifth week of Great Lent, a liquidation commission began its work at the monastery. Church services ceased. The monks were gradually evicted. The monastery came under the jurisdiction of “Glavnauka.” The monastery buildings were occupied by an orphanage, the museum office, and private apartments. Most of the monks’ quarters were rented out by the museum as apartments to summer residents. The majority of the Optina monastic community moved to Kozelsk and nearby villages. Some bought small houses and lived together in groups of several people. They were joined by nuns from the already-closed Shamordino Convent and other women’s monasteries, who had previously been under the spiritual care of the Optina elders. For the monks, left without a roof over their heads, without a morsel of bread, and with no prospects for the future, prayer was their only consolation. At the Skete, the elders’ cells were restored to their original condition, both inside and out, according to Father Sebastian’s instructions.

In 1923, two months before the monastery was closed, Father Sebastian was ordained a hierodeacon.

In March 1923, Elder Nektarios was arrested and exiled outside the province. It was said that during his arrest, when the authorities demanded that Father Nektarios stop receiving visitors, all the Optina elders appeared to him and said, “If you want to be with us, do not turn away your spiritual children.” And he did not refuse.

At first, the elder lived in the village of Plohino (forty-five versts from Kozelsk), then moved to the village of Kholmishchi in the Bryansk Province (fifty versts from Kozelsk). After the elder’s arrest, Father Sebastian lived in Kozelsk together with the Optina community and often visited the elder in his exile. In 1927, Father Sebastian was ordained a hieromonk by the Bishop of Kaluga. On April 29, 1928, Elder Nektarios passed away. He entrusted his holy soul to God while his spiritual son, Father Adrian Rymarenko (later Archbishop Andrew of Rockland, † 1978), who had arrived from Kyiv, wore the epitachelion. Father Sebastian wept inconsolably at the funeral and later at the elder’s grave. Fulfilling the elder’s blessing after his death to go serve in a parish, Father Sebastian first went to Kozelsk, then to Kaluga, and later, at the invitation of the rector of the Church of St. Elijah in Kozlov, Archpriest Vladimir Andreevich Nechaev [the father of the now-living Metropolitan Pitirim (Nechaev) of Volokolamsk and Yuryev], he arrived in Kozlov and received an appointment to the Church of St. Elijah from Bishop Vassian (Pyatnitsky) of Tambov and Kozlov. There he served from 1928 to 1933, until his arrest. During this period, he waged a tireless struggle against the Renovationists in Kozlov.

Father Sebastian maintained contact with the brothers of Optina Pustyn who were living in exile. Thus, in 1929, he administered the Holy Mysteries to the dying Hierodeacon Cyril (Zlenko, † July 19, 1932, Old Style), who had returned from exile in Kzyl-Orda and was the former secretary of Elder Varsonofy.

Soon after, Archpriest Vladimir Nechaev was arrested, and Father Sebastian took on the responsibility of caring for his family: his wife Olga and their children.

The divine services in the parish church differed noticeably in their prayerful atmosphere from the reverent services of the Optina Hermitage, to which Father had grown accustomed. It would happen that on some feast day he would come out of church feeling disheartened. He did not like the unprayerful musical singing and wanted the choir to sing the way they did at the hermitage. But the choir director preferred singing that was louder and more cheerful, and he didn’t mind tapping his foot to the beat. Father insisted that before the service, the choir director seek his blessing regarding what and how to sing. Father would say, “We must sing in such a way that people are moved to pray and weep.” But the choirmaster objected, “His is the Altar, and mine is the choir.” Yet the priest would not tolerate such freedom, and they sang as he had blessed them to—in the monastic style.

It also happened that on major holidays, the male choir members would ask for money for wine. But Father Sebastian never granted this request, and if he did allow it, it was only “Kagor,” and even then, mixed with water. He would feed them until they were full at lunch, buy them each a shirt, and comfort them with anything but vodka. And because of this “disdain,” Father Sebastian endured trouble from the men his entire life.

Spiritual sisters began to gather around Father Sebastian in Kozlov. The first to arrive was Agrippina, a nun from the Shamordino Convent, whom Father Sebastian assigned to sing in the choir; then came Fevronia, also a nun from that same convent, whom Father Sebastian appointed as housekeeper. One day, having

finished her household chores, she went out into the courtyard to rest. She was plagued by thoughts: “Why did I come here? Father is just like all the other priests; the work is the same as it was at home.” Suddenly, Father came out of the house, sat down next to her, and said, “Why did you come to me? I’m just like all the other priests.” She realized that he could see all her thoughts, fell at his feet, and asked for forgiveness. And she understood that Father Sebastian was, in fact, not like everyone else. Mother Fevronia stayed with Father Sebastian forever; she was by his side during his years of imprisonment in Karlag and lived in Karaganda until her very death.

Soon, two young women from a merchant family came to visit Father. One of them, the nun Varvara, had been sent by her parents to Shamordino at the age of twelve. They came to Father dressed in city clothes: in slippers, delicate dresses, and headscarves. Father looked at them and said to Mother Fevronia, “Bring these girls some ‘fez-style’ boots, jackets, and shawls. Let them get dressed and go to church.” They obeyed without question and went to church in the clothes that had been brought for them. There, they stood right at the threshold behind the stove so that no one would see them or stare at the young girls. That was how Father sometimes humbled them.

The nun Varvara had a beautiful alto voice and an excellent memory. She was also the choir director. In addition, she was called “the Peacemaker” because she reconciled those who were quarreling. Father said of her: “If Varvara were a monk, she would be a hieromonk.”

At that time, other monks and nuns from ruined monasteries, as well as laypeople who had previously visited Optina Pustyn, were living in Kozlov. And the hearts of those sincerely seeking salvation through the creative power of God’s Spirit were drawn to Father Sebastian. This could not fail to attract the attention of the local authorities.

On February 25, 1933, Father Sebastian, along with the nuns Barbara, Agrippina, and Fevronia, was arrested and sent to the Tambov OGPU for investigation. During the interrogations, the investigator sought to uncover Father Sebastian’s contacts with like-minded people, as well as his attitude toward the Soviet authorities. To this, the priest gave a direct answer: “I view all the actions of the Soviet authorities as the wrath of God, and this regime is a punishment for the people. I have expressed such views among those close to me, as well as among other citizens with whom I have had the opportunity to discuss this topic. At the same time, I said that we must pray—pray to God—and live in love; only then will we be delivered from this. I was deeply dissatisfied with the Soviet authorities for closing churches and monasteries, as this destroys the Orthodox faith” [FSB of the Tambov Region, Case No. R-12791, Vol. 1].

The GPU did not accept parcels from outsiders, so Father’s spiritual children who were still at liberty sent a telegram to Tambov summoning his distant relative. They accompanied her to the prison; she delivered the parcel and spoke with Father. And at lunchtime, when the prisoners were led out of the prison and across the courtyard to the dining hall, the sisters stood by the gate and peered through the cracks. As Father Fomin passed by the gate, he blessed them.

On June 2, 1933, a session of the OGPU’s Special Commission on Extra-Judicial Cases ruled: “Stepan Vasilyevich Fomin, accused under Article 58–10, Part II of the Criminal Code, is to be sentenced to seven years in a correctional labor camp, with the term beginning on February 25, 1933.”

Father Fomin had his hair cut short and his head shaved. And when he passed through the gates for the last time, he could not even lift his head, so great was his grief.

The medical commission at the Tambov FZITK acknowledged that, due to limited mobility in his left elbow joint (Father Sebastian had injured his left arm as a child), he was unfit for heavy physical labor. Despite the commission’s conclusion, Father Sebastian was sent to the Tambov Region to fell trees, a task that was beyond his strength. His spiritual children learned the location of the logging site and, regardless of the distance, found a way to bring him care packages, comfort him, and support him as best they could. On Sundays, the convicts were allowed to go home. It was a long way home to Kozlov for Father Sebastian, but even on this side of the forest, in a small village, there were spiritual children who waited for him on Saturday evening. There, everything was provided for him: a place to wash, change clothes, eat, pray, and rest. Sunday was spent in prayer and conversation, about which Father Sebastian himself said: “It’s just like Easter! It’s like being in paradise!” And on Monday, he had to go back into the forest to work. But even that passed. A year later, Father Sebastian was transferred to the Karaganda camp in the village of Dolinka, where he arrived on May 26, 1934.

Historical Background

If one attempts to trace the origins of Karaganda, it becomes clear that the history of this city is nothing other than the history of Karlag and the history of the peasant “special settlers” of the 1930s. Until the early 1930s, Karaganda, as such, did not exist. Only on the site of what is now the Old City [the name of one of the districts of modern Karaganda], on a hillock, stood a red-brick outbuilding with a burgundy tin roof, built by the British back in the days of the Tsar. It was they (that is, the British) who dug the first test pit at the site of what would become the first Kostenko Mine and extracted the first coal, which was transported away on camels. And in this section of the steppe, there were several settler villages that had sprung up at the beginning of the century—Staraiia Tikhonovka, Bolshaya Mikhailovka, Dubovka, Fedorovka, and Dreshchenovka—where Russian settlers lived and, in some of them, Orthodox churches stood. That is all that existed before 1930, the year of the “great turning point,” when widespread collectivization—or the mass persecution of the peasantry—began throughout Russia.

Special Resettlers

The program of the first Five-Year Plan of the young state, which sought to consolidate its power in a short period of time, included the task of developing the virgin lands of Central Kazakhstan and the Karaganda coal basin. Since this task required an extremely cheap labor force, a commission chaired by Andrei Andreevich Andreev was established in early 1931 to address this issue in collaboration with the OGPU. The commission decided to deport 52,000 peasant families to Central Kazakhstan—a total of about half a million people, including children and the elderly. In February and March 1931, mass arrests of peasants began, and they were transported in convoys to the scorching steppes of Central Kazakhstan. Initially, to build the railroad from Akmolinsk to the future city of Karaganda, the heads of households and eldest sons were sent to Akmolinsk, where they constructed the railroad in a remarkably short time. In four months—that is, by May 1931—it was already complete. After that, the families of the railroad builders began to be transported to the Karaganda Region and the Osakarov District. Trains packed to the brim with peasant families set off toward Karaganda under strict OGPU guard. They came from all over the Volga region—from the Astrakhan Oblast all the way to Chuvashia and Mordovia—as well as from the Penza, Tambov, Kursk, Voronezh, and Oryol Oblasts, and from the Kharkiv and Orenburg regions. They were transported across the scorching steppes in tightly sealed cattle cars, where there was only one toilet barrel for the entire car. Pregnant women, nursing mothers, children, and the elderly traveled in those cars. People began dying even while still in the cars, and the dead were transported alongside the living to their destination. Once again, the strongest young men and women were selected from among the new arrivals to build the Karaganda–Balkhash railway. The daily quota (even in winter) for each laborer was 8 metric tons of soil. Their tools consisted of a wheelbarrow, a crowbar, a pickaxe, and a shovel. Those who failed to meet the quota had their rations cut. And people dropped dead. No graves were dug for them; instead, they were laid directly on the railroad embankment and covered with soil. So this road from Akmola to Balkhash literally stands on bones.

So, in the summer and early fall of 1931, 52,000 peasant families were brought to the territory of what would become Karaganda and its region and left out in the open to fend for themselves—with no housing, no sufficient food, and no water. People settled in hastily dug pits that they had dug themselves, covering them with rags so they could shelter from the scorching sun and the parching steppe wind. And during that extraordinarily hot summer of 1931, nearly all children under the age of 6 died of dysentery and starvation. The rest—from 10-year-olds on up to the elderly—were mobilized to build earthen barracks. They did not manage to finish building the barracks by winter, and in November, when snow had already fallen and the frosts were biting, people began moving into the unfinished, uninsulated, and unheated barracks, some of which did not even have roofs. Barracks measuring 50 square meters were occupied by 100 or more people. And during the winter of 1931–1932, a wave of mass mortality swept through. The main causes of death were cold, hunger, epidemic typhus, and scurvy. As a result, more than half of the total number of peasants in the settlement-quarantine camps perished. However, no one kept a record of the dead. There were only burial crews attached to the commandant’s offices, who gathered the bodies onto carts and dumped them into ditches dug on the outskirts of the settlements.

In late fall of 1932, to replace the deceased special settlers in the Osakarovsky District—where nearly all had frozen to death—a new contingent arrived: several trainloads of repressed Kuban residents. And in 1933, when famine struck nearly the entire country, a new wave of deaths swept through the special settlers.

During those terrible years, there was not a single Orthodox church in the entire Karaganda Region. The special settlers gathered secretly for prayer in dugouts. It was they who later formed the first communities of the Karaganda Church, which, beginning in 1942, petitioned for the opening of Orthodox churches and prayer houses at the mines and in the newly formed settlements.

What can be said about the plans for the first Five-Year Plans? Of course, they were fulfilled. The special settlers of the First Virgin Lands Campaign cultivated thousands upon thousands of hectares of virgin land; by the mid-1930s, they had established 25 economically robust collective farms in the Karaganda Region and the Osakarovskiy District and developed the first mines of the Karaganda Coal Basin.

But if we try to take stock and estimate the number of peasant special settlers who perished here in 1931–1933—based on the fact that only one in every four people survived—it turns out that for over sixty years now, the remains of approximately four hundred thousand peasants and their children have lain in hastily dug graves on the outskirts of special settlements and beneath the railroad embankment stretching from Akmola to Balkhash.

Just as with the transport of “dekulakized” special settlers, a similar problem—where to find cheap and undemanding labor to develop the uninhabited steppes of Kazakhstan, labor that would be free from family ties and ready to be moved from place to place, requiring neither housing nor hospitals nor schools—was solved just as simply.

On December 19, 1931, a decision was made to establish one of the Gulag’s branches in Central Kazakhstan—Karlag—which was initially named the “Karaganda Giant State Farm of the OGPU,” and the purpose of its establishment was to create the foundation for agricultural production to support the rapidly developing heavy industry of Central Kazakhstan. One of the first policy documents stated: “The Karaganda OGPU Giant State Farm, organized in 1931, has been entrusted with the honorable and responsible task of developing the vast region of Central Kazakhstan.” And this development began when, in late 1931, convoys of victims of political repression—along with criminals—began arriving in the ancient steppes of Sary-Arka from all corners of the Soviet Union. The first convoy, numbering 2,567 people, was housed in a tent camp surrounded on all four sides by barbed wire. The number of prisoners grew year after year, and along with it, the giant state farm expanded and developed. Its sphere of influence stretched from Altai to Betpak-Dala, from “Kazakhstan’s Switzerland” to the Zailiyskiy Ala-Tau. The territory of Karlag was equal in size to that of France. The capital of Karlag was the village of Dolinka (33 kilometers from Karaganda); the gateway through which prisoners passed was Karabas Station; and the entire boundless steppe of Central Kazakhstan became the mass grave of thousands upon thousands of its prisoners.

Karlag possessed real authority, weapons, and vehicles, and maintained a postal service and telegraph system. It consisted of 26 branches (“points”) located within a radius of 2 to 400 kilometers from Dolinka. The branches were integrated into a single economic plan, and there was never a case where this plan was not fulfilled. The conditions here were unique. Surrounding Dolinka, tightly encircling it, camp zones also sprang up, equipped to meet all the technical requirements of the camp regime: fences with barbed-wire canopies, watchtowers, a control strip that was plowed and harrowed, and circular guard dog posts. In the center of Dolinka was the third division (later renamed the first)—a prison within a prison, where prisoners had their sentences extended, were subjected to torture, and were executed by firing squad.

A three-member visiting panel of the Karaganda Regional Court, known as the “troika,” operated in Karlag. Sentences were carried out on site. The condemned were forced to kneel at the edge of a pit previously dug by other prisoners and shot in the back of the head. Those shot were recorded in the roster with the notation “Deceased,” and their personal files were destroyed.

The Karlag economy flourished. Karlag abounded not only in cheap labor but also had a strong intellectual hub. It held scientists, military commanders, cultural figures, politicians, clergy, and monks known throughout the world. Behind the barbed wire of the steppe divisions, a large number of highly qualified agronomists of all specializations, animal scientists, medical workers, and economists were concentrated. The living conditions of Karlag’s prisoners were unbearable. A report compiled by Gulag inspectors on February 5, 1941, states:

“Prisoners are housed in standard barracks. The barracks have adobe walls and are furnished with double bunks. The floors are earthen, and there are no winter window frames. The barracks are muddy and damp, and the stoves are not heated daily. The air temperature in the men’s barracks is +4°, and in the women’s barracks, +16°. Many prisoners lack bedding. Due to a lack of fuel, the bathhouse, laundry, and disciplinary

cells operate with significant interruptions. Widespread lice infestations were found, as well as a shortage of linens, which are neither changed nor washed. Less than 50% of the prisoners have been provided with winter clothing. Most are dressed inappropriately for the season and wear summer shoes. There is no boiled water, either in the barracks or at work sites. There is not even raw water available at the work sites. Prisoners eat snow instead of drinking water. The quality of the food does not correspond to its caloric content. There are cases where prisoners do not go to work because they lack shoes or adequate clothing. Prisoners who do not go to work for these reasons are classified as work refusers and are given the ration of a work refuser. They are even sent to solitary confinement (punishment isolation cell)."

Escape attempts were frequent at Karlag. All of them ended in "liquidation."

And against this backdrop, the fame of the Karaganda State Farm of the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs (times changed, and so did the names) and its experimental agricultural station resounded throughout the country. Cabbage, cucumbers, and tomatoes yielded record harvests here. Plant breeders achieved unprecedented results. They developed new varieties of winter and spring crops, as well as forage crops. Agronomist Mitroshina, sentenced to 25 years under Article 58, developed the "Epicur" potato variety and yielded 60 metric tons per hectare. In addition, a livestock farm was established. At the All-Union Exhibition in Moscow, for example, a cow named Moroshka was showcased, which produced 12,000 liters of milk per year. From mid-summer to late fall, enormous flocks of sheep made their way on their own from various Karlag branches all the way to the Petropavlovsk meat processing plant. Karlag had a sugar factory, a glassworks, a pima cotton mill, and a leather tannery. During the war, Workshop No. 3 of the RMZ produced M-82 mines. Prisoners worked everywhere. Karlag fed the army and supplied the state with grain, meat, weapons, and clothing. But the prisoners were not considered human beings. They were fed gruel and "Anutka's eyes" barley. Every day, judges came from Dolinka to try prisoners for taking a carrot or a beet.

And it is no secret that the mortality rate in Karlag was very high [Over the years of its existence (from 1931 to 1956), Karlag held about one million people. But since Karlag's archives remain classified to this day, it is impossible to give even an approximate number of its victims.].

"Ultimately," states one of the research reports from the experimental station, "all economic activities of the Ministry of Internal Affairs' state farm can be viewed as a grand-scale production experiment in the successful agricultural development of the extremely arid steppes and semi-deserts." That is exactly how it was. But all of this was designed and built by prisoners, at the cost of their own lives.

The Internment of Father Sevastian in the Karaganda NKVD Camp

Thus, in May 1934, Father Sebastian, a hieromonk from Optina Pustyn, was brought by convoy to one of the Karlag branches in the scorching steppes of Central Kazakhstan.

Recalling his time in the camp, Father Sebastian said that there he was beaten and tortured, and they demanded one thing of him: to renounce God. He said, "Never." Then they sent him to a barracks with the criminals. "There," they said, "they'll re-educate you quickly." One can imagine what the criminals did to an elderly and frail priest.

Due to his poor health, Father was assigned to work as a bread cutter, and later as a warehouse guard within the camp grounds. During his night shifts, Father never allowed himself to sleep; instead, he engaged in prayerful labor. And the authorities, when they came to inspect, always found him awake. Father recounted how movies were sometimes brought to the camp, and all the prisoners were herded into the club. "I didn't go to the movies," he recalled, "everyone else would go, but I'd tell my partner, 'You go to the movies in my place, and I'll stand watch for you.'" And if he had to go, Batyushka would arrive at the club early and lie down somewhere in a secluded corner or under a bench. He would sleep, rest, and say his prayers.

In the final years of his imprisonment, Batyushka was released from guard duty and lived in a guardhouse in the third section of the camp, located near Dolinka. He hauled water on oxen for the residents of the Central Industrial Gardens (ЦИО—). Sometimes, in the winter, he would bring water, approach an ox, and warm his numb hands against it. They would bring him mittens as a gift. But the next day, he would arrive again without mittens (having given them to someone or had them taken away) and once more warm his hands against the ox. The clothes he wore were old and tattered. When Father froze at night, he would climb into the livestock manger and warm himself with the animals' body heat. The residents of the labor camp gave him food—pies, lard. He ate whatever he could, but took the lard to the prisoners in his ward. "I was in prison,"

Father recalled, “but I didn’t break my fasts. If they gave me some gruel with a piece of meat, I wouldn’t eat it; I’d trade it for an extra ration of bread.”

His sisters Varvara and Fevronia, who had been arrested along with Father, were not sentenced. His sister Agrippina was sent to the Far East, where she was released a year later. She wrote to Father about her intention to return to her homeland, and he blessed her to come to Karaganda immediately. In 1936, she arrived, was granted a visit with Father, and he suggested that she buy a small house near the village of Bolshaya Mikhailovka, closer to Karlag, settle there, and visit him every Sunday by hitching a ride—“on any car that comes along.” Two years later, her sisters Fevronia and Varvara arrived in Karaganda. And a little house was bought on Nizhnyaya Street—an old shed with a sagging ceiling. They set up two rooms, a kitchen, and a porch inside it. There was also a vegetable garden with a well. Sisters Agrippina and Varvara found work at the hospital in Novy Gorod, while Fevronia, who was illiterate, worked on the collective farm. Other nuns also arrived in Karaganda: Kira, Martha, and Mary. They settled in Tikhonovka. The sisters got to know the faithful and began to quietly gather for communal prayer. Upon learning that Father Sebastian was in Dolinka, the faithful began to help him. On Sundays, the sisters would visit Father Sebastian at the ward. In addition to food and clean linens, they brought the Holy Gifts, a stole, and an epitachelion. Together they would go out into the woods; Father would receive Communion himself and hear the sisters’ confessions and give them Communion. The prisoners and the camp authorities grew to love Father. The love and faith in his heart overcame malice and enmity. He led many in the camp to faith in God—and not just any faith, but true faith. And when Father was released, he had spiritual children in the camp who, upon completing their sentences, would travel to see him in Mikhailovka. Many years later, when a church opened in Mikhailovka, the residents of the Dolinsky branch of the Central Prison Organization went there and recognized their former water carrier in the dignified elderly priest.

His prison term was coming to an end. Father was released from the camp on April 29, 1939, on the eve of the Feast of the Ascension. He went to his novices in a tiny little house where the floor was smeared with yellow clay, and in the kitchen, behind a screen on top of a large chest, was his bed. And so they lived there—Mother Fesha, Mother Varya, Mother Grusha, and later Mother Ekaterina, who had come to join them from captivity, along with Father. They rose early in the morning, read their prescribed prayers, the sisters went to work, and Father stayed at home. He fetched water, cooked lunch, and mended and cleaned shoes. The sisters were embarrassed by this, but the elder nuns living in Tikhonovka told them, “You do not understand what Father is doing, so keep silent.” They celebrated the Liturgy in secret, and every day Father recited the daily cycle of divine services.

Before the war, he traveled to the Tambov Region. Father’s spiritual children, who had waited many years for his return from the camps, hoped that he would stay with them in Russia. But Father, seeking not to do his own will but to surrender himself to God’s will, after spending a week in the village of Sukhotinka, returned once again to Karaganda, to the place that had been assigned to him by Divine Providence.

In those years, the population of Karaganda consisted of the same special settlers assigned “permanently” to the coal mines, as well as former Karlag prisoners who were being released with a certificate stating “permanent exile to Karaganda.” More than two-thirds of the city’s population did not have passports. The exiles lived in dark storage rooms, dugouts, and small sheds, and every 10 days they were required to report to the commandant’s office.

Karaganda was a city plagued by hunger; the bread situation was particularly dire during the war and postwar years. The priest himself would go to the store to get bread with his ration cards. He dressed like an ordinary old man, in a very modest gray suit. And so he would walk there and get in line. When his turn came, people would push him aside, so he would go back to the end of the line—and this happened more than once. People noticed this, and seeing his kindness and gentleness, they began to let Father skip the line and give him bread.

In 1944, Father and the sisters bought a larger house on Zapadnaya Street. Father walked around the house, surveying everything like a master of the house and saying what needed to be remodeled and how. “But why, Father?” the sisters objected. “We’re not going to spend the rest of our lives in Kazakhstan! Once the war is over, we’ll go back to our homeland with you.” “No, sisters,” said Father, “we’ll live here. Life is completely different here, and so are the people. The people here are warm-hearted, conscientious, and have endured hardship. So, my dears, we’ll live here. We’ll be of more use here; this is our second homeland, after all—we’ve already grown accustomed to it over the past 10 years.” And so they remained in Karaganda

forever, until their deaths. And at the Mikhailovsky Cemetery, they are all buried next to Father. Father himself buried three of his nuns—Agrippina, Varvara, and Ekaterina—even though they were much younger than he was. They all developed heart conditions after bandits attacked their little house on Nizhnyaya Street. They were scared half to death, and this undermined their health. Mother Fevronia was not at home that night, and she outlived all three of them. Father, foreseeing trouble, insisted that his novices move to the Melkombinat district. But that was far from B. Mikhailovka, and the nuns absolutely refused to move far from the church. They never heeded the Elder's advice, for which they suffered, dying one after another of heart attacks. Shortly after the attack, Father Mikhail bought a house for them next to the church, but the three nuns' strength had already been sapped. Their monastic names were Alexandra, Vera, and Elena. Mother Fevronia was tonsured after Father's death, taking the name Thekla. She passed away in 1976.

Back then, in 1944, a small house chapel was set up in the new house on Zapadnaya Street, and Father Sebastian secretly celebrated the Divine Liturgy there. Father's house was always clean, quiet, and filled with extraordinary peace. The rooms were filled with icons, before which the lights of oil lamps glowed softly.

Time passed. The residents of Mikhailovka, having heard about Father, began inviting him to their homes. He did not have permission to perform religious services, but Father never refused a request. The people of Karaganda were loyal—they would not betray him. Not only in Mikhailovka, but in other regions as well, people came to love Father and believed in the power of his prayers. The elder's spiritual children—monks and laypeople seeking spiritual guidance—began to flock to Karaganda from all corners of the land. They came from the European part of Russia, from Ukraine, from Siberia, from the far reaches of the North, and from Central Asia. He welcomed everyone with love and helped them settle into their new surroundings. Houses in Karaganda were inexpensive at that time. They belonged to special settlers who, over time, built new homes for themselves and sold their adobe shacks. Father would give money to those who had none to buy a house, or supplement the funds of those who didn't have enough. The money was eventually repaid to him, and he would pass it on to others, and so on.

New mines and quarries were opening up around Karaganda, and it wasn't hard to find work either. Soon there were a great many of "Father's people" in Mikhailovka, and their numbers kept growing, while Father was always cheerful, loving, kind to everyone, and approachable to all. And once, when he was walking with the nuns Maria and Martha to the communal cemetery beyond Tikhonovka—where, in the middle of the cemetery, there were mass graves into which two hundred deceased special settlers, who had died of starvation and disease, were placed each day and buried without a proper burial, without mounds, without crosses—the elder, having looked at all this and heard all about it, said: "Here, day and night, on these mass graves of martyrs, candles burn from the earth to the sky." And Father Sebastian prayed for all of them.

Karaganda grew and developed, absorbing the old settler villages—divided by stretches of steppe, mines, and quarries—as well as the settlements of special resettlers from the 1930s and the villages of Germans exiled to Karaganda from the Volga region during the war years. First, Kopay-Gorod was built, then the settlements of the 1st and 2nd mines; next, the Old City was built near the large mines; and after the war, the multi-story New City began to be built on a grand scale befitting a regional industrial center. Mikhailovka turned out to be the closest district, directly adjacent to the New City. And there was only one church in Karaganda—at Mine No. 2.

In November 1946, with the blessing of the elder, the Orthodox residents of Bolshaya Mikhailovka submitted an application to the relevant local authorities to register a religious community. Having failed to achieve a positive result locally, the believers appealed to the Commissioner for Religious Affairs in Kazakhstan in Alma-Ata. In response to this petition, in November 1947, the Karaganda Regional Executive Committee received an order: "Prohibit Priest Sevastian Fomin from conducting services in the unauthorized church." Repeated applications were sent to Almaty in both 1947 and 1948. Believers traveled to Moscow to petition the authorities and sought support from the Alma-Ata Diocesan Administration. Parents of soldiers who had died during the Great Patriotic War wrote to the military commissar of the Karaganda Region; their only consolation was to pray for their sons who had perished in the war: "But we," the letter stated, "are being deprived even of this opportunity" [Council for Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the Kazakh SSR, correspondence with the commissioner, File 1, p. 12; File 4, p. 45.].

In addition to Novy Gorod, the Bolshemikhailovsky parish included the districts of Melkombinat, the Fedorovsky coal seam, the Mikhailovskaya railway station, the districts of Sarani and Dubovka, 10 brick

factories, the Novostroyka district, the districts of the five Karaganda coal open-pit mines, several mines, and others (a total of 20 locations). And there was only one priest; he was assisted only by nuns.

The faithful asked to register the house of prayer at least as a branch of the existing Kirovsky House of Prayer at Mine No. 2.

As a result, in 1951, the Mikhailovsky Prayer House—where services had been held for some time—was permanently closed. It was not until 1953 that official permission was granted to perform church sacraments and rites—baptism, funeral services, weddings, and confession—at the Bolshemikhailovsky Prayer House. Now a much larger number of people could turn to Father, but he could celebrate the Liturgy only in secret, in the private apartments of the faithful. And after an exhausting day's work, after his private prayers, Father—small, thin, wearing a long black coat and a black skullcap—would walk at three o'clock in the morning with his light, quick stride through the dark streets of Karaganda to a prearranged house, where Orthodox believers would gather one by one or in pairs. On major holidays, the All-Night Vigil was held starting at one o'clock in the morning, and after a short break, the Divine Liturgy was celebrated. The windows were tightly covered with blankets to keep out the light, while inside the house it was bright and crowded. The service ended before dawn, and just as before, one or two people at a time made their way home along the dark streets.

It was during this period that two nuns of high spiritual standing—Mother Agnia and Mother Anastasia—arrived in Karaganda; Father Sebastian knew them well from his time at Optina Pustyn. Mother Agnia—a spiritual daughter of Elder Varsonofy and a talented artist—had studied icon painting from a young age at the Znameno-Sukhotinsky Monastery. She was well-read, thoroughly familiar with the writings of the Holy Fathers, and inwardly very reserved and intelligent. Mother Anastasia, with the blessing of Elder Nektarios, practiced the asceticism of holy folly. She often performed acts that defied common sense, the significance of which became clear only later. She tried to hide her concern for everyone and the angelic kindness of her soul behind an outward sternness, sometimes making sharp remarks to those around her and exposing their sins and shortcomings. But only those who were not yet accustomed to Mother Anastasia feared her; those who knew her reciprocated with the same love and great respect. Both of these elderly women were endowed with divine gifts. They saw right through people and made many prescient predictions, yet, possessing deep humility, they lived under the spiritual guidance of Father Sebastian.

Meanwhile, the efforts to open the church continued. Alexander Pavlovich Krivonosov, a man devoted to Father Sebastian, traveled to Moscow time and again and finally, in 1955, brought back the document he had secured for the registration of a religious community in Bolshaya Mikhailovka.

Renovation work began to convert the residential building into a church. Father Sebastian oversaw everything. Partitions between the walls were removed, and a blue onion dome—like those found on the ancient churches of forest hermitages—was erected on the roof. Local government officials, who were closely monitoring the progress of the work, categorically forbade raising the church's roof even by a single centimeter. So Father gave his blessing for the people to gather secretly one night and, during that night, lower the church floor by one meter. The people took up shovels, and over the course of the night, 50 cubic meters of earth were hauled away by trucks. As a result, the ceiling was now one meter higher than before. The floor was quickly covered with planks, and by morning, a prayer service was already being held in the church.

A building was erected in the courtyard and named the “guardhouse,” to which four rooms were gradually added: a refectory with a kitchen, a cell for the nuns, and a large, bright room with a warm vestibule, which became the priest's cell. Further into the courtyard, an open-air chapel was set up for the celebration of the Easter Matins and the Epiphany Blessing of the Waters; in the kitchen, bunks were set up for visitors, who were especially numerous during the holidays (a few years later, the bunks were removed by order of the City Council). The residents of Mikhailovka began bringing in the icons they had managed to preserve. Some of the icons had been saved by them when the old Mikhailovka Church was closed in 1928. For example, the priest decided to place the icon of “The Quick to Hear,” a work of wondrous beauty once commissioned on Mount Athos by the first settlers of Bolshaya Mikhailovka—immigrants from Belarus—in the iconostasis. Mother Agnia painted an icon of the Savior with the Gospel for the iconostasis, the same size as that of the Mother of God. She also painted many other icons for the St. Michael's Church. Church vessels, liturgical books, and the writings of the Holy Fathers were sent from Moscow by Protodeacon Jacob, a former prisoner of Karlag. And in 1955, on the great feast of the Ascension of the Lord, the church in Bolshaya Mikhailovka, dedicated to the Nativity of the Most Holy Theotokos, was consecrated.

Father selected his own priests. First, he would observe them; then he would call them over and say, “You must become a priest.” This was the case with Alexander Pavlovich Krivonosov, who held a leadership position in agriculture at the Regional Executive Committee. He was frightened by these words; he went home and couldn’t sleep—he wept. But he didn’t dare disobey; he went to Father and said, “Bless me, I agree.”—“Well, that’s good. Study for a while, and then you’ll go to Almaty to be ordained.”

A letter from Elder Sebastian to Metropolitan Nicholas (Mogilevsky) of Almaty and Kazakhstan has been preserved:

“Your Eminence, Holy Bishop Nicholas, I ask for your holy blessing. Your novice, the unworthy Sebastian. Holy Lord, I earnestly ask you, if it is possible, to ordain Alexander Pavlovich Krivonosov as a priest, since my health is failing and I find it very difficult to serve the parish. Lent is now approaching, and there are many people coming for confession and Communion, so it is hard for me to carry out this holy work alone. Therefore, I, a sinner, ask that you not refuse my request and that of my parishioners to ordain Alexander Pavlovich as a priest. Alexander Pavlovich is a moral, sober man, worthy in every respect of the priestly office.”

More should be said about Alexander Pavlovich Krivonosov. In his youth, he visited the Shamordino Convent, and Blessed Pelagia, who lived there, spoke to him at length about his future path in life. She said, for instance, that he would stray from Orthodoxy, become involved in various religious and political movements, and at the end of his life become “Archimandrite Diveyev.” Her words later proved true. He did indeed stray from Orthodoxy, joined the Old Believers, and became involved in other religious movements. But when he met Elder Sebastian in Karaganda, the elder had such an influence on him that he finally and irrevocably settled into Orthodoxy and was ordained a priest. Father Alexander became a kind, loving pastor and a practitioner of the Jesus Prayer. Until his death, he awaited the fulfillment of Blessed Pelagia’s prophecy and would say: “Everything she prophesied to me has come true. Only one thing has not come to pass.” But if we look at the bigger picture, everything has come to pass. From this prophecy, we can conclude that Elder Sebastian established the “Diveyevo Monastery” in Karaganda—that is, a women’s community similar to the one in Diveyevo. After the elder’s death, Father Alexander became the abbot. This means that, in God’s eyes, he was the “Archimandrite of Diveyevo,” which is what Blessed Pelagia had foreseen. Father Alexander fell asleep in the Lord on July 5, 1971.

Another priest, Seraphim Nikolaevich Trufanov, had been ordained long ago at the request of his father, who was also a priest, but had worked as an economist for many years. Like Father Alexander, he was unmarried. Later, Father sent Pavel Alexandrovich Kovalenko, the church warden, to Alma-Ata for ordination. Father Pavel became the fourth priest. Deacon Nikolai Samartsev, who had taken a vow of celibacy, was also a protégé of Father.

Father served as rector of the church for eleven years—from 1955 to 1966, until the day of his death.

On December 22, 1957, on the feast day of the Icon of the Mother of God “Unexpected Joy,” Father was elevated to the rank of archimandrite by Archbishop Joseph (Chernov) of Petropavlovsk and Kustanai and awarded a Patriarchal Diploma “For Diligent Service to the Holy Church.”

In 1964, on his name day, he was awarded a bishop’s staff—an unprecedented honor. Before his blessed repose, Father was tonsured a schema-monk.

Father carried out his tireless ascetic service to the Orthodox Church—from his time as a novice at the Vvedenskaya Skete of Optina Pustyn to his tenure as abbot and his ordination as archimandrite—for 57 years, from 1909 to 1966.

Father consistently adhered to the Church’s liturgical regulations, never allowing omissions or abbreviations during divine services. Church services were an integral part of his inner life. Father held the feasts of the Ascension of the Lord and the Holy Trinity in special reverence, as they marked the completion of Christ the Savior’s work and the crowning of all Christ’s Mysteries. In his conversations, his favorite figure was John the Theologian, whose commemoration he celebrated with particular solemnity and reverence. He often lamented his flock’s unworthy veneration of this Apostle of Love and would say: “Behold, today is the feast of the Transfer of the Relics of Saint Nicholas—and the church is full of people. But yesterday was the feast of Saint John the Theologian, Apostle and Evangelist—and the church was half-empty. How can you not understand who is greater and whom you should honor more? Which feast is more important?” Likewise, he especially honored all seven days commemorating John the Forerunner and Baptist of the Lord, as well as

the feast of Saints Cosmas and Damian the Unmercenaries (July 1/14), as the patron saints of the region where he was born.

Father attached great importance to people lighting candles. Sometimes he would call one of his spiritual children or parishioners to him, give them a bundle of candles, and say, “Pray and light candles more often.” Either something was threatening that person, or Father saw that they rarely lit candles. The reason for this often became clear later on. But on one occasion, he said to one of his spiritual daughters, who had taken monastic vows: “You don’t have to light candles; be a candle yourself.” In the same way, Father taught us to venerate icons and spoke reverently about them: “The triumph of Orthodoxy is a feast. What, then, is being celebrated? That the iconoclastic heresy was defeated and overthrown. God’s grace rests upon the icons. They are given to us by God as a help and protect us from the forces of darkness. There are special holy sites where the grace of the Holy Spirit accumulates. And there are icons that are special because of the glory of grace. There are miracle-working icons that have been venerated for centuries, and, like little streams, they carry God’s grace from the Lord.” If Father noticed that someone was not venerating the icons, he would say to that person: “My dear, when you reflect on and reject anything, keep sound judgment in your mind and heart.” To one person he said: “My dear, first understand that it is difficult for you to comprehend many things, and that is why you err so easily. Otherwise, people mistake their own ignorance for wisdom.” Once, during a conversation, Father said that Elder Nektarios always taught that wisdom, intellect, and sound judgment are gifts of the Holy Spirit. They lead to piety. And that a person deprived of the gift of discernment often conceives of himself as superior to others. “Where else can one seek protection from the evil one, if not by acquiring humility rather than pride?”

Father’s constant concern was to instill deep peace in people’s souls through the subjugation of their own will. He strove to bring his own life and that of his flock, even while living in the world, closer to the monastic way of life. He was deeply distressed if anyone disobeyed him or failed to follow his advice—this was always to a person’s detriment and often led to their misfortune. He would be so distressed that it turned to sorrow. He would rebuke them, turn away, and withhold his blessing. But if he saw tears, or if the person repented and ultimately heeded his advice, he would be overjoyed, take pity on them, and after some time bring them joy in some way. Once he said to a young woman: “You didn’t listen to me—so why have you come now, crying and begging? Now you’ll have to suffer the consequences.” And, turning to the young women, he said: “Why don’t you listen to me? Why? After all, I...—he faltered—don’t always make mistakes.” Such was his humility. Father would even weep over his children’s disobedience. He wept just as often while hearing confessions. Why? Either he was horrified by their sins, or he didn’t see proper repentance, or he foresaw something...

Father’s love was tender and caring. Sometimes he got angry, but rarely. When he did, it came across as very childlike. He would say, “I’ll take a stick and give you a good whack with it, I’ll really give you a whack with that stick!” People would often fall to their knees in such cases and ask for forgiveness. Of course, it wasn’t the stick that was scary, but the fact that they had upset Father. Once, during a candid conversation, he let slip: “How many lives have I prolonged...”

Father had a subtle sense of humor and loved to joke, but always in a very kind-hearted way. He never hesitated to take the time to talk with people. Every piece of advice he gave led to well-being. The lives of Father’s faithful children were a model of order. They were called “Father’s children,” and people said that a good half of Mikhailovka was like an unofficial monastery.

Father’s health was frail. He suffered particularly from a narrowing of the esophagus. Everyone knew that under no circumstances should he be disturbed or distracted by conversation while eating. He would immediately start coughing, which sometimes ended in vomiting. This illness was the result of the emotional upheavals the elder had endured throughout his long life. He was always on edge. When the church was not yet registered, and Father secretly celebrated the Liturgy with only his closest associates, he constantly felt a sense of fear. He would say, “Here I am—a priest—celebrate the service! Do you have any idea what I’m going through?” After all, he was breaking the law; they could come at any moment and arrest everyone. And even later, when services were held openly in the church, Father still carried some of that fear with him. Sometimes a man in uniform would walk into the church, and Father would immediately think: “They might come over right now, interrupt the service, and arrest us.” Once, one of the parishioners said to Father: “I’m afraid of so-and-so.” But he smiled and said: “Really? Well, I’m not afraid of him. I’m not afraid of anyone.

But I am afraid that they'll close the church. That's what I'm afraid of. I'm not afraid for myself ; I'm afraid for you. I know what I have to do. But what you'll do—I don't know." Those were the priest's words.

When Father was still strong, he would lead a prayer service after every Liturgy. The choir would sing, and two akathists would be read. But when he grew weaker, only half the akathists were read. At the end of the prayer service, Father would have everyone kiss the cross and would always say a few brief words. Even if it was in a quiet voice, he always offered some kind of edification. Of course, the entire congregation stayed for the prayer services. There were many young people in the church. Only on the choir loft did a group of up to seventeen girls stand and sing. And everyone would hide whenever an official came by to inspect. As soon as someone shouted, "The authorities!"—everyone would hide. Eight people would come with the official. They'd enter the church, and only old women would be standing in the choir loft. The authorities were always trying to close the church, and Father was often summoned "there." He'd arrive, and they wouldn't be able to say anything. "What kind of old man is this," they'd say, "that we can't do anything? Well, let him grow older, and once his old age passes, we'll close the church." And the local authorities preferred to conduct all discussions with Father Alexander. They clearly sensed the Father's spiritual stature; it seemed to frighten them, instilling a reverential fear. Once, the commissioner for religious affairs at the Regional Executive Committee demanded that the churchwarden of Father Alexander's church ensure that the clergy stop traveling to the city of Saran and the village of Dubovka, since those places belonged to a different district. The church warden relayed this demand to Father, and the very next day, Father himself went to the Regional Executive Committee together with the church warden. And when Father spoke with the commissioner, the latter immediately changed his tone—he began to explain himself and even apologize to Father. Father addressed him: "Comrade Commissioner, please allow us, at the request of the miners, to perform religious services in Saran, Dubovka, and other settlements. Sometimes they ask for a sick mother to receive Communion, or for a funeral service for the deceased." The official replied graciously: "Please, Father Sebastian, go ahead; do not refuse them." And no matter what requests Father Sebastian made of him, he refused almost nothing, and the village head never mentioned it again afterward.

A special occasion for the priest's flock was his name day and his birthday. Everyone wanted to approach the priest, congratulate him, and give him at least a small gift. But the priest did not like honors or special attention directed at him, nor did he like to accept gifts. Everyone would gather to congratulate him, but he would arrive late in the evening or the next day. Once, on his name day, Father returned home in the evening, opened the door to his cell, and, before even stepping inside, he suddenly cried out: "Who?! Who gave permission to clutter my soul and my cell?!" The cellmates, alarmed by this reaction, peeked into the cell and saw that there were new robes standing near his bed. Someone had placed them there without Father's blessing.

Father also disliked it when someone was overly praised; he would immediately point out some flaw in that person. And if he saw someone being belittled, he would immediately find the very best qualities in that person. No matter what sins they might have, he would find the good in them.

Father set high standards for himself. He often repeated that one must fulfill one's duty unwaveringly. Someone said to him after a memorial service: "You're very tired again today. You conducted the memorial service for so long." He took a roll from the table, held it up, and said: "Here, you see, for every bun like this, I must say a prayer." At the same time, Father was always moderate in everything. "One must follow the royal path," he would say, "that is, adhere to the golden mean in all things, and, most importantly, always rely on God's will and His Divine Providence."

He loved nature very much, had compassion for animals, and possessed a particularly gentle soul. Once, a cat living in the kitchen gave birth to five or six kittens. The cook brought up the idea that the kittens should be drowned. Father, passing by by chance, overheard this conversation. He trembled all over, shook violently, and almost cried out: "Don't you dare drown them! We'll raise them all!" The kittens were spared, and when they grew up, the parishioners of Mikhailovka snapped them all up—almost coming to blows—for Father's blessing.

Father often traveled to the villages of Dubovka, Saran, Fedorovka, and Topar. He performed baptisms and funeral services in people's homes. In the places he visited, parishes have since been established through his prayers. He also visited the village of Dolinka, where he served his prison sentence. And in Dolinka, at the camp where he was imprisoned, a cross carved into a tree by Father's own hand has been preserved. Since

then, the tree has grown, and the cross has grown with it. There, in Dolinka, a person—a prisoner—is buried beneath almost every tree; there is a grave beneath almost every tree.

But Father especially loved to visit the village of Melkombinat. He used to say that in Mikhailovka he had his “Optina,” and at Melkombinat—his “Skete.” There he gathered his orphans and widows, bought them little houses, and cared for them. And when he came to Melkombinat to pray, people would put aside their chores and worries and, one by one, hurry to where Father was, just to receive his blessing and find comfort. Father welcomed everyone with love and offered each person his own words of edification. A spirit of peace reigned there.

His widowed older brother, Hilarion, had come to stay with Father and was living at the Melkombinat with his youngest daughter and granddaughter, Taisia. He was already a venerable elder—tall and upright. On Sundays and holidays, Hilarion Vasilyevich would come to church with his daughter and granddaughter. When approaching Father for a blessing, he would bow to the ground and reverently kiss his hand, and during confession he would kneel. Before his death, he was tonsured as a rasophore, and Father himself conducted the funeral service for his older brother, the monk Hilarion.

Following an inherited monastic custom, Father especially loved to perform memorial services, and he himself conducted memorial services daily. He said that he preferred to conduct funeral services and commemorate women because they had far fewer sins. He could see the sins of the departed. Sometimes, at 3 or 4 in the morning, he would wake his novices so they could bring him memorial prayers. And after Father’s death, people had this dream: there were many churches, all golden and tall, and among them was one small church covered entirely in crosses. People asked, “Whose is this church covered in crosses?”—“This,” they were told, “is the church of Schema-Archimandrite Sebastian. He loved to pray for the departed, and that is why this church is entirely surrounded by crosses, so that no one can do anything to it.” And it has stood there for 40 years now.

When speaking with Father, it somehow became naturally and undeniably clear that the soul lives forever, that life does not end with death, but only the body ceases to exist. And it was simple, and he spoke about it simply. There is no doubt that Father possessed the gift of clairvoyance, although he did not openly display this gift. His clairvoyance manifested itself openly only when the situation demanded it.

Once, Father was conducting a memorial service and reading from a list of names: “Ioanna, Simeon, Olga, Maria...” As he read, he paused and, still holding the list in his hand, looked around. “Who submitted the request for commemoration—Ioanna, Simeon, Olga, Maria?” “I did, Father,” replied a woman. “And when did Simeon die?” “A long time ago, Father.” “Take your note back; I will not commemorate him. Bring a death certificate.” The woman flared up: “What are you saying, Father? I’m not young enough to do that!” (There is a crude superstition that if you write a living person’s name on a memorial list for the repose of the soul, they will become very anxious and feel compelled to return to the one who is commemorating them in this way.)—“Very well. Bring the certificate.” The priest didn’t know this woman; she was a visitor, otherwise she wouldn’t have dared to deceive him.

There was another such case. A young woman named Maria Stakanova sang in the church choir. She had been raised in an orphanage, where she had been sent from a nursery home—and knew nothing about her parents. One day, Maria approached Father and told him that she grieved over not knowing her parents’ names or their nationality, and that she could not commemorate them or pray for the repose of their souls. “I don’t have time right now,” Father said, “come see me tomorrow, and we’ll talk.” The next day, he called her over himself and said, “Marusya, your parents were Russian, Orthodox, and exiled. Your father’s name was...”—and he named him and named her mother. Maria was overjoyed and began to offer prayers for their repose.

The priest never openly healed or rebuked anyone, and out of his modesty and simplicity, he always said, “I don’t heal anyone, I don’t rebuke anyone—go to the hospital.” “I,” he would say, “am like a fish, voiceless”—that’s how he humbled himself. He helped people through his secret prayers. Speaking of those possessed, he would say: “Here they will suffer, but there their trials will pass painlessly... I do not want to take your crosses away from you. Here you will suffer, but in heaven you will receive a great reward”—and he comforted those who were suffering. Father possessed spiritual wisdom and great patience. When someone complained about a neighbor, he would say, “I put up with all of you, yet you are unwilling to put up with even one person.” If someone was at odds with another, he would worry: “I am the abbot, yet I listen to all of you.” He cared for the salvation of each person; that was his goal. He would ask, “Live more peacefully.” Once we went to a funeral service and forgot the censer. We began to reproach one another. Father said, “It’s

my fault,”—and everyone fell silent. Father would say, “Look, I’ve gathered all of you here—the blind, the lame, the sons of this one and the sons of that one. I myself am sick, and I’ve gathered a bunch of sick people.” Father Alexander, who had no voice, served with him, and Father Pavel also had a very weak voice. “Well, we’ve gathered, and we’ll serve little by little, you sickly ones!”

Father did not approve of traveling to other monasteries. “Here,” he would say, “are the Lavra, Pochaev, and Optina. Services are held in the church—everything is here.” If anyone was planning to move somewhere, he would say: “Don’t go anywhere; there will be disasters everywhere, turmoil everywhere, but Karaganda will only be touched by the edge of it.”

Father Sebastian’s Illness

His Holiness Patriarch Alexy I was very eager to see Father and speak with him. He blessed Bishop Pitirim (Nechaev) to bring Father there, even if only by plane. But Father was already frail and did not agree: “I am not fit to fly by plane,” replied the Elder, and he remained in Karaganda.

And so, in an act of love and selfless service to God and his neighbors, the years passed. Father grew noticeably weaker. His weakness, shortness of breath, and pain throughout his body increased, and he had a complete lack of appetite. He experienced almost constant pain in the area of his hernia and in his chest. The attending physicians administered comprehensive treatment, but Father’s condition did not improve; his suffering was only temporarily alleviated. Yet Father would still attend church daily during the liturgical hours. He would say, “What kind of clergyman would I be if I stayed home during the Divine Liturgy or the All-Night Vigil?” He celebrated memorial services daily, but by then he only celebrated the Liturgy on feast days.

A letter from that time by Elder Sebastian to Archbishop Joseph (Chernov) of Alma-Ata and Kazakhstan has been preserved:

“Your Eminence Joseph. I ask for your archiepiscopal blessing upon all of us and beg your forgiveness for not having been able to write you a reply until now. I have long intended to write to you and congratulate you on the feast day, but I never got around to it. I sent my congratulations by telegram, but I keep delaying my reply: illness and physical weakness, as well as my ministry, household responsibilities, and liturgical duties—all of this wears me down, as I am sick and frail. My ailments give me no respite, not even at night: my cough and hernia trouble me greatly. And time marches on; it waits for no one. Christmas was recently, and three weeks have already passed since then. We spent the holidays well and peacefully. For now, we live and serve in peace and harmony. I would have liked to ordain Father Nicholas as a priest and the village head, Pavel Alekseevich, as a deacon, because he is very zealous in reading and singing; there are few such faithful and zealous people nowadays. As for the rest—it is as God wills and as Your Holiness’s blessing may dictate. As for the construction, the matter has not yet moved forward. Glebov, who received Fr. Alexander and Fr. Andrei in your presence, has been ill the whole time, and we would like to know the exact outcome: whether construction will be permitted at the old site or at another location, or whether it will be denied altogether. We are gradually acquiring building materials, but since the location has not been determined, we do not know where to store them. Your Eminence Joseph, I ask for your holy blessing to retire from active ministry and devote myself to my own soul, while Father Alexander, or Father Seraphim, or Father Nicholas—may serve as rector. My mind is failing, and my ill health prevents me from managing these matters. In particular, the concerns and labors involved in the construction, as well as in the divine services, are beyond my capacity given my current state of health. Please grant me your blessing to retire, and, with your consent and that of the parishioners, appoint Father Alexander as rector. All of us—myself, your unworthy novice, as well as Father Alexander, Father Seraphim, Father Nicholas, the clergy, the entire church staff, and all the parishioners—bow before you and ask for your Holy blessing and holy prayers.”

In the church, behind the memorial service area, a small room was partitioned off for him, which they called the “cabin.” Against the back wall, behind a curtain, stood a bed where he could rest during the service when he was troubled by pain or severe weakness. By the window stood a small table, with an armchair in front of it, above which hung a large icon of the Most Holy Trinity painted by Mother Agnia. Sometimes Father would let out a cry, lie down on the cot, and have a pillow placed under his feet so that they were slightly elevated. He wore a half-mantle, an epitachelion, and cuffs. And he would sometimes recite the Ektenia while lying down. He always stood for the Gospel, put on his felonion, and read the Gospel while wearing it.

Father would hear confessions while seated in a chair. He began to speak less with those who came to see him and could no longer receive everyone. He refused no one who had traveled from other cities, but later he began to shorten his conversations with them as well.

In December 1965, severe frosts set in, with temperatures dropping to 40°. As he walked across the courtyard from his cell to the church, Father began to cough violently. The doctors, Olga Fyodorovna Orlova and Tatyana Vladimirovna Tortensten, who were monitoring his health, said, “You mustn’t walk across the courtyard in such severe frosts.” Father looked at them disapprovingly and said, “I’ll fly across.”

Starting in January 1966, his health deteriorated significantly, and his chronic conditions worsened.

His attending physician, Olga Fyodorovna Orlova, diagnosed the following conditions: chronic bronchitis with bronchiectasis and small abscesses, pulmonary emphysema, esophageal stricture, and prostate adenoma with associated complications: chronic pyelonephritis with severe symptomatic hypertension, and bilateral inguinal hernias with frequent partial incarcerations. Father had been suffering from these ailments for several years.

Father was deeply distressed that it had become difficult for him to celebrate the Liturgy—he often coughed during the service and felt short of breath. The doctors suggested that he receive injections in the morning before the service. Father was delighted and agreed. After the injection and a short rest, he was able—albeit with difficulty—to walk to the church and celebrate the service. But the disease progressed, and soon he could no longer make it to the church even after the injection. Seeing his suffering, the doctors suggested to Father that the novices carry him to the church in a chair. At first he refused, but when, after much persuasion, his attending physician, Tatyana Vladimirovna, began to cry because of her patient’s disobedience, Father placed his hand on her head and said, “Don’t cry; let them carry me.”

The boy deacons, Father’s novices Alexander Kiselev [Currently Archpriest Alexander, rector of the Church of the Nativity of the Most Holy Mother of God.], Alexei Veretennikov [The late Hieromonk German.], and Peter Goroshko [Now Hegumen Peter; he serves at the same church.], and Vasily Pisarev [the late monk Vasily], quickly fashioned a lightweight chair out of aluminum tubes; the cell attendant tied a warm scarf around Father’s mouth, seated him in the chair, and carried him to the church. At first he was very embarrassed, but then he got used to it. He smiled and joked. Every time the cell attendant dressed him, he would say, while waiting for the boys, “Well, I’m ready! Where are my little horses?” And once, when they were carrying him and Tatyana Vladimirovna was walking alongside, he said, “Well, here’s another one to help pull the cart.”

The priest’s doctors were amazed at what a compliant, patient, and kind patient he was. He obediently followed the treatment plan prescribed for him, but would first ask what medication was being prescribed, how it worked, and how long the course of treatment would last.

Father respected medical professionals and valued the work of everyone from orderlies to doctors. When people came to him for a blessing to pursue their studies, he most often blessed them to attend a medical school, occasionally an institute, and to work as an orderly in a hospital. “It’s not a sin to seek treatment,” he would say, “and working in a hospital is a saving grace—it’s a good deed to care for people.” He recommended surgery only when absolutely necessary, when he knew that conservative treatment would not help. Those who underwent surgery with his blessing went on to make a full recovery. The priest himself was a skilled diagnostician. When he sent his attending physician, Olga Fyodorovna, to examine a patient, he would say: “Olga Fyodorovna, please examine the patient. I think he has such-and-such a condition.” The diagnosis he made was confirmed.

The days passed, and with each one, Father’s condition worsened. In February, Bishop Joseph arrived in Karaganda. Although Father was quite weak, he concelebrated the Divine Liturgy with the Bishop. As he took his leave, His Grace said, “And now I’ll come back after Easter and bring you a gift—a basket of grapes.” Everyone understood that tears awaited us.

Father often spoke of death and the passage into eternity. When people asked him, “How will we live without you?” he replied sternly: “Who am I? What am I? God was, is, and will be! Whoever has faith in God—even if they live thousands of kilometers away from me—will be saved. But whoever, even if they cling to the hem of my cassock, lacks the fear of God will not be saved. Those who knew me and saw me after my death will value me less than those who did not know or see me.” “Close but slippery, far but deep.”

Great Lent had begun—the last one in the elder’s life [This account of the final days and passing of Elder Sebastian is based on manuscripts by Tatyana Vladimirovna Tortensten and Olga Fyodorovna Orlova—

the elder's attending physicians.]. On Forgiveness Sunday, he celebrated the Liturgy and conducted the rite of forgiveness in the evening. He was alert and his face was radiant.

During Great Lent, for the first four days of the first week, nothing cooked was eaten in the church, except for soup on Wednesday after the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts. On that day, Father blessed the infirm to receive Communion. On the remaining days until Friday, nothing was cooked—not even tea was boiled. They sat down to eat after Great Vespers. They served black bread, sauerkraut, pickled cucumbers, and raw onions. For those with upset stomachs, Father permitted them to eat warm baked potatoes and baked onions. On Friday, during the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts, there was a large number of communicants. After the Liturgy came the meal: mushroom soup and sweet porridge. In the evening—porridge left over from lunch, white rusks, and white bread.

During the first week of Lent, Father served daily, reading the Great Penitential Canon of St. Andrew of Crete himself in a clear and distinct voice. On Sunday, the Feast of Orthodoxy, he served the Liturgy. During those days, Father did not converse with anyone nor receive visitors.

The second and third weeks of Great Lent passed. Everything went on as usual, and it seemed that Father would be with us forever.

On March 13, the son of a professor at Kyiv University, the young hierodeacon Fr. Pavel, arrived from Kyiv to visit Father. He was born in Paris. Their family had returned to Russia about ten years earlier.

Throughout the fourth week, Father Pavel read the services in church—very beautifully and expressively, pronouncing every word clearly; he assisted at the altar and spent all his free time trying to be near Father. Father would talk with him at length. Not only Father, but everyone associated with the church, grew fond of Father Pavel. He was very modest, but a high level of refinement was evident in all his actions. Father watched him closely.

On March 21, Father Andrei arrived from the village of Osakarovka. He asked Father to send someone to assist him with the readings in church and directing the choir. Father gave his blessing for an experienced female singer to go, and suddenly also gave his blessing for Father Pavel to accompany her to Osakarovka. A very moving conversation took place between Father Pavel and Father. Of course, Father Pavel had not come all the way from Paris to Russia—and then to Father—just to find himself alone in the remote steppe. He had come to be near Father, and since Father was sending him away, he said, “Bless me to return home. I will return to my hermitage near Kyiv.” Father: “I’ll give you a hermitage! You came to me, and I accepted you. You came of your own free will; I didn’t call you. Here’s your hermitage in Osakarovka!” Father Pavel: “Let me go; bless me to leave you for good.” The Father grew agitated: “I’ll give you Kiev—I’ll give it to you with a stick, I’ll give it to you with a stick, and I’ll take a rope too—I’ll give it to you with a rope! Are you a monk?!” Father Pavel fell at the priest’s feet: “Forgive me, bless me; I’ll go to Osakarovka.” He ran to his room to fetch the icon with which his father had blessed him for monastic life when he was still a boy. He took nothing else.

Everyone felt sorry for Father Pavel; everyone was upset. They complained to Father and said: “We need Father Pavel ourselves—he reads so well and sings in the choir. We have almost no male voices. And he helps everywhere: in the sanctuary and in the sacristy. Are you going to send everyone away? Let Father Andrew find and select his own people. Then others will come to you asking for the same.” The priest remained silent.

Father Andrew was in a hurry to leave. Everyone came to see Father Pavel off. Everyone reproached Father Andrew. Father Pavel looked stunned and bewildered. The priest did not leave his cell.

Before the All-Night Vigil, Father drank tea and spoke to no one. The next day was the feast of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste. During the All-Night Vigil, Father was agitated and “raged,” as the nuns put it. Father Alexander got into trouble for asking whether to sing or read “Glory to God in the Highest.” Father Alexander and Alyosha Veretennikov were reprimanded again when they tried to stop Father from going to cense the entire church. He said angrily, “Give me your blessing; I’ll go cense it myself.” He went around the entire church, censuring it all by himself.

On Friday, March 22, Father performed the funeral service for one of his spiritual daughters, who was not yet old. He wept during the service.

A woman possessed by a demon was brought from Siberia. Father celebrated the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts. Throughout the service, the possessed woman would alternately meow, bleat like a sheep,

and crow like a rooster. They dragged her out into the narthex. It wasn't difficult—she was extremely emaciated.

On Sunday evening, March 24, when the worshippers had dispersed and the church was nearly empty, Father was still in his “cabin.” The possessed woman lay quietly in a corner, accompanied by one of the women who had come with her. Suddenly, the Royal Doors swung open, and Father stepped out onto the pulpit in full vestments, wearing a mantle and carrying a staff. The possessed woman rose from the floor and walked toward him, barking and meowing. Before she reached the priest, she let out a loud crow like a rooster. “Well!” said the priest loudly, and his voice was unrecognizable. The woman possessed by a demon cried out again, but much more quietly. “Well!” repeated the priest. She cried out very softly, as if from afar. “Well!” said the priest for the third time. She was silent. Then she said, “You are Joshua.” “I am not Joshua; I am Sebastian,” said the priest authoritatively. “Tomorrow morning you will come here to the priest, confess your sins, and receive Communion.”

On Friday, Father didn't celebrate the service; he sat in the sanctuary. The former possessed woman stood calmly during the service and quietly received Communion. That evening, she was taken away to Siberia.

On Sunday of the sixth week, Father did not celebrate the service; he sat in a chair in the sanctuary. After Communion, he instructed them to sing “Open to me the gates of repentance, O Giver of Life...” From that day on, his strength began to noticeably fade.

On March 31, at 3:00 a.m., Father woke the cell attendant and said, “I feel worse than I ever have. Surely, my soul is leaving my body.” They supported his breathing with oxygen all night. Father began to breathe calmly.

On Lazarus Saturday, April 2, something very significant and exceptionally important happened to Father. At 3 a.m., he woke his cell attendant and asked her to call Father Alexander to him. Radiant and trembling with joy, he told Father Alexander, his spiritual father, something. No one knows what they spoke about. We know only that Father Alexander heard the Father's confession and gave him Holy Communion, as he had gone into the sanctuary to receive the Holy Gifts. After Communion, the Father began to sing, “Christ is Risen!”—and sent the novice to wake up and summon the girls from the choir so that they might sing the Easter hymns for him. The girls came, all wearing white headscarves, and began singing the Paschal troparion, the stichera, and the irmoses of the canon. When they had finished singing, Father asked, “Who's in the kitchen? Tell them to boil eggs three ways: soft-boiled, hard-boiled, and in a bag.” All of this was done.

In the morning, Father asked the housekeeper to bring him some milk: “Well,” he said, “it's nothing but kvass and okroshka. Why are you always forcing me to drink kvass? You should have given me some milk.” The housekeeper went to the store and brought back some milk. No one contradicted Father. The nun poured the milk into a mug and said very timidly, “Father, today is only Lazarus Saturday; then comes Holy Saturday, and only then Easter. If it were Easter today, how many painted eggs we'd have, how many kulich cakes there'd be!” He looked at everyone and said, “Yes... that's it!—he pushed the cup of milk aside.—The milk's gone! Bring me some okroshka, then.”

That evening, Father sat at the table by the window, watching people walk to church carrying willow branches. “The people are gathering for the All-Night Vigil,” he said, “and I must prepare to join the fathers and forefathers, the grandfathers and great-grandfathers.”

On Tuesday, April 5, after the memorial service, Father said to Father Alexander, “Send a telegram to Osakarovka as soon as possible, telling Father Pavel to return for good.”

April 9. Saturday of Holy Week. During the Liturgy, Father lay in his room. After the Liturgy ended, he put on his cassock and cowl and went out to bid farewell to the people. He congratulated everyone on the upcoming feast and said, “I am leaving you. I am leaving this earthly life. The time has come for me to part from you. I promised to say goodbye, and here I am, fulfilling my promise. I ask one thing of all of you: live in peace. Peace and love are what matter most. If you have these among yourselves, you will always have joy in your souls. We are now awaiting the arrival of the Bright Matins, the arrival of the feast of Easter—the salvation of the soul for eternal joy. And how can this be attained? Only through peace, love, and sincere, heartfelt prayer. You will not be saved by anything outside of yourself, but only by what you attain within your soul and in your heart—peaceful stillness and love. May your gaze never be sidelong toward anyone. Look straight ahead, ready for any kind response, for any kind deed. This is my final request of you. And I ask one more thing—please forgive me.” He bowed at the waist and staggered. Quietly, with great difficulty,

he made his way into the sanctuary and asked to be carried home to his cell. The crowd did not disperse; everyone was weeping.

On April 10, on Easter night, Father wanted to be carried to church, but he was unable to get up. Everyone around him was overcome with distress. Matins was in progress. Dr. Tatyana Vladimirovna left the service and ran to Father. He looked at her and said, “Why did you leave the church? I’m not dying yet. I’ll still have time to exchange the sign of the cross with the departed here. Go back to the service in peace.”

When the Liturgy began, Dr. Olga Fyodorovna was summoned to the priest. After a painkiller injection, his condition became calm, even joyful. “I want to go to church. After all, I used to sing well myself. I sang ‘Pascha’ in my cell all through Holy Week. And now I have to ask others to sing for me. But I don’t want to stay here; I want to be in church. I really want to put on my cassock and cowl and sit like that, at least for the Divine Liturgy.” The cell attendant began to dress him, and he continued speaking: “I ask all of you to comfort one another, to live in love and peace, and never to raise your voices at one another. I ask nothing more of you. This is the most important thing for salvation. Everything here is temporary, fleeting—there’s no need to worry about it or strive for anything for yourself. It will all pass quickly. We must think about the eternal.” They dressed the priest, and the boys carried him to the church.

On Sunday afternoon, Father was lying in his cell, dressed in a new cream-colored silk cassock. “I was lying here just now, remembering,” he said, “how the elders at Optina passed away. Father Joseph was ill for a very long time, but Father Anatoly ‘the Little One’ wasn’t ill at all—not even for a single minute. He died in a miraculous way... It is a sacrament... a very miraculous one. In his spirit, in his great humility, he was closest of all to my elder, Father Nektarios. After the revolution, two elders died and were buried in the Optina cemetery. Father Theodosius, the skete abbot, died in 1920, when things at Optina were still as they had always been. But when the Civil War ended in 1920, everything changed. Especially in 1922, there were many persecutions, searches, and arrests. It was Elder Anatoly’s turn next. On July 28, they came to him and conducted a lengthy search. Then they said, “Well, get ready.” He began to ask for a delay until morning so he could pack. They agreed, but sternly ordered the cell attendant to wake the elder by morning and prepare him for departure. They left. The elder began to pray. The cell attendant waited about two hours—he was still praying. Then he went in and said, “Father, it’s time to get ready.” But the elder replied, “Go away; don’t disturb me.” He came back again and asked, “Father, it’s time to get ready.” “Why are you always bothering me? I’m not going anywhere with them—go away.” The cell attendant came a third time, and Father Anatoly was lying on his cot, his hands folded across his chest—dead. Well, the cell attendant called the necessary people; they dressed the elder, laid him on a table, lit candles, and read from the Gospel. Soon they came for him, asking, “Is the elder ready?” The cell attendant replied, “He’s ready; come in.” They entered, and there he lay, dead on the table. Of course, they were greatly astonished. Father Anatoly was the last to be buried in the Optina cemetery, next to Elder Makarii. When they were digging the grave, they damaged Elder Makarii’s coffin and discovered the elder’s incorrupt relics.”

On Monday, April 11, they brought Father a small Easter egg from Mother Agnia. He beamed with joy: “May the Lord save her and bless her. How much she has done for our church! No one has done as much as she has. And in general, how much good she has done throughout her entire life. I am dying. From now on, turn to her for everything.”

At 3:00 a.m., Father began bleeding from his throat. They administered a hemostatic agent, and Father dozed off. In the morning, they called Bishop Joseph in Almaty. He said, “He won’t die this week yet, but death is already at the door. I’ll fly out to see you.”

On the morning of April 12, Easter Tuesday, Father felt better and was breathing freely. “Vera,” he said to his cell attendant, “put my boots on me; I must go out to the people to exchange Easter greetings so they won’t be sad. I promised. I’ll tell everyone what’s most important.”—“Father, your feet are so swollen; I can’t even put slippers on you, let alone boots.”—“No, no, I have to say what’s most important. Put them on me!”

Vera fetched some slippers and cut them open on the sides. The boys carried Father to the church. He was wearing his cassock and cowl. He sat for a while by the altar, then stood up, went out through the Royal Doors to the pulpit. Leaning on his staff, he began to bid farewell to the people once more: “Farewell, my dear ones, I am leaving now. Forgive me if I have upset any of you. For Christ’s sake, forgive me. I forgive you all for everything. I feel so sorry for you. I ask you for one thing, I beg you for one thing, I demand one thing: love one another. May there be peace among you in all things. Peace and love. If you listen to me—and I ask

this of you so earnestly—you will be my children. I am unworthy and sinful, but the Lord has much love and mercy. I place my hope in Him. And if the Lord deems me worthy of His radiant abode, I will pray for you unceasingly. And I will say: ‘Lord, Lord! For I am not alone; my children are with me. I cannot enter without them; I cannot be alone in Your heavenly abode. They have been entrusted to me by You’... And then, quietly, barely audibly: “I cannot do without them.”—He said this, wanted to bow, but could not; he merely bowed his head. The boys took him by the arms and led him to the altar.

Everyone in the church was weeping.

On Wednesday, April 13, Bishop Pitirim’s sister, Nadezhda Vladimirovna, and Anatoly Prosvirnik from the Academy [later Archimandrite Innokenty († 1994)] arrived. Father Pitirim spoke at length with Nadezhda Vladimirovna after the Divine Liturgy in his cabin.

A call came from Almaty: Bishop Joseph had fallen seriously ill, with a fever of 40, so he would not be able to fly in.

On Thursday night, Father barely slept; he was in agony, gasping for air, and said: “There isn’t a single spot in my whole body that isn’t in pain. My spine burns as if with a red-hot iron; I can’t breathe. And worst of all—the anguish of the spirit.” He kept asking what time it was.

Some nuns came to see him from the church. When Sister Fevronia entered, Father looked at her with a long, unbroken gaze, blessed her twice, and said, “May God save you for everything—for all your kindness and devotion. I’m taking everything with me. May God save you.” As she was leaving, he crossed himself several times in her direction.

Messengers arrived from Sister Agnia, saying that Mother Agnia had locked herself in her room and was not letting anyone in.

In the evening, Hegumen Dimitri flew in from Kokchetav. They called Bishop Joseph to ask for permission for Father Dimitri to tonsure Father into the schema. The bishop replied, “There’s no need. Tomorrow, Bishop Pitirim will fly in from Moscow and take care of everything.”

They asked Father, if possible, not to change his name during the tonsure, since everyone knows him by that name, and a name change would be, as it were, an additional hardship for everyone. Father agreed and said he would ask Bishop Pitirim about this.

“The day of my passing is drawing near,” Father began to say to those around him, “I am very glad that the Lord has deemed me worthy to take the schema; I have long awaited this day. It is a pity to leave all of you, but such is God’s will.” “Father, who will you leave us with?” Father remained silent for a moment, deep in thought, then said, “Do not grieve. I leave you in the care of the Queen of Heaven. She Herself will look after you. And you, try to live in peace with one another and help one another in every way you can.” I will not forget you; I will pray for you, if I find the courage before the Lord. And you, pray as well. Do not abandon the church; make a special effort to attend on Sundays and feast days. By observing this, you will be saved by God’s mercy and through the intercession of the Queen of Heaven.”

Late in the evening, while Dr. Tatyana Vladimirovna was giving Father an intravenous infusion, he began to speak: “Here, my dear doctor, my old doctor. It’s hard for me to even utter a word, but I want to tell you something. My tongue won’t move, my mouth is dry, and everything hurts. You couldn’t find a single spot with a needle that wouldn’t hurt. My legs can no longer support me; there is such weakness throughout my whole body that it’s even hard to lift my eyelids. But my mind is clear and lucid; my thoughts flow distinctly, deeply, and calmly. My consciousness is neither clouded nor altered—no. I lie here and think: so thought does not depend on the body. And the brain is the body. There would no longer be any strength left in my body for thought. Thoughts come from the soul. Now this has become clear. So, praise be to God, I’ve barely managed to tell you this.”

On Saturday, April 16, at 9:00 a.m., Bishop Pitirim arrived from the airport. He went straight to Father and was struck by his appearance. “I have never seen him like this, not even during any illness,” he later told those around him. They spoke privately for a long time.

After lunch, Father’s condition deteriorated sharply; he asked that Bishop Pitirim be summoned to him immediately. When the Bishop arrived, Father asked him to begin the rite of tonsure into the schema right away. Preparations began. The Bishop asked everyone to leave; only Sister Anastasia assisted with the tonsure.

After the tonsure, Father spoke very little. His face and his entire appearance were remarkably transformed. He was so filled with grace that looking at him made one’s soul tremble, and one keenly felt one’s own sinfulness. He was a majestic Elder, no longer a resident of this world.

At 3:00 a.m., Father called for Father Alexander to hear his confession and administer Holy Communion. By morning, life within him was barely flickering. He lay with his eyes closed, breathing heavily, running his fingers over the blanket as if over piano keys. When he opened his eyes, he gazed with a distant, sorrowful look past those present. Then he spoke with Bishop Pitirim. Soon he called for Dr. Tatyana Vladimirovna: “My old doctor, help me—I’m in great distress; it hurts so much.”—“Where does it hurt, Father?” He pointed to his hands, which were bandaged from the intravenous infusions. It was already difficult to find his veins, so the medication seeped under his skin, causing him additional pain. “Right away, Father; I’ll give you a painkiller injection, and the pain will go away.”

“That’s not the main pain. The main thing is the anguish of my soul. Do you think death is a joke? I have many sins, but few good deeds.”

“Father, your sins are too small to see even under a microscope, and your good deeds are a whole sea.”

“But what have I done? I wanted to live a strict and modest life, and yet, whatever they may be, I indulged in joys and comforts. And I admired beauty a great deal, especially the beauty of nature.”

– Father, isn’t beauty itself a grace from God?

– God’s grace is joy from God. As for merits—I have no merits of my own! No heroic deeds! A person lives, but for what? Everything comes from God. And what does God receive in return? This applies to everyone; the transition is inevitable for all. Everything here is temporary, fleeting. Why does a person walk the path of life? For love, for goodness. And that is why he must suffer and bear his suffering patiently. And strive to pass into eternal life for eternal joy. But I lived—I did good, you say—and then I sinned. A person makes mistakes, acts cruelly, and loses everything he has gained. I have suffered greatly, bearing my own heavy, monastic cross. The monastic life is difficult, yet it is also the easiest. But I have grumbled at times. And because of this grumbling, everything is lost—all my merits. And so—anguish of the spirit instead of joy.

– Father, how should I live? The priest paused, then said:

“Live as you live. We’re all sinners. Just don’t commit any major sins... Well, that’s our conversation. It’s easier for me to speak and breathe today. Christ be with you.”

On Monday evening, for the Radonitsa memorial service, the priest was carried to church. He lay in his “cabin,” saying nothing to anyone, looking at no one. He crossed himself frequently, listening to the singing and the service. Bishop Pitirim presided. When they sang “Eternal Memory,” he ordered that he be carried home. After the service, he spoke with His Eminence, and then with Father John, who had flown in from Michurinsk at 10 p.m. Father joyfully welcomed him, saying he was glad that Father John had found him still alive. “You managed to come to see me, and I managed today to exchange the sign of the cross with all the departed and pray for them. Just look—what a wonderful day! Today His Eminence prayed, and tomorrow he will pray for all my departed children. I have lived to see Radonitsa. The Lord is merciful. And the departed so need—so cherish—the prayers of the living for them. I have always prayed most of all for the departed. And to you, Father John, I bequeath this: pray most of all for the departed. Glory to God for everything! Glory to God for everything!”

During these final days of Father’s life, many of his spiritual children, not wishing to leave the Elder’s side, spent the night at the church. On April 18, after the usual evening prayers (the beginning of Thomas Week), Father asked that the Paschal Hours be read, after which everyone returned to their places. His cell attendants—his granddaughter Taisia and Dr. Olga Fyodorovna—remained on watch near Father’s cell. Father slept restlessly, tossing and turning. At 4:00 a.m., he rang the bell from his cell. Olga Fyodorovna immediately got up and went into the cell. The priest looked as if he were in agony. Olga Fyodorovna asked, “Father, my dear, are you feeling unwell?” He nodded affirmatively and said, “Yes, I’m not feeling well.” Olga Fyodorovna offered to give him an injection. He agreed: “Yes, please, do it.” His head and hands were hot. She dampened a piece of gauze and placed it on Father’s forehead. After the injection, he calmed down, and the pain subsided. Olga Fyodorovna began rinsing the syringes. Suddenly, Father coughed violently, sat up abruptly in bed, propped himself up on his elbow, spat phlegm into a bag, and glanced questioningly at Olga Fyodorovna and then at the bag. There was blood in it. Then he spat two or three more times. Olga Fyodorovna sat down next to him on the cot, trying to support his back. Suddenly, the sharp coughing fit recurred. The priest jerked upright in bed, took a deep breath, and opened his eyes wide. His gaze shot into the distance, as if he had seen someone and was surprised. It lasted only a moment. His face turned deathly pale; he stretched

out slightly, took his last breath, and passed away. A questioning, surprised look froze in his open eyes. Father died on April 19 at 4:45 a.m. It was Tuesday—Radonitsa.

Olga Fyodorovna screamed; the nuns and Taisia rushed in immediately. Weeping broke out, and commotion ensued. They summoned Bishop Pitirim and everyone who was nearby that night. Everything else proceeded as usual.

At 5:30 a.m., His Grace began to conduct the memorial service. Father lay on the bed atop a white bedspread, wearing a new cream-colored silk cassock. The same cream-colored fabric covered his face and feet. His hands were crossed in the shape of a cross over his chest. There was a deep and solemn silence. No one was crying anymore. There was no grief—peace enveloped the soul.

After the memorial service ended, everyone left the cell. The vestment ceremony began. The priest's body was still warm, his face serene, as if he were alive. The priest's body was almost gone—nothing but bones. They anointed him with olive oil and dressed him in the schema. The bishop covered him with a mantle and concealed his face with a cowl.

Candles were burning in the room. The priest was reading from the Gospel. On the table, beneath his cassock, lay our Father, whose love surpassed any love possible for a human being on earth. Each of his spiritual children was his most beloved. Not just one of his most beloved, but each one was his very most beloved. What seems impossible is possible in God—and not only possible, but understandable and natural. And now a black cloth covers something lying on the table. Everyone knows that it is Father. Undoubtedly, it is Father. And yet, it was no longer him. An impassable barrier, deeper than the deepest abyss, lay between him—lying beneath his black cassock—and us.

In the morning, His Grace celebrated the Memorial Liturgy of Radonitsa. At five o'clock in the evening, they brought the coffin, lined with black cloth, and laid Father inside it. His Grace removed Father's kamelaukion, placed a miter on his head, and, as the hymn "Helper and Protector..." was sung, the coffin was carried into the church. The words of the spiritual hymns, stunning in their depth, flowed forth—full of sobering sorrow and consolation, reaching the very edge of what is incomprehensible to us, yet already comprehended by the holy Father's soul. His grievous sufferings had ended—the crucifixion-like sufferings of his sacrificial love, his physical torments, his "languishing of the spirit." His spirit had found freedom. And we were left without that joy of always being able to ask Father about anything. No matter what happened, all we had to do was go to him, tell him, and everything would fall into place; everything would be set right. His gentle gaze, his voice, drawing out the end of his sentences as he read the Gospel—all that, too, was gone. But can we grieve, weep, or pine away? Can the spiritual bond with Father ever be severed? Our communion is now of a different kind—one of prayer.

From all corners of Kazakhstan, Siberia, and the European part of Russia, clergy and laity—Father's spiritual children—gathered under the blessed canopy of Father's church. Priests served memorial services all night long, and the choir sang. And people kept coming and coming. A telegram was received from His Holiness the Patriarch: "I express my condolences to the parishioners of the church on the occasion of the passing of the benevolent elder, Archimandrite Sevastian. Your Eminence, Bishop Pitirim of Volokolamsk, is hereby blessed to perform the burial of the departed in the Lord. Patriarch Alexy."

On the third day, Father was buried at the Mikhailovsky Cemetery. The hearse carried the coffin only a short distance to the highway. Upon turning onto the highway, the coffin was carried to the cemetery on outstretched arms. It floated above the enormous crowd and was visible from all sides. All traffic on the highway was halted; people formed a solid wall lining the highway and sidewalks. The windows of the houses were open—people were looking out from them. Many stood at the gates of their homes and on benches. A choir of young women, singing "Christ is Risen," followed the coffin. "Christ is Risen"—the entire crowd of many thousands sang. When the procession passed by the cement plant, the entire fence was filled with workers sitting on it, and the entire shift, in overalls stained with wet mortar, poured out into the factory yard. People made their way through the crowd toward the coffin to touch it with their hands. Many had gone ahead and were waiting for the coffin at the cemetery.

The grave for Father was dug at the edge of the cemetery, and beyond it stretched the boundless Kazakh steppe. The coffin was placed by the grave, and His Eminence conducted the funeral service. Father had wished to be buried wearing his kamelauk. His Eminence removed the miter from his head and placed the kamelauk on him. The coffin was lowered into the grave, a mound of earth was piled over it, and a cross was erected.

May you rest in eternal memory, gracious Elder, tireless intercessor, fountain of living water, teacher of healing wisdom—words flowing from the Spirit.

Shortly after Father's death, Bishop Joseph arrived in Karaganda [Metropolitan Joseph of Alma-Ata and Kazakhstan (Chernov, 1893–1975) spent a total of 20 years in camps and in exile. Of those, he spent 6 years in Karlag.].

He celebrated a memorial Liturgy for Father, went to the cemetery, and conducted a memorial service. He rebuked some, humbled others, and comforted still others—feeding everyone “grapes,” some sweet, some bitter. And before leaving, he said: “Father Sebastian, the most reverend, the blessed Elder, wept and prayed a great deal at night. And only God and he knew about this. And what was he weeping about? He wept because many—including those in leadership positions—disagreed with him and did not heed his counsel. He endured it all with humility, praying to God for the salvation and enlightenment of everyone. And now, because of his tears and prayers to the Lord, the grace of the Holy Spirit will rest upon Karaganda until the Second Coming.”

Bishop Joseph loved to visit Karaganda. He used to say: “Karaganda is anointed with honey,” “Karaganda is built upon the bones of the saints,” and “Let's go to blessed Karaganda.”

Speaking of the Bolshemikhailovsk parish, he said: “Father planted grapes here, which he then nurtured with his tears.” “It is a small church, invisible from the ground, yet its lamp shines all the way to heaven.”

On one of his visits to Karaganda, His Eminence toured the parishes and celebrated the Liturgy in the priest's church, but he did not visit the priest's grave. Everyone saw him off at the airport, and of course, everyone mourned. And this is what happened: the plane flew as far as Almaty, but there were adverse weather conditions there; Almaty wouldn't accept it, so the plane turned around and flew back to Karaganda. And His Grace joked on the plane: “That's our Sebastian for you! We didn't visit his grave, and he sent us right back!” From the airport, His Eminence took a taxi to Mikhailovka, celebrated a memorial service, visited Father's grave, and only then flew away.

He spoke of Father this way: “I am absolutely certain that Father is numbered among the venerable ones.”

Father's Children

Feodosia Fedotovna Prokopenko (Shvager)

We were brought to Osakarovka, to the fifth settlement, on August 1, 1931. Our mother was with us, along with the seven of us children. My oldest brother Pavlik was sixteen, I was twelve, my little brother Zhenya, my sisters Nadya and Varya, then Vanya, and the youngest, Grisha. We were a large family. They took our father away first, and we didn't know where he was.

We lived in the Stalingrad Region; my father worked on the village council. In 1929, when they began to dispossess the wealthy peasants, my father was enlisted as an activist. He refused to confiscate the peasants' property, saying, “I won't go; I can't do this”—and then they took him and all of us away as supporters of the kulaks. We were small-scale farmers—middle peasants, as they said back then. We had a dugout, a cow, a couple of horses, and a few sheep. My father spent a year in solitary confinement. At first, they took us forty kilometers away from Stalingrad, and in 1931 they brought us to Osakarovka, to Settlement No. 5, where there was a flat steppe. There were fifty thousand people in that settlement. All around, police on horseback stood guard to make sure no one escaped. But where could you run? The Ishim River was there. We got our drinking water from there, and that's where we did our laundry. We gathered wild greens, cooked them, and ate them. Out on the steppe, we dug a hole like a cellar, covered it with whatever we could find, and lived there. That's how everyone lived during the first year. There was only one well for the entire 5th settlement, twenty-five meters deep—it's still standing to this day. Day and night we stood in line for water. Mom would send you with a little bucket, and you'd go, just to bring water for the sick children. There were no toilets; there was a ditch, about thirty meters long, dug out, shared by everyone. And then, people began to die—a widespread outbreak of dysentery. Every evening a cart would come by; the dead were thrown onto it like logs and hauled away to the pits. It happened that entire families died. And our children began to fall ill with dysentery. They had high fevers, there were no doctors, their lips were cracking and bleeding, so we moistened them with water. And then, on August 31, my little brother Zhenya died; then, on September 11, my little sister Nadya

died; and on the morning of September 17, Varya died. The sun had just come out, risen halfway, when my mom and I opened that hole; we were lying there as Varya was dying. And just as the sun rose fully, Grisha, the youngest of us all, died. There were no coffins; we dug the graves ourselves and threw the bodies into them. We were lucky to have Uncle Petya, a relative from our farmstead. May he rest in peace. He'd tell Mom, "Don't worry, Dasha; we'll weave baskets for your children"—there was brushwood there. And Mom put all the children in the baskets. And Mom would ask the boys from that farmstead, "Dig a little space under the barrel so we can slide the basket in there." And then they'd pile more on top, and more, and more, and up higher still, and more, and then they'd cover it all up. Of the fifty thousand, did half survive or not? But we had Pavlik, me, and Vanya left, and Mom was with us.

Then we started going to work. There, they were digging up sod, and we teenagers—about twelve of us—would hitch ourselves to a cart and haul that sod to the construction sites—they were building houses, laying walls out of sod. But we didn't end up in those first houses. And then Mom got sick with typhus; she lay unconscious for two weeks, and we just sat there.

Winter set in, and a light dusting of snow began to fall. Once the snow had fallen, Dad came to see us; he'd managed to secure permission for us to be reunited. Dad started working, and things got a little easier for us. He lined a corner of our dugout with sod and covered the pit with sod on top. He brought with him a sheepskin coat that we'd managed to smuggle to him on our own. And my little brother and I lay under that coat all winter, because we were stripped of our clothes—they'd taken us away with only the clothes on our backs, and that's how they brought us back. Forgive me, of course, for saying this, but we kept count of how many fleas each of us caught and killed—the fleas were crawling all over us. We ate dry rations; there was nowhere to cook there. They'd bring lentils, and we'd chew on them. That winter was the hardest of all. Pavlik and Vanya didn't survive it, and I was the only one left of all the children, along with Mom and Dad. By the second year, they'd already built a house; they partitioned it into five apartments, and we built the stove ourselves.

What we went through—God forbid anyone should ever have to! Anyone who's never been to Kazakhstan hasn't seen true suffering, but anyone who stays there will never forget it until the day they die!"

And where were the graves, in the 5th settlement? Now there's just flat ground there. I can't even imagine where they were buried now—the settlement is so big. There used to be a lot of pits there, but I don't know where to find them now. Does anyone even remember where those pits were? I don't think so. There aren't many old people left. If my mom were alive, she might have remembered.

Nina "Kokhlushka"

My name is Nina "Khlushka." Well, even if I told you my last name, no one knows me by it. I'm from the Sumy region myself, from the Zernovo station. In '41, when the war started, I was in Ternopil. We were evacuated from Ternopil to Kyiv; we ran all the way to Kyiv, and they told us: "Save yourselves however you can." I managed to make it home to my father and mother somehow. No sooner had I arrived than the Germans came. I worked for them—cleaning their boots. Two of my sisters were immediately taken away to Germany, while I was ordered to sign some kind of paper and left to clean boots. And when our troops arrived, I let slip that I'd signed some kind of receipt—though to this day I don't know what it was. And so, based on that receipt, I was charged. Only later did they explain to me that I was a German agent. And they sentenced me to ten years. I spent four years logging in the Kirov Region, and then they sent me to Karaganda. I spent six years in Karlag. What did I see there? Nothing but suffering and torment. I had three numbers on me—a number here, a number there, a number over there—I was completely branded. And then, when I was released, they wrote: "Permanent exile to Akmolinsk." They brought me from Karaganda to Akmolinsk, and I immediately fell ill with jaundice. And when I recovered, I left the hospital and thought: "Where should I go?" I'm standing on the street—wearing my camp clothes—and everyone is avoiding me. I stood there crying bitterly. Some people came up to me and asked, "Why are you crying like that, woman?" I said, "It's like this and that."—"Oh, sweetheart, you're from the camp, and we're special settlers here. We'll take you in." What a miracle of God! They took me in, got me a job at a hospital, and I worked there for four years. And just then, everyone was released from their life-long exile. I came home from Akmola, and everyone looked down on me back then—after all, I'd been in prison. But there, in the Bryansk region, in the village of Brasovo, there lived an elderly man, Father Matthew from the Ploshchanskaya Hermitage. I went to him and said, "Father, I have no life here!" And Father Matthew replied, "Go back to where you came from. You'll find everything

that's yours there, and you'll be rewarded with unexpected joy!" Oh my! I was overcome with trembling! What was there? What kind of joy could there be? I'd endured so much suffering there, shed so many tears—I'd served my time there! In Aktas! In Karabas! I'd just been released from Dolinka, and—"Go back to where you came from."

I returned to Akmola and started going to church all the time, and the priest, Father Nikolai Moiseev, said to me: "You know, Nina, go to Karaganda—Father Sebastian is there. You're alone; maybe he'll take you in." And that was the first time I went to see Father Sebastian. When I walked in, he was standing there, like a father in a large family, calmly blessing everyone. As soon as I opened the door, Mother Anastasia cried out, "It's our girl! It's our girl!" Then, when Father called me over and I went into his cell, I fell at his feet, kissing his boots, not knowing what to say, and wept bitterly: "Dear Father! Dear Father! I didn't even want to think about Karaganda—let alone come here—I didn't even want to remember that it existed on earth! I was sitting here innocently, serving my sentence in Aktas, in Karabas; I was released from Dolinka. And now I've come here to you!"—and I told him everything while weeping bitterly. Tears welled up in Father's eyes. And all the sisters were moved to tears by our weeping. Father called me a "martyr," since I had been imprisoned through no fault of my own—"for the sins of the whole family," Father said. He gave me a large icon of the Holy Trinity and gave me plenty of candy: "And this, Nina, you should distribute in Akmola to whoever you know." I stayed there for two days, and then I had to return. They saw me off, put me on the train, and Father said, "You'll come visit me again." And so I began to visit. I went for about three years, and then Father blessed me to stay in Karaganda. That was around 1960. I came here, and Father sent me to work at the hospital. He sent all his people to the hospital. I worked in the pediatric ward, and with Father's blessing, we laid many unfortunate children to rest. And then the enemy rose up against me. I felt so sick to my stomach that I said to a child, "Ugh! May you choke to death—I'm so sick of you!" I came to my senses and ran to Father: "Father! Look what I did today!" He didn't scold me, but said right away, "But was that really you? 'It was,' he said, 'the devil!' 'Leave the pediatric ward, because the enemy has risen up against us for loading the children onto the train. Go to Ward 1; there's no one of ours there.' And I worked in Ward 1, the Botkin Ward, the whole time.

We hadn't heard anything from Maria, my sister, whom the Germans had taken to Germany, for fifteen years. "Father," I said, "we don't know how to pray for Maria—she hasn't returned from Germany." And he said, "But she's alive!"—"How can that be? We haven't heard from her in fifteen years!"—"Yes, she's alive; you'll hear from her soon!" And sure enough, we soon received a letter from Maria—she was in France.

One day I walked into the memorial chapel, and the priest immediately said, "Nina! Your family sent me a bun!" What was that about? I walked away, still unable to figure out what kind of bun my family had sent. When I got home, there was a letter in the mailbox— —from my parents, who wrote: "We prayed so hard for the priest! We baked a nice cake and handed it out in church for Father." That's when I understood.

I hadn't been thinking about that elder, Matthew, anymore; I'd forgotten about him. But then I suddenly remembered, and I told Father Sebastian all about him and what he'd said to me. And Father said, "No, that won't do. You go there, give him a little prosphora, and let him pray for me."

I was standing in the church, thinking about my trip back home. I went up to Father to receive his blessing, and he asked, "Where have you been? You went back home, didn't you?" He blessed me to go home to my father and mother. "Father, how long should I stay there?"—"As long as your mother blesses you to stay. Buy them some sugar." And in their letter, my parents wrote to me: "Bring us some sugar." He had foreseen all of this. And when I arrived in my hometown, I went to see Elder Matthew, gave him a piece of prosphora, and showed him Father's photograph, and he said, "Ah! But this is a great elder!"—and he kissed the photograph. "He'll die soon—five years earlier than he should—because you don't listen to him." And he prayed for him—Elder Matthew from the Ploshchanskaya Hermitage. And I wept—Aktas... Karabas... Dolinka... and then this unexpected joy—this is who I found—Father!

Anastasia Petrovna Parshin

Sister Evpraxia was the same age as Father. She told me that she often visited the elders at Optina Pustyn. At that time, Father was a young novice. Once, when she arrived, he came up to her and said so affectionately, "My little one, my little one!" She thought to herself, "He's just a novice—and he's already calling me 'my little one'! I came here to see the elders—why is he calling me that?" Later, she came to Karaganda to visit him, and Father kept her there. That's how she became his "little one."

Mother Eupraxia also recounted: she had been exiled, and in the same area, the hieromonk Hierotheos was living in a settlement. Living with them was a young woman named Seraphima, who was gravely ill with tuberculosis. Then Father Hierotheos received a letter from Father Sebastian. He wrote: “Tonsure Sima with the name Sophia. Do not delay.” The letter arrived on the eve of a major feast day. “What can we do?” they thought. “We cannot postpone the celebration,” so they decided to go to her immediately after the All-Night Vigil. They gathered quickly after the service and arrived to find Sima glowing with a blush. Father Hierotheos performed the tonsure, in the presence of Mother Eupraxia and another nun, who became Sophia’s godmother for the tonsure. Sister Sophia asked her godmother to read her the first monastic rule. The godmother remained to read the rule, while Sister Sophia paced back and forth on her bed. The godmother asked, “What’s wrong with you?”—“Demons have surrounded me on all sides and are gnashing their teeth; my soul is tormented by this terrible gnashing of teeth.”—“Are you afraid of them?”—“No, I’m not afraid, but it’s unpleasant to my soul.” And by the end of the rule, when dawn was already breaking, the young nun Sophia committed her soul into God’s hands.

Father Ioann Timakov, a retired priest, Karaganda

We were brought from the Samara Governorate to the steppe, to the site of the future settlement of Novaya Tikhonovka, in the middle of the summer of 1931. I was young; my wife and our small child were with me. We dug a pit one meter deep, covered the roof with tarpaulins, and placed a sack of luggage at our heads. Our infant lived in that pit for a month and then died. And in the winter, when we were moved to unfinished barracks, our second child was born. That first winter, typhus raged; it was very cold, it was hard to survive on the rations, and people were weakened. In ’31 and ’32, all the children and the elderly died, and by ’33, only the young remained—you’d rarely see an old person anywhere. And then the young began to die as well. In Tikhonovka, two hundred people were dying every day. Three work crews dug graves (two meters wide, five meters long). They would wrap a person in a dirty blanket and throw them into the pit. In the winter, we couldn’t keep up with digging graves. The dead were piled into heaps the size of a house; five hundred to seven hundred people lay in each heap, one on top of the other, like firewood. Our second child died, too. My wife and I survived because we sold her fox-fur coat—which she had inherited from her mother—bought some oats, ground them up, ate them, and barely managed to stay alive.

I, along with other special settlers, worked at the Kirova Mine. It was an eight-kilometer walk from the mine to our village. And every day we had to walk back and forth across the steppe. When you work in the mine, groundwater pours down from the ceiling like rain. When you’d come out of the mine, you’d be soaking wet—water in your galoshes, your footcloths wet—and you’d just put on a dry sweater and run back to the village in thirty-degree frost. By the time you got there, your clothes would be frozen to your body. Miners would walk home from work and drop dead. And they lay on the road all winter long. Sometimes, during a blizzard, you couldn’t see the road, and the dead lay across the steppe like road markers. In the spring, they were gathered up onto carts. And I myself was on the verge of collapse. I could barely make it home, barely alive from weakness. I was very sick—anemia, vomiting. For a long time, I begged the settlement commandant to let us move into a dugout near the mine; I finally managed to persuade him with great difficulty. And when we moved there, life became like paradise. I no longer had to walk sixteen kilometers. I’d leave the mine, cross the road—and go straight into the dugout. There, I began to recover a little.

Until 1934, we had no priests. Only one Old Believer priest, Father Sergiy, would come to baptize the children. Then, in 1934, Father Yakov Penkov was released from Karlag. The elderly residents of the village of Bud-Gory had kept an antimension, a cross, and priestly vestments. They gave all of this to Father Jacob, and he began to secretly conduct services in various homes. Many times, Komsomol members would take him away and bring him to the commandant’s office. They forbade him from serving, threatening him with another arrest, but Father Jacob replied, “I have made a vow to God, and I will serve.” And to the elderly women he knew, he would say, “I want to suffer for my faith.” And in 1937, they came for him, took him away, and to this day there has been no word from him.

Until 1938, we traveled to Akmola to receive Communion. In 1938, Father Vladimir Kholodkov was released from Karlag, and once again, in groups of fifteen to twenty, we began to gather secretly in dugouts. We celebrated the Liturgy on feast days and received Communion.

And when the war began, and Stalin issued an order permitting people to pray to God, Father Vladimir went to the city council and secured permission to serve openly. And then people began to come to us. The

house of prayer was in a dugout near the Kirov Mine, where we lived and worked. We literally held services underground; our windows were in the ceiling. And when we opened our doors, five hundred people began gathering for the services. We expanded the dugout, added small outbuildings, and continued holding services that way until 1950, when the Church of the Archangel Michael was built. I first heard about Father Sevastian in 1943 and began attending his services. Later, with his blessing, I moved to the Melkombinat, built a house for myself, and helped build and purchase homes for widows with children, whom Father Sevastian also helped settle at the Melkombinat. Time passed, and life gradually got back on track. A church had already opened in Mikhailovka in 1955. And then, at the end of 1955, my sister wrote to me from Kuibyshev: “Vanya, come visit us—we miss you.” I went to Father: “Bless me—I’m going back home.” And he said, “Don’t—don’t go.” But about three weeks passed, and on the first day of 1956, after the service, I approached the cross, and the priest suddenly said, “Ivan Semenovich, you wanted to go to Kuibyshev—go, but get ready quickly, quickly!” And that very evening I boarded the train and left. I arrived in Kuibyshev, and there—a miracle: Zoya was standing there. [In 1956, an event took place in Kuibyshev (now Samara) that turned many people toward God. During the Nativity Fast, on New Year’s Eve, a young woman named Zoya committed a blasphemous act: since her fiancé, Nikolai, had not shown up for the party, she decided to dance with an icon of St. Nicholas. While dancing, she suddenly turned to stone, yet remained alive. At night, Zoya would scream horrifically, calling on people to repent. She remained petrified like this for one hundred twenty-eight days. On the night before Easter, her body came back to life, and on the third day of the feast, Zoya passed away to the Lord, having walked the difficult path of atonement for her sin.]

The city was in turmoil. Crowds gathered at Zoya’s house, and people openly went to church: they were making the sign of the cross and repenting. I, too, went to see Zoe, but the police would no longer let me into the house. I spent a week in Kuibyshev, and upon my return, I told the people of Karaganda about Zoe and about God’s providence for a world perishing in sin.

More on Father’s insight. My eight-year-old daughter fell ill with tuberculosis. We took her to the doctors, and they said, “We can’t cure her here; take her to a sanatorium in Borovoye, or she’ll die.” We went to Father: “Father, please bless us to go to the resort; otherwise, our daughter will die.” But Father said, “Yes...—he said—it’s better to bury her here than to go there.” My wife and I were heartbroken—we felt so sorry for the little girl! And the girl was very good: smart, obedient, gentle—like an angel. So I took her to Borovoye. They did cure her there, but when she came back from the resort, she was a different person—she became like a stranger to us. And then she joined the Young Pioneers, the Komsomol, and the Party. And to this day, she has not come to faith.

My other daughter, as she grew up, met a young man—a German by nationality—who proposed to her. To which my daughter replied, “My father is a believer, and he won’t let me marry you because you aren’t baptized.” And Volodya—that was the young man’s name—agreed to be baptized and to marry my daughter in the church. So I went to the priest for his blessing, but the priest said, “We’ll perform the wedding, but there’s no need to baptize him.”

If another priest had said that to me, I would have objected, since you can’t marry someone who isn’t baptized. But in this case, I kept quiet because I knew the priest wasn’t wrong. And when we spoke with Volodya’s mother, she told us that in 1942, a priest came to their special resettlement village and baptized all the children, including Volodya. And Father Sebastian knew all this, even though he had never seen Volodya in person.

Vera Afanasyevna Tkachenko, Father Sebastian’s housekeeper

I met Father Sebastian in 1939. I was eight years old, and Father had just been released from prison. I lived with my aunt on Nizhnyaya Street. My aunt was a devout believer, and Father and I would often go from house to house together to pray. And when my mother died, Father and I became very close, because he had a soft spot for orphans. He used to say, “If I hadn’t been an orphan myself, I wouldn’t feel such compassion for others.” And then Father said, “I want to take you in.” I was already eleven years old. And he placed me with a nun, where I lived under Father’s supervision. And when I turned sixteen, Father took me in as his cell attendant, and I lived with him all the time and took care of him.

When we lived on Nizhnyaya Street, we all ate from a single bowl. Five or six of us would sit down at the table, and Father would join us. Sometimes I’d be really hungry, but they’d put out just one little bowl

for all of us. “No,” I’d think, “we won’t get full.” And it was nothing short of a miracle! There was still food left in the bowl, and everyone was full. How did Father manage to do that? I don’t know.

Our church wasn’t registered yet, so for about ten years we went to pray in people’s homes. For example, if we had to go to Fedorovka to pray, Father would say, “We’ll get up at half past four in the morning and go to Fedorovka.” And we’d all get up and walk to Fedorovka. Books slung over his shoulder, Father with his little bell, Mother Varya, Mother Grusha—that was Father’s choir. We’d pray there, and at half past seven, Father would bless me to go to work (you couldn’t not work; they persecuted those who didn’t work). And when I’d come home from work—I’d have to go pray again. We’d go from one end of Karaganda to the other, because we weren’t allowed to serve in the same place.

Father was an exceptional man. He wept with those who wept and rejoiced with those who rejoiced. He always offered a thoughtful prayer; it was in his heart. But the life of his soul was hidden. It’s hard to explain in what sense it was hidden—one could only sense it for oneself. I remember how once, when I was telling Father about my trip to Moscow, about the Moscow churches, and about how I had approached the Patriarch for a blessing, Father listened in silence, but something was happening inside him—his eyes changed; they turned from brown to gray. I mentioned this to him, but he didn’t say anything; he just lowered his eyes. Of course, Father was very wise; he didn’t always speak openly. But I was still a child back then, so it wasn’t easy for me to figure out what he meant. Sometimes he’d even tap me on the forehead—lovingly, of course—to knock some nonsense out of my head. All sorts of thoughts cross your mind. For example, I’d think: “What kind of life do I have? I leave for work in the morning—they’re praying; I come home from work in the evening—they’re praying. I can’t take it anymore! It’s better to live in the secular world and not worry.” And Father would come over and gently tap my forehead with the back of his hand.

Here’s what I had to deal with: I’d look down from the choir loft toward the altar—and there he was, Father, getting undressed. I had to hurry to my cell to get everything ready so that when Father came in, everything would already be on the table. After Father had eaten, he needed to lie down and rest as soon as possible. But people kept coming in—one after another—and Father, tired as he was, would sometimes say: “I can’t see them.” “Father, how am I supposed to tell them?” “Just say it like this—don’t offend them, and find a way to say it. If necessary, let them wait.” So I go and say, “Father is resting.” Then Father has rested and is reading a little book. Again: “Father, a woman has come.” “Let her wait.” But he just keeps reading. You go again and explain the situation. And the people grumble: “Hey, you’re the one who doesn’t want to let them see Father!” I go to him. He says: “No, let them wait; the time hasn’t come yet.” “Father, they’re saying it’s me who won’t let them see you.” And he says, “If you like to go sledding, you’ve got to carry the sled too. After all, I myself lived with the elder at Optina Pustyn.” Sometimes I wouldn’t let anyone see him at all, because Father would say, “I can’t receive anyone today; I’m feeling very unwell.” And people would say, “Vera is very strict; she might beat you.” Well, here’s what happened. Father sent me to Moscow, and Mother Iulia and Maria Obraztsova [Maria Obraztsova—Father’s second cell attendant] stayed with him. They wrote to me: “Vera, come back; it’s hard without you.” And Father would say, too: “Oh, you fools! Vera wouldn’t let such chaos happen.” Everyone just walked in as if it were an open courtyard. And when Father was already sick, there were two “police officers” standing guard—Shurik and Alyosha. Even they couldn’t handle it, so they called me. I had to go and “sort things out.” The guys, of course, were a bit softer, but I was already used to protecting Father. They would complain to Father: “Father, why is Vera so angry? She won’t let us see you.” And he would say: “We need people like that in the monastery, too.”

Once, Father asked Bishop Pitirim to send him two typewriters. When they were delivered, Father said, “Here you go, Vera—one for you and one for Maria Obraztsova.” And I thought, “Why do I need one? What am I going to do with it?” But after Father’s death, I really needed that typewriter. I learned to type and taught typing and office administration courses for twenty-five years. And Maria thought, “What do I need it for?” This was in the evening. And in the morning, Father said to Maria, “No, you don’t need it; you’ll be a psalm reader.” And he gave the typewriter to Elena Agafonova [Elena Alexandrovna Agafonova currently works as a clerk at the Alma-Ata-Semipalatinsk Diocesan Administration.].

Maria Obraztsova, Father’s cell attendant

I first came to Father in 1948 from Tikhonovka. It was Christmas. When I arrived, the service was being held in a small residential house, fenced in with a stockade and barbed wire—that was what our church looked like. They were celebrating Great Compline and the Liturgy. The service made such an impression on

me that it's impossible to describe—I forgot where I was. When the service ended at four in the morning, my friend and I were put up to rest at the priests' wives' homes on Nizhnyaya Street. We arrived—a small cottage, everything so tidy, with gauze curtains and rugs laid out. We rested, had something to eat—now it was time to go home. But the mothers asked, “Did you see Father?”—“No, we didn't.” And suddenly Father appeared from the street—knocking on the window with his cane. I was overcome with fear, but our Nikolai, from Tikhonov, said, “Here's what we'll do: we'll receive his blessing, but since it's your first time, you should bow at the Father's feet.” The Father came in, took off his outer garments, and congratulated everyone on the holiday. We fell to our knees, but he said, “No, don't do that—it's a big holiday.” Then he dismissed everyone else and took me and my friend into his room. I was very frightened, and Father began to ask me questions: “Where do you live? Who do you live with? Who are your relatives?” My whole being was trembling. And he blessed me to come visit him.

For two months after my conversation with Father, I was beside myself with joy. What was I so happy about? I now knew Father. And so I kept visiting Father for two years. Then he said, “You need to move here. Have your mother come here.” My mother came. He asked, “How many children do you have?”—“Four daughters and a son.”—“Well, I'll take one of them.”—“Take her.”—“Don't worry, you'll be able to come visit her here.”

And he bought us—the three of us girls—a small house at the Melkombinat. That was in 1950. He bought the house, gave us the keys, and we started living there. We'd visit Mikhailovka on holidays, and Father would often come to see us at the Melkombinat. What a joy that was! As soon as Father arrived, people would instantly flock to us—as if the news had spread through the air. And Father would conduct prayer services and memorial services for us. When Father left Melkombinat, day turned into night. “Father, I'm coming with you!”—“No way, I can't take you—there's no room, of course.” But as a consolation, he'd give us a photograph or some kind of picture. “Father, please sign it!” “Wow! Next time—when I don't take you.”

And when we settled in at the Melkombinat (it was in the fall), Father said, “Build a large room here, five by five.” And we began to build. There were three of us girls, and he assigned us a man—just as much of a failure as the rest of us—and they brought us lumber: And by Christmas, Father had consecrated that room and celebrated the Divine Liturgy there. Back then, he celebrated secretly on holidays, on Sundays, and on Saturdays. There was a young woman living in a small house on Stakhanovskaya Street; he celebrated the Divine Liturgy at her place, too. Then, in a Mordovian woman's house—with crooked windows and doors—he celebrated the Divine Liturgy there. It went on like that until 1955, when we finally received the registration documents for our community. The Melkombinat was his brainchild, just like that of the Venerable Seraphim of Diveyevo. Whether someone's house was falling apart, a shed had sprung a leak, or a well had collapsed—he saw it all. When Father would come here, we'd pray and quickly set the table. Wherever Father was, everyone was there.

Father would be sitting there, Shurik would be sitting there, Petya would be sitting there, and then—all sorts of people of every age: this kind and that kind—everyone! It was a big family, with a loving mother among them. You couldn't call Father a father. He was a loving mother.

Well, let me tell you a story. Once, a woman came to Father from Tikhonovka: “Father, Shura is sick.” (Alexandra Sofronovna, his spiritual daughter.) “She's sick; her heart isn't doing well.” Father said, “Well then, we'll go see her tomorrow.” But today there was a blizzard—you couldn't see a thing—and all the roads were snowed in. By morning the blizzard had stopped, but the frost was bitter. Still, we set out. Father took me along, and Nikolai too—he served as our deacon. We were driving when the taxi driver took us as far as the Second Mine and said, “I'm not going any further—there's no road.” Well, then, we set off on foot. And the cold was unbearable! A little horse was passing by, pulling a small sleigh. We asked Father to get in, while Nikolai and I sat on the runners in the back. By one o'clock in the afternoon, we arrived at the sick woman's house. As soon as Father stepped through the door, her husband fell right at his feet and burst into tears: “Father! Shura's in the hospital! The ambulance took her away!” Father shook his head and said, “Well, it's all for the best—it's God's will.” And the husband kept crying, “Shura's been driving me crazy! Under what circumstances was Father invited here, yet I won't be at home!” And Father says to me: “You know, Maria, go see her at the hospital this evening and tell her that Father didn't come, or else she'll worry terribly”... Well, who could do such a thing? Only a mother.

I went to the hospital that evening and said, “Alexandra Sofronovna, Father sent me to tell you that he couldn't come—the roads are impassable.” She said, “Glory to You, Lord! I didn't sleep all night, thinking

that Father would come while I was in the hospital.” And the nun who was caring for her came in and said, “Shura, Father did come after all!” Of course, she was deeply distressed, but she appreciated it all. “Lord!” she said. “Who am I? I’m so unworthy! And yet Father did come!”

And then Father took me in as his cell attendant. We lived well. Mother Julia and I slept on the floor on a straw mat, and Vera slept on a fold-out bed. When it was very cold, Father would open the door to his cell, come out, and cover us—while we were sleeping—with his cassock. And sometimes Father would send me down to Nizhnyaya, where the mothers lived. I’d tell them, “The room is warm, clean, and the dinner is wonderful.” And Mother Varya would say, “Why can’t you be driven here with a stick? It’s better to sleep on a straw mat, but close to Father.”

Father is such a person that words cannot do him justice. Here he comes after the service; if, for example, it’s chilly, he’ll say, “Vera, give me a sleeveless jacket to put over my shoulders”—but he’ll never say, “Why is it cold?” He was strict with himself but merciful toward others. He’d never say that something was wrong. But once there was an incident—a rather funny one, actually. It was a Wednesday evening, the feast of the Archangel Michael. I was serving him dinner: “Father, would you like tea with milk?”—“No, without milk.” I went into the kitchen and told Mother Anastasia, “Mother, Father asks for tea without milk.”—“No,” she said, “here, take it with milk!”—“No, Mother, I won’t take it.”—“Take it, I’m telling you!” So I took it. Father looked at me and said, “I asked for tea without milk.”—“Father, Mother Anastasia says to take it, and that’s that!”

He stood up, took that cup with milk, carried it to the kitchen, walked over, and splashed it right in Mother Anastasia’s face. She snapped at me, “You silly girl, why did you bring tea with milk?” “Mother, you’re the one who poured it for me!”—“Ugh! Vera would have fought with me, but she wouldn’t have brought it—and you just went and did it! Now look what’s happened!”

But all of this, of course, was just a game. She and Father had their own way of talking that we didn’t understand. Father would sometimes say, “Nastya, now is not the time,”—meaning her holy foolishness. She acted like a holy fool, but, of course, not to the extent she would have liked. Mother also led a remarkable life.

Once she fell ill, and it was my mother’s name day. And Mother spent the whole day cooking pancakes for us, but by the end of the day she asked for an antidote. That’s how abstinent she was. Father also ate very little. Mother Varya would say, “He fasted without actually fasting.” They’d bring him a meal fresh off the stove, as they say, and he’d swallow three spoonfuls and say, “Take it away.” Or, for example, the first day of Great Lent. Usually, on the first day, no one here is allowed to eat. After the Great Canon, they give everyone a small piece of prosphora. But here, Father would order potatoes to be boiled at noon, and by three o’clock, when they had already cooled, he would eat half a potato and say, “Look, my fathers are fasting (meaning his fellow priests), but I am not”—with this, he humbled himself. “After all, I’m sick,” he would say, “so I’ve broken my fast.”

He was extraordinarily loving. For example, the feast of Alexander Nevsky was on August 30 according to the old calendar, and I said, “Father, I’m going home to dig up potatoes.”—“Go on, go on; your mother is waiting for you there.” So I went. We were digging potatoes in the field when it started to rain. But we had to get everything done and be at church by five o’clock for the feast of the Deposition of the Belt of the Most Holy Mother of God. I was on pins and needles. But Father was resting; then he stood up, pulled back the little curtain, and said, “It’s raining, and someone’s digging potatoes. Vera, go call Maria and tell her not to come to the All-Night Vigil.”—“But who should I call? They’re out in the field.”—“Just go and call.” Vera went to call from our house. And just then, my sister opened the door—she’d come home for her lunch break. She opens the door, and—the phone rings. She picked up the receiver, and Vera said, “Tell your abbess not to come to the All-Night Vigil; she should stay home.” And my sister left a note on the table: “You don’t need to come to the All-Night Vigil.” Well, of course, when I came home wet and tired and read the note, I just burst into tears—what a priest! How he knew me and saw right through my whole soul!

Here’s what happened. Father said, “Natasha, go to the Obraztsovs and tell them to slaughter their cow.” And this was in March. They’d fed the cow through the winter, and now they were supposed to slaughter it. Mom said, “My God, what a shame!” Some time passed, and Father called Natasha again: “Did you go?”—“I did.”—“Go right now and tell them to slaughter the cow.” Natasha came back and said, “What, are you kidding me?” Mom said, “Well, what can we do? We have to slaughter it, but it’s such a shame.”

More time passed; it was already April. And Father said so sternly, almost irritably, “How long are they going to torment the animal?” Natalya came and said, “Slaughter it right now! I won’t leave until you’ve

slaughtered it.” They slaughtered the cow, and there was a rusty nail in her stomach. She had been suffering from it and would have died anyway, and Father knew that.

When we were still living at the Melkombinat during our first year there, one day during the first week of Lent at one o’clock in the afternoon, we ate fruit jelly, and a piece of apple core got stuck in my throat—I couldn’t breathe in or out. We went to Father, but he had already gone to pray, and the service didn’t end until nine in the evening. We walked home with Father to Nizhnyaya. We sat down to supper, but I wasn’t eating—I couldn’t even swallow my saliva. Father asked Natalia, “What did you eat, and when did you eat it?” He broke off a piece of bread and gave it to me: “Here, eat this.” I thought, “How am I supposed to eat?” I ate a small piece—it was fine, it went down. Then I ate a bigger piece—and it was as if nothing had happened. I said nothing. And when we finished the evening prayer, I bowed at Father’s feet: “Father, may God save you! It was as if nothing had happened.” And he said, “Well, thank God.”

Once, Father said to me, “Do you want to know how His Holiness signs his name?”—and handed me a sheet of paper written in Mother Agnia’s handwriting (I recognized her handwriting). And at the top, written diagonally in red pencil, was an instruction. “Here,” he said, “read what’s written diagonally, but don’t read anything else.” He handed me the paper and stepped out into the little hallway. And I was burning with curiosity—what on earth had Mother Agnia written that His Holiness had signed? And then I thought, “You shameless girl, aren’t you ashamed? Father didn’t tell you to read it.” I put the paper on the table and walked away. But Father was nowhere to be seen. And I was curious—well, what had Mother Agnia written? I’d walk over to the table again, and again I’d think, “No, I won’t”—and walk away. And so, three times, my curiosity got the better of me. Then Father came in, smiling: “Go on, read it!” And there was Mother Agnia’s petition to have her monastic tonsure performed. Father soon tonsured her into the mantle.

Of course, it was hard for us to cope with Father’s passing. Everyone mourned; everyone wept. And six months later, I had a dream that will never fade from my memory. I dreamt that I was walking into a church, and Father was taking out the consecrated particles from the altar—but the altar wasn’t ours; it was narrow. I was standing by the door, my hands folded in a gesture of blessing, and I called out in a whisper, “Father!” He turned, came over to me, and blessed me. I remained silent, not knowing what to say: if I spoke too much, perhaps he wouldn’t have time; if I spoke too little, I didn’t know how to phrase it to get the main point across, so I stayed silent. But he came so close and said, “And I pray for you!” And I woke up. Oh, I don’t know how I ran about with joy! The priest seemed so real, and he comforted me once again.

And a year after Father’s death, the Annunciation coincided with Palm Sunday. The service is very complex. I was the psalm reader and didn’t know how to properly combine the two feasts. Father appeared to me in a dream and laid everything out in order: “Look closely, pay close attention. He’ll say: ‘This is for Vay, that is for the feast (that is, the Annunciation). The stichera are for the feast—six of them—and Vay has four; the Glory: for Vay, and the ‘Now’: for the feast.’ Once again, Father was just as if he were alive. When he had explained everything, I woke up, remembered it all, and conducted the service that way.

I remember how, before Father’s passing, we were waiting for Bishop Pitirim. It was nighttime. Father was sitting in his cell by the stove. Vera was preparing something, changing the bedding; Olga Fyodorovna was unbraiding Father’s pigtail; I was wiping behind his ears. There was a deathly silence... And Father sat there, gazing at the holy corner... It would seem that we could have asked Father anything we wanted, but we were all frozen in place. Father himself broke the silence; he said, “When I die, you will remember how you cared for me...” And now that memory remains with us as a comfort for the rest of our lives. Father has passed away. Of course, things aren’t bad here in Mikhailovka—we’re doing our very best to keep things going—but, of course, it’s not nearly the same because Father is gone. Well, our priests, by the way, are just like him—yes, yes. That’s why everyone is doing their best.

Tatyana Artemovna Izyumova

My parents were special settlers who were deported from the Volgograd Region in 1931—my mother, my father, and their three children. They were taken to a barren steppe, to Settlement No. 13, sixteen kilometers from Temirtau. There were twenty-five thousand people in that settlement, and everyone was digging dugouts in the steppe. By winter, they had built something like a shed out of brushwood, and ten families lived in that completely unheated shed. There were no windows, the roof barely covered the shed, and everyone lay on the bunks, almost naked. Sometimes Dad would come home from work, and Mom and all the children would be lying there, covered in snow. Dad would shovel the snow away and ask: “Are you still alive in there?” – “Yes,

we're alive." And there was nothing to eat or drink. My older brother found a small log somewhere, brought it to Dad, and said, "Dad, chop up the log and make us some tea." Just then, the commandant came over, grabbed Dad by the collar, and put him under arrest for three months because of that log.

By spring, there were almost no people left in Settlement No. 13—everyone had died. Our family miraculously survived—the kids and Mom. Then they were transferred to Tikhonovka, where there were five-family dugouts made of clay and caragana brush. And it was there, in 1939, that I was born. In 1940, Mom was crushed to death while waiting in line for bread. She was pregnant and died. In '41, my older brother was drafted to the front and he was killed. And during the war, Dad worked two or three shifts at the mine—it was the "second front"—and people were killed in the mine every day. And every time he left for work, Dad would say goodbye to me: "Well then, sweetie, I'll be back—or maybe I won't make it back from the mine—God only knows."

That's how we grew up. I remember they called us "kulaks." I didn't understand the meaning of that word, so I asked my dad, "Daddy, why do they call us kulaks?" And he said, "Sweetheart, they call us that because when we lived in Russia, we didn't have time to sleep on a pillow—we rested in the fields on our fists. It's because we worked hard, tilled the land, and fed Russia with the fruits of our labor."

In 1955, when I was already sixteen, I met Father Sebastian. That was the first time I ever went to church. The service was in progress, and Father Sebastian was officiating. I stood there quietly and listened. And in my youthful soul, a rebirth took place; I was overcome by an unearthly feeling of joy and inspiration. After that, I began attending church regularly and got to know Father Sebastian better, and he began to draw me closer to him. He was so dignified, extraordinarily kind, and very affectionate. He treated people very simply and good-naturedly, greeting everyone with heartfelt warmth, especially if a person was visiting him for the first time. I began to get used to choral singing. Father loved the Optina chant very much; sometimes he would come up to the choir loft himself and sing. The choir was all-female, like a monastic one. The nuns and young women sang. There was no monastery here as such, but the monastic spirit was very much present. The community was small—there were ten or twelve nuns, though some were in hiding. Father loved long services. In our church, nothing was omitted or shortened. Father tried to instill the spirit of Optina Pustyn in this church, into which he had put a great deal of effort; as he himself said, "I've shed a lot of sweat here to establish this church."

When I first came, Father asked, "Where's your mom?" I said, "Father, my mom died; I don't remember her."—"Was she given a funeral service?"—"No."—"Well, let's hold a funeral service for your mom." And Father immediately began to conduct a funeral service for my mom.

I had an experience like this. My eight-year-old nephew got into a fight while playing with some kids on the street. Afraid he'd get scolded at home, he ran away with a friend. They got on a train and headed toward Tashkent. The whole family, of course, was worried sick. With bitter tears, I went to Father, fell at his feet, and said, "Father, I'm in such great sorrow! My nephew has gone missing, and we haven't heard a thing from him for a month now." And Father patted me on the head and said, "Don't worry, Tanya, God willing—he'll be found." Time passed, and a telegram arrived saying that my nephew had been detained in Alma-Ata. So my sister went and brought him back. Overjoyed, I brought Father a large bunch of grapes and a big watermelon as a token of my gratitude. And Father patted me on the head and said, "Well, I told you your nephew would be found—and here he is." So, it was because of his prayers.

He was a great man, a great man of God; he performed great miracles, but secretly, hidden from human eyes. Father modestly expressed his clairvoyance. When he was surrounded by young women—his spiritual children—he would sometimes look at them all and say, "I know you better than you know yourselves." Such was the great insight he possessed. It would happen that you'd go to confession carrying such a heavy burden, with such emotional pain, bearing so much grief, so many worries and sorrows; but after you confessed and spoke with Father, you'd leave feeling as if you'd been given wings—everything was left behind—that's the kind of feeling it was. Father could heal people's souls with his words, with his touch. He'd pat you on the head, or say a word that would instantly soothe the soul, bringing peace and tranquility. But when a person went against God's will, or when Father wanted to prevent someone from some misfortune, then he would be strict. He could, of course, scold you sternly, and then say: "Oh, I didn't sleep all night, worrying about you, praying to God." He took everything very deeply to heart; every human sorrow was as close to him as his own. He would say: "I myself grew up an orphan, and I feel the sorrow of orphans as my own; the sorrow of others is close to my heart."

There was an incident like this after Father's death. A woman came from Novosibirsk. Her name was Nadezhda. She had cancer. She fell onto Father's grave and wept bitterly. Then she prayed as best she could, calling on him for help, and as she was leaving, she took some soil from the grave. When she got home, she placed the soil in a clean vessel, poured water over it, and began to drink the water. Gradually, her illness disappeared, and she bore witness to her healing.

It so happened that our choir was left without a choir director, and I was asked to take on the role. This was after Father's passing. I was very unsure whether I would be able to lead the choir, so I prayed to Father: "Father, is this God's will? Will I be able to handle it?" I prayed like this in my mind, and that night I dreamed of Father. He was at the Melkombinat, his favorite place, his hermitage. There was a small earthen hut there, and I opened the door, went inside, and there was Father, serving in full vestments, with a cross and a censer in his hands. I opened the door, and with the thought of whether I should agree to lead the choir, I fell at Father's feet and said, "Father, bless me!" And he made the sign of the cross over me with a large cross. I kissed his hand, and immediately woke up, feeling the warmth of his hand in mine. I realized that this was God's will. I agreed, began directing the choir, and, thank God, I'm still directing it to this day.

Anna Vasilyevna Zaikova

I lived in Mordovia; my parents had passed away, and I came to Elder Jacob to have their funeral service performed. There was this very perceptive Elder Jacob in Barki. I came to have their funeral service performed, and he said to me, "Where are you going? The road is so good! And who will meet you there? A pillar reaching from the earth to the sky!" And I thought to myself, "What on earth is that supposed to mean? A pillar reaching from the earth to the sky will meet me?" Then, in '59, my daughter left for Temirtau and wrote, "Mom, come visit, Mom, come visit!" So Mom sold everything and came here. But I felt such a heaviness in my heart—after all, I used to sing in the village choir. So, I came here and went straight to the church. As I was walking, I saw Father Sebastian being led by two boys. People were crowding around him, but he came straight to me and blessed me right there, in the middle of the church. And ever since then, I've been coming here—I've been coming here for thirty years, and it's such a joy! You won't find joy like this anywhere else! But when I arrived, I had nowhere to live, so I—Lord, forgive me—went up to him and said, "Father, I got married!" I married an old man—I had nowhere to live. He said, "You got married? If you're not going to get married in church, then leave." I went home and said, "Grandpa, I'm leaving."—"How can you leave?"—"You're not going to get married in church, are you?"—"I will get married in church!" And straight here—to get married in church. And ever since then, I've been coming here all the time. And when I arrived, Mother Anastasia—she didn't even recognize me—but right away she called out, "Anna!" she said, "Why aren't you praying for your godmother, for Anastasia? She brought you to the church when you were three days old! And you're not praying for her! She's dead!" And I didn't even know my godmother had died—how was I supposed to know? She was in Russia, after all. So I stood there, looking at her—what else was she going to say to me? She handed me some prosphora: "Here, share this with your grandfather!" Grandfather fell ill right then and there—maybe she foresaw his imminent passing. Yes, those elders were truly wonderful...

And Elder Jacob in Barki—he was so wonderful! He's a saint; people are healed at his grave. And once I went to see him—I was eighteen years old—and, Lord, what a sin I was! Well, I just didn't understand! I was living with my grandmother and my own family. My grandmother didn't have any matches. I took some eggs from the nest without asking my grandmother—well, I thought, "It's not a sin, is it?"—so I took them from the nest, ran to the store, bought some matches, and brought them to my grandmother. Then I went there, to Father Jacob, and he said, "You bought matches with those eggs!" He knew every sin a person committed—you couldn't hide a thing from him! And I looked at him, thinking, "Who is he talking to?" But he said right to my face, "I'm talking to you." So I said, "Uh... Father! I'm sorry, I did that!" He could see right through a person, as if through a sieve!

Father Sebastian was such a kind-hearted man; he loved everyone, and to him, everyone was like a child. When we'd come from Temirtau, he'd go out of his way to please us all so we wouldn't get upset. It was as if we'd arrived as if we were made of gold—and yet we were such sinners!

Yes, I saw it one more time: there were so many people, and Father Sebastian was shouting from over there, "Stay where you are, don't come in!" Apparently, this man had come in with bad intentions and wanted

to make his way over to him. But as soon as Father Sebastian raised his hand—the man froze in his tracks, rooted to the spot, unable to move either way. May God’s kingdom be with Father Sebastian!

And how could I forget Mother Agnia! I was supposed to receive my pension, but I just couldn’t get it. I went to see her, my dear mother, sat down on the threshold there, and waited. Everyone kept crowding around her, everyone kept crowding around her, and then she said, “Come here.” She sat me down at her feet, blessed me, saying, “You’ll get your pension,” and then asked, “Do you make icons?” And I was putting the icons away in their frames. “Do you make icons?” “Yes,” I said, “Mother, I do. ‘I’m sorry, I even took photos of the icons (there were no images anywhere)—I even took the photos myself.’” She said, “You came too late; otherwise, I would have taught you how to paint them back then. Well, God be with you”—whatever you do, just do it.

Now there’s a church in Temirtau; I’ve been going there and singing every day for five years now. And Father Sebastian is always in our hearts—we travel here from Temirtau. The trip has become a joy; we’re never late. The service hasn’t started yet, the doors aren’t open yet—but we’re on our way, through Father’s prayers, to visit his church. Everyone here feels like family, no matter where I am, but my heart aches to be here—my whole soul is here, you know what I mean? Why is that? It pulls at my soul, of course. I stand there in the choir, singing, but my heart is right here.

Maria Vasilyevna Andrievskaya

We were deported in 1931 from the Saratov Region. They brought us to Osakarovka in cattle cars and, like cattle, dumped us onto the ground. I remember it as if it were yesterday: it was pouring rain, and we collected the rainwater and drank it. I was five years old at the time; my brother was two years older than me; I had a three-year-old sister and two more infants—five children in all, along with our mother, father, and grandparents. In the Saratov Region, we were farmers and always went to church. And so, a convoy brought us to Osakarovka, out into the barren steppe, where we didn’t sleep for two days; we sat on the ground next to our father and mother, clinging to their legs. Two days later, Kazakhs arrived on horse-drawn carts, put us on them, and took us to the 5th settlement. As they were driving us there, we asked our father: “Dad, Dad, where will our home be?” He said, “It’ll be here soon, just wait.” They brought us to Settlement No. 5: “Where’s the house? Where’s the house?” But there was nothing there—just a sign that read “Settlement No. 5,” and soldiers were guarding us so we wouldn’t run away. They drove us to the Ishim River, dumped us on the ground again, and we kids were wailing. Dad went off, chopped some firewood, we dug a square hole, set up our blankets like a little tent, and on the floor, on the ground in that dugout, we lived until the Feast of the Intercession. And on the Feast of the Intercession, fifty centimeters of snow fell. My brother woke up in the morning and said, “Mom, Grandpa’s frozen, and I’m freezing too.” We rushed over, but Grandpa was already gone—he had died.

We were building barracks. Teenagers and adults carried sod on their backs for about six kilometers. After the Feast of the Intercession, they housed us in these barracks—no windows, no doors. My father was still alive then; he’d pour water into a trough, let it freeze, and then insert that block of ice into the window in place of glass. They crammed two hundred people into each barracks. You’d wake up in the morning—ten people dead here, five there—and we’d drag the bodies out. I can’t forget that. A Mordvin family lived with us—twenty people in all—and only two of them managed to escape to Russia; the rest all died. Eighteen thousand people were brought to Settlement No. 5, but by spring, only five thousand remained. My father died in 1932, and a month later my mother gave birth; there were six of us children left, along with our blind grandmother. And how did we live? We begged. My mother forbade us to steal: “No, daughter, you’ll never get enough from others. You’d better go and hold out your hand.” So I went. Some people would give me something, while others wouldn’t—they’d just push me away.

Then our newborn brother, our youngest sister, and our grandmother all died. As we grew older, we joined a children’s work brigade. And in 1937, they forced my mother to join the collective farm, but she didn’t want to. They told her, “Do you know who you are? You’re a kulak.” And they sentenced her to three years and sent her to the Far East. And we children were left on our own. My brother was fourteen, I was twelve, my sister was ten, and my younger brother was eight. We worked in the children’s brigade, scavenged for food, looked after other children, and went to spin yarn. Whatever they gave us, we took and used to feed one another. That’s how we lived for three years.

Then Mom was released, and soon the war began. They drafted my brother; he died at the front. That was the extent of our happiness; that's how our life went—amid tears, poverty, and grief.

In 1955, we met Father Sebastian. And he blessed our whole family to move to Mikhailovka. Yes... from then on, we began to live as if in paradise. Within a year, with his blessing, we built a house. And from then on, we were always with Father; we brought all our needs and sorrows to him: "Well, it's all right," Father would say, "put your trust in God; God will not forsake you." And he always helped us with his holy prayers, of which we, sinners that we are, are certainly unworthy.

Matrona Tikhonovna Frolova

When I returned home from the front in 1945, I really wanted to get my life in order. So I went out often with young people, hoping to find someone. I worked as a nurse, and one day, when I went to a patient's home to apply cupping glasses, I saw a photograph on her wall of a priest surrounded by many nuns in white headscarves. I was a believer and prayed constantly. "Who is that?" I asked. "Oh, that's Father Sebastian," they replied, "he lives in Karaganda." My heart was so heavy with sorrow—my heart had already overflowed with longing from all that socializing—and I thought to myself: "My God, what a string of misfortunes I've had since returning from the front! I just can't seem to get my life together, and the years are passing by." "Well," they said, "write him a letter." I wrote one, and Father Sebastian invited me to come to Karaganda. I went for a short while and started telling Father Sebastian about all the misfortunes I'd faced since returning from the front, and he said: "The Lord has not destined you for married life, and you will not be married." And I thought: "What's going on? He's destined it for everyone—has He not destined it for me alone?" And the priest said again: "Go back to Russia, settle your affairs there, and then come here. You have God's blessing to live in Karaganda." I went back, but for a very long time I couldn't leave Russia to go to Karaganda, because the world was holding me back—it was literally chaining me down. Even Father was praying fervently, but it wasn't until four months later that I was able to arrive.

My baptismal name is Matrona. But when I was enlisted for the front, they wrote "Maria" on my papers. So that's what everyone called me—Maria. I sent Father a telegram: "Please come to meet me. Maria." But Father told his household: "Here comes Matrona; go and meet her." And Father took me into his home. He never took anyone in like that—he was so very protective of me from Satan. But I couldn't settle down in Karaganda and kept wanting to leave. I packed my suitcase and said, "I need to leave; I can't live here." But Father put my suitcase in his car and brought me back to his home again. And once again, I went to live with them. I lived there for about a year, and all the mothers who were with Father were always dissatisfied with me because I talked far too much, and they didn't like that—they were used to living in silence and not speaking unnecessarily. But I blabbed about anything and everything—forgive me, Lord! And when Father returned from the service in the evening, they would complain about me to him, but Father would try to reason with them: "Sisters, there are so many of you, and I put up with all of you. Yet you won't put up with just one Matron." That's how he kept admonishing them. And for as long as I lived there, people always complained about me, because my behavior was truly improper. But Father would say, "She was at the front; she suffered a great deal, and the Lord protected her. Don't give her a hard time—she came to me, not to you." Later, Father bought me a little house. Sometimes he'd come to visit me, look at the garden, and say, "Wow! Matrona's little garden! Just as it is in her heart, so it is in the garden!" And I had such tall grass in my garden—almost waist-high. And Father went to great lengths to bring me to my senses. I'd kneel before him, crying, my heart so heavy, because Satan was tempting me so strongly. But Father wouldn't look at me; he'd look off to the side and say, "Satan, Satan, why are you tormenting her soul!"

I was a nurse, and I often applied cupping glasses to Father, and he would say, "Matrona, you're treating me, but I'll treat you." And I felt lighter and lighter.

He went to such great lengths for us—we were all so precious to him. And now, for as long as I've lived, I've never wanted for anything. I have no one—no husband, no children—and I've lived my whole life alone. And I've never wanted for anything—not food, not drink, not firewood, nothing at all—as if someone were carrying me on wings.

Lydia Vladimirovna Zhukova

Our family was brought to Karaganda for free from the Samara Region in 1931. There were four of us children, along with our mother and father. We were transported by train, in freight cars. First, they took us to

Akmolinsk, where we lived in huts. But I don't remember that; my mother told me about it. I don't remember how long we lived there in those huts, either. I don't even remember how my sister, the three-year-old Nadezhda, died. I was turning five at the time, and I had two older brothers. From Akmolinsk, they took us to Kompaneynsk, out on the steppe. And when I was 11 and we moved to Bolshaya Mikhailovka, for some reason I thought that this village of Mikhailovskoye was Pushkin's village.

We all survived that exile—only our little Nadezhda died. My parents met Father Sevastian. I remember when I was finishing school and would come home after classes; there was water all over the room. Now I understand that a baptism was taking place in our house, but back then they kept it a secret from me. I myself saw Father for the first time in 1952, after graduating from college. My parents had already moved to the Melkombinat with Father's blessing, and Father would visit there and often celebrate the Midday Prayer or Vespers at our home. People would come running from all over the Melkombinat, so we built a large house to accommodate everyone. And Father loved every single one of us. I remember once, after we had prayed and had dinner, everyone had already left, but Father stayed overnight with us. And Matrona, the nurse, just wouldn't leave. Well, she wanted to see Father and hear him every single minute. She was the first to arrive at our house and the last to leave. So I'd already poured water into a basin and was giving her a look that said, "Go home!" but she wouldn't leave. I helped Father get into bed, took off his shoes, and brought the water to wash his feet. And Father saw that Matrona was peeking in, so he said, "Lydia Vladimirovna, it's all right—let Matrona wash my other foot!"

When my father was seventy, he became a deacon, then a priest, and served at St. Michael's Church alongside Father. And Mom and Dad would say, "How wonderful that we were exiled! If we hadn't been exiled, we wouldn't have met such a wonderful priest!"—that's how they thanked God.

The Samartsev Family

Vasily Ivanovich Samartsev

We lived in the Orenburg Region. Our parents were deeply religious people. In 1931, my father was dispossessed as a kulak and imprisoned, and in May of that same year, the six of us children and our mother were taken to Settlement No. 9 near Karaganda, out in the open steppe. My oldest brother was 11 years old, followed by Genochka; I was four; younger than me were Ivan, who was three, and Evgeny, who was two; and the youngest, Pavlik, was a baby. We had a koshma and a chest with us. We dug a hole in the ground, spread out the koshma, broke apart the chest, and set it over the hole to serve as a roof. That was our home. When it rained or snowed, we covered the hole with the koshma. And there we were, six children, huddling together like chicks around their mother.

Then they started building adobe houses and forced everyone to mix clay. The overseer rode around on a horse and used a whip to drive people into the clay. We cut sod, cut all kinds of grasses and shrubs—we had to build barracks by winter so we wouldn't perish. That's how the village of Tikhonovka grew up at Mine No. 2. We children were given very meager rations. There was a small stream there, but it dried up, and there wasn't enough water. And so, by winter, we had erected the walls, installed windows and doors, and built two stoves for each barracks. There were twenty families in each barracks, and everyone slept on bunks during the winter. One family on one set of bunks, another on the next, and another—a continuous row of bunks with a narrow passageway between them.

The winter of 1932 was very harsh, and I saw with my own eyes entire families lying dead. People died of hunger, of the cold, and of all kinds of diseases—dysentery broke out, along with diarrhea; there was nothing to treat them with, and there was little bread—starvation. The people from Orenburg and Siberia were tougher. But those from the fertile regions—Tambov, Voronezh, Penza—were weaker; they died out in their families. How were they buried? They dug pits three meters wide, dragged the dead families out of the barracks, threw them onto a cart, hauled them away, and dumped them into the pits like firewood. And in just one week that winter, our brothers Pavel, Ivan, and Evgeny died. As for how Genochka died, we didn't even hear about it. They went to call him to eat, and Genochka was already dead. They made little boxes for the children, and they wrapped the infant Pavlik in a rag, placed him in an iron pipe, dug a small grave, and buried him. That's how it was. Two years later, only five thousand people remained in Tikhonovka. Twenty thousand perished there, near Stara Tikhonovka. Only two brothers and our mother survived.

In 1933, our father arrived, and soon after, our mother died of starvation. Believers who had been forcibly resettled would gather in groups to pray. And when the nuns Martha and Mary were released from Dolinka and settled in Tikhonovka, they told us that Father Sebastian, the Optina elder, would soon be released from Dolinka as well. And so we began to wait for him.

Before the war, we received bread with ration cards. There were long lines in Tikhonovka, so I would go into town to get bread. And Father, after he was released and settled in Mikhailovka, also went to get bread himself. I really wanted to meet him in town, and I did meet him; I walked up to him and struck up a conversation. And how happy I was when he took me to his home on Nizhnyaya Street. That's how our friendship began.

Nina Petrovna Samartseva

I had a difficult delivery, after which I caught a cold and developed an infection. They discharged me from the maternity hospital as a hopeless case, sending me home to die. And Father began to visit me. He'd come and say, "Here, I brought you some fruit; here, I brought you some fish." It was Lent, and he'd bring me a carp: "Cook the carp!" But I wasn't eating anything—I was already dying. A doctor from the hospital would come and say, "Why treat her? Nothing will help her now." Our doctors—Olga Fyodorovna and Taisia Grigoryevna—would come and give me injections twice a day. Father felt very sorry for me: "A man," Father would say, "is stronger, but a woman—she's defenseless." We had boys first, and then girls. "Father," we'd say, "we have a girl!" "Well, a girl!" Father would say, "I love girls!"

He'd sit by my bed for a little while and talk to me. His head was slightly tilted to one side and would sway. And so, day after day for a month, Father came to see me, and by spring, thanks to his prayers, I was back on my feet.

Valentina Sergeevna Popova

We worked at the Karaganda Confectionery Factory. The factory was run by the Communists; all the workers were union members, but we didn't join the union. And at the factory, they looked down on us because we were believers. But we loved our work and did it well. One day, a TV crew came to film a program about model workers. They wanted to film us, but the boss forbade it, saying, "No, they're believers." Of course, they scolded us for a long time afterward and laughed: "You've lost out big time—you're so young and you believe in God!" We went to see Father Sebastian, told him what had happened, and he comforted us so much—no mother could comfort us the way Father did. "It's all right," he said, "you can endure this for a little while. You'll still earn their trust; they'll entrust you with the keys and make you storekeepers."

Of course, they worked us hard at the job; in the winter, they kicked us out of the workshop to work outside on construction sites. We unloaded coal cars and loaded them onto trucks, and did whatever else was needed. And then we became friends with the director and the chief engineer, Ivan Semenovich. Ivan Semenovich would come to visit us; he saw that we were fasting, and he liked that. He asked us all sorts of questions about fasting and Christian holidays and said, "How well you live! I'd like to live that way, too." So they made us storekeepers, entrusted us with the keys, and the director even trusted us with his apartment when he was away.

Nun Nina (Korshunova)

When we were working outdoors on a construction site, I ruined my health. Father no longer blessed me to go out to work. I was on sick leave for half a year. Then Father said, "You need to work at the church." And I was granted a second-degree disability. I started working at the church and have been working there to this day.

One day, a huge lump grew on my arm. And whenever we have some kind of trouble or need, we all run to Father. So I went to him and said, "Father, I have a lump on my arm, and it keeps growing and growing." Mom says, 'You need surgery.' But Father looks out the window, strokes my arm with his hand, and says, 'Yes, it's a big lump. But no, you don't need surgery.' And just like that, it disappeared—whether right then or later, I don't even know—but when I got home, the lump on my arm was already gone.

When we were still around 15 or 16 years old, we bought movie tickets—without, of course, asking Father's blessing first. But Father saw this coming and took us with him to the dairy plant. There he'd stop by one person's place, sit for a while, walk around the garden, then go to another. "Well," he'd say, "we're in no

hurry.” And we, of course, were in a hurry, but we kept quiet. Mother Varya was with us; she’d say, “And the girls are in such a rush.” But Father would just smile and keep walking, stalling for time. It was already seven o’clock, then eight... and Father said, “Well, now we can go home.” So we never made it to the movies. Those were the days of our youth.

One time before Christmas, Father blessed my sister and me to whitewash Father Peter’s room. We arrived in the morning, and before starting work, we wanted to ask Father for his blessing, but the cell attendant said, “Father is very sick; you can’t see him.” We were disappointed and went to work. We finished whitewashing everything, were getting ready to go home, and again wanted to ask Father for his blessing, but the cell attendant said once more, “Father is sick; you can’t go to him.” It was already late, and it was dark outside. We walked past Father’s window, and his light was on, and the curtains were drawn back. We saw Father sitting in his cell, and at his feet was Father Anatoly Prosvirnik (he was still a student at the Academy at the time and had come to visit Father for the Christmas break). I said to my sister, “Oh, Father is sitting there, but Vera wouldn’t let us ask for his blessing.” Well, I thought, I’ll just ask for it from a distance. So we walked past the window, and I said, “Father, bless us!” But my sister said, “Why are you peeking through the windows? That’s not right—Father will say something.” “But he,” I replied, “won’t think of us; he’ll just think it’s Glafira running around here.” And we went home.

The next day, we went to church; the priest was conducting a memorial service, and Glafira was standing nearby. I went up to the priest to receive his blessing, and he held my hand while turning to Glafira and saying, “Why are you peeking through the windows?” Imagine that! Glafira burst into tears—she didn’t understand a thing. I went to Mother Anastasia (in our community, when it’s impossible to approach the priest, people go to Mother Anastasia—she’ll sort everything out). “Mother,” I said, “this and that happened; Glafira didn’t understand anything and is crying. Should I explain it to her?” “Don’t,” Mother Anastasia said, “don’t say anything—it’ll all work out.”

Father wanted the four of us biological sisters to live together in Karaganda and said, “I’ll buy you a house, and you’ll live there.” But Yevgeniya, one of the sisters who lived with our parents in Zhaltyr in the Tselinograd Region, wrote to me in a letter that she was planning to get married. So I told Father that Zhenya was getting married, and he asked, “Who else do you have?” I said, “My older brother.”—“Where does he work?”—“In the police.”—“Well, he’ll help.” And I thought, “How exactly will my brother help?” So my brother went to Zhaltyr and started scolding our parents: “What are you thinking? She’s eighteen, and you’re giving her away in marriage! I won’t allow it! I’m taking her in; I’ll educate her—she’ll become a doctor!” The wedding was called off, and my brother brought Zhenya to Karaganda. Later, of course, my brother really regretted it: “I shouldn’t have brought her here—at least there she would have gotten married, but here she’s started going to church.” And my sister ended up staying with us, living with Father.

Sometimes Father would spend the night at our house. “Who’s going to braid Father’s hair?” It’s impossible to describe what a joy that was for us! Mother Varvara would say, “Girls! There’s a little piece of the Lord in Father, and the Lord Himself is so sweet!” You’d comb his hair and gather up the strands. I still have some of Father’s hair to this day.

When Father was already very frail, and they carried him to church in their arms, Vera, his cell attendant, wouldn’t let anyone near him. But I really wanted to be close to Father. And so, as Petya and Shurik were carrying him out of the church, Father said to me, “Well, let’s go; I’ll take you on a journey through the trials.” I thought, “How can that be?”—and I followed them, and Father said, “Come in, come in.” I went in, Father crossed himself, and we all crossed ourselves, and I saw that he was smiling; he walked over to the table and gave me an orange and an apple, saying, “Well, go!” But I was afraid to go—Vera is very strict. I wanted to go out the other door, but it was already locked with a latch, so I had to go into the entryway. That’s when Vera pounced on me and started giving me a good thrashing. She hit and beat me, shouting, “How could you? Father is sick, and you went in there?!” That’s when Petya stepped in, and my mom ran over; they started arguing: “What are you doing?” And then my father ran up: “You little troublemaker, what are you doing? Father himself blessed her!” That’s the kind of “ordeal” I went through just to get to the door. And Father was smiling: “Well, go on!”

When Father was sick, we didn’t go home to sleep; we slept on the bunks in the gatehouse. We were afraid that Father would die, and we wouldn’t be there when he passed away. And on Radonitsa, at 4:45 a.m., I saw in a dream: Father was standing in the memorial chapel, giving candles to his cell attendant, Vera, and saying: “Here, hand out the candles to everyone,”—and he lit a candle himself. I woke up and said, “Tanya,

Father has died.” No sooner had I said it than there was a knock at the door: “Father isn’t feeling well!” They didn’t say “he’s died”; they said “he’s not feeling well.” We ran to the cell; Father was still lying there, uncovered, with his epitachelion on. The Bishop was standing at the front, along with Vera, Olga Fyodorovna, and Glafira—they were all standing with their heads bowed—Father had died. And Father himself was the first to tell us.

Taisia Grigorievna Fomina

Ilarion Vasilyevich Fomin was my maternal grandfather. And Father was also like a grandfather to me. Grandfather Ilarion was widowed at the age of forty-seven. He was left with four children, ranging in age from four to seven and older. His daughter, Maria—my godmother, who was nineteen at the time—took on the entire burden herself: she raised all the children and helped Grandpa survive. Our family arrived in Karaganda on August 1, 1955, with Father’s blessing. We settled at the Melkombinat. Grandfather Ilarion was a worldly man, but deeply devout. He always prayed and read spiritual books. From his youth until his death, he never shaved. And he held Father in very high regard; they were never at odds. I was constantly by Grandfather’s side. When he died, Father performed his funeral service.

Father possessed spiritual wisdom and a love for orphans and widows; he always tried to help them, even if only with a piece of bread. But sometimes Father was very strict. Even though I was a relative, I felt a certain fear in Father’s presence; I couldn’t behave freely or casually around him. Once, when Father was already frail, I accompanied him from the street to his cell. When we entered the cell, there was no cell attendant nearby to help him undress. So I decided, “I’ll help Father myself.” He turned around and said, “What do you think—that I can’t take care of myself?” I stood there frozen in place. And he undressed himself and hung up his clothes. “I’m still able,” he said, “to help people.” That’s how he put me in my place.

A great many people came to visit Father in Mikhailovka, and the sisters welcomed and served them all. At first I took this for granted, until I realized how burdensome strangers can sometimes be, how difficult it is to endure all of this, to bear all their frailty and care for them. The sisters’ hospitality deserves great praise. They were spiritual and lived a spiritual life.

When Father passed away, Bishop Joseph did not come to the funeral. But there was wisdom in this: Bishop Pitirim came, and Bishop Joseph knew about it. Bishop Pitirim was Father’s spiritual son, and moreover, he had been blessed by the Patriarch to conduct the funeral. Bishop Pitirim was a bishop, while Bishop Joseph was an archbishop. And so as not to create any tension, Bishop Joseph did not come.

After Father’s death, there was no discord between us. If there were any conflicts, they were minor. The Lord protects us. As for Father’s children not listening to him—that has happened, is happening, and will continue to happen. That’s just how we humans are. We like it when people speak in our favor, but when they speak against us, we don’t like it. Well, we asked for forgiveness afterward.

Antonina Ivanova

I worked in the mine for 10 years. But when a decree was issued to remove all women from the mines, I was left without a job. And then Father sent for me, so I went. “See there,” he said, “that woman sitting there? She has a sick child, a boy. You’ll go with her and take care of him.”

The next day I went to the hospital to see the boy. He was turning seven. He was a handsome, well-mannered boy, but he couldn’t walk—he was paralyzed. I stayed overnight with him at the hospital, fed him, and took him out for walks. Then the boy was discharged home as a hopeless case. Father Sebastian immediately predicted that Volodya wouldn’t live, and he gradually prepared the parents for this. But the parents couldn’t come to terms with it—he was their only child. His parents were ready to try anything and did everything they could—they invited many doctors, brought in some Chinese man who stuck needles into his spine and applied moxibustion, and fortune-tellers came to their home, but the boy did not get better.

Before the boy fell ill, his father drank heavily, and whenever he got drunk, he would become violent and swear. And then he got into a fight with a neighbor in the yard, right in front of the boy; one of them grabbed an axe to chop the other one down, and this six-year-old boy, out of fear, climbed onto a two-meter-high fence and couldn’t get down; they had to pull him down from there. He was immediately paralyzed, then went blind, and lost the ability to speak. His mother went to see Father, weeping, and Father comforted her. The boy was ill for seven months. Father visited often, gave him Holy Communion, and said that this boy was like a martyr. And when Volodya died, Father sent Mother Anastasia and other mothers to their home. The

deaconesses washed the boy's body, prayed, and prepared everything for the funeral. Mother Anastasia sat there for a while, then said, "Zhenya isn't here (that's the boy's father). Come on, Petya, Kolya, hurry through the barns—or in a minute there'll be another coffin." And in the farthest shed, they found Zhenya—he was already putting a noose around his neck. And so Mother Anastasia saved him. She, too, was a great woman, and the priest had sent her there on purpose. And until the boy was buried, Mother Anastasia didn't leave.

Valentina Petrovna Panova

Our family was living in Tselinograd when we heard at the local church that there was an extraordinary priest in Karaganda. And in the winter of 1955, my parents and I traveled to Karaganda to see the priest. I was in ninth grade at the time. We arrived, went to confession, received Communion, saw the priest, and left. And the priest truly made an extraordinary impression. Although outwardly he was an ordinary man, when I approached him for a blessing, my heart skipped a beat from the reverent awe that filled it. I was overwhelmed by this feeling.

In 1956, I graduated from high school, and since I had a penchant for painting, I decided to go to Moscow and apply to the Stroganov School. Around that time, a relative of ours arrived from Father Sevastian's and said that Father did not bless me to enroll in the school. But I had already bought my ticket, so I went anyway and didn't enroll. Then my father brought me back to Karaganda. Father blessed me to stay and said, "You will live with Mother Agnia and help her." I lived with Mother Agnia for four years. Mother Agnia was also an extraordinary person. We deeply revered her, and whatever she said, we accepted without question. People were constantly coming to see her—from morning till night—and we fed everyone; I don't even know where the food came from. Mother's hospitality was exceptional. As some left, others arrived, and we had to set the table all over again. In between receiving visitors, Mother painted icons. Sometimes I would say, "Mother, when are you going to work? I'll close the gate!" "How could I?" Mother would reply. "People are coming; we must welcome them first." She placed her love for people above everything else and could set everything aside just because some little person had come. People came to her from other cities—specifically to her, to Mother—because they felt her warmth, her hospitality, and her kindness. And she treated everyone only with tenderness, only with love. A person simply cannot possess that much warmth and kindness on their own. It came from above; her kindness was spiritual. When Mother died, people wept: "Our nurturer has died. Who can we turn to now, who will welcome us at any time?" And Mother spoiled me. She demanded nothing of me, only fed me delicious food. When I'd come home from work, my mother would ask, "Are you hungry?"—"No, Mother, we just ate."—"No, you're hungry; I'll make you something." And she, though sick, leaning on a nightstand, would go to the stove and bake me incredibly delicious pancakes.

I can't say anything particularly special about my mother. I think every day back then was special. It all seemed like ordinary life, but it was a daily feat. From morning till night, our doors were always open. Sometimes our boys—Petya and Alyosha—would come by, and she would greet them with reverence. We'd watch and think, "They'll probably become priests, since Mother greets them like that." I remember Father Alexander used to come by when he was still a teenager, and she treated him with such respect—she only refrained from approaching him to receive his blessing. After all, he hadn't even thought about the priesthood, but everything turned out the way it was already meant to be.

Mother Anastasia—she was more direct; she could speak her mind bluntly, right to your face. She had a look in her eyes that made it seem as if she could see right through you. I was a little afraid of her, even though she was also very kind. She loved to treat everyone to kvass she made herself. You'd come to church, and Mother Anastasia would be right there on the road: "Would you like some kvass?"—"Well, please do, Mother."

We revered Mother Anastasia, too. But sometimes she would say things that made it hard for us to believe her. She said that Father would be glorified, that he would be taken away from here. She said that times would change, that the Soviet Union would fall apart—but to me that seemed like science fiction, because everything seemed so solid back then. She also said that when they took Father away from here, they shouldn't forget her either. I heard that myself, but at the time I didn't believe such a thing could happen.

I didn't even believe Father's prophecies about our family. When he said that our family would move from Tselinograd to Karaganda, I objected: "No, that will never happen—all our relatives are there, my older sister and her husband are there, and Dad would never leave my sister behind." But Father just smiled: "You'll

come, buy a house, plant a garden, and you'll have everything." That was in '59, and by '60 our family was already in Karaganda, and we celebrated New Year's with our suitcases packed.

Father had predicted to my mom that she would die on the road. And whenever Mom went to visit one of our relatives, we let her go with trepidation. Death did indeed come on the road, but not the way we thought it would. Mom and Dad were killed together here in Karaganda in 1976, when they were driving across a bridge.

I had wonderful parents. They were very devout and kind. But our spiritual elders were even warmer. The priest could say just one word, and you'd already be soaring away from him as if on wings. A worldly person cannot love and give as much as the spiritual leaders loved and warmed our hearts.

The Khmyrov Family

Monk Sebastian (Alexander Alekseevich Khmyr)

In 1931, we were dispossessed and exiled from the Tambov Region to Karaganda. They exiled our mother, us three brothers, and 11 other families from our village—we all traveled together in the same train car. First, they took us to Petropavlovsk, right on St. Peter and Paul's Day. And, as I remember to this day, they fed us nettle soup in Petropavlovsk. From Petropavlovsk, it took us about two weeks to reach Kompaneysk.

There was a barren steppe there, a scorched steppe. They unloaded us at night; it was raining. We pulled the planks—the bunks we'd been sleeping on—out of the train cars, split them into four pieces, and made trestles. Then we chopped down some caragana bushes, covered the trestles with them, and built a shelter. We lived in those shelters. Everyone was forced to work, making adobe bricks. I was just a kid, but I worked too, turning the adobe bricks so they would dry in the sun. Then the adobe bricks were taken to the construction site and used to build small houses. They cut sod and used it to build houses as well. We had barely managed to put up the walls when winter set in, and the houses had no ceilings. In December, an outbreak of typhus began because of the filth and the poor diet—the soup was bland, and they gave us only 400 grams of bread. People were dying. And then, on the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, my two brothers died. They were in the hospital in the Old City, which was called 1st Karaganda at the time. They told my mother, and she went to the hospital to look for them. There, they asked her, "What do you want?" "Well," she said, "we were told that our loved ones are here, so we're looking for them." "And when were you notified?"—"Yesterday."—"Oh!" they said, "Don't look for them—those people are gone; they've been taken away. Five carts hauled them off today and dumped them in a mass grave. Your brothers are there now. And these fresh bodies are lying here." But Mom recognized one of her brothers. They took him away, laid him on a sled, and brought him to Kompaneysk. There was already a cemetery there, and they dug a hole that looked like a grave, wrapped my brother in a blanket, and buried him. And that's how they transported people to Kompaneysk—by cart. It's a great tragedy; it's terrifying—you can't put it all into words. So, there were houses without ceilings, and the snow was piling up. The people who were still alive would crawl out from under the snow. And those who weren't alive—they lay under the snow; they'd pull them out and put them on a cart. And they'd haul it along—men just as exhausted as the rest of us would drag that cart—they were forcibly made to gather and transport the dead. And this happened—they'd be pulling this cart, and right then, one of the men pulling it would collapse and die. They'd pick him up, put him on the cart, and keep going, pulling it on. Life was very hard back then; everyone suffered in those years.

Then I grew up; by 1936, I was already sixteen years old. There was no set term there, and people left as best they could. And I left for Russia. And after the war, when I got married, my wife, my little daughter Lyubov, and I came to Karaganda on our own in 1951 to settle there. We heard that Father Sebastian was here and became close to him. Our family grew, the children were growing up, and there were so many sorrows—too many to describe. You'd go to Father, talk to him, have a conversation; he'd give advice and ease the grief. And when our mother fell ill—and our youngest daughter was only a year old—he came to our home. I cried, and he cried with me. He said, "I know how hard life is for orphans."

Nun Evnikia (Alexandra Florovna Khmyrova)

In the winter of 1964, I became seriously ill. After a long and unsuccessful course of treatment for my liver, I developed inflammation of the bile ducts, and bile entered my bloodstream. The doctors concluded

that if I didn't have surgery, I would live no more than three days—but even after the surgery, they couldn't guarantee I would survive. My husband went to see Father, and he immediately gave his blessing for the surgery, handing over two scarves for me—a handkerchief and a headscarf.

I knew my condition was terminal. It was hard for me to go in for the surgery, because I was leaving eight small children at home, knowing I would never return to them. And not long before that, I'd had a dream that I'd left home and headed east with a small child in my arms (my five-month-old daughter had died). I told Father about this dream and said, "Father, I'm going to die!" Father replied, "Why?"—and tears welled up in his eyes as he said sadly, "It's because of your illness."

The surgery lasted several hours. During that time, the Liturgy was being celebrated in the church. Father stepped up to the pulpit and, with tears in his eyes, began to plead: "Brothers and sisters! Let us pray! Right now, a mother of many children is undergoing surgery..."—but he couldn't finish his sentence; he began to cry and went back into the sanctuary. Father Alexander Krivonosov followed him out to the congregation with the same request, but he, too, was unable to finish his words and began to weep. After that, the priest came out again, served a prayer service with an akathist, and the entire congregation (and the church was always full when the priest was there) knelt and prayed together with him. The surgery went well.

When I was discharged from the hospital, my eldest daughter went to the church. Mother Anastasia asked, "How is your mother feeling?" The daughter replied, "They've already brought her home from the hospital." "There you go!" said Mother Anastasia, looking at the icon. "We prayed to God for this!" Such was the greatness of the elder's love and prayer.

During Lent in 1962, I was suffering terribly from headaches. At that time, Father came to our home to administer Holy Communion to my sick mother-in-law. I immediately asked Father for his blessing to visit the grave of Blessed Xenia of St. Petersburg that summer, and Father replied: "I bless you to go, without delay, to the righteous Simeon of Verkhoturys." But I had a six-month-old baby in my arms. How could I leave him? Yet the elder's prayers were so powerful that that very night the baby refused to nurse—he turned away on his own. And when my husband and I went to Father to ask which day to buy tickets for, he replied, "On the third day of Easter, May 2." We went straight to buy tickets, but there were no tickets left at the box office for that day. We returned to Father: "Father, there are no tickets." And he said, "Go and ask for just two tickets." We went back to the ticket office and asked for two tickets. The cashier said, "Here, two tickets to Verkhoturys were returned," and gave them to us.

Before we left, Father blessed us and kissed us both on the head. And already on the way there, I felt relief from my illness. And when I touched the relics of the righteous Simeon, I was completely healed.

When we went to Verkhoturys, Father passed a letter to us to give to Father Leonid, the priest in Verkhoturys. And this is how it happened. Father came to our house with the nuns Anastasia and Irina. We were all sitting at the same table, but my husband and I could not understand what the elder was discussing with the nuns; it was as if God had veiled it from us, even though they were speaking Russian. And when Mother Irina asked, "Father, should I write everything down?"—he replied, "Everything, write everything down." From those words onward, everything became clear to us. Father gave his blessing for Mother Irina to dictate while I wrote a letter to Father Leonid. From that letter, I understood that Father Leonid was in a state of delusion. Upon arriving in Verkhoturys, we delivered the letter to Father Leonid. Father Sebastian had never met him, but in the letter he wrote: "I have known you ever since Bishop John ordained you,"—and specified when and where this had taken place. After reading the letter, Father Leonid said, "Truly, he is a great man! He told me the whole truth about myself without ever having seen me."

This Father Leonid was a good priest who had spent nineteen years in prison, but had now fallen; and our Father, foreseeing his fall in the Spirit even while far away from him, extended a helping hand to him.

Seventeen years after Father's death, in 1983, my headaches returned—just as unbearable as they had been in 1962. One afternoon I asked Father, "Father, help me!"—and fell asleep. In my dream, I saw Father. He was saying something to me—I don't remember what—and touched my head with his hand. I woke up and felt that the pain had stopped.

My son Misha (now Hegumen Aristarkh) was very ill at the age of three, and as he lay in bed, he pleaded, "Mother of God, tell Father to come—I'm so sick!"

At that moment, Father was driving somewhere with Sister Iraida when he suddenly said, "Let's stop by to see the sick child—he's waiting for me." Father arrived at our house and asked, "Where is the sick child here?" He went into the room where Misha was lying, blessed him, gave him a big red apple, and left. And

the child got up right away, as if he'd never been sick. That's how Father heard the requests of his spiritual children and fulfilled them. And when my son Alexei was nine months old, he became seriously ill with dyspepsia. Medicines didn't help him. The doctors said the child would die. And they insisted on admitting him to the hospital. We went to Father and asked, "Should we put Alexei in the hospital or not?"—"Give him Communion three days in a row." We did just that. When he received Communion for the third time, the child fell asleep immediately, and after waking up, he was completely healthy. Now Alexei serves as a deacon in the Moscow Region.

Monk Sebastian (Khmyriv)

I came to the church in the evening, and suddenly, during the service, I was overcome by a fever, and my nose began to ache terribly. I decided to hold on until the anointing and then leave—I felt that bad. I approached the anointing; Father anointed me and, as if by accident, touched my nose—and it hurt so much! I headed for the exit and felt myself getting better. I paused. The pain began to subside, and I realized that Father had perceived my illness and healed me.

Once, Father invited my eldest daughter, Lyuba, who was sixteen, to his cell. He was talking with her, and during the conversation he suddenly transformed: he became young, beardless, and as radiant as an angel; even the cell was filled with an extraordinary light. Thus the Lord revealed the elder's spiritual greatness and purity even while he was still alive.

There was an incident. My godfather was driving a truck and had to cross a shallow river. The bank was steep, and the truck suddenly began to slide down the slope. At that moment, he cried out, "Father, help me!"—and immediately drove safely back onto the road. It is amazing how Father could hear everyone who called out to him for help and assist them, even when he was far away from them.

Olga Sergeevna Martynova

Our family lived in the Astrakhan Region—my father, mother, and seven children. We had a windmill, three cows, bulls, and horses—my father was a good farmer. Our family was devout and God-fearing. In 1930, my father was forced to join the collective farm, but he refused. And so, I remember, three women and two men came into our house and said, "Hello there, Sergei Petrovich! You're subject to dispossession!" "Well, if that's the case," my father said, "go ahead." And they spent the whole night making an inventory, listing every rag and every pot. My two older brothers were arrested; they served their sentences separately from us. My father, due to his disability, was not subject to arrest. They brought a cart to our house and put my mother, father, five children, and our infant niece Klavochka on the cart and took us beyond Astrakhan to a desolate spot in the steppe. Seventy other families were brought there along with us. We built a shed out of planks and lived in it for a year and a half. On August 1, 1931, all of us who lived in the steppe were loaded into freight cars and transported like livestock. We had neither water nor bread, and everyone—men, women, the elderly, and children—traveled mixed together in these cars, with the toilet right there as well. The cars swayed from side to side as if they were drunk, and people began dying even while we were still on the road.

Eighteen days later, they brought us to the outskirts of Karaganda, to the area where the village of Maikuduk is now located, and unloaded us all onto the ground. We were exhausted, barely alive, but little Klavochka would open her mouth and point with her finger—she wanted to drink, she wanted to eat. There were Kazakh yurts in the steppe. Dad went over there and asked, "Give us some water." "Give us your boots," they said, "and then you'll get some." Dad knew Kazakh (there were Kazakhs living in Astrakhan); he pleaded with them, and they gave him a bucket of water. We were a family, and other families were asking for this water too, so we had to share it however we could. Late that evening, they loaded us back onto the train cars and brought us to Prishakhtinsk. There was a field there and tall caragana bushes. They set up tents for the guards, but for us—nothing, as if we were supposed to just die. Some official walked around, measuring out a plot for each family with his steps: "Four meters this way and four meters that way. Your address: 12 Reconstruction Street—you can write home." We had nothing to cut down the karagan thicket with. We climbed into it on our 4-by-4-meter plot and started digging a small hole. We dug it out, gathered some sticks from somewhere, set them up over the hole like a little hut, covered it with karagannik, and lined the bottom with grass—that was our entire shelter. And there we all were, nine of us, lying on top of one another. A week later, our little Klavochka died, and then the adults started dying.

By winter, people started building dugouts—cutting slabs from the roots of the caragana bushes. And they built these dugouts out of the slabs—no windows, no doors. So, let's say your blanket is covering the doorway, and my blanket is covering the window. But there was nothing for a person to cover themselves with. And our family had nothing to cover the windows and doors with. There was nothing to eat either, just a little bit of grain that we'd managed to bring with us. But we had to eat. So Dad built a stove out of dirt. He'd put a pot on it and cook something from herbs. And we'd sit around the stove. It would smoke, snow would blow in through the windows, and we'd just sit there.

On March 18, 1932, our dad fell ill with typhus. We couldn't take him to the hospital—the police wouldn't let us. But I was a girl, so the police didn't beat me (back then they beat everyone, but they left me alone), and Mom said, "Take Dad to the hospital." I went, found a cart, and took him there. But the hospital had no windows or doors, and inside the building there was snow on the floor and ice. Dad had a high fever, so they laid him on the ice. When I came in the morning, Dad was already gone—frozen stiff on the ice.

In the spring, they started sending everyone out to work, to make adobe bricks. They sent the children out to guard the bricks so the Kazakh livestock wouldn't trample them. The children, though small, would go just to get their ration of six hundred grams of bread. Adults got eight hundred. And if you looked out across the steppe toward the cemetery—a pitch-black throng was carrying the dead. Well, not exactly carrying—they'd find a plank, tie a rope to it, lay the deceased on the plank, and drag them along the ground by the rope. How else could they do it? They had no strength left. This was Prishakhtinsk, Tikhonovka, Kompaneysk—there, the mass graves were twenty meters long and three and a half meters wide, so that the feet would lie next to each other. There were no coffins. They'd cover the body with some rag or a towel. They'd lay them in rows, row after row... Once the grave was full, they'd just bury them like that.

The only ones left alive in our family were my sister, my mother, and those two brothers who had been imprisoned in Astrakhan.

I met Father Sevastian in 1946. By that time, I was already married, and in February of 1946, my father-in-law died. An old woman brought Father Sevastian to conduct his funeral service. At the time, I didn't even deign to ask what Father Sevastian's name was, but he came up to me himself and asked what my name was. He asked me to bake him some Lenten pies, since it was a day of fasting, and everything prepared for the wake was non-Lenten. After the funeral service for my father-in-law, they placed the coffin on a sleigh, and a little horse carried it to the cemetery. It was a long way to the cemetery, and the frost was very severe, with a strong wind blowing. We were all wrapped up from head to toe, but the priest went out almost undressed, in a simple cassock, covering his head with an old scarf and carrying an iron cross in front of him with his bare hand. So we walked twelve kilometers through the biting cold.

After the funeral, I never did ask Father what his name was, and on the way back he put me on a sleigh. I asked him, "Father, how can you hold that iron cross with your bare hand in such freezing cold?" And he replied, "Oh, that's nothing! I once faced a trial like this: when they forced me to renounce the Orthodox faith, they left me out in the freezing cold all night wearing only my cassock and posted a guard. The guards changed every two hours, but I stood in the same spot without moving. But the Mother of God spread a little "shelter" over me, and I was warm inside it. In the morning, they took me in for questioning and said, 'Since you haven't renounced Christ, go to prison.' And they sentenced me to seven years.

That was my first encounter with Father, though it wasn't really an encounter, since I didn't attach any significance to it. I gave Father some pastries, and that was the end of it.

A year later, Sister Evdokia passed away. I came to the wake to help with the preparations, and Father arrived. He came over to me and said, "And here, too, Olyushka is baking pastries! But this Olyushka's 'balls' still aren't working at all." He handed me 400 rubles and said, "You'll cover all the costs of the memorial service for this nun." This was my second encounter with Father, but again, nothing became clear. We were as distant then as we remained afterward.

A few more years passed, and I turned 50. I started having terrible headaches; I suffered for many days, and one night I touched my head, pulled on my hair, and it came out on one side—I became half completely bald. No medicine helped—not a single hair grew back—and the doctors refused to treat me, since the hair had fallen out along with the follicles. My friends began advising me: "Go to Mikhailovka to see Father Sevastian—he'll cure you." But I brushed it off again—what did that even mean, going to a priest for treatment? How could that be? But people kept advising me, and others were saying the same thing—go see the priest. So I finally made up my mind and went. As soon as I opened the church door and looked at Father

(he was standing at the pulpit), I barely recognized him. Back in '46, he was still a bit dark-haired, but now he had turned completely white. After the service, I approached him, and he said, "Stay here for the night; go to Mother Kornilia." They escorted me to her, Father came there, and we talked all night. He asked me where I was from, where I was born, how we were dispossessed, how much we had suffered, who I live with now, how many children I have, that I have a mother, and that my mother is a believer. "And you?" "Well, I've been here and there."

"Father," I said, "I saw in a dream that I need to have twenty prayer services performed for me. Take the money from me, perform them all at once, and I won't bother you anymore." "No," he replied, "we'll perform twenty prayer services for you, but you'll have to come to the church twenty Sundays in a row. I'll read the akathists to you myself." And so he would take me into the sacristy, where we would kneel, and he would read the akathists to me every Sunday. That's how I grew accustomed to Father, to the church and the choir, and to the customs practiced there. I began to believe, to go to confession, and to receive Communion. I got my husband on board, and he started going to church with me. And then our children grew up. We'd go and take them with us, and Father knew them all by name. Soon I began to feel better, and thanks to the Elder's prayers, my hair started to grow back. Through my illness, our faith was revived, and we grew closer to Father.

A short time later, my six-year-old nephew got sick—he fell off his bike and started limping. His parents didn't pay any attention to it. I decided to take him to the doctor myself. The surgeon examined him and said, "His hip is rotting." They performed surgery, but it was unsuccessful. They opened him up a second time, cleaned out the bone, but again, it was unsuccessful. Then I went to church, and suddenly the priest asked me himself, "Olga, is someone in your family sick?" "Yes," I replied, "my nephew." "Then transfer him to Mikhailovskaya Hospital—you know a surgeon there, don't you?" I made the arrangements and transferred my nephew to that hospital. As soon as the doctors saw him—the boy was barely alive—they rushed him back into surgery and performed an emergency operation, his third already. Sunday was approaching, and I went to church. The priest asked, "Did you bring the boy? Why aren't you following through? Why aren't you bringing him to me? People come to see me from Moscow and St. Petersburg, but you're right here and you won't bring him to me. Go to the hospital right now and carry him to me in your arms."

I went to the hospital; his mother was there with the boy. We picked up Misha and, taking turns carrying him, brought him to the church. It was just before Vespers. We carried him into the church and brought him to the priest, who called out, "Mi-ishenka, Mi-ishenka!" But he just rolled his eyes and lay there as stiff as a board, completely emaciated, lifeless. The priest said, "Take him to the icon of the Holy Trinity in the confessional." I took him there. The priest ordered that a chair be brought in and said, "Put Misha on the chair!" I was horrified! The child's arms and legs were as limp as a whip—if he stood up, he'd be half-dead! The priest then called his mother over and said, "Hold him on both sides and set him down. Be brave, be brave!" We set him down; his little feet touched the chair, and we held him on both sides, stretching him to his full height. Then Father called over some more nuns and told them, "Pray to God!"—and he himself began to pray. We were holding Misha, and I watched as he grew firmer and firmer, straighter and straighter, until he stood up straight on his own two feet! Father said, "Take him off the chair, lead him—he'll walk on his own two feet." And Misha walked on his own two feet. Everyone was in awe! Then Father anointed him with holy oil and said to his mother, "Stay here with him tonight; we'll give him Communion tomorrow, and he won't even limp." But his mother didn't stay; she left with Misha, overjoyed, and went home. And Father had also asked her to bring a sack of flour as a token of gratitude to God, but she brought only a small little bag. And our little Misha grew up and became such a handsome boy, but he limped on one leg—after all, his mother hadn't obeyed and hadn't left him to receive Communion.

In 1954, on Easter, I had an attack of appendicitis, and I didn't think to ask for a blessing before the surgery—I went on my own. During the service, the priest noticed I wasn't there and said to a woman he knew: "Here's some prosphora for you; go to the hospital right away and pick up Olga before her surgery—have her eat the prosphora, or else her surgery will be difficult and painful." She arrived, and they were already calling me in. I ate the prosphora and went into surgery—which lasted four and a half hours.

Some time later, I became pregnant. The doctors said I couldn't give birth; I had to have an abortion. I went to Father and asked, "What should I do?" And I pleaded with him, "Please bless me for the abortion!" But he replied, "You're throwing yourself into hell and dragging me down with you! No 'please.'" And he handed me a beautiful bouquet of flowers from the altar: "Throw away the wilted ones; keep only the fresh

ones, and every day brew one flower in your tea and drink it, so that this childbirth won't be any harder than the previous ones." He gave me an icon of the "Annunciation" and said: "You will give birth to a son—handsome, intelligent, and loved by all. Don't ruin him. He'll be a help to you in your old age. And name him Seraphim, because no one glorifies St. Seraphim, and no one is called that anymore." And indeed, on the Feast of the Annunciation, I safely gave birth to a son, and now he's a doctor.

In 1957, I became pregnant, went to Father to confess and receive Communion. Father said, "I'll give you a little treat." At that time, he had been given a lot of apples. He took a long time choosing one, and finally handed me an apple—one side red, the other green—and said: "Eat the whole thing yourself; don't give any to anyone. You'll have a girl, and you won't come back to see me for a long time—you'll have complications after giving birth." I gave birth to a girl named Masha; she was healthy for fifteen years, but then she was sick for fifteen years and died at the age of thirty. And the apple was half red and half green.

One day I came to the service, and the priest said, "I'll bless you from the altar, and then you can go home." Suddenly, during the service, the priest came over and said, "Well, go home, but as soon as you walk in the door, say right away, 'I want to buy a cow.'" And I replied, "Father, but the day is already over—I definitely won't be buying a cow now!"—"You will! As soon as you walk in, just say, 'I want to buy a cow.' And buy one. There will be a red one, a spotted one, and a bald one. Take the red one—that's your cow. And in two days, you'll bring me some fresh cream."

I went on my way, thinking, "What kind of parable is this?" I got home, and there were my brother and his wife visiting us. I said, "Hello! And I want to buy a cow!" My brother replied, "What's the big deal? You've got the money in your pocket, and the cow's in the yard. Let's go—some friends of mine are selling three cows." We got there—and there were three cows, just as Father had described them. I chose the red one and, two days later, sent some fresh milk to Father. I couldn't go myself, so I asked a neighbor. She refused: "How can I go to Father with someone else's charity?" But she took it anyway. As soon as she walked in, Father said, "Give me Olga's cream!"

Time passed, and my children grew up. The time came for my daughter Lydia to apply to college. We went to Father: "Father, please bless Lydia as she goes to college." And he said, "Lidochka, where are you planning to go?" "To KAZGU, to study law."—"Oh," said Father, "you wanted to eat Almaty apples, but I'm blessing you—eat Karaganda potatoes instead; they're good for you. Do you want to judge people? Are you going to judge me, too?" "No, no. Stay home this year, learn to sew with your mom—it'll come in handy. And next year, apply to medical school; they're opening a new department there, and that's the one you'll go to." But my daughter decided to apply to medical school that very year and didn't get in. So that year she learned to sew, and the following year she got in without any trouble.

Then it was time for Sasha to apply to college. I asked Sasha, "Which college are you going to?" He said, "Since Lydia received such a blessing, I won't make any plans. Wherever Father tells me to go, that's where I'll go." And my other son, Anatoly, finished eighth grade and decided to ask for a blessing to attend a technical school. We went to Father: "Father, Sasha needs to apply to college." Father asked, "Well then, Sasha, which college do you want to attend?" "Father, whichever one you say, that's where I'll go." "Go to the Polytechnic University's School of Civil Engineering, and you'll be the engineer we need. God will bless you." (Today, that son is the city's chief construction foreman. With his involvement, a new church dedicated to the Nativity of the Most Holy Mother of God is being built in Karaganda.) And he asks Tolik, "Where do you want to go?" "I want to go to a technical school." "A technical school? Your mother has been teaching you and teaching you, and you've only finished eighth grade and now you want to go to a technical school? You won't get my blessing. Finish tenth grade, then come back."

So what did my Anatoly do? "Mom," he said, "what does 'my father's blessing' even mean?" And we had a relative who worked on the admissions committee at that technical college. "Let's go," he said, "to my uncle; he'll help me, and I'll get in and study." I agreed: "Let's go, if you want." They gave Anatoly an exam sheet, he went to take the exam—and got a D. "Mom," he pleaded, "go see Uncle; tell him to give me another exam sheet." So I went. "Let him," I thought, "let the boy have his fun." He took the exam again—another failing grade. The third time, even my uncle put in a good word for him, but he still got a failing grade. So, without my blessing, even his relatives couldn't help him. And so my Anatoly enrolled in vocational school.

In 1962, he was supposed to march in the May Day parade with his school. But May 1st that year fell during Holy Week. So, he left for the parade in the morning, and by evening, Anatoly still wasn't home. "Oh well," I thought, "he probably went over to my brother's place." The next morning, I was on my way to church

when the priest called me over and said, “Go home; you need to be home. Here, take these eggs”—and he handed me some cracked and bruised eggs. “What’s going on?” I thought, and I didn’t feel very happy about it. I went home. “Was Anatoly here?” I asked. “No, he wasn’t.” That evening I went to church again, and the priest came up to me once more and said, “Go home—go home right now.” And again he gave me some crushed and battered eggs. And Mother Anastasia gave me some eggs, also crushed, and said, “Hurry up and go home”—and she sent me on my way. I left. As soon as I turned the corner, my daughter Lydia ran toward me: “Mom,” she said, “we’re in trouble! Tolik was stabbed; he’s in the hospital, unconscious.” It turned out that hooligans had slashed his stomach during a demonstration. He underwent surgery. Anatoly lay unconscious for nine days, and then Father Sebastian and Mother Anastasia prayed for his recovery. He was on the verge of death, his condition hopeless. No one told the elders anything; they knew on their own what had happened to him. Anatoly spent eight months in the hospital, recovered, and is alive today.

Maria Fyodorovna and Olga Fyodorovna Orlov

Maria Fyodorovna

My parents were deeply religious people. When our family was dispossessed in 1931, Dad said, “Whatever God has sent. We must drink from this cup.” Dad was arrested and held separately, and many years passed before we were reunited. As for Mom and us four children, we were taken to Kompaneysk to a barren hill where there was neither water nor bread. We dug a hole in the ground and lived in it—Pyotr, me, Olga, and Alexandra. Our mother was pregnant, and she miscarried. Mom suffered terribly; our hole was covered in blood, the blood had dried on our clothes, and there was nowhere to wash them—nothing but the steppe all around. “Daughter,” Mom pleaded, “find a pebble, throw these clothes on it, wet them with a little water, and stomp on them with your feet.” I was little and didn’t know how to do laundry yet.

Then they started building dugouts; they dug up clay, poured water on it, kneaded it with their feet, and made bricks. They built barracks—no windows, no doors. In the barracks were bunks, and people lay on them covered with whatever they could find. In the morning they’d get up and drag out the dead. No one cried over the dead there—there was no time for that—but our mom just prayed and read akathists, while we sat next to her: “Mom, we’re hungry! Mom, let’s eat!”—“Wait, let me just finish reading the akathist.”—“Mom!”—“Okay, just one more page left,” she’d say, stalling for time, “I’ll finish reading it now, and God will help us.” She’d finish reading, take a piece of bread, and cut off little pieces from it. And we’d point with our fingers: “Who’s this for?”—“This is for Pete.”—“And who’s this for?”—“This is for Maria. This is for Ole. This is for Shura”—just like that. We collected every crumb, and Mom always tried to give us some of her own ration. And how did we survive, how?! It’s unbelievable—it was impossible to survive there! I had a terrible cold and was bedridden with rheumatism. My legs were covered in sores; they were festering. Mom sat there and cried. Flies swarmed around us, and Mom covered my legs with gauze.

And look how God helped us! We all grew up, and we all received higher education. Petr graduated from the academy; Olga and Alexandra became doctors; and I became a teacher. It was God who preserved us through our mother’s prayers—it’s a miracle that we stayed alive.

Olga Fyodorovna (Batyushka’s attending physician)

In 1949, my sister Alexandra and I were graduating from the Alma-Ata Medical Institute. The time had come to be assigned to our first permanent jobs. After consulting with our parents, we decided to accept an assignment to Kokchetav—our brother Peter lived there with his family, and we all decided to move in with him. But unexpectedly, a telegram arrived from Dad. In it, he instructed us to accept an assignment only to in Karaganda and said he would explain the reason in a letter. Soon we received that letter. Dad wrote that, on the advice of a fellow believer he knew, he had gone to St. Michael’s Church to see Father Sebastian to seek his blessing for our departure. Father asked Dad in detail about the purpose of our move, listened carefully, and said: “No, Fyodor Ivanovich, I do not bless your departure: a son is a son, a daughter-in-law is a daughter-in-law, and daughters are daughters. Today your son lives there, but tomorrow he may move to another place of residence.” (And indeed, my brother and his family soon left Kokchetav.) “Let your daughters apply for jobs only in Karaganda.” My father told the priest that he had already sold everything and asked what he should do now. To this, the priest replied, “Do not be afraid, Fyodor Ivanovich; God will help, and everything will work out.”

My sister and I did as Father had said. Upon arriving in Karaganda, we immediately hurried to St. Michael's Church. Father greeted us with a radiant smile. When we entered, he was standing by the window. In his light-colored vestments, illuminated by the sun's rays, Father Sebastian himself seemed to radiate light. After receiving his blessing, we found jobs at the regional hospital without any difficulty.

After settling in Karaganda, I began attending St. Michael's Church in the evenings after work. Father Sebastian celebrated Mass daily in the morning and evening. I really loved the way he conducted the services and the way the church choir sang. I began to observe Father closely: I was always struck by his God-fearing, reverent, and touching attitude toward the service, as well as his great patience toward the parishioners, whom he tried to help in every way possible.

Father was very humble, gentle, and merciful. There wasn't a single person who didn't love him with all their heart after seeing him even once. As a doctor, I noticed that he was very tired and ill. During the service, he coughed frequently, and his breathing was labored. In a conversation with Father, I asked him in detail about his health and offered him my services as a doctor. From then on, I began to monitor him constantly. When I first started attending church, I had no idea about spiritual life, spiritual guidance, or the essence of Christianity in general. When I first encountered an instance of Father Sebastian's spiritual insight, I took it to be a mere coincidence—that my thoughts happened to align with his. But here's what actually happened. One day during Vespers, I was standing there thinking: "It's so nice here! I don't want to go home. I wish I could stay and spend the night with Anfisa Ivanovna, who lives here at the church." The service ended, and I began to get ready to go home. Suddenly, Father approached me and said, "Olga Fyodorovna, why don't you stay here and spend the night at the church with Anfisa Ivanovna?" I was delighted and exclaimed, "Father! I was just dreaming about that! Isn't it amazing how our thoughts coincided?" Father smiled but said nothing and went to his cell. Shortly afterward, Father blessed me to go to confession and receive Holy Communion. In the morning, I went to church and saw that there were a great many people waiting to confess. I was disheartened and thought that I probably wouldn't be able to confess, since I had to go to work soon. Suddenly, the door to the confessional opened, and Father appeared in the doorway. He held out his hand to me and said, "Come, Olga Fyodorovna, let's go to confession." I didn't know how to confess or what to say. My mind was a complete jumble, and various thoughts were overwhelming me. And suddenly the priest said, "You see, Olga Fyodorovna, I have various thoughts in my head." And he began to list all the thoughts that were overwhelming me and that particularly troubled me. I said, "Father, I have those kinds of thoughts, too. Is that a sin?" He replied, "Yes, you must avoid them and drive them away from yourself, because it is a sin."

Another time, when I was standing in church and praying, a subdeacon approached me and said, "Olga Fyodorovna, the Father is calling for you." I hurried into the memorial chapel, thinking that the Father was feeling unwell, as was often the case. But he was sitting on a small stool in front of the icon of the Holy Trinity, holding something on his lap. There were many people around him, but I managed to squeeze through and saw that he was holding a small plate on his lap, and on it lay blessed wafers drizzled with wine. It was the first time I had ever seen such wafers. "So that's it," I thought, "they eat the breads drizzled with wine themselves, but they give us the plain ones!" That thought flashed through my mind in an instant, like lightning. But Father turned toward me, pushed aside the people standing next to him, and said: "Olga Fyodorovna, take this blessed wafer and eat it,"—and he handed me a piece of the wafer drizzled with wine. Father didn't give any more wafers to anyone else. Once again, I was struck by the fact that all my thoughts were laid bare before him. I felt ashamed and afraid.

Other examples attesting to Father's holy insight are no less astonishing.

It was the Feast of the Most Holy Trinity. The service was very solemn; Father was joyful, energetic, and at peace. The choir sang especially well. When, after the communion verse, they began singing the "Svetilen," I couldn't make out the combination of words at the part where they sang: "Light and of Light, Giver of Light." I didn't know which was correct: "Light from the Light, the Giver of Light" or "Light and Light, the Giver of Light." It bothered me, and I wanted to know for sure, but there wasn't a suitable moment to ask. And so, shortly after the feast, I came to the evening service. Father wasn't officiating; he was listening to the service from his cell. I went in to see him and asked for his blessing. When I held out my hands to Father, he placed his palm on them, smiled, but didn't bless me; instead, he said, "Olga Fyodorovna, 'Light and Light, Giver of Light!'" I was surprised and said, "Father, that's exactly the part I didn't understand!" He smiled again and blessed me. Once more, his insight struck me.

At the age of 32, I fell seriously ill with a women's disease. I thought I had cancer and was very distressed. I was also distressed because, due to my illness, I could not receive Holy Communion, kiss the icons, receive the Anointing of the Sick, eat prosphora and blessed bread, or light candles.

Once, during a service, I was feeling particularly sorrowful and turned in my heart to the Lord: "Lord, like a leper, I have been unable to touch the holy objects for so long. I must have cancer. What a tragedy!"—and I began to weep. At that moment, the subdeacon came out of the memorial chapel, quickly approached me, and said: "Olga Fyodorovna, Father is calling for you." I forgot all about my ailments and hurried to Father, thinking he might be unwell. When I entered, he was sitting in a chair, looking cheerful, and, smiling, he said to me: "Olga Fyodorovna, this will all pass; it happens sometimes, even to young people. You mustn't kiss the icons, nor must you eat prosphora or drink holy water, but you may eat the blessed bread. You may pass on candles, but you mustn't place them before the icons,"—and he blessed me, giving me half of the blessed bread.

I left him feeling uplifted, joyful, and hopeful for a recovery. And in the days that followed, I did, in fact, recover completely.

When my mother was seriously ill, Father would come to our home to give her Holy Communion. On one of his visits, as we approached the cross after Communion, Father said to my sister Ekaterina: "Katya, don't get married." "Why?" my sister asked. "Don't get married, Katya, because you'll weep bitterly, bitterly," said Father, even though he hadn't seen her fiancé and Ekaterina hadn't told him anything about her plans. As he was leaving, Father told me that they wouldn't stay together—they'd part ways. But Katya didn't listen, and soon after the wedding, the priest's prediction came true.

I knew that Father didn't like it when people paid him special attention or gave him gifts on his name day. I'd wanted to give him a piece of fabric for his vestments for a long time, but I was afraid to even mention it. And then one day, on my way home from work, I stopped by the church. As I walked past Father's cell, I glanced through the window and saw him standing there, beckoning me with his finger. I went into the cell, and Father opened the door and said, "I'm so glad to see you, Olga Fyodorovna. Come in. I really need vestments made of material like this,"—and he showed me a piece of bluish-white fabric.—"I have the fabric, but I don't have the vestments. Vestments like these would be useful for the feasts of the Mother of God and the Lord." I realized that Father had finally responded to my long-held secret wishes, and I said, "Father, then please bless me to buy a piece of fabric like this."

Having been close to Father for many years, we have repeatedly witnessed the power of his elderly blessing. The following incident serves as an example confirming the power of Father's blessing.

In the early 1960s, an order was issued to cull livestock. We had a cow and were now forced to sell her. On Saturday, my father went to church. After the service, he approached Father, explained to him that we could no longer keep the cow and that tomorrow, on Sunday, we would have to sell her. The priest replied, "All right, Fyodor Ivanovich, I bless you. Come to the Liturgy tomorrow, and after the 'Our Father,' go sell the cow." My father said, "Father, how is that possible? It will be very late by then; we have to travel far, all the way to the Old Town, and there won't be anyone left at the market." The priest replied, "Don't worry, Fyodor Ivanovich, God will help you; you'll sell it." And that's exactly how it turned out. My father went from St. Michael's Church to the horse stable in the New Town, then home to get the cow, and only then to the market in the Old Town, which was about ten kilometers away. Dad rode in a cart, with the cow tied to it. Along the way, he met people already returning from the market who laughed at him, saying he was riding in vain—there was no one left at the market. But Dad decided to ride all the way to the market anyway; he'd see what happened once he got there. When he pulled up to the market, he saw that there really were almost no people left, and those who were there were just about to head home. Just then, a man approached my father and said, "So, Father, are you taking your cow to sell?" My father replied: "Yes, I'd like to sell her." The buyer offered his price: "Let's not beat around the bush—if you agree, it's a deal." After a little haggling, they agreed on a price, and so, to everyone's surprise, my father successfully sold the cow at the price he wanted.

How Father taught me humility on my name day.

One day in mid-July, I stopped by Father's cell. At that moment, he was examining a rug with his cell attendant, Maria Obratsova. "Ah, Olga Fyodorovna," he said, "come in, come in, you're most welcome!" "What are you doing, Father?" I asked. "Well, we're just looking at this rug, but it has crosses on it, so we can't lay it down under our feet." "Maria," he said to his cell attendant, "maybe we should give it to Olga Fyodorovna for her name day?" She replied, "Yes, Father, that's a good idea."— "You have—" Father

continued, “—your name day in a few days, don’t you? Will you invite me to your name day celebration?” My heart skipped a beat. As much as I loved Father, I was just as afraid of him, and I had never invited him to my home unless he came on his own. And, of course, I said, “Of course, Father, please come.”

About three days before my name day, Father called me to his room, gave me some advice, and presented me with an akathist and a large prosphora. And so, having received all these gifts—and Father’s promise to come on my name day—I felt a little elated.

The feast day of St. Olga, Equal to the Apostles, arrived. At home, we turned everything upside down. We washed and cleaned everything and prepared a variety of dishes—both dairy and fruit-based. Meanwhile, I was receiving Communion at church. After the Liturgy, everyone approaches for a blessing. I approached as well. But Father seemed not to see me; he turned away and blessed the others. I stood there, waiting for his blessing. Then he seemed to notice me: “Ah, temptation,” he said, “is that you, Olga Fyodorovna?” And with a half-turn, he blessed me. (He usually blessed people with a large cross.) My heart sank: “What happened?” I thought. My mood immediately turned gloomy, not at all festive. “Father,” I said, “they’re waiting for us; let’s go back.” But he replied, “Vera, get ready; I’m going to eat and rest in my cell now.” I stayed behind to wait until Father had eaten, rested, woken up, and come to the church cell. I sat there, as if on an electric chair, waiting for him. In the cell, he talked with someone for a long time, then called out to Peter: “Peter, get the car ready; we’re leaving now.” “Father,” I asked, “are we going to see them?” And he said, “Oh, what a question—to see you. No, no, no, we’re going to the Melkombinat to see Olga Stepanovna.”—“Ah! Father, but they’re waiting for us!” But he acted as if he didn’t hear me. We drove to the Melkombinat. There we held a memorial service and a prayer service, had a meal there, then stopped by the Zhukovs’ place, and Father said, “Petro, let’s go!” Well, I thought, to our place. Even though it’s late, we’ll still make it. We drove up to our house, stopped at the gate, and Father said, “Olga Fyodorovna, get out.”—“Father,” I said, “but how?! How will they greet me at home?! What am I supposed to say?! Why aren’t you coming in?!” He didn’t say a word and drove off. Yet he’d often tell me, “Olga Fyodorovna, humility comes first—for your future.” That’s how he could teach humility. And at our next meeting: “Olga Fyodorovna, please forgive me for not coming; somehow I... I don’t even remember why... maybe I was in a hurry... or feeling unwell... I don’t remember anymore.”—“Oh,” I said, “Father, I really got an earful at home!” That’s how it was.

When I worked as a district doctor at the Mikhailovskaya Clinic, my duties included responding to calls and visiting patients in my district. I witnessed all sorts of things—both decent and indecent. Once, after seeing all kinds of things, I went to church with the intention of preparing for Communion the next day. After praying, I was about to go home when suddenly the priest’s cell opened, and the priest came out and said, “Olga Fyodorovna, come and confess.” I froze. Why had the priest decided to hear my confession today? I went into the cell; the priest blessed me and immediately began to say, “Olga Fyodorovna, you go around your district, treating the sick. This is, of course, a good deed. But you witness various scenes of life—some proper, some improper; some beneficial to the soul, some not. Do not let the improper things seep into you.” Oh! My ears burned—after all, I’d just seen it all. “Father,” I said, “forgive me!” He heard my confession, and I left. He didn’t hear anyone else’s confession that evening; he stayed for my sake, so that neither I nor he would forget by tomorrow what is harmful to the soul.

Father often gave me money to distribute to the sick and the poor. I’d say, “Father, how am I supposed to do that?”—“Don’t worry about it, Olga Fyodorovna. If, for example, you’re on duty at the hospital, go up to a patient, look at their medical record, talk to them, and if you find out that they’re a visitor or poor, discreetly slip some money under their pillow. And if you see during a appointment at the clinic that a patient is poor, you can write him a prescription, explain everything, and slip some money into the prescription as you see fit, depending on the cost of the medicine.” That’s how Father cared for everyone, and I did as he blessed me to do.

I’ll give an example of a miraculous healing through Father’s prayers. In 1960, Pelagia Melnik came to see Father from Izhevsk. For half a year already, she had been unable to eat bread, porridge, potatoes, or any other food. She subsisted solely on milk and raw eggs. She had grown weak and could barely move. When Pelagia tried to enter Father’s cell, she was not allowed in, as there were so many people waiting to see him. She asked to be allowed to skip the line, but to no avail. Suddenly, the door opened, Father came out, and said, “Let this woman come to me; she is very ill.” Upon entering the cell, Pelagia knelt before Father and, without saying a word, burst into bitter tears. Father said to her, “Don’t cry, Pelagia; it will all pass, and you will be healed.” He gave her a fresh prosphora, a glass of water, and a large apple, and said, “Eat this.” She replied

that she hadn't eaten bread for half a year, that her throat hurt, and that she couldn't keep any food down. The priest said, "I bless you. Go to the baptismal chapel, sit on the wide bench, and eat." She went to the baptismal chapel, sat down on the bench, and easily and freely ate the priest's gifts. After that, she fell asleep immediately and slept for a full day. The priest came to check on her several times but did not order anyone to wake her. Pelagia woke up completely healthy. The priest said, "Your work is hard, but everything will change soon." And indeed, half a month after returning to Izhevsk, Pelagia was transferred to another, easier job—even without her asking.

P. I. Kosinova recounted the following. She came to Father with complaints of pain in her rectum and lower back. After an examination at the cancer center, she was diagnosed with rectal cancer and advised to undergo surgery. Before the surgery, she decided to visit Father to ask for his blessing, light candles in the church, and have a prayer service held. But Father said, "Don't rush; you'll end up dying on the operating table. Live a little longer—after all, you have children." She approached Father three times, but his answer was always the same: do not have the surgery. He advised her to buy aloe, prepare a remedy, and drink it. He also suggested ordering a prayer service with the blessing of water dedicated to the Savior, the Mother of God, the Guardian Angel, and all the saints. Three months later, she went to the cancer center for a follow-up examination. The examination revealed that the tumor had almost completely disappeared. Soon she made a full recovery.

She also told me about her son, Mikhail. On the first day of Great Lent, Mikhail went to see off a friend. His mother was against it and was distressed to see her son's disobedience. Offended by him, she thought, "Punish him, Lord!" She waited a long time for her son to return, but in vain. Finally, at midnight, she received a call telling her that her son was in the hospital with an open fracture of his lower leg. Mikhail remained in the hospital for about three months, but the fracture did not heal. He underwent three surgeries, but a nonunion developed. They suggested a fourth operation, but Mikhail checked himself out of the hospital and went home in a cast. He was unable to work for over a year. His mother suggested that Mikhail receive Holy Communion, but he refused. So his mother went to see Father Sevastian and told him everything. After listening, Father Sevastian instructed them to bring her son to the church. It took some effort to persuade him, but they brought him there. Father Sevastian gave Mikhail Communion and ordered a prayer service to be arranged. After the service, Father Sevastian approached Mikhail, who was sitting in a chair, and told him to stand up on his crutches. He made the sign of the cross over him from the front and back and said, "Go with God. God will bless you. 'Now you can have the surgery, or you can choose not to.'" And he walked away from him. Two weeks later, a neighbor who was a doctor took Misha to the hospital for an examination to decide whether to proceed with the surgery. The follow-up X-ray clearly showed signs of recovery—a callus had formed, and the bone had begun to heal. The surgery turned out to be unnecessary.

This same woman's granddaughter, Tanya, was hit by a car and suffered fractures to her leg and pelvic bones. This happened on the eve of the Dormition of the Most Holy Mother of God. The fractures took a long time to heal. They told Anastasia's mother about this, and she told the priest. The priest gave the girl a piece of prosphora and offered to give her Holy Communion, which was done. Father asked Tanya if she was wearing a cross... "She is suffering because of her sins," he said, "but it's all right; she will gradually recover." And that is exactly what happened.

Maria Fyodorovna

My husband was a non-believer, a communist, and he often drank. Life was hard, both emotionally and financially. When he was sober, my husband was very kind, but when he was drunk, he would persecute me for my faith and cause terrible scenes. He would yell at the icons: "Ah! These little gods! I'm going to throw them all out!" And my mother would sometimes say, "You didn't put them there, so it's not up to you to throw them out." My father gave me the icon "Unexpected Joy"; I placed it in the closet, in a hidden spot, so it wouldn't be visible. That's where I prayed in secret.

Once, Father asked me how I was doing. I told him everything and said, "I'll probably break up with him." But Father didn't say anything to me; he'd give me an apple or some cookies. And so time went by.

So one day I came home, and the house was quiet. I opened the door to the living room, and there was my husband, kneeling in front of an icon by an open closet, half-drunk and praying: "O Good King, O Good Mother..."—but he didn't know what came next; he just kept repeating that one line over and over. I asked, "Why are you kneeling there?" And he replied, "Can't you see I'm praying? I know there's an icon there."

Just like that, thanks to the elder's prayers, fear took hold of him, and he began to pray. But he only prayed when he'd had a drink; when he was sober, he was too shy. After that, he stopped causing a scene and didn't throw the icon away. After a while, he suddenly said, "Maria, let's get married." I was stunned; I couldn't believe it, and I said, "But you're persecuting people for their faith." And he replied, "Let's get married and live a better life. Sew yourself a dress."

And he got all the kids on board with it. I went to see Father, told him about it, and he said, "That's good—come on over."

Father Alexander Krivonosov married us, and my husband began to change. He noticed that I didn't eat meat on Wednesdays and Fridays, so he'd come home from work before me and prepare something Lenten for dinner. His children would ask him, "Dad, why are you cooking something Lenten?" And he'd reply, "Well, of course—our mother isn't eating it, so we'll fast too."

Some time passed, and my husband came down with the flu and said, "Everyone in our family dies suddenly." We admitted him to the hospital—they diagnosed a lung shadow that had developed into cancer. Before the surgery, he confessed with fear, received the anointing of the sick, and took Communion; they operated on him, and he passed away. After his death, I had a dream: my husband came home, and I said to him, "Petya, have a drink," and handed him a shot of vodka. He took it, walked over to the sink, poured it out, and said, "We don't drink here." That is how, through the elder's prayers, the Lord led my husband to salvation."

Olga Fyodorovna

Father always blessed us to take our vacation so that the first two weeks would coincide with the last two weeks of Great Lent, and the last two weeks of vacation with the two weeks after Easter. And in 1966, I took my vacation starting April 1. On the night of April 1, Yulechka called me from the church: "Olga Fyodorovna, Father is not well. Petro is coming to pick you up; get ready." I gathered the medications and left. I didn't return home until after Father had passed away.

Father prayed for everyone during his lifetime and continues to pray and help even after his death. To confirm this, I will describe two dreams.

On the twentieth day after Father's death, I was on a business trip in Moscow. And then, at 1:30 a.m. Moscow time (and here in Karaganda it was already 4:30 a.m., that is, the hour of Father's passing), he appeared to me in a dream—cheerful, smiling, and saying: "Olga Fyodorovna, may God bless you for everything, for everything,"—and he waved to me. I wanted to say something, but didn't have time before I woke up. My heart was filled with such joy, as if I had seen Father alive.

In January 1994, I saw Father again in a dream. It was as if I were in church; the service had ended, and everyone was leaving. Many people, including me, headed to the rectory to receive Father's blessing. There I met Father's housekeeper, Vera, and said, "Vera, go see Father, do what needs to be done, and then ask if I can come in too." Vera said, "All right, Olga Fyodorovna," and went into the cell. After a while, she came out and said, "Come in, Olga Fyodorovna; Father has given his permission." I thanked her and went in to see Father. He was sitting in the front corner of his cell in front of the icon of the Savior, leaning on a small table. He was dressed in a beautiful new cassock, the hem of which reached the floor, and a kamelauk, also new, with a hood. It seemed as though Father had come from somewhere but hadn't changed his clothes (he usually took off his cassock and kamelauk immediately). He looked solemn. I approached Father, knelt down, and said, "Bless me, Father." He blessed me; I kissed his hand and felt that it was warm and soft, as if alive. I pressed my face against his hand and said, "Father, my dear, it's been so long since I've seen you—I've missed you so much," and I felt a lump in my throat and knew I was about to cry. But Father said to me gently, "Oh, by the way, I'm here every day." I thought, "How is that possible? He's 'over there,' after all," and began to say, "But Father, you're..."—but Father interrupted me and said, "Yes, yes. I'm here and there, but I'm here every day." He spoke these words clearly and convincingly. And then I woke up.

In this way, Father made it clear to me and to others that he does not abandon us, that he watches over his flock closely, that he is with us here on earth, and that we can always turn to him in prayer for help and guidance.

Raisa Ivanovna Kuzmicheva

Our family was deported from the Kursk Region in 1931—my mother, my father, two small children, and my mother-in-law. They were taken to Kompaneysk, to the barren steppe. As far as the eye could see, all the way to the horizon, there was not a single bush or tree. At first, the resettlers built makeshift huts, then dug dugouts. Sanitary conditions were appalling—there were no clothes, no food, and only one well for the entire settlement, from which they drew water with a tin can. People were dying in droves. My parents buried two of their children and my grandmother-in-law. They were wrapped in rags and laid to rest in a mass grave. My parents were left alone. It's impossible to describe what they went through. The hardest years were 1931, 1932, and 1933. Then things got easier. They planted vegetable gardens near the dugouts, and people began to receive bread on ration cards. I was born in 1935, and my brother Nikolai was born in 1938. In 1939, my mother heard about Father Sevastian, took my brother to Bolshaya Mikhailovka, and Father Sevastian baptized him. Father Sevastian himself was still very weak; he had just been released from Dolinka at that time. And just as we had eaten a little bread, the war began. Our father was killed at Stalingrad. And my mother (she was a deeply devout woman), when she received the notice, cried, of course, very much, and immediately made a vow to God—not to eat meat. And she never ate meat for the rest of her life.

During the war years, Father began visiting us in Kompaneysk. He gathered all the widows and orphans around him and tried to help them, even though he himself lived in great poverty. On the day of his arrival, Mom asked me to climb onto the roof and watch as Father walked from the train station to our house. I remember how he walked—a white beard, white hair, a light-colored raincoat, a gray hat, walking with a cane. Mother Varya and Mother Grusha were with him, and everyone ran to Father for a blessing. But I ran headlong to my mother, and she sent me to the 15th settlement to tell them there that Father had arrived. Each of his visits was a celebration for us.

Our family lived from hand to mouth. Day and night, by the light of a kerosene lamp, Mom worked the sewing machine to feed me and my brother. Father knew this. And starting in 1942, he began inviting me to stay at his house on Nizhnyaya Street during my school breaks. He probably did this to feed a half-starved child and to strengthen the faith in God that my mother had instilled in me. Those were the happiest days of my childhood. Even on the train ride there, my heart would skip a beat with joy in anticipation of the upcoming visit. And when I stepped over the threshold of that small, clean house, where the dirt floors were covered with oilcloth and multicolored knitted rugs—it seemed to me the most beautiful place on earth, and its inhabitants—angels in the flesh. I revered them. Mother Grusha, Mother Varya, Mother Fekla—in long, clean dresses, cinched with white aprons, wearing white headscarves, polite and friendly. They always spoke softly, never raising their voices. In the kitchen stood Father's bed under a white, immaculately clean bedspread, and in the room, three more beds were placed right up against one another, on which the mothers slept. What a generous soul one must have had to invite a stranger's child—who caused nothing but inconvenience and trouble—to stay, while living in such cramped quarters! And apparently, I wasn't the only one Father invited. There were always people in the house, including children. Some would leave, and others would arrive.

I was well fed and taken to the bathhouse. Father and I often went to Zelenstroy. Father was warmly welcomed there, and he, pointing at me, would smile affectionately and say, "Look at this little girl—and she's already in third grade!"

Having known Father since I was a child, I couldn't help but notice how different he was from other priests. At that time, other hieromonks who had been released from Dolinka also lived in our region: Father Kifa, Father Makarii, Father Parfenii, Father Kessarii, and Father Parmen. They were all good priests, but none of them inspired such a sense of reverence as Father Sebastian. Waves of grace radiated from him, and everyone could feel it. Even Father's appearance was extraordinary: a dignified, spiritual face, piercing dark eyes, and hair as silky as a child's. Father was very tactful and considerate; he never humiliated, insulted, or cut anyone off, and he never pointed out a person's physical shortcomings. And in Father's presence, it never occurred to anyone to say about someone that they were deaf, blind, lame, or the like. There was an aura of high moral character surrounding Father; once you entered it, it was impossible to act meanly or speak rudely. He had no particular favorites; he treated everyone equally, and this brought people even closer to him. Everywhere, always, and in everything, Father was quiet and modest, and he even tried to do good deeds unnoticed. Sometimes you'd approach him for a blessing, and he'd very discreetly slip a coin folded in four into your hand. Often, after he visited our home, we'd find money under the bedspread in the evening while making the bed. Mother Grusha had left it there at Father's instruction. Apparently, Father did this out of his

sensitivity toward others, so as not to embarrass anyone or force them to thank him publicly. In the 23 years I knew Father, I never once heard him praise himself or hold himself up as an example to others. He was completely devoid of self-admiration and self-satisfaction. On the contrary, he often said, “I am a man of little education; I finished fourth grade, and I have neither the gift of speech nor a good voice.” He usually read his sermons from a book, adding nothing of his own. And when sitting at the table with his spiritual children, he would sometimes tell a story, but calmly and modestly, without putting himself on display.

In 1951, Father bought us a small house at the Melkombinat. By that time, with Father’s blessing, many believers had already moved to the Melkombinat from various parts of Karaganda: Maikuduk, Tikhonovka, Prishakhtinsk, and Kompaneysk. Most of them were families—or, more accurately, the remnants of families—who had survived the tragedy of forced resettlement they had endured in the early 1930s. The residents of Melkombinat were people with hearts torn by suffering, shattered lives, widowed wives, and orphaned children. Each had their own pain, their own emotional wounds. There were people with difficult personalities—capricious, suspicious, aggressive, and withdrawn. But Father found a way to reach every suffering soul. Among those surrounding the elder were also many monastics who had been exiled to Karaganda during the years of persecution or who had later come to him from Central Russia. They formed the backbone of the Karaganda Church. Among them were unique, talented individuals—ascetics leading a life of profound spirituality. Overall, it was a strong Christian community, a Kazakh steppe “skete,” which the Optina Elder managed to organize and nurture on the holy ground of the Karaganda camps during the godless communist regime.

I remember how, in 1954, I heard the Christmas All-Night Vigil for the first time. Upon entering the house where the service was being held, I saw Mother Varya, Mother Grusha, Mother Pasha, and Ksenia Ivanovna standing in the front corner of the priest’s room. Dressed in black festive gowns—beautiful, majestic, and poised—they sang with angelic voices, harmoniously and reverently: “God is with us; understand this, you Gentiles, and submit, for God is with us!” It was such beautiful singing that I was spellbound; goosebumps ran down my body, and my soul rejoiced with the joy and light that filled it to overflowing. I stood there in silence, forgetting everything in the world, and quietly wept with happiness.

I also remember how, back in the early 1960s, on Maundy Thursday evening after the reading of the Twelve Gospels, all the Melkombinat workers left the church on foot, crossing the dam with lit candles. The night was quiet, and we walked like that for a long time, while the candles burned steadily and brightly. It was a moving and majestic sight. But the true grandeur of this procession lay in the spiritual unity of the people. This unity was evident in all matters and events—big and small, joyful and sorrowful. That’s why the funerals of community members were always well-attended. No one was asked or persuaded; everyone came of their own accord, knowing that it was everyone’s sacred duty. I remember when Ksenia Ivanovna Dolgova died in 1960; they carried her on their shoulders and sang all the way from her home to the church—about seven kilometers.

What can I say about myself? I am now 61 years old. With Father’s blessing, I have worked as a nurse my entire life and sung in the church choir. And in my heart there is a constant feeling of gratitude toward Father Sevastian, who so fatherly and caring guided my life along the path of Christian love for God and neighbor.

Tatyana Vladimirovna Tortensten

I was released from prison in 1952. I couldn’t go home to Moscow. At first, I wanted to settle in Kokchetav. It had a pleasant, healthy climate and forests, but I didn’t have any friends there. But my closest friend, Dr. R. G. L., had settled in Karaganda six months earlier; we had worked together for eight years in the camp hospital and lived in the same room for five years. We’d been through a lot together. So I went to visit her in Karaganda on August 31, 1952. I also found other friends who had settled there. And so I stayed in smoky, dusty, coal-filled Karaganda, with its purple gas flames burning on the slag heaps. I no longer longed for the clean, pine-scented air of Kokchetav; I didn’t want to leave the friendly warmth and emotional closeness of my tried-and-true friends, and I found work that suited me.

In the late October, R. G. fell seriously ill with malaria; her temperature of 40–41° would drop briefly, only for another equally severe attack to begin. Once the attacks were brought under control, she suddenly began to suffer from severe delirium caused by acute psychosis.

She lived in another neighborhood, far from me. Her daughter couldn't handle her, so they called an ambulance, which took her that night to a psychiatric hospital 20 kilometers away in Kompaneysk. When we arrived there with her daughter, we were completely stunned and devastated. She wasn't herself; she looked terrifying. She was like an animal: she snatched the food we'd brought her from our hands, shoved it into her mouth as fast as she could, and then grabbed more. Then she started crawling around us on all fours. The orderlies took her to her ward.

Her daughter wept inconsolably. I took her to my place. We arrived devastated, exhausted, and looking like completely different people ourselves. My landlady, upon learning what had happened, said to me, "Don't lose hope. Here's what I advise: go to Mikhailovka tomorrow. There's a priest there—a monk—who's truly special. Ask him for help; he'll pray and help your sick relative. Go—don't hesitate, and don't be afraid."

The very next day, I went to Mikhailovka. Grusha's mother opened the door for me; Father wasn't home. I told her why I had come. She was friendly toward me and said, "Yes, you absolutely must speak with Father, tell him about it, and ask for his help." She gave me the address where he had gone to perform a service and said, "There's a bench by that house. Sit down on it and wait. When you hear singing coming from the house, that means the memorial meal is over, and Father will come out right away. He might not stop to talk with you—he doesn't like to stop on the street—but walk alongside him and tell him what's on your mind. Even though he'll be walking, he'll listen to you."

That's exactly how it happened. I sat nervously on the bench; then singing began inside the house, and as soon as they finished singing, a short, elderly man with a gray beard, wearing a long black coat and a black cap, came out of the gate. Without looking up or glancing at me, he walked along the street with a light, hurried gait. I walked beside him and told him about our trouble. He walked in silence, without slowing his pace, but listened to me attentively. When I began to ask for his help, he stopped, looked at me with his kind, extraordinary eyes—a gaze that penetrated the soul—and quietly, simply said, "She isn't Orthodox, after all, and she's not a believer." I was taken aback. "Yes," I said, "she's a Lutheran. She isn't opposed to faith, but she's far from it." Father was already walking at the same brisk pace. "It doesn't matter that she's Lutheran," said Father. "All right, I'll pray. Visit her in two or three days, and pray earnestly yourselves. Well, I have to go here, to this house. Goodbye."

Three days later it was Sunday, and first thing in the morning we took the train to Kompaneysk, to the hospital. In the courtyard, a nurse met us and smiled. "I have good news for you," she said. "Your patient 'woke up' two days ago; she's already been transferred to the convalescent ward—that building over there, the second one on the left. Go on in. She'll be happy to see you."

They let us right into the ward. R. G. was sitting on her bed, her hair combed, looking neat, wearing a new robe, with her usual expression, and drinking tea. She was very happy to see us. "How did I end up here? What happened to me?" she asked us. Of course, we were delighted and amazed—such a change in just two days.

The next day, I couldn't work, so right after my rounds, I left the hospital to thank Father. At home, he was completely different from how he was on the street—affectionate and friendly. He invited me to stay for lunch, told me stories, was cheerful, and asked me many questions.

Mother Grusha gave me an address where I could stay overnight when I came for Father's night services. Soon I became Father's attending physician and his spiritual daughter. My life took a completely different turn. I became "Father's."

A great misfortune befell me—a major trial came my way, and it was entirely my own fault. I arrived at the church; Father was celebrating the service. I went to the far corner, behind the right choir loft, knelt down, and prayed fervently, weeping profusely. Suddenly, as if jolted, I raised my head and saw Father standing in the corner of the choir loft. Or rather, I saw his eyes. He was staring intently at me, serious and concerned. I realized that he had come to me, worried about my state of mind, even though no one could see me there in the corner. He never went out onto the choir loft when he was officiating. But now he had come for my sake, to listen to my silent story. I looked into his eyes and wept, but no longer out of sorrow, but out of "holy love for the Lord" and because it was so easy to entrust my soul into Father's hands. My sorrow faded, and my soul was filled with joy—a vivid sense of happiness from the realization that Father was there and that the Lord truly "rests with the saints." Father had already left and was leading the chants from the altar. He had been here for only a very brief moment. But I still hadn't risen from my knees and was weeping quietly.

Hieromonk Father Trifon lived in the village of Tikhonovka. He often visited Father and sang in Father's choir. After the church opened, Father, with the help of the dean, managed to organize prayer houses in Tikhonovka and Fedorovka, which Father Trifon served with Father's blessing. One Sunday, after the service, he approached Father to ask for his blessing to go to Fedorovka that day. Father looked at him intently and, as he blessed him, said, "I was already planning to send you there today. But you must not drive—walk directly through Zelenstroy." He said this sternly. Father Trifon was surprised, because although the route through Zelenstroy was the most direct, the journey on foot was very long. But, of course, he set off as Father had blessed him. The path led through a tree nursery. As Father Trifon was crossing it, he did not encounter a single person along the way. And suddenly, a young, burly man in a highly agitated state leaped out from behind some thick bushes, grabbed him by the arm, and dragged him into the woods, away from the road. Father Trifon was very frightened, but he was forced to obey, hurrying after him into the thicket. "Come on, Father, come on," the man kept saying as they walked, "I've been waiting for you for a long time; I'm worn out." "Well," thought Father Trifon, "this is the end of me." When they entered the thicket, the man let go of Father Trifon's hand and said: "Well, sit down, Father, on this stump, listen to me, and decide my fate." And he began to tell his story: "I love my wife very much. She is young, beautiful, intelligent, and a good homemaker. We live happily together, in comfort. We really want to have children, but we don't have any. And then suddenly yesterday, I found out from a nurse that my wife had an abortion last week. I tossed and turned all night, tormented by my thoughts—my wife wasn't home; she'd gone on a 24-hour shift. Well, I thought, if she did that, it means the child isn't mine, and she's cheating on me. And if it is mine, then she doesn't love me and has decided to leave me. So she's been lying to me all these years. Because of that lie, and because she killed our long-awaited child, I decided I couldn't forgive her no matter what. And I decided I had to kill her. I don't know if I dozed off or lost myself in thought, but I had a vision of an old man—short in stature, with a big beard. And he said to me, "What are you doing? You've decided everything on your own, without consulting anyone. You can't do that. Ask for advice first. Tell everything to the first elderly man you meet on the road. And do exactly as he tells you, or else, in your current state of agitation, you might make a mistake"—and he said this sternly.

I woke up, sat up in bed—no one was there. But I'd clearly heard a voice. I jumped out of bed and ran out of the house before my wife came home from her shift. I was walking down the street, thinking, "How can I possibly talk to anyone on the street, pour out my heart? Who will listen to me and really understand my situation?" So I decided to go to Zelenstroy and wait for an older man to come by so I could talk to him. Just tell me the truth—the whole truth—as you understand it about my wife. I'll know if you're beating around the bush. Say exactly what you think, or else you'll be in trouble too."

"What's your name?" Father Trifon asked him. "Nikolai."

"I will pray to your patron saint, Saint Nicholas. After all, I am a monk. I will pray that Nicholas the Wonderworker reveals the truth to us." And Father Trifon began to pray.

"Well, Kolya," he said gently after the prayer, "your wife is already repenting. She loves you and is faithful to you. She's crying right now, regretting that she wanted to live freely, without worries, for a little while longer. She cherishes you." Go home in peace, forgive your wife. Make peace with her and live happily together." The man listened intently, and his face grew brighter and brighter, as if the madness were leaving him. "You'll have a child soon. Saint Nicholas told me all this; I'm not speaking on my own."

The man began to tremble all over, burst into tears, and fell at Father Trifon's feet, thanking him and begging for forgiveness.

"After all, I could have killed you too, if I'd decided to kill my wife! I would have feared you as a witness—I was losing my mind!" "Well, go on, Kolya, take it easy. Go in peace. I forgive you." Father Trifon said goodbye to the man and set off, still in a daze, toward Fedorovka. "How could it be," he thought, "that the priest blessed me to walk through the forest? Such danger awaited me there..." And when he saw the Father again, the Father greeted him with a smile: "Well, did you make it back alive?" – "Yes, Father, I'm alive, though I could just as easily have perished," – Father Trifon was stunned that the Father knew everything. "What are you saying, Father Trifon? I was praying the whole time—why were you afraid? We had to save two souls, to free them from such a demonic obsession." And the priest forbade anyone from telling anyone else about it. "As long as I'm alive, don't say a word to anyone. But when I die—then do as you please."

In 1955, Sister Maria, an altar server, began to experience pain in her upper lip. Her lip became deformed by a growing tumor and turned blue, so Sister Maria was taken to a surgeon. He said that surgery was needed immediately and gave her a referral to the oncology department. Mother Maria went to the elder to ask for his blessing for the operation, but he said: “The tumor is already large; they’ll cut off the lip, but it might reappear somewhere else. No, don’t have the surgery. Press your lips against the icon of the Holy Trinity in the memorial chapel. God willing, it will go away.” A month later, Mother Maria could be seen in church again, just as quick and busy as ever. “How did you cure your lip?” someone asked her. “I didn’t treat it—I just pressed my lips against the icon of the Holy Trinity, just as Father blessed me to do. The swelling began to subside and gradually disappeared completely. Glory to God!”

Here’s another similar case. Sister Paraskeva, who constantly read the Psalter for the dead, developed a blue spot on her chest, just below her neck on the left side, which began to grow and turn purplish. At the hospital, they immediately told her she needed surgery right away and made it clear that it was cancer. Bursting into tears, Pashenka went to church. At the church gates, she ran into one of the parishioners, who advised her not to cry but to go see Father. Pasha obeyed and went. She came out of Father’s office beaming... “Father said, ‘Cancer... cancer...—nonsense. Don’t go anywhere; it’ll go away’” (the priest pronounced some words in a rustic dialect). And what happened? The spot began to shrink, fade, and disappeared without a trace. And now, 30 years have passed; this nun took her vows and is still alive, though very advanced in years.

A nurse named Sofya Vasilyevna worked at one of our hospital’s health clinics. Her husband was the chief accountant of a trust. It’s hard to imagine how much grief this family has endured. Seventeen years ago, they tragically lost their only son, who was twelve years old. The boy went out onto the balcony to water the flowers in a planter; he wanted to adjust something, leaned over the railing, and fell from the fifth floor. His parents were sitting at the table in the dining room; he was talking to them from the balcony when suddenly the doorbell rang, and the boy was carried in, dead.

Then a series of new misfortunes befell them. In 1937, the father was arrested and sentenced to ten years. For Sofya Vasilyevna, years of loneliness, persecution, unemployment, and hunger began. But they endured it all calmly, weathering the storm. All that was long behind them; now they lived in a large house, in comfort, but... as they grew older, the childless couple wanted to take in a boy.

In the city of Kuibyshev, there was a large “Infant Home” where orphans under the age of seven were housed. The couple decided to go there and choose a boy. One of the priest’s spiritual daughters told Sofya Vasilyevna that if they wanted this child to bring them happiness, they should first visit Father Sevastian and ask for his blessing.

Tickets to Kuibyshev had already been purchased; there was still one day left before their departure, so Sofya Vasilyevna and the elder’s spiritual daughter went to see him. Upon arriving, they learned that Father was ill—he was lying in bed and not receiving visitors. Suddenly, Father rang from his cell. He asked who had come and told them to come in. They entered and knelt by his bed. Father listened attentively and, without lifting his head from the pillow, said, “That is a good intention; go ahead. You may take a child, but only a girl. You must not take a boy.” And, blessing Sofya Vasilyevna, he repeated, “I bless you to take a girl of about three years old.” After thanking the elder, they left. Sofya Vasilyevna was worried about how her husband would come to terms with letting go of his dream of having a boy.

A few days later, the couple returned from Kuibyshev and brought a three-year-old girl with them. She was friendly and affectionate, clinging most of all to her father, but she was very unattractive. It wasn’t that her individual facial features were irregular—no, everything was normal—but overall, the child was unattractive. But the happy parents didn’t notice this. They joyfully recounted how they had chosen the child.

When they filled out the paperwork to adopt a child at the “Infant Home” office, they were told: “Now go ahead and pick whichever one you like. They’ll be waking them up from their afternoon nap and putting them on the pot, so just walk among them and choose.” “We hadn’t even made it all the way along one wall of the potty room,” says Sofya Vasilyevna, “when a little girl ran up to us from the other end of the room, wrapped her little arms around my husband’s leg, pressed her face against his knee, and, trembling all over, cried out, ‘My daddy’s here! My daddy’s here!’” The caregiver pulled her away, picked her up, and said, “Don’t be embarrassed—choose one, take a look.” “No,” my husband said, “we won’t be choosing anymore. She chose us herself. Please arrange for us to adopt this girl.” So they brought the plain-looking girl home and grew to love her because she had “recognized” them herself. Joy filled the house; the girl grew up cheerful, very obedient, and helpful. She adored her father. When he came home from work, she would rush to take his

boots off his feet and bring him his slippers from the bedroom. Trying to help her mother, she would grab a broom and sweep the floor, even though she didn't know how to do it yet. "We didn't teach her any of this," said Sofya Vasilyevna, "she figures it all out on her own."

Of course, the couple showered their child with warmth and love, and she—having never experienced this before—soaked up her parents' affection like a flower soaks up water. Four years later, the girl started school and proved to be very capable and diligent. She began to stand up straighter and grow more beautiful; her former plainness vanished. People around her would say, "Sofya Vasilyevna, your daughter is getting prettier." And she would reply, "She's always been pretty."

There you have it: the priest's blessing and obedience to him.

But what hardships, pains, and misfortunes did people have to endure when they went against Father's advice? This was especially true regarding the matter of marriage. They would come to ask for his blessing, and he would say plainly, "You must not marry him." But the young people were headstrong: "I love him," or "I'll set him straight." And then came the trouble—a life of utter hardship. If an intolerable situation arose in married life, Father never insisted that they continue to endure it, not even for the sake of the children. He would listen to everything and say, "Well, then, you can leave him. Go your separate ways."

At the very beginning of Father's pastoral ministry in Karaganda, he had a spiritual daughter named Tanechka, a remarkably intelligent and pleasant girl with a sensitive and kind heart. She was very attached to Father, and he loved her dearly. Tanechka was planning to marry a young, handsome engineer from Almaty. Father did not give his blessing. At first she obeyed, but then she began asking for his blessing again. Then he forbade it strictly. Father spoke with her at length, trying to convince her to leave her fiancé. But in the end, she said, "I love him, and I'll put up with anything." When Tanechka left to join her fiancé, Father wept, begged her to reconsider, went to the train station to see her off, and there pleaded with her to just go to Alma-Ata and come back. No one could recall another time when Father had been so persistent. Tanechka did not return. Her life turned out to be very unhappy. She endured much suffering, contracted tuberculosis, and died two and a half years later.

Father saved us from many misfortunes when we didn't even realize it, and when we did, we were amazed by his foresight and the power of his prayers. Sometimes he demanded a decisive action from us, but more often than not, everything happened quietly and calmly, like water flowing in a river. Father's guidance and intercession were quiet. Three times in Karaganda, death came to my doorstep, but Father would not let it take me and prolonged my life.

Father once greatly impressed me with his ability to hear when I addressed him in my thoughts.

Once, R. G. and I were returning to Karaganda from Sarani. The bus was driven by a young man of Chechen descent. On the way, another bus overtook us, and its driver—also a young Russian guy—stuck his head out of the cab and shouted to the Chechen with a laugh, "You're crawling along like an old nag!" The Chechen driver flew into a rage, stepped on the gas, and sped up to overtake his taunter. The other driver also stepped on the gas. Our bus raced along, bouncing over the bumps in the road so violently that the people standing in the aisle were banging their heads against the ceiling. Horror and fear gripped my heart. The highway zigzags, winding around a field of harvested wheat. And, to our horror, we see that our driver, in order to take a shortcut, is veering off the highway and driving the bus across the bumpy field. The bus bounces over the bumps, swaying from side to side; the wheels are about to come off, and the bus will tip over, breaking our bones. The children are crying; everyone is begging the conductor to stop the driver, but she herself, pale as a sheet, screams: "Who's going to stop him now, when he's gotten so wildly carried away?!" Realizing that we were on the brink of disaster, I began to pray, mentally crying out to Father: "Father! Father Sebastian! Save us! Help us!" I looked out the window and saw that the first bus had stopped on the highway; all the passengers were getting off and crowding around it. What was going on? The bus had lost a wheel. Our driver slowed down, pulled out onto the highway, and silently drove past the first bus without even looking out of the cab.

The next day was the All-Night Vigil for the feast. I arrived in Mikhailovka early and waited off to the side for Father to go to church. I wanted to tell him how frightened we'd been the day before, but he asked me himself, "Was it you who called out to me yesterday, 'Father, save us and help us'?" – "Yes, Father, it was me." – "Well then, when you call me, you have to say everything: who's calling, and from what to save—otherwise it's hard for me. I hear, 'Save!' But who? From what? Well, did you make it there safely?" I was simply dumbfounded: "We made it safely, Father."

Father performs miracles all the time; we just don't always see them or understand them. And sometimes, when Father is asked a direct question about something, he'll say, "How should I know? I'm no prophet; I don't know that." That's the whole answer. Sometimes he'll even frown. In 1956, I became seriously ill with a heart condition. I was lying at home, but my recovery was slow. Suddenly, my temperature spiked unexpectedly. With great difficulty, and on IV fluids, I was taken to the hospital. My condition was extremely serious; my temperature was 40°. It turned out I had typhoid fever. There was almost no hope that my heart would be able to withstand this illness. The situation was catastrophic. My consciousness was clouded; I couldn't communicate anything about my condition. But Father himself found out that I was in trouble and sent Father Alexander and Sister Anastasia to me. I was lying alone in an isolation room. When I saw them both standing beside me, my mind cleared. I asked the nurse to make sure no one else entered my room. Father Alexander heard my confession and gave me Holy Communion. After Communion, I read the letter from Father that they had brought with them. It was short, but it gave me strength and hope: "Christ is among us! Most esteemed and dear Tatyana Vladimirovna! Your serious illness is not leading to death, but to the glory of God. You still have much work ahead of you. We will take care of you now. Hieromonk S. Fomin." After Communion, Father Alexander and Sister Anastasia stayed with me in my hospital room for a long time. They prayed and read the Gospel. I understood everything clearly. By nightfall, my temperature had dropped, and by the next day it was almost back to normal.

In September 1958, circumstances dictated that I had to leave urgently for a vacation in Moscow. It was difficult to get tickets at that time. I had to go to the station, sign up for the waiting list, and sit there all night, since they called out the names of those on the list every two hours. It was a torturous, sleepless night on the street. By morning, I had secured a good ticket for a compartment car. The next day, I went to see Father. He greeted me with a smile: "Did you get a ticket? Good, good. Let's say a prayer service for travelers. And what day is your ticket for?"

"Wednesday, Father." He looked up and stared into the distance. Suddenly he frowned, turned his gaze to me, and said sternly, "There's no need to rush. It's still too early to leave on Wednesday."—"How is it too early, Father? How is it too early? My vacation is starting, I have to make it back in time—I had such a hard time getting this ticket!" The priest frowned even more: "You need to sell that ticket. Right after the service, go to the station and return the ticket."—"But I can't do that, Father; I can't put it off."

"I order you to return the ticket! Return it today, do you hear me?"—and Father, in a fit of anger, stamped his foot at me. I came to my senses: "I'm sorry, Father, I'm sorry—bless me. I'll go right now and return it."—"Yes, go now and come back to me from there; you'll still make it back in time for the service," said Father, blessing me. Never before had Father been so demanding with me.

After returning the ticket, I went back to the church. I felt calm and joyful that I had obeyed Father. What would he say now?

Father came out to meet me, cheerful and pleased: "Did you return it? That's good. When do you plan to leave now?"—"Leave? But I returned the ticket."—"Well then, go tomorrow and get a new one. You can stop by the station on your way home and get in line. You won't have to wait all night—go home and get some sleep. Then come back in the morning and get your ticket." All I could say was, "All right." I rode to the station and thought, "Father has always been so kind to me—why is he being so hard on me now?"

A man with a list was already standing at the station; registration had just begun, and I was seventh in line. I told the man that I'd already suffered through one night, and he said, "I'm not going anywhere—go home, and I'll mark you off the list during roll call. Come back tomorrow by eight o'clock in the morning." And he marked my last name.

The next morning I arrived, got in line, and picked up a ticket.

Before we left, they held a prayer service; the priest gave me a large piece of prosphora, blessed me, and I left.

As our train approached the Volga and pulled into the Chapaevsk station, I saw all the passengers rushing out of their compartments and crowding around the windows in the hallway. I stepped out, too. "What's going on?" I asked. " " One of the passengers let me through to the window. On the adjacent tracks, I saw passenger cars piled on top of one another. They had blocked the next set of tracks as well. Some cars were standing upright in a sort of heap. Everyone was overcome with fear. They rushed to the conductor with questions. She explained: "An express train like ours—the one that left Karaganda on Wednesday—crashed—it plowed into the rear of a freight train at full speed, and, well, the cars piled up on top of each other. It was

such a horror here! They brought in medical cars from Kuibyshev. And it'll be a while before they clear away these cars—there's a lot of work to be done with them. Freight cars don't go through Chapaevsk; they're rerouted around it."

I went into my compartment, lay down on the bunk facing the wall, and began to cry: "Father, Father! My dear Father!"

In 1959, I left for Moscow for good. Father let me go, saying only, "Come visit more often." I would visit Father during my vacations. Father said that wasn't often enough. In 1965, I was informed that Father's health had deteriorated significantly. I wrote him a letter saying that I would like to spend more time with him and asked for his blessing. In reply, I received a telegram: "Father has given his permission; come—we're waiting." I quit my job in the fall of 1965 and left for Karaganda. At first, Father seemed to me just as he had been during my last visit to him in 1963. His condition did not seem life-threatening to me; I thought Father would recover, and everything would be as it had been before. Sometimes it seemed that he was getting better, that soon he would once again be available to everyone. But that did not happen.

On the tenth day after Father's passing, I left for home in Moscow. In Moscow, I walked from Kazansky Station to Komsomolskaya Square. Everything was familiar from my childhood, yet somehow distant. How could I get used to it? How could I live so far from Mikhailovka, so dear to my heart?

My heart ached with pain and remorse. I remembered what Father had said: "You haven't been here for five years again?"—"What are you talking about, Father? Five years?" He was displeased that, after moving to Moscow, I didn't come to see him every year. If only I could turn back the clock on those years!

Protodeacon Vasily Denezhkin

In 1937, my older sister and I were sentenced under Article 58 to 10 years in the labor camps. We served our sentences in Karlag. While in the 19th Dolinsky Division in 1943, on Easter, I first heard about Father Sebastian. At that time, we received prosphora from Karaganda along with a note: "Eat this without hesitation. It was consecrated by Hieromonk Sevastian of Optina Pustyn." We were very happy to break our fast with prosphora on Holy Easter. But at that time, we did not have the opportunity to see Father Sevastian in person and receive the spiritual strength we needed from him.

Long years of waiting followed. In 1947, I was released from the camp and sent into exile at the Uspensky Mine. My sister was also released. We managed to obtain permission for my sister to serve her exile with me at the Uspensky Mine. In 1951, our younger sister Olga came to join us from our homeland. It was difficult for her to live alone in the countryside. Our acquaintances advised Olga to go to Karaganda to see Father Sevastian. She went, and Father Sevastian blessed her to stay in Karaganda and work at the Melkombinat. From that time on, through our correspondence with my sister, we grew closer to Father Sevastian as well.

Father was well known not only in Karaganda but also in various parts of Russia. Anyone who visited Father, received his blessing, and experienced his spiritual guidance and comfort retained fond memories of him. Protodeacon Jacob, an acquaintance of ours with whom I had served my sentence in Karlag, later wrote to us from the Vladimir Diocese: "You write that your sister Olga has found work at the Melkombinate, where I, too, used to go in '45 and '47, and where Father Sebastian often visits—seeing him and conversing with him was a true delight for me." And in another letter he wrote: "A new commandment I give to you: Love one another." Love—that is the true miracle. Father Sebastian is significant precisely because he affirms our lives through his own, serving as a true apostle of the teaching of love." And the following verse followed:

In days of doubt, lies, and sacrilege,
When the mad world bathes in blood,
He preaches brotherhood to people of all backgrounds,
And his words are full of Gospel love.
Not given to vain and unnecessary arguments,
He goes, a disciple of the Crucified Christ,
To all who are broken, grieving, and afflicted,
To all who are faltering under the weight of the cross.
And, penetrating to the depths of the soul with his spiritual eye,
He mourns with the sorrowful and hastens to help the sick.
He appears to us as an ascetic, a prophet,

Shining like a lighthouse in this dark night.

This letter stirred in me an even greater desire to see Father. And in 1953, during Holy Week, after receiving a week's leave from work to have my concussion—sustained in a mine accident—examined, I packed my things in great haste and took the first train to Karaganda. Upon arriving, I found house No. 59 on Nizhnyaya Street. It was Maundy Thursday. Father wasn't home, but he soon arrived, and shortly after, a baby was brought in to be baptized. I had missed church services so much that I dared to ask Father to allow me to attend the baptism. Father agreed. After the baptism, he lay down to rest, while the priest's wives began preparing a meal. They gave me Dimitry of Rostov's **Lives of the Saints** and asked me to read it aloud. Just as a body recovering from a long illness eagerly accepts and absorbs food, so I, starved for spiritual nourishment, eagerly set about reading the book.

Soon Father came out of the room, said a prayer, and we sat down to eat. I struck up a conversation with Father and mentioned our acquaintance, the protodeacon, with whom we correspond, and right there at the table I recited from memory the contents of his letters. The mothers really liked the verses, and they asked me to write them down. I glanced at Father and said, "I'll be happy to copy them down, if Father gives his blessing." Father paused for a moment and replied with a smile, "They'll put you in jail for that." Father did not seek glory for himself, and we were convinced of this on more than one occasion afterward.

After lunch, we began to get ready for the service—the reading of the Twelve Gospels. Father suggested that I go with him, and we walked down West Street to the house of prayer. There we entered a small room where three mothers were sitting. One of them, Mother Anastasia, was lying on a bed and moaning. Father asked, "What's wrong, Mother?" "My head hurts, Father." "Then why did you lie down by the stove? It's hot in here." Then Father went into the sanctuary and began gathering everything needed for the service. There was no permission to hold services in the house of prayer, so on that day the service was held at Polyakova's house. The choir members arrived, and the three-room house was overflowing with worshippers. I stood near the choir, prayed, and, overcome with joy, sometimes asked myself, "Is this a dream?"

The day after the Service of the Burial of the Shroud, I went to confession with Father. I had been accustomed to going to confession since childhood, and here I felt that Father's confession was special—it was imbued with more love than sorrow. When I had poured out everything that had accumulated in my soul over the past few years, Father covered me with his epitrachelion and recited the prayer of absolution; tears flowed involuntarily down my cheeks. I felt such a sense of relief in my soul, as if I had been reborn.

On the evening of Great Saturday, my sister Olga and I went to the house of prayer. A large crowd had gathered there—everyone had brought Easter cakes and Easter bread to be blessed. We were waiting for Father; he had been going from house to house in Mikhailovka, blessing the Easter bread. The people were anxious because the police had arrived and said: "Why is the priest going from house to house? Let him hold the service at the house of prayer." Soon Father arrived; they told him that the police had been there and ordered him to hold the service at the house of prayer. Father also became agitated and asked, "Did they give written permission?"—"No." "Well, then we can't hold the service; go home. But let the workers from the flour mill come to us on Nizhnyaya Street in small groups; I'll bless their Easter cakes there." We went inside, Father blessed the Easter cakes, and the workers from the flour mill headed straight home across the dam, singing Easter hymns the whole way. Arriving at the flour mill at two o'clock in the morning, my sister, the other believers, and I sang the Easter Matins, read the Midday Prayer, broke our fast, and in the morning, after a short rest, gathered as a group and walked around the flour mill, glorifying the Risen Lord. In the evening, we went to Mikhailovka, where Father celebrated Vespers and Matins at his home. After the service, he announced that we would celebrate the Divine Liturgy the next day at 8 Stakhanovsky Street. In the morning, the service took place solemnly, in a spirit of prayer, even though the spacious house was very crowded with the large number of worshippers. After the service, everyone gathered for a communal meal, where I remember Mother Anastasia well. She was so joyful, offering me Easter dishes, and my soul rejoiced along with hers.

On the third and fourth days of Easter, the service was held in the same place, on Stakhanovsky Lane. How much patience it must have taken to serve day after day under such conditions for many years!

My vacation was coming to an end; it was time to return home. After receiving Father's blessing and saying goodbye to my younger sister, I returned safely to the Uspensky Mine, where my older sister was waiting for me. I did not know how to thank God for the spiritual comfort He had sent me, especially for my meeting with Father. A person who has tasted spiritual nourishment will long feel the soothing effect of God's grace in his soul and strive again and again to acquire this precious spiritual pearl.

In 1954, we had to endure a great trial. Officials from Moscow arrived at the mine and announced that we would remain there under a pledge of permanent settlement, and that leaving without authorization would be punished by a long prison term. This was a blow to us—after all, we had so hoped to move to Karaganda in two or three years. We had one consolation left—to go to Father and pour out our grief to him. And on Christmas 1955, having obtained permission from the authorities, I traveled to Karaganda for three days. Father listened to me attentively and, after a brief pause, said: “Do not be afraid. All of this will gradually pass, and you’ll come to live in Karaganda.” It was as if a great weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

That same year, after receiving another vacation from work, I visited Father again. He blessed me to stay at the Mining and Processing Plant with my sister, who lived there with three other young women. My sister had great faith in Father and was devoted to him. She told me a lot about Father’s visits to the Melkombinat, about his spiritual guidance, and about the material support he provided to many people. “One spring,” she recounted, “we ran out of potatoes. We were sitting there, talking about how we should go to the market to buy at least a few potatoes. But when we looked out the window—there was a sack of potatoes being brought to us on a sled, and Father was helping from behind with his walking stick.” So Olga and I were talking, and she said, “When I attend the funeral services Father conducts for his spiritual children, I find myself wishing that Father would perform my funeral service as well. It seems to me that the souls of those people for whom he performs funeral services and for whom he prays are blessed.” That is what she said, and the Lord granted her wish. Soon, our Olga was diagnosed with liver cancer. My sister showed remarkable patience during her illness. She refused to be admitted to the hospital and took no medication, entrusting herself entirely to God’s will. Father often visited her. About three weeks before Olga’s passing, her older sister had a dream: it seemed as though she was in Olga’s room, and Olga said to her, “Look what Father has prepared for me.” She opened the closet, and there were clothes shining with a golden light and a golden crown just like them. After having this dream, her older sister traveled to Karaganda the very next day and told Father about it. He said, “It was not I who prepared this for her, but the Lord, who blessed me to prepare monastic garments as a reward for her patience.” And he performed the monastic tonsure on Olga. When Olga died, Father conducted her funeral service. That was on April 1, 1956. Returning from the funeral to the Uspensky Mine, I reflected sadly: “When will I come back to Karaganda? When will I pray in the church, see Father, and all those who have become dear to my heart?” But God’s providence had other plans. Two weeks later, a special package arrived from Moscow; its contents were as follows: “On April 10, 1956, by decree of the Prosecutor General of the USSR, your exile has been lifted. As a citizen with full rights, you are free to travel throughout the Soviet Union.” I had the opportunity to experience this joy myself and share in the joy of others, since I worked for the post office. Telegrams flew out to family and friends in every corner of Russia, and requests for final pay due to relocation began to arrive—and the process moved swiftly. I submitted my resignation as well. The postmaster shook my hand warmly and signed my resignation letter. Our long-cherished dream of moving to Karaganda had come true. After hastily packing our modest belongings and loading them into the car, my older sister and I arrived at Olga’s apartment at the Melkombinat. It was Wednesday of Bright Week. The next day marked the 40th day since Olga’s death. Father and everyone from the Melkombinat gathered at her home.

The days of Easter flew by, followed by Radonitsa, and I needed to decide on a job. Father blessed me to work as a storekeeper at the church. The church warden at that time was Pavel Alexandrovich Kovalenko, and he was pleased with me, since I successfully carried out the duties entrusted to me. But there were times when, out of ignorance, I violated the priest’s blessing. For example, one fall, around the feast of St. John the Theologian, the church warden sent me to the village of Dubovka, where our workers were repairing the house in which the priest usually held services. I saw that the work was nearing completion, and when the workers asked me until what time they should work, I—thinking they would finish by five o’clock—told them to work until five. And that is exactly what they did. And when we arrived in Mikhailovka for the All-Night Vigil, which also began at five o’clock, half the service had already passed. Since Father held St. John the Theologian in particularly high esteem, he called me over and gave me a stern reprimand. I apologized, but this incident remained in my memory for a long time.

The priest did not like to give his parishioners his blessing to go on vacation to other regions to visit relatives or acquaintances, and he often said: “I haven’t gone anywhere in twenty-five years, and I have no desire to go. The Holy Fathers say: ‘As you leave the monastery, so you will return.’” “While traveling and on vacation, as you interact with all sorts of people, you disperse all the spiritual strength that you have

painstakingly gathered over a long period of time.” One parishioner recounted: “A few years after the war ended, my relatives began inviting me to come visit them. I went to Father for his blessing, but he wouldn’t give it, saying, ‘You have a cow; go to the state farm and earn enough feed for her for the winter.’ I went home and told my family that the priest wouldn’t bless my trip to see them. They objected—saying I hadn’t explained it to him properly—and insisted they would go and plead with the priest themselves. My wife and daughter went, pleaded with him—after all, we hadn’t seen each other in so many years—and they succeeded; the priest gave his blessing. I went, saw my relatives, and during the visits there, the drinking started, which I had long since given up. I returned home by fall, but the livestock was left without feed. But most importantly—my old illness returned.” From this, we can conclude that one must listen to Father from the very first word.

Father took care of everyone who turned to him for help. That’s how he learned that a paralyzed priest, whom he knew from Optina Pustyn, was living in dire conditions in Odessa and was asking Father to take him to Karaganda. And Father did not refuse. The priest was brought there and settled in a separate cottage, where he was well cared for and often taken to the church for services. The priest thanked Father with tears in his eyes, and two years later he died having made a proper preparation for death.

But sometimes Father experienced sorrow caused by those he was helping. For example, in the early 1950s, Hieromonk Anthony approached Father, and Father accepted him and blessed him to serve alongside him. This hieromonk had an impressive appearance and a beautiful voice. He won over many of Father’s spiritual children, including those closest to him. Father Anthony conceived the idea of transferring Father Nikolai to another parish and taking over the ministry of his congregation himself. To this end, he traveled to Alma-Ata to see His Eminence Metropolitan Nikolai. Father Nikolai blessed Pavel Kuzmich, a sexton and member of the audit commission, to accompany him.

“When we entered Metropolitan Nicholas’s reception room,” Pavel Kuzmich later recounted, “Father Anthony began to say that Father Sebastian was old and frail, and that Mother Grusha was calling the shots at the parish.” “Well, all right,” said His Eminence, “we’ll remove Father Sebastian from the staff, and we’ll appoint you in his place.” When I heard these words, tears streamed down my face; I fell at His Eminence’s feet and began to beg him, for Christ’s sake, not to remove Father from the staff: “After all, he supports so many people, including the sick and the paralyzed, such as Hieromonk Parmen, who was released from Dolinka and whom Father has also taken under his care. They will perish without his help.” Thus I tearfully implored His Grace. His Eminence realized that Father Anthony had misled him; he rose from his chair, approached me, and lifted me from my knees, saying: “Brother, don’t cry like that. We’ll leave Father Sebastian in his post; let him serve as he has served. Calm down.” That is how Pavel Kuzmich defended Father Sebastian.

In 1957, the Petropavlovsk and Kostanay Diocese was established, which included Karaganda. Bishop Joseph (Chernov), who had been released from Karlag, was appointed to the see of this diocese. He began to visit us frequently. There were three parishes in Karaganda—at Mine No. 2, in Tikhonovka, and in Mikhailovka. Our parish endeared itself to Bishop Joseph with its spirit of prayer, and when he celebrated services at other churches in Karaganda, he always came to spend the night with Father and often conversed with him.

In 1958, our church warden, Pavel Alexandrovich Kovalenko, was ordained a priest. Father called me to his office and offered me the position of church warden. And no matter how much I refused, citing my inexperience in administrative and construction matters, I had to accept this position out of obedience and work in this field for twenty years.

Father accepted his elevation to the rank of archimandrite with deep humility. Once, after the service, holding the miter in his hands, he said: “Here is the miter. Do you think it will save us? Only good deeds done in faith will save us.” Father truly lived out the words of the Gospel: “Whoever among you wishes to be first must be the servant of all.” He sacrificed his monastic peace and often received reproaches instead of gratitude. Some members of the clergy and monastic community, failing to understand the essence of the elder’s ministry, made remarks to him: “Look, Father Sebastian is always hanging out with young women.” In such cases, Father never explained himself or made excuses. He considered it his sacred duty to save Christian souls. He carried selfless Christian love in his pastoral heart. He offered fervent prayers to God for those whom the Lord had entrusted to him and for the whole world, tossed about by the waves of the sea of life. Father prayed for the living and especially loved to pray for the departed. His passing was a testament to

this love. He celebrated Easter with the living and, on Radonitsa, passed into the Heavenly Realm to share the joy of Easter with the departed.

The author of these lines has repeatedly experienced firsthand the elder's fatherly love and the power of his prayers, and has set forth in this simple account what remains in his memory, so that his words and deeds—so dear to us—may not be forgotten.

Archpriest Eustathius Prokopchuk, Church of the Nativity of the Most Holy Mother of God, Karaganda

I had known about spiritual fatherhood and spiritual fathers since I was an infant. I was born in Ukraine into a religious family. There were clergymen and monks in our family, and so conversations on spiritual topics—including spiritual fatherhood—were a frequent part of our home life. And amid these conversations, a desire took root in my heart: to find a spiritual elder in my own life. But as the Lord willed it, against my will, in 1945 I was taken to Karaganda to work in the mines. As I traveled, I thought that only atheists could live here in this remote steppe. But it turned out that, in addition to the contract workers, there were many special settlers working in the mines, most of whom were people of faith. And from them I heard that here, in the steppe, in the village of Bolshaya Mikhailovka, there was an elder, Father Sebastian. Upon hearing this, I set out to find him. Since Bolshaya Mikhailovka is located ten kilometers from the Kirov Mine, and the only transportation at that time was horse-drawn, I—lacking a horse—somehow managed to get a bicycle and rode to Mikhailovka. There I found Nizhnyaya Street, located the priest's dugout by its number, got off my bicycle, stopped at the door... and was overcome with fear: how could I, such a sinner, enter the elder's cell? I crouched down and began to cry... But still, gathering my courage, I decided to go in. I knocked; the elder's wife opened the door, let me into the room, and invited me to sit down. The elder wasn't home, but when he arrived, I stood up to receive his blessing. But the elder walked past me to the coal bin, crossed himself, bowed three times, approached me, and blessed me. I looked at him and thought, "Here, the Lord has led me to the elder." This was in 1948. I had a question for Father regarding my personal life. I had met a young woman and wanted to get married to her. Father listened to me and blessed me to come to him together with her. We arrived, Father married us, gave us guidance, and from that time on we began visiting him regularly; we became "Father's children." And in conversation, Father would occasionally call me, "Father Eustathius!" I didn't think much of it; I thought that "father" meant the head of the family. But Alexander's mother said, "You'll probably become a priest, since Father calls you Father Eustathius." And I began to feel a desire to go study at the seminary. I told Father about this; he gave his blessing, and I began to prepare. But I still couldn't bring myself to go. A year passed, then another... And just as I'd decided that I wouldn't be going to study, one day, while I was doing some construction work at home, a thought suddenly arose in my mind with incredible force: "I'm going to seminary!" I immediately dropped everything, sat down on a bench, and thought again: "I have to go!" I stood up, went over to my wife, and told her firmly, "I'm going to study." And that was it. Father blessed me, I went, enrolled, and began my studies.

When I was finishing my studies, I received offers to stay and serve in Russia. I wrote to Father about this, and he replied, "Write to him and tell him to come here." And so I returned to Karaganda. I was supposed to be ordained, and Father spoke to me about this; he also said that I must devote my entire life to God and the Church. However, he didn't insist. His words were: "Whatever you decide, so be it." And again I hesitated; again I put it off. I wanted to be a priest, but I can't explain exactly why I didn't take holy orders—perhaps, by God's will, what happened was meant to happen. But I had to feed my family, so I went back to work in the mines, and in my free time I would go to Father's church and sing in the choir. The nuns at the church would tell me, "A priest's blessing doesn't just go away like that. You're still meant to be a priest." I should mention that I also loved mining very much; I was considered the best worker and performed such difficult tasks that it was hard to stay alive. And my work drew me in; I went to church less and less often, while Father grew weaker.

And then one day I got up at five in the morning to go on my shift, stepped outside—it was warm but overcast, with a light rain falling. I looked up at the sky and suddenly thought, "Father has died!"—I immediately had this feeling, as if something had snapped. I went into the room and told my family, "Father has died." They said, "What? How? How do you know?" And just then, a neighbor knocked on the window; she'd been told over the phone, "Father has died."

I went to the mine, took time off work, and drove to Mikhailovka.

A day later, we buried Father. And as I was returning from the cemetery, I decided that since Father had died, everything I had was gone. My aspirations, my studies at the seminary—it was all in vain. Father had died—everything was gone, and I was gone too. And I reached a point where nothing brought me joy: neither my family, nor my work, nor life itself. I went so far as to decide that I, too, was hopelessly lost, that there was no place for me in this world and there would be none in the next either. Only hell awaited me—and that was all. That’s what I concluded after Father’s funeral, and I didn’t say a word about it to anyone. I figured that no one could help me anymore, so I didn’t turn to anyone. And on the very first night after the funeral, I saw a garden in my dream! But words cannot describe what a garden it was! It had no end and no boundary. And there stood trees, tall, tall trees, and beyond them, even higher still, I could make out enormous golden domes and shining golden crosses. I looked on in wonder: what churches! What cathedrals! And in the garden, in this monastery, there was no sun, yet light radiated from it. And I stepped onto the very edge of this garden. I looked ahead and saw Father coming. He was wearing a black cassock and a small skullcap, with a staff in his hand—just as he always walked. But he himself was radiant, looking younger, and I could sense a power within him. A monk was accompanying him. And it was as if someone had said to me, “This monk is showing Father his heavenly abode.” I stepped forward to receive his blessing; Father blessed me and said, “You, Eustathius, come to me!” He said this twice, and I kissed his hand—it was warm, as usual.

And this dream, this vision, Father’s words, and his blessing kept me from falling into complete despair.

Nevertheless, I stopped going to Father’s church. My coworkers invited me to sing with them at the church at Mine No. 2, and I began going there.

Ten years had passed. I was still singing in the choir and working in the mine. In 1976, at one of the mining faces, we had to perform the following task: remove a local ventilation fan from the tunnel, which was suspended from the roof of a six-meter-long drift. For safety, wooden crates were placed beneath the fan to catch it in case it fell. I set to work. First, I disconnected everything related to the electrical components from the fan, leaving it hanging from its suspension points. Now, to remove it from the suspension points, I had to strike the pin securing it to the suspension points and knock the pin out. Then the fan would fall onto the racks. I surveyed the racks and figured it out: I’d stand on the adjacent platform, strike the pin, the fan would fall onto the racks, and if they couldn’t support its weight and collapsed (since it weighed 300 kg), I’d remain safe on the adjacent platform. So I set to work: I struck the pin; it gave way slightly and hesitated for a moment. I struck it again; the fan fell onto the racks, and the racks held its weight. But everything beneath me was breaking, and I was falling down. And when everything collapsed beneath me, the first thought that struck me at that moment was: “All this is for disobeying the elder!” And I fell from a height of six meters onto my back, into the mud, into the swamp. My helmet with the headlamp flew off to the side, and the light illuminated the area so clearly that I saw the edge of the shelving unit snap off and the fan roll down the beams—like down a slide—straight toward me. And when I saw that, another thought flashed through my mind: “Roll onto your left side!” It all happened in a fraction of a second. Somehow, by a miracle, I managed to roll onto my side, and the fan whizzed past me, only grazing my pelvis slightly. Frightened workers ran up to me; I tried to stand up, but my legs wouldn’t work. An ambulance came down into the tunnel; they carried me to the surface and took me to the hospital.

And on the first night I spent in the hospital, I had another amazing dream: I was in a hospital, but this hospital wasn’t on the ground—it was in the air. It was so quiet and bright there, but the light was unlike anything I’d ever seen. I was lying there, and the other patients were lying there too, and I saw Father Alexander Krivonosov—who had already passed away by then—walking right through the air. He entered the hospital ward through an open window, approached me, and handed me snow-white linens and two white phosphora. And I woke up. I felt joyful, and after that dream, my spirit was revived.

I spent three months in the hospital. When I was discharged, I was already able to walk without crutches. I said to myself, “Come what may!” and walked slowly, leaning on a cane, to St. Michael’s Church. As I walked, I thought, “If they accept me into the choir, I will sing. And if they don’t, I’ll still come here, just like all the other parishioners.” By the time I reached the church, they were already singing the Cherubic Hymn. I walked in, and tears began to flow. I crossed myself, bowed, and silently addressed the priest: “Father, forgive your prodigal son!” Then the cantors saw me and called me up to the choir loft. And up there, after the service, Mother Anastasia said to me, “They’ll offer you the priesthood; make sure you don’t refuse. This will be your last offer.” At that point, I answered decisively, “Mother, I’m ready.”

But time passed; I waited and waited, yet no one offered it to me—they ordained others instead. First they passed me over, then they passed someone else over. Mother Anastasia had already passed away, yet they kept passing me over, and I remained silent.

And once again I had a dream: the Liturgy was taking place. Father Sebastian was presiding, but he was wearing the bishop's vestments—a sakkos, an omophorion, a miter—all gilded and of a beauty I had never seen in my life. I was standing on the choir loft, preparing to receive Communion. And there were only children in the church. Father Sebastian came out onto the ambo with the chalice; the children surrounded him and waited to receive Communion. I came down from the choir loft and waited for the children to receive Communion. Suddenly, the children parted and made way for me: "Come forward!" I walked forward, approached Father Sebastian, and he gave me two particles of the Eucharist. And after receiving Communion, I woke up.

And that same year, during the Week of the Triumph of Orthodoxy, I was ordained a deacon, and the next day, a priest.

So, for thirty years—as if it were a single day—I worked in the mines, and for eighteen years now I have been serving as a priest at the Church of the Nativity of the Mother of God, founded and built by Elder Sebastian.

And I believe that the Lord, having heeded the desire of my heart—to find an elder—even in my childhood, and to this day, both showing me mercy and disciplining me, keeps my soul under the protection of the elder's prayer.

Elena Alexandrovna Agafonova

I arrived in Karaganda in 1960 from Alma-Ata. I was twenty years old. On the day of my arrival, Father Sebastian was not in Mikhailovka; he had gone to the Melkombinat. Mother Anastasia welcomed me warmly, fed me borscht, and drove me to the Melkombinat to see Father Sebastian. We were standing with her at the bus stop near a four-story prefab building, and Mother Anastasia said to me, "Lena, it's so nice to live on the first floor of a building like this!" At the time, I didn't think much of Mother Anastasia's words, but now I live on the first floor of just such a building.

When we arrived at the Melkombinat, Father had just finished praying and was coming out of the house. Petya, his driver, followed him out. Father looked at me very affectionately, blessed me, and Mother Anastasia said to Petya, "Petya, pick Lena up and carry her to the car!" He replied, "Mother, but look how big she is!"

Father Sebastian has long since passed away, and Mother Anastasia has also passed away, but Hegumen Peter is still alive, and his prayers are a great source of strength to me.

Father Sebastian blessed me to stay with Mother Agnia; then my mother came to visit me, and Father bought us a separate little house. And I lived in Karaganda until Father's passing. That time spent with Father was the happiest of my life. Back then, I had no worries or anxieties, and thanks to Father's prayers, all my problems were resolved very easily.

In Mikhailovka, Father had many young women—they were nuns—and the elder's prayers united us so much that we all lived as one family. For example, Father would be hearing confessions, and we would all stand there, holding our breath. Father would give someone a word of edification, say something, or recite a prayer of absolution, and at that moment it felt as if there were only one person standing there, and only one person confessing. Through Father's care, everything was bound together into a single union of love. And Father cherished this bond deeply and often told us: "Girls, eat, drink, and sleep as much as you like, just live more peacefully." Father saw the hardships of human life and, through his attention and the warmth of his soul, tried to ease them. But if a person approached him with ulterior motives or harbored something unkind in their heart, Father would then be very strict. Once, after the service, as he stepped out of the sanctuary and walked through the church, Father suddenly stopped near a woman we didn't know and unexpectedly almost cried out: "What do I know?! Huh?! I know what day it is today, what the date is, and that's all I know!" It was said so sternly that we were stunned. It turned out that this woman had come to test Father."

But still, I missed Almaty. We'd be sitting at the table, and I'd start thinking about Almaty, and Father would say, "Lenushka, do you miss Almaty?" And he'd bless me to go to Almaty on vacation. When I was getting ready to go, he'd give me a lot of money and say, "Here, take this, Lenushka. Break it into small bills and give it to the beggars sitting on either side of the steps at St. Nicholas Cathedral. Let them know me in

Alma-Ata and pray for me.” And Father would give me plenty of bread to distribute to my acquaintances in Alma-Ata. And Mother Anastasia would send bread to Alma-Ata. And Mother Agnia once sent a letter for Bishop Joseph, and when I came to the Bishop and we spoke with him about Father Sevastian, the Bishop said: “Love him, have compassion on him, carry him in your arms.” And soon they made a chair for Father and began to carry him in their arms.

One day, not long before Father’s passing, many girls gathered in his cell, and Father spoke to us about eternity: about eternal life and the infinite bliss of the saints. They asked him a question about the relics of the saints: how does the Lord glorify their bodies? And Father spoke with us, explaining everything, and at the end of the conversation, he looked around at us, smiled, and said very softly, “In thirty years, my body will be raised from the earth.”

In the summer of 1968, the Republic of China attempted to cross the Soviet border in the area of Lake Zholanoshkol in the Semipalatinsk Region. China laid claim to part of Kazakhstan’s territory. I was living in Alma-Ata at the time. During that period, a sense of unease hung over the city, and the faces of the townspeople were somber; everyone was worried. Believers hurried to St. Nicholas Cathedral in the morning. And so, after the Liturgy, Father Pavel Milovanov [in monastic life, Hieromonk Isaac († 1991)], a cleric of St. Nicholas Cathedral, stepped up to the ambo and addressed all those praying: “Brothers and sisters! Let us pray to the Lord; let us ask the Queen of Heaven and all the holy servants of God to intercede so that the Lord may have mercy on us and turn this calamity away from us.” Father Pavel and all those praying knelt down. Father Pavel read the prayers with tears in his eyes, and everyone prayed and wept. Then everyone venerated the cross; Father Pavel blessed everyone, and they began to quietly disperse.

That night I had this dream: the service at St. Nicholas Cathedral had ended, and everyone was quietly leaving. I was the last to step down from the cathedral’s high porch; I turned to make the sign of the cross, and just as I raised my hand to do so, I saw Father Sebastian coming out of the church onto the porch and stopping at the top of the steps. He was wearing a white canvas cassock, his head uncovered. A light emanated from Father Sebastian; his eyes were turned toward the sky, tears streamed down his cheeks, and the words of his prayer were these: “Lord, forgive them! Lord, have mercy on them!” I heard Father Sebastian’s prayerful voice very clearly. And then I woke up. It was three o’clock in the morning. I immediately remembered how, when sending me off to Almaty, Father had given me bread and money so that people in Almaty would recognize him.

Archpriest Valery Zakharov, rector of St. Nicholas Cathedral in Almaty

In the 1970s, Metropolitan Joseph (Chernov) of Almaty and Kazakhstan said the following in one of his sermons: “We, the people of Almaty, live at the foot of the Tien Shan Mountains. On the one hand, we are happy that the beauty of these mountains delights the human eye, but on the other hand, the mountains harbor the danger of earthquakes and mudslides. But Alma-Ata will never be swept away by a mudslide and will never be destroyed by an earthquake, because we have remarkable intercessors in the person of Metropolitan Nicholas [Metropolitan Nicholas (Mogilevsky) of Alma-Ata and Kazakhstan, 1874–1955]. After spending 10 years in camps and in exile, he led the Diocese of Almaty and Kazakhstan from 1945 to 1955. He is buried at the Central City Cemetery.] and Schema-Archimandrite Sevastian.” His Eminence Joseph spoke these words, and I remember this clearly.

From the memoirs of Metropolitan Pitirim of Volokolamsk and Yuryev

In 1966, I was included in a pilgrimage group traveling to the Holy Land. Our group was led by the then-Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations, the late Metropolitan Nikodim of Leningrad and Ladoga. The trip was expected to be a very important one—we were to resolve many issues concerning our Spiritual Mission in Jerusalem.

On the eve of our departure, in early April, I called Archimandrite Sevastian in Karaganda and asked for his holy prayers and blessing for the journey. But to my surprise, the Elder advised me to cancel the trip. “It must be so; you’ll understand later,” he told me over the phone at the time. His answer simply stunned me; I was completely at a loss and bewildered: on the one hand, I had always believed in and followed the Elder’s blessing, but on the other hand, I thought to myself, how would I explain my refusal to the Metropolitan?

The decision came completely out of the blue.—Right before my departure, literally the night before, I came down with a severe fever—my temperature rose to forty degrees. It was obvious that I wouldn’t be

able to go. I called Vladyka Nikodim and told him what had happened. It seems the Metropolitan was very upset that my trip would not take place. We spoke on the phone, discussed our affairs, and he wished me a speedy recovery.

A few days passed, and suddenly the phone rang from Karaganda—it was Father Sebastian—asking me to fly out to him immediately. How surprised I was then: The Elder had literally “talked me out of” such a significant trip to the Holy Land, and now suddenly: “Fly out immediately.” But I hurried to fulfill Father Sebastian’s blessing, especially since I was already feeling much better.

On Saturday, April 16, I flew into Karaganda and went straight from the airport to see the Elder. – He looked very bad. He was completely weak. – I don’t think I’d ever seen him like that, not even when he was sick... He asked me to tonsure him into the schema... Preparations began immediately; it was no longer possible to put it off—the Elder was very weak.

Thanks be to God, everything went very well: despite his exhaustion and weakness, Father Sebastian was in full possession of his faculties, and we were able to perform his tonsure into the great angelic order right then and there.

I was by the Elder’s side literally until the very last hours of his life. That same night, after his tonsure into the schema, he became very ill; he confessed and received Holy Communion. He complained of weariness of both spirit and body.

On April 19, the Elder passed away...

His Holiness Patriarch Alexy I sent a telegram of sympathy addressed to me in Karaganda, expressed his condolences on the occasion of Fr. Sebastian’s passing, and blessed me to conduct the Elder’s funeral.

On April 21, assisted by the clergy of the church, I conducted a memorial service and then the burial of Father Sebastian at the city’s St. Michael Cemetery.

May the Lord and our God, Jesus Christ, grant that the soul of His servant, Schema-Archimandrite Sebastian, may rest where the righteous rest, may He number him among the righteous, and may He have mercy on us, for He is Good and Lover of Mankind. Amen.

Archpriest Alexander Kiselev, rector of the Church of the Nativity of the Most Holy Theotokos in Karaganda

I was fifteen years old when, in 1956, with Father’s blessing, we came to Karaganda from the Tambov Region. I had finished school and was living with my parents. On the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, Father blessed me to serve in the altar and blessed my sticharion. And from that time on, I began to assist in the altar on feast days.

It was time for me to join the army. On the day they delivered the summons for the first medical examination, Father came to the Melkombinat, where we lived. I went up to Father to ask for his blessing to go to the medical examination, and right away he spoke these prophetic words: “God willing, they won’t take you, Shura.” And indeed, when I went to see the doctor and they checked my blood pressure, it turned out to be high. The doctor referred me for further testing, and I was granted a deferment for a month, then for a year, then for two years. After that, I underwent the medical examination every year, but my blood pressure remained high. And a few years later, I was issued a military ID. So, I didn’t end up joining the army. But the first words were the priest’s: “God willing, they won’t take you.”

For the first four years, our family lived in a small two-room dugout, and in 1961, with Father’s blessing, we bought a larger house. And when Father came to consecrate it, he stayed the night with us. I should mention that whenever Father came to the Melkombinat, people would gather right away—sixty or more of them. No one needed to be invited; everyone would put aside their work and come to pray and share a meal with Father. If it was a name day or some other family celebration, the celebration became a communal one—a celebration for everyone. So, Father blessed our house; the crowd had already dispersed, and we were sitting with him over evening tea when Father said, “Shura, you should get to make shutters for the windows.” I replied, “Father, there’s so much that needs doing here”—and I didn’t pay much attention to his words, since there was plenty of work to be done around the house. And here’s what happened. About two months later, in the evening, some hooligans threw a brick through the window of the room where our grandfather lived; it flew past my grandfather’s head and landed in the corner. That’s when I remembered that we needed to make shutters, and my uncle and I quickly carried out that blessing.

Father’s words were never empty; whatever he said, we had to take it as a blessing and carry it out.

There was another incident like that with my grandfather. He was quite old, suffered from dementia, and sometimes he would get up early, quietly open the door, and run away. Then I would hop on my bike and search for him all over the Melkombinat. And one day in late fall, when the snow had already fallen, my grandfather left the house. We searched for him all evening, and in the morning we went to Father: “Father, Grandpa’s gone missing; we can’t find him.”—“Well, it’s all right; God willing, he’ll come back,”—those were Father’s words. Grandpa was gone for two weeks. We looked everywhere for him: in hospitals, morgues, we filed a report with the police—we didn’t know what to think anymore. We went to the priest: “Father, maybe he was killed?” The priest seemed to agree: “Maybe he was killed.” – “Or maybe something else happened to him?” – “Maybe that, too.” But the elder’s first words had been: “God willing, he’ll turn up.” And two weeks later, a neighbor brought Grandpa home—he’d run into him at a bus stop. And to this day, it remains a mystery where Grandpa had been for those two weeks.

Here’s another very interesting story. One year in Karaganda, there was a poor potato harvest, and in the fall, Father gave his parishioners one or two sacks of potatoes per family. Among them, he gave a sack of potatoes to our uncle, whose family consisted of three people. Winter passed, and just before Easter, my uncle came home and said to his wife: “Shura, our neighbors’ potatoes aren’t running out, thanks to the priest’s blessing. They were given a sack; the whole family has been eating them, and the potatoes aren’t running out.” “But you and I,” his wife said, “didn’t buy any potatoes either; we boiled them all winter long, and look—we still have potatoes left.” That’s the kind of miracle it was. It seemed so unremarkable, yet what came by the priest’s blessing never ran out.

How I Went to Seminary.

I had no intention of becoming a priest, and Father never spoke to me about it. With his blessing, I graduated from vocational school, earned a certification as a cabinetmaker, worked at a furniture factory, and helped out at the church in my free time. Two months after Father’s death, when Father Alexander Krivonosov became the rector, he called me in and asked, “Sasha, would you like to go to seminary?” The question took me by surprise; I hadn’t given it any thought and didn’t give Father Alexander a definite answer. I said, “I’ll go talk it over with my mom.”

That evening, my mother and I said our evening prayers. There was a portrait of Father hanging above my bed, and I asked him to somehow show me what to do. I went to bed and had a strange dream: it was as if Father were in Father Peter’s house and was getting ready to go somewhere. I wanted to approach him to ask what I should do, but a woman beat me to it with her own question. The woman spoke with him, then walked away, but for some reason I didn’t approach Father; meanwhile, he opened the gate, went out, and walked down Vesennaya Lane toward the house where the mothers lived. He reached their gate, opened it, and disappeared. I returned to Father Peter’s house, and there Mother Anastasia was sitting; I asked her my question: “Mother, Father Alexander asked me if I would like to go study at the Theological Seminary.” Mother looked intently into my eyes and said, “And what do you want—for things to be good for you both here and there?”

And when I had this dream—it was four o’clock in the morning—I woke up everyone in the house and told them about it—that’s how deeply it had affected me.

The next morning I went to Mikhailovka and told Mother Anastasia everything as it had happened, and she, in turn, replied: “Well, there you go,”—with such a country accent—“go to Mother Agnia,”—and sent me off to another elderly nun. She listened to me and said, “No, I don’t know anything; it’s up to Mother Anastasia to decide.” You see, that’s the humility of great people—when they deflect attention away from themselves. That was the late Father as well. We’d often walk him from the church to his cell, and someone along the way would ask, “Father, my daughter is sick, or my husband is sick.”—“Go see a doctor,” he’d say, “Olga Fyodorovna is over there; she’ll advise you.” He would pray for them himself and help, but he would, as it were, push the matter away from himself. That’s just how these elderly nuns are—they pass people back and forth like a soccer ball. I went to Mother Anastasia again: “Mother,” I said, “Mother Agnia has sent me to you again.” – “Well, all right,” she says, “(and at that very moment, Father Innokenty (Prosvirnin), who was still a student at the Theological Academy, happened to be there—he’d come to visit Father’s grave),—you there, go to Father’s grave, cast lots, and pray. You’ll place it, and let him take it.”

And early in the morning, even before dawn, we went to the grave, prayed quietly, placed our offerings, and Father Innokenty (who was still Anatoly Ivanovich at the time) picked up the lot—and received God’s blessing to go to the seminary. That is how I ended up at the seminary. And once I was already a student, I

interpreted that dream; indeed, while I was with Father, I didn't think about anything—I was content. As the Apostles said on the day of the Transfiguration: "It is good for us to be here: let us make three tents—one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah—for we need nothing; it is good enough for us to be with You." That's how good I felt, and I didn't give anything a second thought. I don't know how to put it into words—you can only experience it. It just felt good in my soul, and you can't tell your heart what to do... And I didn't ask Father anything, so he didn't say anything to me either. And when I was already a student at the Theological Seminary, there were many celebrations at the Lavra, various forums, and the Council—the election of Patriarch Pimen—I was a direct participant—a special courier for the Council. But I didn't feel that spiritual atmosphere, that spiritual grace, so to speak, that peace of soul that I had felt when I was still a young man in Father's presence. It would seem that with the assembly of bishops and everything so solemn and festive, all of that was undoubtedly good, but it was different... That stillness, that peace of mind that I had felt with Father, was no longer there.

In our church, there are certain traditions that Father introduced here, following a custom he inherited from Optina. For example, on Trinity Sunday, clergy throughout Russia celebrate the service in green vestments, but in our church, the vestments are white. Father explained that green vestments on this feast symbolize the abundant greenery of nature, while white vestments symbolize the Holy Spirit. In other words, the spiritual aspect of the feast was emphasized. Then, on the patronal feast of the Nativity of the Most Holy Theotokos, we do not wear blue vestments, but—given the grandeur of this feast—golden ones. That, too, was Father's blessing. "Your Nativity, O Virgin Mother of God, is a joy to proclaim to the entire universe: for from You has shone forth the Sun of Righteousness, Christ our God..." that is, here the beginning of our salvation is revealed; this day brings the Mother of Light into the world. This is precisely how Father understood this feast from a theological perspective.

I remember when the late Metropolitan Joseph came to visit, accompanied by Fr. Stefan Teodorovich, who was his secretary at the time. So Fr. Stefan, seeing that they were preparing yellow vestments, objected: "What are you preparing? Why? It's a feast of the Mother of God; His Eminence wears blue vestments, yet you're preparing yellow ones?" They reported this to His Eminence, but he did not object."—"Let it be as they have it," he said." His Eminence celebrated in blue vestments, while everyone else wore gold vestments. Both the altar and the entire church were adorned in gold.

The Ascension of the Lord marks the culmination of God's plan for the salvation of humanity. On Ascension Day, we always hold a procession and a communal meal. This is also because it was on Ascension Day in 1955 that we received permission to open the church. On Ascension Day, we always set up a table in the courtyard, and anyone who wishes to join—up to five hundred parishioners—shares the meal. And on the anniversary of our Father's passing, we always serve a memorial service, a memorial Liturgy, and a funeral service at his grave. On this day, too, there is a meal for everyone. And just as our Father always helped everyone—giving money and sharing everything he had—so we now try to give something to someone on the day commemorating our Father. Just as our Father showed us charity, so we try to do the same to the best of our ability.

Then, during the non-fasting periods on Sundays, everyone wears gold or yellow vestments; here, we wear dark burgundy. Not red, as at Easter, but dark burgundy. This, too, is a blessing from Father. But during Lent in Moscow, they wear purple or gold vestments on Sundays, while here we always wear green.

In the choir, we used to sing in the Optina style. But few of the old cantors remain, and little of the old singing has survived; still, we try to preserve what we have.

There are other customs as well. For example, on Saturday during the All-Night Vigil, the Gospel remains in front of the ambo until the Great Doxology, and only at "And now: Most Blessed are You, O Virgin Mother of God..." do we bring the Gospel into the altar.

The priest would read the Small Compline in the evening, and in the morning, before the Liturgy, the morning prayers and two akathists were read. Likewise, during the days leading up to and following a feast, we read the Triodion at the Small Compline; during the "Blessed Are," we always read from the sixth ode of the canon to the martyrs. Father tried to conduct services according to the liturgical regulations.

Thanks to the efforts of our parish, construction of a new three-altar cathedral has now been completed. Its main chapel, like that of the Holy Vvedenie Optina Hermitage, is consecrated in honor of the Entry of the Most Holy Theotokos into the Temple; the right side chapel is named in honor of the Venerable Sebastian of

Karaganda, and the left side chapel is named in honor of Saints Cosmas and Damian, the unmercenaries and miracle-workers, to whom the altar in the Elder's homeland in the Oryol region was dedicated.

Our cathedral was built according to classical architectural principles, and its foundation resembles the shape of Noah's Ark. It has a total capacity of 1,200 people, a height of up to 15 meters, and the highest point of the dome reaches 30 meters [In a 1994 competition held in Minsk for designs of churches to be built on the territory of the former USSR, the design for the Holy Vvedensky Church in Karaganda took first place.].

The cornerstone of the cathedral was laid on July 14, 1991, on the feast day of Saints Cosmas and Damian the Unmercenaries, and exactly four years later, in July 1995, during a visit to Kazakhstan by His Holiness Alexy II, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia (which was the first visit by a Russian Patriarch to Kazakh soil in the entire history of the Russian Church), in the square near the walls of the already-erected cathedral-palace, His Holiness conducted a memorial service for the countless victims of Karlag; and after the service, to everyone's surprise, he drove to the remote Mikhailovskoye Cemetery to the Elder's grave—dear to all—as the focal point of the spiritual depths of the boundless Kazakh steppe.

There is no doubt that, by the providence of God, representatives of all walks of life and all levels of the spiritual hierarchy gathered at the Elder's grave. The Patriarch, bishops, clergy, heads of the regional and city administrations, the Father's spiritual children, and the entire Orthodox community of Karaganda offered prayers to the throne of the Lord for the repose of the Elder—a figure who was dear and unforgettable to some, yet barely known to others—in the City of the Righteous. Father gathered everyone together as a heavenly intercessor with a compassionate heart, as one who mourns and prays for the human race.

Memories of Elder Sevastian and his teachings, recorded by his spiritual children

On Prayer

Father spoke about prayer: “You can pray anywhere, at any time: standing, sitting, lying down, while working, or on the road. Only talking in the church is a sin.”

He would sternly reprimand those who talked in the church during the service, especially the monastics. Sometimes he would even step out of the sanctuary while still in his vestments to reprimand them.

He reminded people time and again that when boarding a bus, plane, car, etc., one must silently cross oneself without looking at anyone, even if others are laughing. For the sake of one, two, or three believers, others may also be saved from impending disaster. Here is an example: one evening after the service, several women from a distant area were preparing to take the bus home. The priest, blessing them, prayed at length before the icon of the Holy Trinity, and everyone noticed this. And what happened? On the road, as the bus was descending a drawbridge, the driver noticed something black ahead on the road and braked so hard that the bus flipped off the bridge onto the ground and landed back on its wheels. It all happened so quickly that the passengers didn't even have time to realize what was going on or what had happened to them. Everyone was alive and unharmed, except for one young woman and the conductor, who sustained minor bruises.

The sisters who lived with Father had noticed on more than one occasion how Father would suddenly approach the holy corner and begin to pray in silence. This was a sign that a prayer for help had reached him from somewhere far away. Later, the truth behind this would come to light. For example, four thousand kilometers from Karaganda, in the city of Tambov, a young woman walking home late from work was being pursued by a man, and she cried out, “Father, save me!” And she was rescued by kind people.

Regarding the sign of the cross, Father remarked: “The sign of the cross must be made correctly, with the fear of God and with faith, not just by waving one's hand. And then one must bow; only then does it have power.”

On humility, pride, and faith

Father often reminded us to forgive one another's offenses and not to hold grudges, saying, “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” And regarding the proud: “A wild horse falls into a deep pit.” And there were times when, because of pride, disobedience, and conceit, people fell and faced temptations.

One of the choir members, named Alexandra, who sang in Father's church, suddenly developed a strong and beautiful voice that "broke through" sharply and vividly. And she became proud—she grew arrogant, began to boast about her voice, and belittle others. Our mothers, and especially Mother Varvara, gently admonished her, but Shura wouldn't listen to them. One Easter night, Father Sebastian sent her along with the others to sing at the Easter Matins service in the chapel, since the church couldn't hold the entire congregation and the service was also being held in the chapel in the courtyard. But Shura flatly refused to go. Everyone was surprised by her refusal and advised her to obey Father. But Shura wouldn't listen. Then Father said very sternly, "Shura, don't be proud; God will take away your voice, and you won't be able to sing!" Father was spot on! Before long, she fell ill, was admitted to the hospital, and when she returned, she could no longer sing—her voice was gone. Father and everyone around her felt very sorry for Shura, but her health and voice never returned.

But with simple, humble people, through the priest's prayers, the Lord worked miracles. One young woman had developed an eye condition as a child (her eyes had swollen and seemed to have completely closed over). The doctors refused to treat her. So she turned to Father, who blessed her to have a prayer service with the blessing of water performed before the icon of the Sorrowful Mother of God and to wash her eyes with holy water. And, to everyone's joy, the swelling disappeared, her eyes opened, and she could see as before.

Those who came with humility and faith—believing that God, through the priest's prayers, would help them in their affairs—he received more readily and spoke words of benefit to them. But those who came without the fear of God and without faith—merely out of curiosity or idle chatter—he would not receive at all, and he would say sternly: "I know nothing; I am a sinful, sick, and illiterate man, just like everyone else. Am I some kind of clairvoyant or something?" "You have your own priests," he would say if the people were from another nearby parish.

Once, during a conversation about people's character, Father said—and even pointed out—'These people must not be touched; out of pride, they will not tolerate either a remark or a rebuke. But others, because of their humility, can be.'

Sometimes he would gently rebuke someone in front of everyone (sometimes even someone who wasn't at fault, but was humble and patient) in order to bring to their senses those to whom one couldn't speak directly about their misdeeds and shortcomings. He himself did not rebuke or condemn such people, nor did he order others to do so, but waited, endured, and prayed until the person came to realize it on his own and turned in repentance to God and to his spiritual father.

He humbled those who were stronger in spirit in front of everyone, freeing them from vanity and spiritual pride (which prevent even good deeds from benefiting the soul and can lead a person to eternal perdition). Those who understood this rejoiced in such purification and immediately asked for forgiveness and prayers for their correction.

There were times when Father would make the elders ask forgiveness from the younger ones; he humbled those who had been wronged, while defending the wrongdoers. There was spiritual wisdom in this. And the experienced ones understood and took no offense.

Father valued it when a person gradually came to realize their own shortcomings, weaknesses, and vices on their own. And, not relying on themselves, asked God for help, for deliverance from them, and for mercy. And, having repented, the person received from God what they had asked for, accepting it with humility and gratitude.

When someone came to him with a complaint about a neighbor—especially out of envy or jealousy—then all was lost. He would assign such a trial and humbling lesson, and offer such spiritual medicine, that you would not be pleased, and you would not want to complain again. Father tried to eradicate such complaints in everyone, as if they were a spiritual ailment.

He sometimes dealt very wisely with slanderers and backbiters: he would punish the slandered person even more severely than the slanderer had expected, thereby instilling a sense of shame in the slanderer and weaning him from slandering his neighbor.

But when someone approached Father with secret anger toward a neighbor, seeking protection from Father to justify themselves and accuse the neighbor, Father would, instead of offering protection, rebuke them in front of everyone and humble them for their proud thoughts and deeds.

In cases of offense or misunderstanding, he taught them to ask one another for forgiveness and not to hold grudges, especially before receiving Communion. And he cited the well-known example of the two brothers—Titus and Evagrius.

At times, he would point out in whom and in what pride (the root of all sins) manifested itself: in some, it was evident in their gait; in others, in their voice; and in still others, spiritual pride lay hidden—which is the most dangerous and harmful thing for a person, and which one must recognize and reveal to one's spiritual father. Only the Lord, through the prayers of the spiritual father, will reveal all the hidden recesses of the human soul with all its twists and turns, and all the serpents lurking within it will crawl out, to the astonishment and horror of both the person himself and others.

"Each person requires a different approach. What may be beneficial to one may be harmful to another." He often said: "Bear with one another's weaknesses and shortcomings—in this lies salvation. Fire is not extinguished with fire, but with water. And evil is overcome by love!"

When two young women—or two older, but wealthy women—moved in together without a blessing, Father would sometimes say: "It would be better for an elderly, wealthy woman to take in a younger girl or widow who would work and care for her, obey her, and learn all that is good." He did not bless young people living together at all. And those who did live together did not get along, because they would not yield to one another and did not learn anything good. But he did not bless anyone living alone either, especially the proud and headstrong. He pointed out the danger of such a life. As an example, he told the story of a shiny nail that gets worn down by feet on the threshold. Another, rusted, lies somewhere in a corner, and no one touches it. And he added the saying: "Those who live together rub against one another—and all will be saved."

When discussing pride, arrogance, and self-confidence, he cited a parable from the Optina Elders: "On a warm summer day, a beetle flies along, humming, 'My fields, my meadows, my forests...'" But then the wind blew, the rain poured down, and the beetle huddled under a leaf, whimpering pitifully, 'Don't push me away!'

A mentally ill woman insulted Father in front of everyone, calling him and his spiritual children names, and she also insulted those who were caring for her. But Father calmly replied to her: "What did you think I was like? This is exactly who I am! Well, go find someone better than me!"

He often answered the question, "How should we live?" with the words of the Optina Elder Ambrose: "To live is not to grieve, not to judge anyone, not to annoy anyone, and to show respect to all."

To those who quarreled among themselves, he would sometimes say, using the words of those same Optina elders: "Rub against one another, and all will be saved!" "Patience and hard work will overcome everything." And he referred to quarrels and misunderstandings within families or between individuals as "spittle from the enemy." When those who were at odds were reconciled, they themselves realized that this was true.

On Illnesses

To those complaining of illness, he would sometimes say: "One will pass, another will come!" "We must suffer; otherwise, we will not be saved. Illnesses are gifts from heaven!"

To comfort the elderly, the sick, and those grieving because they could not attend God's church, he would say: "I bless you to pray silently in your mind: 'Lord, have mercy,' 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner.' The Lord will hear you. Endure your illnesses without complaint. Illnesses purify the soul of sins."

To the elderly, he would sometimes respond with the words of the prophet David: "Seventy years—or, if one is strong, eighty years—and their toil and sickness are many." Young people get sick, but how can the elderly avoid it when their bodies, like clothing, have worn out with time."

Others think they can improve their health and prolong their lives by drinking wine and eating meat. Father would sometimes say: "No, meat is beneficial only for a healthy heart and stomach; otherwise, it is only harmful. Plant-based food is easily digested by a sick body and is therefore beneficial." And he would cite himself as an example: despite his many illnesses, he did not eat meat, yet he lived to a ripe old age. And then he would add: "Man does not live by food alone."

Father urged us to take care of our health. In severe cold, he advised us to dress and wear shoes that were warmer, even if it wasn't fashionable. "Take care of your health; it is a gift from God. It is a sin before God to abuse your health."

To some young people, given their poor health, Father would not give his blessing to continue their studies beyond the tenth grade. “You’ll finish your studies, but you’ll lose your health. And without health, what kind of worker will you be? Plus, there’s spiritual desolation—your soul will lose its last spark of God!”

In the winter, especially around the feast of the Nativity of Christ, he would not give his blessing for whitewashing the houses, protecting the health of his children and their homes from dampness. Just clean the house—and that’s all. He would sometimes say, “In our monastery, we only whitewashed and cleaned the rooms for Easter.”

He did not advise going to resorts or vacation homes: “With that money, stay where you are, heal yourself at home, rest, and go to God’s church more often.” And he would also say: “Give thanks to God in your illnesses!” And to those complaining of illness, he would sometimes say: “How else do you expect to be saved? There is no other way.” “No one inherits both kingdoms either. Whoever lives here for the flesh, seeking their own pleasure and forgetting about the soul, is deprived of the Kingdom of Heaven.”

There were quite a few instances when people approached Father with complaints about some illness. To one he would say, “I am sick, too. I have pain as well.” And he would add, “It will pass!” And everything would pass; the person would recover. To another he would say the same thing, but without adding the words “it will pass.” That meant it would not pass.

Whenever someone suffered from a headache, Father advised them to take some oil from the lamp in front of the icon of “The Beheading of John the Baptist” and rub it on their head, as well as to offer prayers to John the Baptist.

There were times when, in response to someone’s plea—“Father, please pray for me; my teeth hurt”—he would reply, “Don’t quarrel with your neighbors; live in peace, and your teeth won’t hurt!”

Regarding some mentally or emotionally ill people, or those who were possessed, Father would say: “Some of them will recover, some will end up back in the hospital from time to time, and some will remain in this condition until their death.” He comforted some of the possessed, urging them to endure with God’s help: “...and you will be like the martyrs; you will enter the Kingdom of Heaven without trials.”

It would happen that someone would fall ill, lie at home, and think: “If only Father could send someone to bring me even just a cracker! I would feel better right away.” And what happened? Soon someone would come bearing a small gift from Father, to the great joy of the sick person. And that person would immediately feel better.

He would sometimes say: “Why do some people suffer, fall ill, and endure grief, grievances, and so on for almost their entire lives? Because of the sins of their parents and ancestors. These sufferers are offered up as living sacrifices to atone for the sins of their parents and ancestors.”

On Caring for the Sick and on Compassion

Father urged us not to forget those who are suffering and the sick, especially those in the hospital, and to be sensitive and compassionate toward them—for we ourselves may one day find ourselves in their place. He blessed many young women to work in the hospital. “Even the hardest heart, upon seeing such sufferers, can soften and become sympathetic and compassionate toward one’s neighbor. The salvation of the soul depends on this.”

As for those who envied the wealthy, he would often take them with him on visits to the poorest widows with children, living in dugouts. And he would say: “Look how people live! Yet you love to look at nice houses and the wealthy and envy what offers no salvation. That is where salvation lies! That is where the school of compassion and good deeds lies! To eradicate envy, you must look at those who live worse than you; then there will be peace in your soul, not confusion. And you will stop envying others.”

Speaking of the benefits of non-attachment, Father cited the example of a priest he knew who, upon his death, left nothing behind: neither money nor possessions. “How wonderful! How easy it is to die when you have nothing superfluous! And there will be a place of refuge in the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Since Father himself was merciful and compassionate toward the sick and the poor, he taught others to do the same: “This is where our salvation lies.” “If you yourself do not show mercy to your neighbors and, worse still, do not forgive, then how will you ask the Lord for mercy and forgiveness for yourself?”

But Father did not give alms without reason, nor did he warn others without cause. He especially avoided drunkards. He did not approve of stinginess or unnecessary extravagance. “In everything, strike a balance.”

There were also cases where people caring for sick relatives began to grow weary of them, mistreat them, and reduce them to tears. And even if they lived far away from Father, he sensed this in his spirit and would suddenly appear at that family's home. He would comfort the sick and the wronged, reconcile everyone, and pray that the Lord would grant patience and love—both to the sick and to those caring for them—for the salvation of their souls.

On Communion and Fasting

He severely reprimanded those who fasted on their own initiative, without his blessing, before receiving Communion (that is, those who abstained from food for one, two, or three days). He would not even allow such people to receive Communion. But for the weak and infirm, he would even bless them to drink a cup of hot water and eat a piece of bread the night before Communion, so that they would not grow weak or feel unwell by morning.

For those with weak or ailing stomachs or lungs, he permitted them to drink milk or tea with milk during the fast following the reception of the Holy Mysteries, as a remedy. But afterward, they were to tell the priest in confession that he had allowed this due to illness and infirmity and to ask God for forgiveness.

Father sternly reminded the elderly nuns who, at meals in the secular world, had eaten meat, thereby violating the monastic rule (when, at such an age, even fasting food should be consumed in moderation). , however, did not forbid the young from eating meat until a certain age, and then gradually weaned them off it. Father valued moderation in everything.

He often said: “If you fail to observe fasts without good reason, the time will come when illness will overtake you. Then you will fast against your will. The Lord will allow it as punishment for your sins.”

He spoke with regret about those who rarely attend church and rarely or never receive Communion (especially the elderly). As an example, he pointed to those who live near the church: “They’ll sit on a bench for the entire service, but they won’t come into the church, even though they call themselves Christians! Other people, however, who live far from the church—many kilometers away—find time to come to church on feast days and pray for the salvation of their souls.” He also lamented that few men attend church: “It’s almost exclusively women; where are the men?” Sometimes someone would say, “There are more people in church this year!” And he would reply, “Those aren’t our people—they’re visitors. As for our New Town, just as no one used to go, so no one goes now, except for a few women.”

Sometimes during Great Lent, someone would say, “There were a lot of people receiving Communion today.” And he would reply, “There are many receiving Communion, but truly, very few have partaken of it.”

“One should not take pride in those who receive Communion regularly, nor should one despair over those who, due to circumstances, are unable to do so. Sometimes, it is only at the very moment of death that a person is deemed worthy to receive Communion for the salvation of their soul.”

He often said, “It is not the beginning that matters, nor the middle, but the end.” And he cited many instructive examples of people who, at the start of their spiritual journey, fervently took up prayer, fasting, and the like—even without a blessing—but later grew cold and abandoned that path. Others, however, proceed moderately, with perseverance and patience, and surpass everyone else. Father valued moderation in all things and said: “All the Holy Fathers walked the royal path.” “Whoever proceeds gradually from the very beginning—not skipping two or three steps from the first, but moving steadily from one to the next without haste until the end—will be saved.”

“Moderation, self-restraint, discernment, timeliness, and gradualness are beneficial to everyone and in everything.” There were instances when, out of ignorance, some newcomers approached the Holy Chalice without having confessed. Father would immediately ask sternly, “Have you confessed?” and would not allow them to receive Communion. And after the service, he would explain to the person how one should prepare to receive the Holy Mysteries. He was particularly stern with those who, without a valid reason, arrived late to the service and demanded to be confessed and given Communion without proper preparation—even while in good health. “Only the sick may receive Communion, but you are in good health and have many sins on your conscience. Can’t you find the time to prepare yourself, purify yourself through repentance, arrive at the church on time, listen to the liturgical instructions and the service, and, after confessing, approach the chalice with the fear of God!” And he would not allow such people to receive Communion. He would add: “Approaching the chalice of the Holy Mysteries is not the same as approaching the table for a bowl of soup or a cup of tea.”

He was very displeased with those sick people or their relatives who called for a priest to administer the Holy Mysteries when the sick person could no longer even speak and had lost their reason. In some cases, the relatives were to blame; in others, the sick person himself, lacking faith, would rebuke them, saying, “Do you want to bury me?” Such was the superstition that he would die after receiving Holy Communion.

There was a case where a young man who was completely bedridden was being anointed. And it seemed to him (as he himself recounted) that once the anointing was over, his wife and children would come to him to say goodbye, as if he were dying. But God granted that, after the anointing and receiving the Holy Communion, he began to recover, fully regained his health, returned to work, and began attending church.

Father Sebastian was displeased with those who refused to receive the Last Rites because they believed that they were administered only to the dying. Others held the superstition that one must not walk on the ground after receiving the Last Rites, to which Father Sebastian would reply with displeasure, “Well, fly then, since you can’t walk.” And Father Sebastian blessed the young people to receive the sacrament of anointing, because almost everyone suffers from spiritual and physical ailments, and those who receive it with faith are granted healing, strength, and forgiveness for forgotten sins.

On the Veneration of Feasts and Saints

Father often urged people, in times of sorrow, illness, and temptation, to call upon all of God’s holy saints in their prayers and to honor their memory. He also urged them to honor the day of their Guardian Angel—whose name they bear—rather than their birthday.

Father was displeased with those who celebrated their birthdays rather than their name days. He cited the example of Herod, who, during a feast on his birthday, ordered the beheading of St. John the Baptist.

Father was deeply saddened that the people revered the feasts of the miraculous icons of the Mother of God more than the Twelfth Great Feast of the Nativity of the Most Holy Theotokos, on which day few people attended church.

In order to honor the Nativity of the Mother of God, the altar was consecrated in honor of this feast; as a result, a bishop would come for the feast, and there was a great celebration.

Also, over the years of his ministry, Father made the parishioners aware of the significance and greatness of St. John the Theologian and taught them to come to church on the day of his commemoration. He often said: “After all, there is no peace or love among you in your families. And who will help you, if not he, St. John the Theologian, the apostle of love? ‘Children, love one another!’”

He often implored them and warned them very sternly, to avoid God’s punishment, not to go to the market, shops, or elsewhere on feast days. He taught them to cherish the festive church services and not to exchange them for anything worldly or harmful to the soul. “It is only in church that a person’s soul is renewed and finds relief from their sorrows and illnesses.”

He took great care to ensure that during the Twelve Great Feasts, everything in the church was solemn and festive, and that people were dressed for the occasion—if not in new clothes, then at least in light-colored ones. He also made sure that the festive day was marked with special food. During Lent, or on weekdays, he would reprimand those who wore light-colored clothing without good reason. He was attentive to everything—both spiritual matters and earthly, everyday concerns.

He also made sure that the candles were made of pure wax, especially at the altar. “God’s grace descends upon the fragrant scent of wax candles,” Father would say, and he held the hardworking bee in high regard. He often held her up as an example to us, the lazy and negligent: “How much good does it bring—wax to God, and medicinal honey to man.” And to children who did not honor their parents, especially their mother, he held up as an example how bees protect their queen: they cherish her, and if she falls ill, they swarm around her and flutter their wings to make her feel better.

Father often insisted that “we should procure the very best items for the church and keep the inferior ones for ourselves.” But with us, it’s the opposite: “We take the better things for ourselves and the inferior ones for the church.” And we should work conscientiously, to the best of our ability.

On Icons

Father would under no circumstances bless the acceptance of distorted icons from parishioners (that is, those painted contrary to the canons, carelessly, or with distorted faces). And if people donated antique icons that were damaged in places, he would have them restored and then give the icons to those who needed

them. He greatly valued antique icons. When he would give someone an icon as a prayerful memento, he would sometimes say, “But this is an antique icon, painted with pigments.” He did not allow icons to be decorated with bright paper flowers.

Returning from services, Father would often lament the neglect with which icons were treated in people’s homes. If there were one or two icons, they were soot-stained and covered in dust, hanging somewhere in a far corner behind a dirty curtain so that no one would see them. Yet they would hang photographs of themselves and their children almost in the holiest corner.

On the rules in the church

After the service, the priest would instruct them to immediately open the doors and vents to air out the room. A schedule was even drawn up for the caretakers and staff on duty, specifying how many hours to keep the doors open after the service and how many hours before the service (taking into account the weather and the season). He required the cleaning staff not to stir up dust while cleaning and to protect the icons and gilding from dust and soot. He kept a close eye on all the service staff and observed how each person worked: some conscientiously, others lazily and carelessly. At night, from the small window of his cell, he kept an eye on the night watchmen and would sometimes say, “This watchman was walking around the courtyard all night; I saw him from the window.” And about another, he would say, “But this one didn’t leave his booth all night, which means he was sleeping instead of being on duty.” He ordered that such people not be kept on duty. He also observed everything that took place in the church and in the churchyard—both good and bad—and identified what needed correction. If anyone walked quickly through the church without the fear of God, waving their arms, pushing others, or even behaved that way in the courtyard or on the street, he would reprimand them in front of everyone as a lesson to all. This was especially true for those who allowed themselves to run, stomp their feet, or make noise, imitating the blessed. The Father strictly forbade this. By a person’s gait and outward movements, he could discern their character and the inner state of their soul. “One must walk quietly and calmly, without taking wide strides or stomping one’s feet—especially in the church—even if you are in a hurry. After all, the world is watching us and taking us as an example.” From the Cherubic Hymn until the end of the Divine Liturgy, any movement in the church was prohibited (including the sale of candles, the recording of prayer requests, and so on); Father taught us to remain in the church until the end of the prayer service, which is why he only allowed us to venerate the cross after the prayer service. He often repeated: “We are all old, weak, frail, sick, and slow-moving, and we do everything slowly. That is why the service takes so long. But where there are young priests—strong and vigorous—everything is done quickly, and the service ends sooner.” (Alas, to our dismay, we have now seen this for ourselves.)

On Singing

He loved chanting that was prayerful and moving. “It is not pleasing to God to shout—and to stomp one’s feet as well. God is not deaf; He hears everything and knows our thoughts.”

Father paid very close attention to the choir’s reading and singing, ensuring they read and sang with the fear of God, reverently and prayerfully. He could not tolerate shouting, especially when one person drowned out everyone else. He valued the singers’ hard work and patience, cherished them, and gave them as much attention as he could. On holidays, he would treat them to tea and hand out gifts. Father especially loved to give out headscarves or handkerchiefs. Sometimes he would give out so many that nothing would be left. Then he would give someone money to buy more scarves to distribute.

On Clothing

He would reprimand those nuns who liked to dress in monastic garb for show, or lay widows and young women who dressed in black. He would say, “It is best to dress in blue or gray, modestly. Black will not save you, and red will not ruin you.” He advised young people to wear colorful clothes so they would not arouse suspicion at work or be slandered for no reason.

He also said: “Young people should not pay too much attention to their appearance. They shouldn’t be too concerned with their appearance: they shouldn’t bathe too often or dress with too much style, but rather more casually, without troubling their soul or conscience, so as not to be a stumbling block to others. Seek your own salvation and do not hinder others. As for the elderly, they should be clean and neat so that people do not despise them or turn away from them.”

On Orphans

He treated orphans with great sympathy and compassion. When he met them, he would first feed them, comfort them, examine them from head to toe—checking what they were wearing and what shoes they had on—ask them about everything, and help them with words, deeds, and prayer. He would care for them like a father and mother.

On Raising Children

Sometimes Father would speak about the bonds of marriage and spousal duties: about fidelity, trust, and patience in the event of illness affecting one of the spouses or their children. He would rebuke ungrateful children, reminding them of their parents' sacrifices: their hard work, love, sleepless nights by the cradle during illness, and fear for their children's lives and health. "The Lord will deprive such children of happiness," Father would say. "Honor your father and mother, and you will live long on the earth." He held up as examples those children who honored their parents during their lifetimes and prayed for them after their deaths.

He repeatedly warned parents who, almost from infancy, accustom their children to willfulness and self-centeredness: "Now it is not the children who follow their parents, but the parents who follow their children." And one would often see a boy tugging at his grandmother's or mother's hand: "Let's go home or outside!" Just to get out of the church. And the parents would obey and leave.

More than once or twice, Father reprimanded parents for their excessive favoritism and attachment to their children, for being ready to practically pray to them instead of to God. "The simple, illiterate peasants themselves dress and shoe themselves in whatever they can find and however they can, going hungry so that they can clothe, shoe, and educate their children on a par with the urban intelligentsia. And once the children are educated, they begin to despise their parents' illiteracy and ragged clothing—they are even ashamed of them."

Metropolitan Joseph (Chernov) urged parents to teach their children from infancy not to kill living creatures, starting with cockroaches, insects, birds, cats, and dogs. Eventually, this will extend to humans, and even the parents themselves will not be spared from cruelty. "Teach them to love and have compassion for every creature of God, and not to harm them. This includes plants as well." But there were some zealous mothers who laughed at Metropolitan Joseph's sermon: "What are these cockroaches and bugs?" They didn't even want to understand the meaning of it, let alone teach their children something useful. (Perhaps some of them eventually came to understand when a son or grandson, having grown up embittered, taught her a lesson about her own parenting.)

On Obedience

There were times when visitors, to avoid trouble at work and at home, were in a hurry to leave as soon as possible. But contrary to their wishes, Father would keep them there for a day or two. Those who obeyed and stayed returned safely, and everything went well for them, both at home and at work. But those who disobeyed and left encountered troubles on the road, at home, or at work. And they regretted having disobeyed Father.

During the holidays, he did not bless anyone for their journey, and those who left of their own accord also did not escape sorrow and misfortune.

Father did not approve of those who acted on their own accord, and the outcome of their affairs was sad. One of the older young women decided to get married without a blessing. Others told Father about this, and he replied, "What kind of husband is that? A good-for-nothing!" And they begged and pleaded with her not to marry him: "If you do, you'll suffer!" That is exactly how it turned out later on.

It used to happen, Father, that he would say in front of everyone: "Whoever does not learn to listen to their parents, their peers, those older than themselves, and even those younger than themselves, will, when they grow up, listen to no one, and no one will ever listen to them."

On Funeral Services

Father lamented those people who, having lost a loved one, would sink into despair and even hysteria, raising cries and wails at the coffin of the deceased. Father would say that these were unbelievers. “It is hard for a person without faith to die, leaving behind family and wealth, and it is hard for unbelieving relatives to lose a loved one in whom they had placed all their earthly happiness. The Lord shatters their hope, and they do not understand God’s will. Among believers, relatives do weep for the deceased, but with restraint, and they mourn, but with moderation. Everything is dissolved in prayer and hope for God’s help. A believer dies peacefully, as if falling asleep, and after death, the final kiss of the Guardian Angel is imprinted on his face.”

After the funeral service for an unbeliever or someone who died unexpectedly, he would sometimes be unable to contain himself and say, “How difficult it is to conduct a funeral service for such people!” (He performed funeral services for those who died without repentance and without receiving the Holy Mysteries of Christ solely for the sake of comforting their loved ones.) And to those who read the Psalter over the bodies of non-believers (for the comfort of their relatives), he would say the same thing: “How difficult it is to read the Psalter over them!”

If Father performed a funeral service for an elderly person who had lived a pious life, he would sometimes say after the service, “A ripe ear of grain has sunk into the eternal granary!” And he would say something different about another person. He knew the fate of the deceased’s soul.

He was especially grieved for deceased infants, for whom no one had performed a funeral service—neither in person nor in absentia. “They’ll still bring them to be baptized, but to have a funeral service performed—that’s very rare. And don’t many of them die?”

Sometimes one of the cantors, feeling sorry for Father, would suggest postponing the posthumous funeral service for the deceased until the next day, but Father would reply sternly: “Do you know how he is faring there? You can postpone it, but you might die yourself, and the soul will remain unburied.”

Many times he urged people not to serve wine at memorial services, let alone vodka. “During Lent, commemorate the deceased with Lenten food; on ordinary days, keep it simple with just a few dishes. The deceased don’t need any of this.” And for the poor, he would bless them to feed three or four people something hot and that was all.”

To one grieving woman who had lost her only son, when she said, “It’s a pity—he was a good, obedient boy, kind to everyone, and a believer,” the priest replied: “That’s good—, you’ll have fond memories of him for the rest of your life. If he’d stayed alive, in a year or two he would have drunk himself to death with his friends, and his soul would have been lost forever.”

“And the miners—if they didn’t swear and had the fear of God—would be like martyrs, going down underground to work as if facing death. Who knows whether he’ll come out of there alive or not?”

On the Father’s Confession

It used to happen that a man would go to the Father with a heavy heart, harboring a grudge against someone, and his thoughts would pound at him like a hammer: say this to the Father, say that. But as soon as he saw the Father and received his blessing—everything vanished like smoke, both the heaviness and the thoughts. His gentle, warm gaze warms the soul and the heart. It becomes light and joyful—and there’s nothing to say, and no one to complain about—everyone has become good. It’s as if the sun emerges from behind a black cloud, warming and illuminating everyone, sinners and the righteous alike. And in the light of these rays, a person realizes that he himself is worse than others.

When people spoke of visions, he would give only one answer: “But I see nothing!” And he would quote the words of the Holy Fathers, that it is not the one who sees angels who is greater, but the one who sees his own sins.

On Verbiage

He could not tolerate it when someone spoke at length without purpose or benefit—and, God forbid, with the intent to condemn. He would immediately make his disapproval known and bring the person to humility. He himself, however, would mostly listen in silence and, at the end, respond to everything with just one or two words.

He would admonish people for verbosity, and even more so for idle talk: “I know you can talk a lot,” he would sometimes say to someone for the edification of all, “but I have no teeth and my throat hurts, so it’s

hard for me to speak.” After verbosity and idle chatter, such a heavy residue remains, as if someone had poured sand onto the soul, even after soul-saving conversations.

Father also said: “Those who love to talk a lot, to engage in idle chatter, and to joke—from such people, at the end of their lives, the Lord takes away their speech.” (Which has indeed been observed in some cases.)

On Laughter and Casual Behavior

Father could not tolerate laughter and boisterous behavior, especially if someone pushed or tugged at another person, as well as jokes, mockery, and the like. He cited the Savior as an example, who never laughed but wept—as His disciples witnessed. Nor has anyone ever seen the Mother of God laughing.

He did not approve of those who told lies, even in jest. “Always speak the truth, and do not laugh. In laughter and frivolity lies the beginning of fornication.”

On God’s Help and Falls

He would sometimes say: “Until your very death, fear falling away and do not rely on your own strength, but only on God’s help, calling upon Him in prayer with humility.”

Regarding the fall of a certain young woman (not one of his close spiritual children), he gave a stern admonition to the others: “A neglected, festering wound, hidden from both the physical and spiritual physician, is difficult to treat and heal. At the very beginning of the temptation, when I could have helped, you hide it and say nothing to me. And when you’re in deep trouble—only then do you cry out and beg, ‘Father, save me!’ But how can I save you when it’s already too late?” And he added: “The most fierce passion is lust. It can torment a person on their sickbed or even their deathbed, especially those who have lived their earthly lives in intemperance until old age. This passion lies deep in the bones; it is the most shameless of all passions. No one can rid themselves of it on their own. Only the Lord can deliver you when you turn to Him with tears and a contrite heart. One must remember this struggle until the very moment of death. The moment you let your guard down even slightly, neglect prayer, or lose the fear of God, it will immediately make itself known. Only unceasing prayer, the fear of God, the remembrance of death, and the remembrance of judgment, hell, and paradise will drive it away.”

Sometimes, in response to someone’s complaints about their shortcomings and weaknesses, he would say, “Read books; you’ll find everything there!” And he would bless some to read the lives of the saints, and others to read the works of the Holy Fathers—whatever would be most beneficial to each person.

“In the work of your salvation, do not forget to seek the help of the Holy Fathers and the holy martyrs. Through their prayers, the Lord delivers us from passions. But let no one think they can rid themselves of them by their own strength. Do not rely on yourselves until the very moment of death in the struggle against passions. Only the Lord alone has the power to deliver those who ask Him for help from them. And do not seek peace until the very moment of death.”

To some who complained of being troubled by people, demons, passions, etc., Father replied more than once: “Peace can come only when they sing, ‘With the saints, grant him rest...’ But until then, do not seek peace until the very moment of death. A person is born not for peace, but to labor and endure for the sake of the future life (rest). Here we are travelers, strangers, guests. And travelers find no rest in a foreign land, in foreign affairs. They move forward step by step, ever onward, to reach their native homeland as soon as possible—that is, the house of God, the Kingdom of Heaven. And if here, in this earthly valley of sorrows, in this world of pleasures, one slows down, then evening (that is, the twilight of one’s days) will creep up unnoticed, and death will find the soul unprepared, without good deeds, and there will be no time left to perform them. Death is relentless! No rich man by his wealth, no lover of money by his riches, no mighty man by his strength, no king, and no warrior can buy their way out of death, and none of them can take with them anything they have acquired. A man is born naked, and he departs naked. Only faith, good deeds, and alms follow him into the next life, and no one will help him: neither friends nor relatives.”

On Condemnation

Father strictly forbade condemning or belittling other priests (whether his own or others’) without first receiving their blessing. He himself would not bless such people. “How do I know what kind of person he is? Perhaps he is better than all of us, yet we will condemn him. How do we know the state of his soul?” “To judge by outward appearance and actions—one can be mistaken, and that is a great sin.”

“Why do you treat my priests as if they were mere boys? I’ll make you bow down to them!”—so he would say to those who truly treated priests (both young and old) as inferiors or equals.

He could not tolerate it when anyone was praised, rebuked, or condemned. He would find good qualities even in the lowliest and weakest, while in those who were praised he would find negative traits; thus he would humble pride and do away with empty glory.

He once remarked to some “insightful” people: “I, too, see people’s shortcomings, but I remain silent; I do not expose them. It is better to pray silently for people so that they may come to realize their own shortcomings, rather than to expose them, as they say, offhand, which can cause some to lose heart and fall into despair.”

Sometimes Father would say: “Teaching others is like throwing stones from the bell tower. But doing it yourself is like carrying stones up to the bell tower.”

On Temperance

He also taught everyone to be thrifty and practice self-restraint, especially during years of poor harvests. One poor widow boasted that she had eaten fried potatoes at home. To which Father remarked: “But there are people who don’t even have potatoes for soup, and yet you were feasting—even though someone gave them to you for Christ’s sake.”

There were times when, at lunch, sweet buns were served with tea, and butter was even set out. Father, though he did not object, would not touch the butter. Seeing this, people realized that the butter was a luxury and a sign of intemperance.

Sometimes the hosts would invite only the priest to sit down at the table. He would not sit down until everyone present had been invited to sit down; only then would he sit down with them. He did not approve of going to bed late or getting up late. “It is better to go to bed early and get up no later than half past five. Get used to order and consistency.”

Father did not approve of those who hoarded excess, nor did he praise those who squandered thoughtlessly, giving away their very last possessions and depriving themselves of the necessities. “One must adhere to the golden mean; the extremes are ruinous. The golden mean applies to all earthly matters, and especially to heavenly and spiritual ones. Whoever rushes ahead too quickly must be stopped. And whoever, through negligence or weakness, lags too far behind and does not care for the salvation of the soul—such a person must be helped to rouse from slumber, to walk in step with those in the middle, neither rushing ahead nor falling behind.”

The priest will say: “Neither wine, nor women, nor money, nor wealth are to blame for our sins and passions—as some seek to justify themselves—but rather our own intemperance. Drunkards blame wine; prostitutes or fornicators blame men or women; the greedy blame money; the rich blame wealth; and so on. It follows that if there were no wine, women, money, or wealth, sinners would not sin. God has arranged everything with great wisdom and beauty. But evil arises from the unwise use and handling of things.”

He also said more than once: “Find evil within yourself, not in other people or things that you have failed to handle properly. Just as a child handles fire or a sword: he burns himself, he cuts himself.”

About Myself

Once, when asked, “Why have you all gathered here?” one woman replied simply, “To look at you.” The priest answered, “If you’re looking at me, your eyes must be bad.”

He often reminded the church council—and wrote to the Bishop—of his desire to retire from active ministry (to live in seclusion), saying, “Enough of mending other people’s roofs while my own is leaking.” But the answer was always the same: “Serve until death.”

Sensing that his end was near, he often reminded them to appoint—even if they were weak and frail—his own people to priestly and leadership positions. Then everything would remain unchanged, just as it had been under Father.

On major holidays, he would treat the choir members to gifts. And after the memorial service, he would personally hand out everything to all those present, saying, “This is how it is with me—help yourselves; I have no family.”

“Why should I collect all this? I don’t need anything.” But the people tearfully begged him to accept at least something from them. And Father would take it from some, bless it, and return it to them. From others,

he would take it and immediately give it to someone else. And from still others, he wouldn't take anything at all, despite their resentment. And if they left something behind, he wouldn't touch it for a long time, and then he would give it to someone in need.

He willingly and lovingly distributed prosphora to everyone, especially those who had come from afar. During Holy Week, after the service, he would sit in the church or in the memorial chapel; a basket of Easter eggs was placed beside him, and, blessing them, he handed each person an Easter egg, to the joy and comfort of all.

On Monastic Life and the World

He once said: "There is a deep chasm between us, the monks, and the world. The world will never understand our life, nor will we understand theirs. If monks knew in advance how many temptations and sorrows awaited them on the narrow but salvific path, no one would enter a monastery. And if the world knew of the future blessings awaiting those who live the monastic life, everyone would enter a monastery."

"Why were the monasteries dissolved? Because the monks began driving around in troikas and wearing woolen coats. But in the past, monks wore canvas cassocks and coarse linen robes, and labored conscientiously. Those were the true monks. Some abbess from the nobility—rather than from among her own nuns—quickly drove the novices into the Kingdom of Heaven with her heartless treatment and cruelty toward them. The poor nuns broke their fast on cabbage, while the abbess, to please her superiors, gave them everything, yet deprived her own of the necessities."

He often repeated the words: "A servant who knew his master's will and did not carry it out will be beaten more severely than a servant who did not know his master's will." And to some he said directly: "After all, you know everything and have traded God for the world (or have traded God)." "The world promises gold but gives mud." "The unmarried man cares for God, but the married man cares for his wife." "He who has not bound himself with the bonds of marriage is always free. His only concern is the salvation of his soul. The goal of life is purity; its end is the Kingdom of Heaven!"

When Father was younger and in better health, he refused to use transportation, saying, "I am a monk; I must walk, not ride." And he would walk long distances—to places like the villages of Fedorovka, Melkombinat, Zelenrest, Kirzavod, and so on. And he would sometimes say: "I loved walking to the outskirts of Zelenrest with a teapot to get good water from the spring. And on the way, I would sing: 'He has turned His gaze upon us!'..."

Two young women asked the novices to report about them to Father. To which Father, after thinking for a moment, said: "You don't know what to do... If you welcome them, they'll become even more attached to you, but if you don't, they'll be offended!" With these words, Father made it clear to the young men—who later became priests—that excessive attachment on the part of young women toward priests, and of priests toward young women, is not safe. But rudeness is not safe either. Once again—the commendable golden mean. "Whoever manages to achieve it with God's help will avoid many temptations."

Once, at a home where tea was being served, the young girls were sitting in one room, and the women in another (it sometimes happened that, for the girls' edification, one thing needed to be said to them, and something else to the women). Suddenly, one of the women walked into the room where the young girls were, where Father was also sitting. He looked at her sternly and said: "After all, only the young women are sitting here, and the women are in the other room, so go sit with them there." She left, displeased, in tears and feeling wronged, to which Father said: "Why take offense? I told the truth—that you, as a woman, should sit with the women. I didn't say she was a man, so why take offense?"

Once at a table where both women and young girls were seated, one of the women remarked that Father showed more compassion toward the young girls than toward the women. To which he, without mincing words, said directly to her: "And how many times have you been married? You've seen all kinds of comfort, but the young girls—nothing! They're happy just to finish the last spoonful of soup after Father, which is a great comfort to them."

He often reminded them to watch their thoughts and the purity of their hearts, and not to imitate the "holy fools"; he said: "Chastity will not save you without good deeds and purity of heart." "Outward appearance is of no use if there is filth within and passions have not been overcome." "Why did the Savior love John the Theologian, if not for his purity, chastity, love, faithfulness, tenderness, and obedience! All the disciples abandoned Jesus Christ on the cross; only John the Theologian stood fearlessly by the cross." And

more than once, Father would also say: “Love is above all virtues.” “God is love,” “Without love, even if you offer your body to be burned—it is all for naught.” “Where there is love—there is God.” “Where there is God—there is peace, harmony, and stillness. Where there is no love—there are contradictions, strife, discord, betrayal, and slander.” “Love is patient; love does not keep a record of wrongs; it is not angry; it is not resentful; it does not seek its own. Love seeks the good of others, even of enemies.” As an example, Father cited John the Theologian, who, through love, brought his disciple back from a band of robbers into the bosom of the Church.

He often liked to repeat the words of John the Theologian: “Children, love one another!” With these words, he reminded us of love for God and neighbor, without which neither labor, nor prayer, nor fasting is of any benefit.

From the sermons of Schema-Archimandrite Sebastian

A Sermon on the Repentant Sinner

“Sinner, cast aside your passions and sinful habits; heaven calls you more than the ninety-nine righteous! The angels in heaven rejoice over a single repentant sinner. Heaven seeks your salvation. Just repent, turn back, and turn away from sin. For your sake, the Lord Himself was born in a manger among the animals and suffered: He was struck on the ear, spat upon, crowned with thorns, and nailed to the cross by the hand of His own creation. He suffered and died so that He might later be glorified and ascend. And you, human being, what do you have to be proud of—what do you possess of your own that is fit for eternity? You cannot take wealth, honor, glory, or health with you—they are temporary. Let us grow rich for the future, gathering our wealth there through the beggars, the poor, and the sick. You are a citizen of heaven—why cling so tightly to the earth!? You are an heir to the Kingdom of Heaven, possessing an immortal soul, which the Only-Begotten Son Himself redeemed through His death on the cross.”

January 31, 1960

On the Presence of the Guardian Angel

“The Guardian Angel remains with a person who has an unblemished heart and a clear conscience. By listening to your heart and conscience, you will always hear his voice guiding you toward the truth. Whoever feels a spiritual hunger—the spiritual sensibility of their soul—will, just as a person seeks food to satisfy physical hunger, seek to satisfy their soul with the food of God’s Word. Those whose spiritual sensibility is stifled and blinded by passions will feel no hunger other than physical hunger. But another, forgetting physical hunger, strives to satisfy spiritual hunger. Passion blinds the soul through the gradual suggestion of thoughts, consent, and the commission of deeds: 1) illness, 2) disease, 3) death of the soul. Where a single passion reigns, there the Holy Spirit and the Guardian Angel withdraw, and the person’s soul dies. O Lord, save us from all these things! Holy Guardian Angels, pray to God for us!”

Undated. Feast of the Archangel Michael.

A Word on Love for One’s Neighbors

“How can one not love Him, the Creator and Maker of the entire universe, of all that is visible and invisible—the Creator, including you, O human being? The Lord created man and breathed into him the life-giving spirit; He gave him free will and reason; He gave him a heart capable of enjoying God’s gifts. To love not the Creator but the creature means to love not life but death, to not love oneself, to be one’s own enemy. Not to love one’s neighbor as oneself means to set the Creator against oneself. One must love the Creator with all one’s soul, with all one’s strength, and with all one’s mind: to ponder, reflect, and reason about God and the blessings He bestows upon us. For He sees all our thoughts, desires, and intentions toward Him and toward our neighbor, whom we love for his salvation, not for our own.”

Undated.

A Word from Father Sebastian in the Evening at the Guardhouse

“I read the Akathist to the Mother of God, ‘Unexpected Joy,’ and conversed at length. ‘Here, three and four years have passed since I was ordained an archimandrite, yet I have not acquired humility and patience.

I am impatient, lazy, negligent, and talkative. But one must walk the narrow path; there are not two Kingdoms of Heaven. One must bear one's cross, given at baptism, until the end of life without complaint and endure all the sorrows sent by God. The Lord Himself endured: He was born in a manger, grew up in poverty and obscurity, and then went out preaching and performing miracles, enlightening the common people. And the Jews, out of envy, crucified Him on the cross. And all the apostles died a martyr's death, and all the early Christians shed their blood, yet we are unwilling to endure or bear even the slightest hardship.

Lord, have mercy! Sweetest Jesus, forgive us... We must always thank God for everything."

June 26, 1960

Commemoration of John the Theologian—the Apostle of Love

"In the beginning was the Word... As the purest, most honorable, and most tender of all, the Savior entrusted His Mother to him. Blessed are you, son of Thunder, soaring above all like an eagle, and thundering with your teaching."

May 25, 1960

The Beginning of Great Lent

"Open to me the gates of repentance, O Giver of Life..." With a deep awareness and sense of his own sinfulness, the tax collector repented. Unlike the Pharisee, he did not address God with arrogance and pride. With a contrite heart, not daring to look up at heaven, beating his breast, the tax collector cried out to the Lord: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Such is the truly repentant. Repent and do not return to your former sins, but begin a new life in a renewed spirit."

February 7, 1960

A Message from Archimandrite Sevastian

"...To walk before God, to carry Him in our hearts. And He enters pure hearts, unclouded by pride, fornication, impurity, and other vices and sins. Lord, take hold of our hearts and purify them! The Lord will descend into our hearts when we open the way for Him through humility, patience, purity, chastity, meekness, good deeds, love for our neighbors—and above all, love for God—obedience, prayer, and self-control over our mental and physical senses and thoughts. We bar His way through intemperance, impurity of feelings and thoughts, impatience in the face of sorrows and illnesses, grumbling, ingratitude, and repaying evil with evil."

Undated.

Name Day of Archimandrite Sebastian

Father Sebastian himself is celebrating the service. God has strengthened his frail health. Sister Maria, against his wishes, made him smooth out his pectoral cross. And he, for her willfulness and disobedience, immediately humbled our brother. He put on his vestments and sat on the phelonion during the service (he usually lifts it in such cases) and crumpled it, making it look even worse than before. There's your lesson. The Divine Liturgy was more solemn than ever, as was the prayer service. And after it all, congratulations to the celebrant on his Name Day, along with a flood of the very best thanks and wishes. But the birthday boy, as always, the more he is exalted, the more he humbles himself and belittles himself. He even takes offense at verbosity and idle talk: "I need nothing from you (neither gifts, nor praise, nor thanks); what brings me joy is peace, love, and harmony among you..."

December 31, 1959

On the Samaritan Woman

"The Lord God Himself is the true happiness of the soul, the true consolation, the true good that the Savior offered to the Samaritan woman. Others, however, seek pleasure in the sensual gratification of the coarse flesh, in wealth, glory, and earthly power. The desires and pursuits of infancy seem ridiculous to a child; what the child desired seems ridiculous to a youth; what the youth so passionately desired seems ridiculous to a mature adult; and what the mature adult desired seems ridiculous to an old man... We fill our senses by fulfilling endless desires, yet we empty our souls. Our senses are full, our soul is empty. "Great is our Lord, and great is His strength; His wisdom is beyond measure."

May 31, 1959

The Ascension of the Lord

“Once unworthy of the earth, now worthy of worship in heaven. We have lost less than we have gained now. God has arranged all our former sorrows for our benefit. Let us spend our time in holiness and live our lives in purity, so that we may be deemed worthy to inherit life in the age to come in heaven. Jesus, who ascended, lift up our souls and our thoughts from darkness, vanity, gloom, and attachment to the earth, the flesh, the world, and its fleeting delights—toward eternity and the future blessings prepared by the Lord Jesus Christ, who redeemed us with His blood.”

Undated.

Feast Day of Saint Andrew the First-Called Apostle

“He was the first to erect the Cross on the hills of Kyiv and declared that this place and this entire land would one day flourish in Orthodoxy. And gazing upon the cross prepared for his crucifixion, he rejoiced and was glad in spirit, hoping to be united with Christ in the Kingdom of Heaven through the cross. So too must we attain spiritual joy and gladness in the blessings to come.”

“Holy love is the sum of all perfection. Such love was possessed by the Mother of God, ‘a heavenly wonder, heavenly holiness.’”

“The Bridegroom of my soul is the most jealous of all; if I love anything else alongside Him, then I do not love Him” (from the Paterikon). “From the cross, the Savior cried out: ‘I thirst!’... He thirsted for our salvation...”

December 13, 1958

On Guardian Angels

“A Guardian Angel is given to every person at the moment of their baptism. How should one preserve the union of the soul with the Guardian Angel? He works through the conscience and the heart. When a person cares for the salvation of their soul, guards their conscience, and avoids all sin, then they feel their Guardian Angel. The Guardian Angel guides such a person toward all that is good, sends good thoughts, and warns against evil. We will see our Guardian Angel on the day we depart from this life. But what our reunion will be like depends on us and our deeds. Will the Guardian Angel rejoice or grieve over our careless life? He will withdraw from those who have not acknowledged either him or their own souls; he will withdraw from those who have acted contrary to their conscience, from those who have committed sin after sin, become entrenched in evil, stifled their conscience, and hardened their hearts. When the Guardian Angel withdraws, the spirit of darkness—the devil—steps in and makes a person his slave. And the person’s soul is lost. The Guardian Angel, having withdrawn, weeps for that soul.

Let us, then, be attentive to our Guardian Angel; let us pray to him for help in all good deeds and for deliverance from every sin. Let us ask him to lead us unwaveringly to the Lord, and let us not put him to shame by our own deeds.”

November 21, 1958

“For six days the Lord created the universe, and on the seventh He rested. And He commanded the human race to labor for six days, and on the seventh to rest and devote time to God, for the glory of His name and for the salvation of their souls. But the enemy of the human race, out of envy, tempts us not to keep this commandment. Even before the coming of Christ the Savior, when the Lord, through Aaron, asked Pharaoh to let the people go into the wilderness for three days of celebration to offer a sacrifice, Pharaoh, instead, imposed labor and supervision upon the people. And so that we might not go into the wilderness of our own souls, Pharaoh (or the evil one) says: “Go about your business, go about your affairs, please your boss, or provide bread and clothing for your children. What kind of feast do you need?” We steal time from God for our own affairs, and God curses us and withholds success. But when you entrust your affairs to God’s providence, He will arrange them for your good and in abundance, and bring them to a successful conclusion. And not only do we work modestly for six days, but on the seventh day we spend our time in carelessness, idleness, and drunkenness, instead of going to church to offer a sacrifice and give thanks to God for His blessings.”

January 14, 1959

Sunday

“The heart is harder than stone, harder than an anvil. A wicked conscience, a soul embittered by a sinful habit of carnal and sensual sins, and a lack of repentance. He laughs at the sight of a corpse, pays no heed to the remarks and reproaches of others, and suffers and grieves with a heart embittered by his conscience. It is easier to shatter an anvil with a hammer than to break a human heart. The death of loved ones, the exhortations of others, the Church’s teachings on judgment, hell, sickness, and sorrow—all these are hammers striking the heart. But the heart does not yield; it has become hardened in evil. Like one intoxicated by wine, the mind has gone mad against all that is good and human. Lord, grant us hearts of flesh; take away our hearts of stone, so that we may feel the hammer striking! “They reviled me and beat me, yet I was not hurt.” “Altar, altar,”—the prophet cries out, not to the king or to the people, whose hearts are harder than the altar stone.”

December 8, 1958

“Blessed is he who does the will of God, and not his own, fleshly will. I surrender myself with all my soul and all my heart to Your will, O Lord. Do with me whatever pleases You. He who does his own will has a slave’s fear and attachment to earthly goods. He who has not acquired the fear of God cannot do God’s will”...

September 9, 1958

The Beheading of John the Baptist

“John the Baptist died a martyr for righteousness and truth before his time. Truth triumphs when people die for it. Otherwise, everyone would think it was acceptable to live lawlessly. If there were no righteousness and truth, there would be no life on earth. Everyone would perish in their lawlessness. We must all live according to truth and righteousness, and set an example for others by doing so. Truth, purity, love, and chastity are so pleasing to the Lord. The holy martyrs endured suffering for the sake of truth and righteousness, putting to shame falsehood and lawlessness.”

September 11, 1958

A Word About Time

“What is more precious than anything else in the world? Time! And what do we lose without regret and to no avail? Time! What do we value least and neglect the most? Time! If we lose time, we lose ourselves! We lose everything! When we lose even the most insignificant thing, we look for it. But when we lose time, we don’t even realize it. Time is given by the Lord to be used properly for the salvation of the soul and the attainment of eternal life. Time should be allocated just as a good steward allocates each coin—each for its proper purpose. Each has its own purpose for him. So let us allocate time usefully, and not for empty amusements and entertainment, conversations, feasts, or revelry. The Lord will hold us accountable for having stolen time for our own whims, rather than using it for God or for our souls.”

September 8, 1958

Feast of Archangel Michael

“There is no equality, nor can there be, either in heaven or on earth. Equality exists only in the Holy Trinity. Archangel Michael defeated Lucifer through humility, patience, and courage. Archangel Gabriel is the herald of God’s mysteries and miracles. And all have their own duties.”

November 21, 1958

Sunday

“Jairus’s daughter died, and the Lord raised her from the dead. So it is that a person dies in spirit: through sinful thoughts, the will to sin, and the commission of sin. Then grace departs, and the soul dies. This is our neglect of the soul. We do not turn to the physician when the illness has just begun and is easily curable. Nor do we turn to Him during the course of the illness. But when the daughter (the soul) had already died, then we turned to the Physician of souls and bodies, the Lord: ‘My daughter has died.’ ‘She has not died, but sleeps,’ said the Lord.

We must offer ourselves as a sacrifice to the Lord from our youth, while we are in the prime of life, in good health, pure, and of a lively spirit—not when we have lost all of this after having served the devil.

“Work while it is day (life),” says the Lord, for night will come—that is, old age and death—and then it will be too late. Thus, the foolish virgins had no oil, because it was night when the Bridegroom came, and there was nowhere to buy oil. They spent the day carelessly and negligently, and their lamps remained empty, and the door to the wedding hall was closed to them. So too, let us bring to the Lord not what is lame, crooked, blind, or rotten, but what is healthy, pure, and firstborn. As the prophet says: He tilled the land, planted the field, cultivated it, weeded it, and watered it, but when He came to gather the fruit, He found nothing. Here and there a sheaf in the field, here and there a cluster of grapes on the vine. The enemies of the Lord came, stole it all, and carried it away. So, too, a person must labor in the field of his soul not in vain, but must be vigilant so that the enemies—the world, the devil, the flesh, and death—do not come and rob it. The world comes and takes what is its own, luring with wealth, luxury, and ambition. The devil comes and carries off the very last of these: purity, chastity, innocence, and the fear of God. Old age and death come, and a person wants to reap something himself from his own field, yet finds nothing. Only here and there was there an intention to do a good deed amid a life of sin. And a person regrets having lived a life without acquiring good deeds for the life to come. Then death comes, and there is no longer time for repentance, for tears, or for prayer. An unexpected death is especially dangerous. Therefore, one must not put off repentance and the acquisition of good deeds until old age, when there will be no strength left—neither physical nor spiritual. Everything will be stolen by enemies, and for oneself—nothing; the lamps will be empty. Pray with love for God and begin all deeds with prayer. Without prayer, there are only vain deeds. In prayer, ask for the fulfillment of God’s will and His commandments, not for what we desire. We must love God unceasingly and pray unceasingly. Love truly and pray with faith, and the Lord will not forsake us with His mercy. “Whom shall I look upon, if not the meek and humble of heart?” Humble yourself; be aware of your insignificance before the Lord, the Creator of all and everything. “If he does not love me, then I will not love him either”—these are the words of the devil. Let him not love you, but overcome his hatred with love. Overcome the passion of hatred with true love and the fear of God.

“Man looks at the face, but the Lord looks at the heart.” “God speaks to the mind through instruction, and to the heart through inspiration.”

November 11, 1958

Easter Sunday

“Ask God for purity of heart and forgiveness of sins, grieving in repentance for what you have done and considering yourself worse than everyone else. And the Lord Himself will come to you, and you will feel such joy in your heart as the world does not know. Do things according to God and for God, not for people—whom you should love, but from whom you should flee. ‘Seek God, and your soul will live.’ We must preserve a clear conscience and acquire a pure heart. And from this, our deeds and actions must conform to Christ’s commandments, so that no one will say of us: ‘And yet they call themselves Christians, and yet they pray—but what do they do?’ We must preserve purity and an unblemished conscience so that the enemy may not profit from us even in the slightest, so that our conscience may not reproach us for our lives; then there will be peace and joy in our hearts.”

Undated.

“Holy Spirit, receive us into Your embrace as a mother does. Come and dwell within us, and make Your home in our hearts. Purify our minds, hearts, and souls from impure thoughts, feelings, and desires—from everything that defiles us. Help us, O Lord, with Your grace; without it, we cannot save or preserve ourselves. Most Holy Trinity, our God, glory to You! “Establish my wavering heart upon the rock of Your commandments.”

Undated.

Schemanun Agnia

Schemanun Agnia (Alexandra Vasilyevna Starodubtseva) was born on April 15, 1884. She was born blind, and her parents took her to Voronezh, to the relics of Saint Mitrofan. At his relics, the girl was healed—she regained her sight.

Her parents died young. First her father died, and when Alexandra was fourteen, her mother died. Alexandra was left with her older sister and younger brother. Her sister took on the responsibility of raising her brother, while Alexandra left high school and pleaded with her relatives to take her to the Znameno-Sukhotinsk Convent, which was home to a renowned iconography school. She lived at this convent for twenty-one years, was tonsured as a rasophore under the name Agnia, and mastered the art of iconography.

Agnia's mother was a spiritual daughter of Elder Varsonofy, and every year, when she was granted leave, she would travel to see him at Optina Pustyn. She painted a portrait of Father Varsonofy, which was later requested by the Tretyakov Gallery. Shortly before his death, Father Varsonofy gave her this portrait, which he himself cherished greatly. It always hung in Mother Agnia's cell in Karaganda. She used to say, "I didn't paint this portrait; Father Varsonofy painted it through my hand."

Mother knew Father Sebastian well from Optina Pustyn and also saw him every year until the monastery closed. She said that in his youth, Father Sebastian was very handsome, with a particularly radiant face; he was friendly and kind to visitors and did his best to help everyone. Elder Varsonofy called him "blessed." Elder Joseph loved him dearly and said, "He has a tender soul."

Once, the following incident occurred. Mother Agnia came to visit the elders and was standing in the reception area of the small hut. The novice Stephen approached her and lightly touched her hand with his own. Mother Agnia was then inwardly indignant at what she perceived as the novice's impertinence. But life revealed that the future elder had already recognized in her his spiritual child and foresaw that her hand would labor greatly to adorn the churches with holy icons.

In November 1919, the Znameno-Sukhotinsky Monastery was dispersed by the Bolsheviks, and Mother Agnia settled in the town of Novokhopersk in the Voronezh Region. During this period, Mother Agnia wrote in her diary:

"Lord, help me endure all that is happening; grant me strength and patience. Now I need wisdom to resolve serious matters on my own, while remaining alone in a foreign land.

February 18, 1929."

Mother Agnia had to endure much sorrow, hardship, and humiliation. But she never uttered a word about it.

In 1952, Father Sebastian summoned her to Karaganda to paint icons for the house of prayer. And on January 4, 1952, the express train No. 32 brought Mother Agnia to Karaganda. It was difficult for her to settle in Karaganda; at first, she intended to return to Novokhopersk, but through the priest's prayers, she stayed. At first, she lived in the church caretaker's cottage, where she painted icons. The first icon she painted was an icon of the Savior with the Gospel for the iconostasis, executed in the same size as the Athos icon "The Quick to Hear." While Mother Agnia was painting this icon, Father Sebastian would often come over and stand beside her. And when the icon was nearing completion, at one point Father Sebastian said, "That's it, enough—not another stroke." She also painted other icons: the Holy Trinity, the Ascension of the Lord, the Flight into Egypt, the Resurrection of Christ, and many others, which adorn the entire church. Her icons also adorn the Church of the Archangel Michael in Karaganda, as well as churches in Shchuchinsk, the village of Borovsk, Osakarovka, and other cities and towns. In Almaty, she painted many icons for Bishop Joseph, including an icon of St. John of Tobolsk. In 1956, with the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Alexy, Mother Agnia was tonsured a nun.

Mother Agnia was not only a talented artist but also a wise elder. She possessed the gift of clairvoyance, which she concealed from others; when people turned to her with questions, she would sometimes say, "Well, what? I'm an old woman; I know nothing. I sit by the stove and never go anywhere." But she herself knew and saw everything.

Raisa Nikolaevna Anisimova, Chelyabinsk

In September 1966, we traveled from Chelyabinsk to Verkhoturys to celebrate the memorial day of St. Simeon of Verkhoturys. Father Alexy, the priest of the Verkhoturys church, asked us, “Have you been to Karaganda? Father Sebastian is there, and it is only through his prayers that I am still alive. Be sure to go see him.”

We took a long time to get ready, putting off the trip, and it wasn’t until August 1967, just before the Dormition, that the five of us arrived in Karaganda, where we learned that Father had died more than a year earlier. At St. Michael’s Church, Mother Anastasia met us and instructed her novice, Anna Sidorovna, to take us to Mother Agnia. We arrived at her house, and Mother came out into the yard, leaning on a small table that she used to walk with. She looked at us with such a piercing gaze that I thought, “Now she’ll see all my sins!”—and stepped back behind everyone else. Mother said, “Come tomorrow. Receive Communion and come back.”

The next day, after receiving Communion, we went to see Mother. We learned from her novice, Maria, that Mother had spent the whole night preparing lunch for us. Mother seated us at the table and began to serve us. Cabbage soup, porridge, watermelons, cantaloupes, grapes, and tea—there was nothing she hadn’t set aside and prepared for us. She kept feeding us, and we kept eating—we’d already had our fill, but we just kept eating. Meanwhile, she stood in the doorway of her cell, watching each of us. Then she took out some magazines and books, opened them to the right pages, and gave each of us something to read. And when we’d finished reading, she began giving us gifts: a scarf for one, a piece of fabric for a dress for another. We refused: “No, thank you, we have everything we need”—why, we thought, should we take advantage of Mother? But Maria, her novice, said, “Take them; since Mother has blessed them.”

We received her blessing to write her letters, and I wrote: “Mother, how I remember your lunch—it was so delicious!” She replied: “Come again for lunch.” And every year during our vacation, we would visit Mother in Karaganda.

What drew me to Mother was her kindness and tenderness. I was young, just beginning to be introduced to the spiritual life, and sometimes I encountered cruel and rude people among the faithful. But Mother immediately won us over with her kindness. Over time, I came to understand that this kindness was the fruit of her exalted life in the Spirit.

Mother spiritually nurtured me; she taught me: “Without the cross, without the sign of the cross, nothing can be done; everything must be blessed in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit... The whole earth is entangled in the demons’ nets; you must pray constantly,”—and she spoke in that vein. But at that time, prayer and the cross meant little to me, and I just couldn’t make sense of what kind of demons were all around us?

We left Karaganda for Chelyabinsk on the evening train. That day we received Communion; people saw us off and helped us board the train. Our tickets were for the second-tier berths. We took our bedding and settled into our berths.

I was asleep, but I heard the announcement for Tselinograd. A lot of people got on; young people came in with guitars and sat down in the side seats of our compartment. And I look—so many little beasts come in with them, so tiny, clinging to the berths with their claws, their tails curled, their heads turning, looking for a place to jump. And down on the floor there are so many of them, there’s nowhere to step! I see all this in my dream; I want to open my eyes but can’t. I curled up in fear: “God forbid,” I think, “that they jump toward us!” One little demon breaks away from the shelf, comes toward me, and crawls toward my feet. I pull my legs up and bless it: “In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”—my mother had said that you have to ward them off with the sign of the cross. And because of that fear—that demons were crawling toward me—I woke up, opened my eyes, and could still see those demons. Then, as if a veil had been lifted from me, the demons disappeared, but I saw that a lot of people had gotten on the train—really, a great many—and young people with guitars were sitting in the side seats.

I lay there until morning, afraid to straighten my legs. In the morning, my companions got up and were getting ready for breakfast, but I was afraid to step onto the floor—after all, there were so many demons there! The girls asked what was wrong with me. And I just started bawling, saying that after Communion I’d seen demons. But there was a devout woman with us, and she reassured me that this vision had come about because of my doubt—that through my mother’s prayers, the Lord had revealed to me how the earth is entangled in nets and how many fallen spirits surround us.

Mother instilled in me faith, humility, and patience. But she didn't always speak directly. More often than not, it went like this. If you asked her something, she'd say, "I don't know." And then she'd reveal everything through her novices, who were also spiritual and understood Mother. She'd say to me, "Raisa Nikolaevna (Mother called everyone—including the young people—by their first name and patronymic), go, lie down, rest, rest." I'd go into the room, lie down, and they'd start a conversation. And through that conversation, I'd receive answers to all my thoughts and doubts. Or she'd bless me to go to Father Sevastian's grave. I'd go and pray there. And whatever I prayed for at the grave, Mother would gradually give me the answer, as if by chance.

Back then, I knew nothing about obedience or a spiritual father's blessing.

One day, Mother said to Maria, "I'd like to buy some milk." And I thought, "Oh, Mother wants milk! I'll go buy some for her; I'll do a good deed for Mother." I didn't think to ask for a blessing for this; instead, I decided to do the good deed in secret. I went to the store—no milk. I went to the main store—none there either. I walked all over half the city, but I couldn't find any milk and came back empty-handed. Maria, a novice, asked, "Where have you been?"—"I was looking for milk for Mother."—"How dare you," she said, "go out without a blessing? You have to ask for a blessing." I went up to Mother: "Please bless me to go to the store for milk." She said, "God be with you," and gave me some money. I went to the store, and they had just delivered dairy products. And I bought exactly the amount that Mother had given me, down to the last kopeck. She knew exactly how much money I would need.

Here's another incident that happened to me. On September 21, the feast day of the Icon of the Mother of God "The Sign," I was told that this was the patronal feast at the Znameno-Sukhotinsky Monastery, where my mother had spent many years and taken her monastic vows. To mark the occasion, I bought a bouquet of flowers, brought it to Mother, and congratulated her. Mother said to the novice, "Maria, take these and arrange the flowers." Maria took them and placed them in the holy corner by the large icon of "The Quick to Hear." I left Mother's room and thought, "See, none of the people from Karaganda congratulated Mother, but I did!" Then I heard Mother shout, "Manya! Take those flowers away! Take them and put them on the stove!"—and she said it so sternly. And I went out into the hallway and burst into tears! I reproached myself so much for my pride and vanity! And when I had cried myself out and calmed down, I heard Mother say gently, "Maria, bring the flowers here." That's how Mother rebuked and humbled me.

I visited Mother for ten years. The last time I came to see her was in the fall of 1975. She was ninety-two years old. She was very ill, suffering from dropsy. From time to time, they would puncture her abdomen and drain the fluid. A great many people came to visit Mother; many traveled from other cities, especially from Chelyabinsk, and stayed with her for months. In the evening, when the last visitor left, Mother would call to the novice: "Maria, lift my legs up for me; I'm going to bed." But she could no longer lift them onto the bed herself.

Once there were a lot of visitors, and Mother put us to bed on the floor of her cell. During the night, I woke up to a loud pounding, and I was terrified. I glanced at Mother's bed and saw her sitting there, holding a staff and banging it against the floor. In the morning I asked, "Mother, didn't you sleep? I heard some knocking." She said, "Well, so many people come—they all tell their stories, but they leave the demons behind, and I have to fight and fight against them."

One morning, Mother called Maria and told her, "Go outside; there's a woman standing in the courtyard. Tell her that I don't practice divination, but pray for people." That woman later became a believer and now deeply regrets not having visited Mother while she was still alive.

Mother never kept any animals in the house, but in the last years of her life, she began to have cats. She fed them from her own cup, caressed them, and the cats were docile toward her and exceptionally intelligent. When she got them, many began to think that Mother had lost her mind due to old age. But that was not the case. Mother Agnia is a wise old woman; through the cats, she often exposed human sins. Once, two seminarians from Sergiev Posad came to Karaganda for vacation. Before their arrival, Mother told Maria, "Bring the cats into the cell." Maria brought two cats, and they lay down on the table. Mother said, "Cover them with a new towel." Maria covered them, and they continued to lie there. The seminarians arrived, crossed themselves, and entered Mother's cell. One of them approached the table and said, "What a disgrace—cats on the table!" And he wanted to shoo them away. But the second one stopped him: "Don't touch them—they're exposing our sins and testing our humility." And while the seminarians were with Mother, the cats lay meekly on the table, but when they left, the cats got up and walked out of the cell.

Events were taking place in Mother's house that, at first glance, might seem random, but they have a specific meaning. A young man named Georgy arrived from Chelyabinsk to visit Mother. It was winter. He walked into her cell, took off his rabbit-fur hat, and placed it on the bed. Suddenly, Mother's cat walked over to the hat, began rolling it around on the bed, and then knocked it onto the floor. The cell attendant picked up the hat and scolded the cat. From the Mother's cell, Georgy went to church, hung his coat and hat on a coat rack in the narthex, and when he was leaving the service and wanted to get dressed, he found only his coat on the rack—the hat had been stolen."

A twenty-year-old girl named Tatiana came to visit Mother from Dolinka. The people of Karaganda tell this story—about how Mother sent Tanya to the Kingdom of Heaven—in different ways. Some say that Tanya had a fiancé who was a sailor, whom she was seeing and planning to marry, while others claim that Mother, in order to distract Tatyana's thoughts from the young men she knew, described to her a fiancé who was far away at the time—a captain serving on a ship who would take her, his bride, on a voyage as the abbess of his ship. And she gave her a rosary. Her mother described the beauty of this fiancé, whose image, as described by her, corresponded to that of our Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

In any case, over the course of a year, Mother set the date for the "wedding"—August 2. Father bought Tatiana a beautiful veil, but Mother did not give her blessing for her to buy shoes or a wedding dress, saying, "It's not time yet." And at the end of July, Mother told Tanya to go immediately and buy a wax wreath to go with the veil—"The time is drawing near; there's no more time to delay"—and gave her three candles "for the wedding ceremony." Tatyana was puzzled: "Why did Mother give me three candles for the wedding ceremony? What is she preparing me for? I don't think she's preparing me for marriage—but for what, I don't know."

On August 2, when an accident occurred on the road, Maria, a novice, was getting ready to go to church. "Manya! Manya!" Mother Superior shouted to her, "Tanya's soul is ascending! Hurry to the church and tell them to pray for the repose of the newly departed, murdered Tatyana!"

Here's what happened. Tatiana was riding on a bus that overtook a dump truck pulling a trailer loaded with coal. As the bus passed, the trailer broke loose from the truck and struck the bus. All the passengers survived; only Tatiana died.

She was buried in a white veil with a wreath of wax, and Tatiana's wedding candles burned on three sides of the coffin.

Hegumen Nikolai (Karpov), Shchuchinsk

I met Mother Agnia in 1973. At the time, I was a completely secular person, not involved with the church, and I went to see her to vent (it had to do with my personal life). And so it happened that, through my conversations with Mother Agnia, everything in my life changed, and my soul found peace. She was an elderly woman nearing ninety, but with such pure, clear, blue eyes. One might think, what could a grandmother—who had never attended school and had lived in a convent since she was fourteen—possibly know, and what could she possibly say about life after the convent? And yet, to all my questions, she gave such answers that even an educated person could not have responded the way she did.

I came to visit (this was before I joined the army); she talked with me, gave me some tea, and sent me off to church: "Go to church, pray." How do you pray? Well, my mom used to take us to church when we were kids and had us receive Communion, but I'd never prayed in church since then. I went to church, and there weren't many people there; the old ladies were glancing at me. It felt like everyone was staring at me—how was I supposed to pray? So I stood behind a pillar and prayed as best I could. After praying, I went to see the mother superior. She gave me some tea, treated me to some refreshments, and told me about her past—how she used to live, how she entered the convent—and said, "I had an acquaintance who was a nobleman, a very noble man, but whenever he came to church, he felt like everyone was staring at him. He'd stand behind a pillar and just stand there." At first I didn't understand, so I asked, "What was this man's last name?"—I thought she might be referring to some historical figure. But she didn't answer me and just kept talking. Only later did I realize—she was talking about me.

Mother wanted me to go to Almaty and meet Bishop Joseph. "We have," she said, "a wonderful bishop." Mother felt warmly toward him, and he held her in high esteem; whenever he came to Karaganda, he always visited her. But I had come to feel a deep trust and affection for my mother, and I told her, "It's enough

for me that I know you; I don't really need anyone else." And before I joined the army, I never managed to meet the Bishop.

I served in the army for only a year, and as soon as I was discharged, I decided to go to Zagorsk to apply to the seminary. Right away, even before I'd received my passport, I went to Karaganda to ask my mother for her blessing to study. At that time, a friend of Bishop Joseph's, Eustolia Ivanovna Leshcheva, who had come from Almaty, was staying with her. And my mother seized on her: "She's going to Alma-Ata—you go with her to see His Eminence. Go, go!" I had no choice—since my mother was sending me there—so I went.

His Eminence received me very warmly. I saw before me an elderly man in a simple cassock and a sweater. I couldn't compare this metropolitan to other metropolitans—I had never seen any before. I met His Eminence's attentive gaze; he immediately wanted to understand what kind of person had come to see him. I had already heard a great deal about him, so I, too, looked intently at this elderly man, whom my mother held in such reverence. He was a little agitated (I later learned the reason—his cell attendant was about to leave His Eminence). His Eminence asked me all sorts of questions and invited me to stay for a while. As I was leaving, he asked, "Perhaps you'll come visit me again?" "As the Lord wills," I replied, "perhaps I'll come again someday."

I returned home to Chelyabinsk, picked up my passport, and went back to Karaganda, intending to travel directly to Moscow from there. I had just arrived there (it was ten o'clock in the morning) when Valya Veretennikova walked in and looked at me so strangely. She had been at my mother's place shortly before I arrived, then went to a call center to call the Bishop about some business, and he asked, "Where is that guy who's at my mother's place? —He put it rather strangely—'Where is he? Tell him to come see me; I really need him.' And Valya said, 'He's not here; he left for the Urals a long time ago. I just came from Mother's; he's not there.' —'Yes, he's there, right there. And tell Mother—let her send him to me.' And then she walks in, her eyes wide—I'm sitting at Mother's house drinking tea. And she tells Mother that Vladyka is asking me to come. "Well, Divine Providence is changing things," says Mother, "and you'll have to go to Almaty." I had set my sights on Zagorsk, and now Alma-Ata—first one thing, then another. "Well, as you bless it, Mother, so be it," I said, and two days later I was already in Alma-Ata with His Eminence.

His Grace was very upset; his cell attendant had left him. We hadn't seen each other for a short while, but he already looked like a frail old man. He was clearly very distressed.

His Eminence said, "Stay with me." And I lived with him for eight months until the day of his passing.

These people—Bishop Joseph and Mother Agnia—have this quality: they simply take a person's soul into their own hands, and that's it—the person, whether willingly or not, changes and is transformed. They have the ability to exert a grace-filled influence on another person's soul. When a person is burdened by emotional distress, when they are agitated and searching for something in life, and then they come across these people, they immediately find peace and feel that they have found what they were looking for. Both Mother Agnia and Bishop Joseph possessed this quality, and it manifested itself very clearly. That's how it was with me, too. I didn't know how to live or where to turn, and then I saw Mother Agnia; I saw her good deeds and wanted to follow her example, to emulate her in some way, even though at that time I was far from the church. And Bishop Joseph—it was the same with him; he took me under his wing.

He was a very striking personality. He left a lasting impression on many people—and not just on me. When he died, someone called and asked, "Is it true that Ivan Mikhalych has died?" (His secular name was Ivan Mikhailovich.) "It's true," I said. "Yeahhh," came the reply, with such regret in the voice on the other end, "he was a decent man!" They didn't say he was highly cultured or anything like that, and the expression didn't strike me as particularly literary; the caller was apparently not a churchgoer—perhaps their paths had simply crossed at some point in life—but with such regret: "He was a decent man."

Bishop Joseph and Mother Agnia—they were two people who respected each other deeply. I can't even say who respected whom more—Bishop Joseph respecting Mother Agnia, or Mother Agnia respecting Bishop Joseph. Once, I was planning to leave Bishop Joseph's place for a few days to visit Mother Agnia in Karaganda. At that time, he was talking to me about monastic life: "I," he said, "will tonsure you and give you a certificate, but it will only become valid after my death." I refused, believing that monastic life wasn't for me, that it was beyond my strength. But he probably thought that I simply didn't want to receive the tonsure from him, and said: "Well, all right, if you don't want it from me, let Mother Agnia tonsure you. Go—she'll

do it, and I'll certify it with my own hand." I refused that as well. Although I still don't know whether nuns have the right to tonsure men as monks, that is the blessing I received.

Mother Agnia predicted to His Eminence that he would be offered the patriarchate. She spoke of this in allegorical terms, but His Eminence immediately told her: "Mother, be silent, or I will excommunicate you from the Church." And His Eminence was, in fact, later nominated as a candidate for the patriarchal throne, but he refused.

Mother Agnia foresaw many things in both my life and her own. My mother used to visit Mother Agnia even before I met her, and Mother Agnia gave me an icon of the Savior, foreseeing that my unbelief would pass and that I would even be ordained a priest.

Mother's insight sometimes manifested itself as if by chance. I remember once a very poor, very sick woman came. Mother said, "Nikolai Mikhalych (I was still young, 22 years old, but she called me by my first name and patronymic), Nikolai Mikhalych, there are some eggs over there—give her the eggs." "How many, Mother?" "Well, count how many there are—count them." I counted—fifteen. "There you go, give them to her." "But what about us?" I asked. "They'll bring some for us—don't worry." About two hours later, another woman came in and brought the eggs: "Mother, here are the eggs." "Nikolai Mikhalych," said Mother, "take them, count how many there are, count them." I counted—fifteen. That's just how it was. It seems like a passing thing, but when you start to realize... Or another time: I was getting ready to go home to Chelyabinsk and said, "Mother, I need to go make a call to let my family know." "Well," she said, "go ahead and call from the train station. Go to the service, don't worry, you can call from the station." I said my prayers, walked back from the service, and thought, "Well, when am I supposed to call from the station? I don't even have a ticket yet. I'll go call right now." I went to a payphone—it was closed. I got on a bus, went to another payphone, tried calling over and over—no signal. I remembered my mother's words, and thought, "Well, this isn't going to work; I'll go see my mother." I arrived, so frozen that I didn't say a word to her; I drank some tea and started getting ready to leave. I arrived at the station late, just fifteen minutes before the train was due to depart. I was walking through the station when I saw the call center—the door was open, but no one was there. I ran inside, dialed the number, said two or three words, got on the train, and headed home. It took me literally two or three minutes to make that call.

Mother Agnia and Bishop Joseph are two people who changed my life. Not only mine—they changed the lives of so many through their grace, humility, patience, and prayers. As St. Seraphim said: "Acquire a peaceful spirit, and thousands around you will be saved." And these are the people around whom, indeed, thousands were saved.

Mother Agnia died on March 17, 1976, having been tonsured a schema-nun. When she fell ill with a terminal illness, she did not eat for forty days and, foreseeing her imminent death, predicted that there would be two coffins.

On March 17, after receiving the Holy Mysteries, Mother Agnia peacefully surrendered her soul to the Lord. The sisters came to wash and clothe her. Accompanying them was the last of the four nuns who had come to Father Sebastian in Karaganda during his years of imprisonment: Mother Fevronia (known in monastic life as Thekla). While Mother Agnia was being dressed for burial, Mother Fevronia also passed away suddenly. Mother Agnia took her with her from this vale of tears to the heavenly palace of eternal joy—so the sisters interpreted it. They were buried side by side at the Mikhailovsky Cemetery.

Schemanun Anastasia

(Recorded by Sister Julia from the words of Sister Anastasia.)

Anastasia Ivanovna Shevelenko was born in 1888 in the Vitebsk region into the family of a shoemaker. Her childhood was very difficult. Her father drank, swore, and met his end when he was killed in a fistfight. Anastasia herself recalled that not only did she not cry over her father, but she even tried to persuade her mother not to cry: "Now Dad won't swear anymore." Her mother was left with eight children, all of them young. She had very fond memories of her mother. Her mother was always calm and very religious. Her mother sent Anastasia to school, but she didn't want to study. "They called on me to read for the first time," Mother recalled, "and I was given a poem I knew by heart: 'The frost crackled in the yard...' I read it from the book very well, and they immediately moved me up to the second grade. But the next time they called on me, I was given an unfamiliar one. I couldn't read it, and they moved me back down to first grade. But I didn't want to study, so I dropped out."

My mother recalled her childhood: “Back then, every family had its own elder: whatever the mother said was law. ‘Mom, what’s that light over there?’ ‘Special people are praying.’ ‘Can I see them?’ ‘No, they’re God’s special chosen ones.’ Suddenly, Petya comes running. ‘Mom, silly little Petya is running.’ ‘He’s not silly.’ ‘But “ ”—that’s what the kids call him, and they throw stones at him.’ ‘They’re the fools,’ says my mother, ‘but little Petya is a holy fool for Christ’s sake.’ And I thought to myself, “Maybe I, too, can be a fool for Christ’s sake?” And, thank God, I lived my life as a fool. (At such times, the Lord takes away part of one’s reason.)”

When Anastasia turned ten, her aunt—her father’s sister—took her in to help with the family business, and at fourteen, her brother got her a job washing dishes at a winery. She worked there for three years. Then Anastasia ran away from home, but they found her and brought her back. From that time on, people began to consider her crazy. Soon she went to fetch water again, left the buckets by the well, and set off to wander forever. The young girl, eighteen years old, began to wander, with nowhere to lay her head.

“Every night,” her mother recalled, “I had to find a place to sleep, and in the morning I had to set out again. It was very hard, especially one time—I remember it was cold, dirty, and raining, and I was frozen to the bone. No matter where I went, I was turned away. The weight on my heart was unbearable. I found a small shed in a field; I put my head inside, but my body remained out in the open. That’s how I spent the night. The next morning, I went to church. No sooner had I stepped onto the church porch than I heard the priest reciting: ‘O most sweet and all-generous Jesus...’ I fell to my knees, and tears streamed from my eyes. “Lord, I had forgotten all about You!” Immediately, a deacon approached and invited me to his home. And then everyone began to call out to me. This is how the Lord tests us and, through our sorrows, teaches us not to put our hope “in princes or in the sons of men,” but to hope only in Him alone.

Then I left for the city of Shuya in the Ivanovo Region to stay with my aunt. She arranged for me to work as a maid for a factory owner. The work was easy, but I stayed there for only two weeks and left because of my employer’s harassment. Later, my aunt arranged for me to work for a landowner who was the spiritual son of Elder Ambrose.

I worked there as a housekeeper for six years. There was a lot of work, but I managed. I really wanted to pray, but I never had the time. And the lady of the house slept until noon. “How can that be,” I thought, “doesn’t she care about her time?” But I would cry and run to church, handing out small amounts of money to the beggars on the church steps so there would be enough for everyone. That’s how I made up for it—I hired people to pray on my behalf. And then such a deep sorrow came over me, such despondency took hold, that it seemed impossible to go on living. “Could it really be,” I thought, “that I’ll have to spend my whole life like this?” But the merciful Lord is very close to those who grieve. A nun named Rufina advised me to go to Optina Pustyn to see the elders. So I went. The enemy tempted me with thoughts of turning back, and I barely made it there. And as soon as I reached the Zhizdra River and set one foot on the ferry, I immediately felt lighter. Father Anatoly blessed me to live in my old place and wrote to the landlord, asking him to welcome me with love. The landlord welcomed me, and I lived with them for another two years. Then I went to the Polotsk Monastery, where I received monastic vows. Once, I had a quarrel there with one of the nuns. And this nun was carrying a teapot of boiling water. I jumped up, snatched the teapot from her, and threw it aside. Everyone was astonished by this act. But a short time later, this nun threw herself at my feet and confessed that she had wanted to scald me.

I lived in the monastery for two years and then set out on a pilgrimage. At Optina Pustyn, Elder Anatoly blessed me to live as a holy fool. He gave me two traveling companions and told me to go to the Tikhonov Hermitage. We had gone only a short distance when I came down with a terrible case of dysentery. I couldn’t walk, so I lay down in the forest, and I saw my father coming—without his hat—and he said, “Don’t stay here; go to the nearest village.” And so we went. No sooner had we reached the first hut than I sat down on the threshold; my eyes closed, and I lost consciousness. And suddenly some invisible force touched me; instead of hands, strong wings appeared and spread out on both sides. My spiritual eyes opened, and I saw that a multitude of demons were passing by me, ready to tear me apart. But I had received Holy Communion, and I made the sign of the cross with my body and crossed my wings, so the demons could not touch me. The last one—the chief among them—pulled out a deck of cards and tried to strike me in the face with them, but he only grazed me. And I remembered that I had played cards and had not repented for it.

We spent the night there. In the morning, my companions set off for the Tikhonov Hermitage, but I couldn’t get up. After a while, I got up, wanted to go, but fell again in the barn, face-first into cow manure.

And apparently, I lay there so long that everything on me had dried up. At that moment, I had a vision: a woman in a black robe—the Mother of God—and beneath the manger, a monk, Hierodeacon Paul (I had seen him before, even when he was no longer in this world). Then they washed me, fed me, and I walked to the village where Brother George Chekryakovsky lived. It had grown dark. “Where,” I wondered, “should I spend the night?” I went to the church, pushed the door—it turned out to be unlocked. I was overjoyed, went inside, and began to make myself comfortable for the night. I took off my outer garments and remained in a white, long-sleeved undershirt. I didn’t even notice how the night passed. In the morning, the caretaker came, saw me dressed all in white, and was frightened—he thought I might be a ghost. He ran away and returned with Father Georgy Chekryakovsky’s brother and his young wife. They grabbed me and took me to the police. On the way, they asked for my passport. And I told them that I didn’t have a passport, but I did have a piece of paper. (When I was leaving the Polotsk Monastery, one of the blessed sisters told me to take a piece of paper from the monastery.) And when they read the paper, the young wife said, “Oh, you poor thing!” (My mother always cried when she heard those words.) They took me to their home and served me borscht with meat. Seeing their kindness, I ate all the borscht. Then they took me to Father George Chekryakovsky, to whom I confided how difficult it was for me to wander. He said, “That’s because you don’t have a roof over your head. If you want, stay with us.” But no way! I felt relieved right away, jumped up, and set off wandering again. I walked and walked until I got lost in the forest. It was cold; snow had already fallen, and since I was lightly dressed, I began to freeze. I wanted to lie down, and I almost did. I saw two men, ran away from them, and ended up on the road. I ran into the first little hut I saw, where a shoemaker warmed me up and fed me.”

She lived in Optina when Father Sebastian was a novice under Elder Nektarios. There she used to walk around in a tattered red skirt. Sometimes the Lord would reveal a particular vice in someone, and then she would denounce them in front of everyone, for which she was often beaten [In particular, the following facts about Mother are known from the stories of the people of Karaganda: once, during the All-Night Vigil, she jumped up toward a monk who was reading the paremia, bared her breast, grabbed him by the arm, and walked with him like that all the way to the ambo. Also, during the procession on the Feast of the Transfiguration, she climbed a tree and began throwing apples at the clergy, thereby foreshadowing the imminent closure of the monastery.]. But Father Sebastian never beat Mother Superior; he would only step on her feet when she sneaked into the elder’s cell.

“Do you remember, Nastya,” Father recalled one day, “how I once gave you a shove at Optina when you hid under the elder’s bed? You flew headfirst down the stairs. And Father Nektarios said to me, ‘Come on, Stefan, give her a shove—she’s disobedient. Look,’ he said, ‘she’s hiding! Deal with her! You’ll end up playing the fool anyway; there’s no other path for you.’ At that, Father fell silent, then said, ‘How sorry I felt for you back then! But—obedience.’ And Mother didn’t want to play the fool; she was sobbing. (She was a beauty: rosy cheeks, long braids.) And Father Nektarios said, ‘If you won’t obey God, do you think it will be any easier in hell?’”

And one day she went into the forest, picked some berries, sat down, ate them, and became very thirsty. Suddenly I saw a spring gushing from the ground—the water was delicious and crystal-clear. I filled my jug with that water and drank my fill. And then I walked through the forest, singing songs at the top of my lungs. That’s when I started singing. I got thirsty again, went back to that spot, but the spring was gone.

Once in Optina, I was running barefoot on the ice. A friend came up to me and urged me to put on my shoes, but I kept running. Then I went to church to bow three times before each icon. And my legs became stiff as wood and stopped bending. An elder noticed this. He came up to me and asked: “Why won’t your legs bend?” I said it was from the bows, but he said, “No, you’ve caught a chill in them, and they’ll hurt.” I was overcome with grief, terrified that I would lose my legs, and in an instant I went from being a beauty to a hideous sight—that’s how grief affects a person.

I was twenty-six years old. One fall, I got lost in the woods near Optina. It started snowing, and I was barefoot. I searched for a way out for a long time and, at night, came to a hermitage and sat down on a cast-iron stove. The monks saw me and invited me into the hut. I didn’t go to the monks; instead, I went to the monastery. I knocked, and they asked, “Who’s there?” I didn’t admit who I was, but went to the sawmill. There, the caretaker’s cottage turned out to be vacant, but unheated. I climbed onto the stove, but had nothing to cover myself with. I stayed that way until morning, when some acquaintances found me and took me into their home. There they warmed my feet, which felt like wood, especially my calves. But it was fine—they didn’t hurt. They only hurt in Karaganda in 1964.

During the severe persecution of Christians, I lived in Kaluga with a nun. I was very sick; they thought I wouldn't survive. One morning, my host went to church, and I saw myself as if I were reciting the rule before an icon of the Mother of God, and the Mother of God in the icon case stirred. Then I looked, and there She was standing by the table in a white apostolic robe, looking at me, while the icon case was empty. I said to Her, "Mother of God, what is happening?" (I was referring to the persecution of Christians.) And She said, "Drink Epiphany water with prosphora." And She went back into the icon case."

From then on, Mother Anastasia always stocked up on a great deal of water for Epiphany. In Karaganda, she would freeze the water in rings and give everyone Epiphany water with prosphora to drink throughout the entire year.

During the years of persecution, Mother Anastasia was in the camps.

After her release, she was taken to Kokchetav to settle there. "I went from house to house. I came to one house, and they said, 'We don't have any bread.' But they fed me potatoes and kvass. I went to another house, where they immediately grabbed me and wanted to take me to the police—some of their laundry had gone missing. But the neighbors stood up for me, and they let me go. I kept walking. At the third house, they grabbed me again—a sack of wheat had gone missing, and they accused me again. It would have been bad for me, but an old man stood up for me, so they let me go. After all, after my time in prison, I really did look like a street urchin. So, it was nighttime outside—where could I go to spend the night? I went to some nuns' place, but I didn't dare knock, so I lay down in their courtyard. It started snowing and covered me with a thick layer, but I was warm."

In Karaganda, she lived in a guardhouse; she loved to feed everyone, but ate very little herself. Whatever anyone gave her, she accepted gladly, as if she needed it. But she immediately gave it all away to others. At first, she slept in the bathroom, where her belongings were stored. Later, in a cold corner, she piled up various mounds so that you couldn't lie down on them for long. She slept in the evening but worked through the night—cleaning under the bunks and brewing kvass. She made very good kvass and gave it to everyone to drink. At times she would fly into a rage and, for some reason, reduce some of the sisters to tears. She dressed with a galosh on one foot and a valenok on the other. It often happened that in the winter she wore galoshes and boots, and in the summer, valenoks. Her dress was always dirty; if she put on a clean one, it wouldn't stay that way for long. On her head was a scarf or a rag, almost always disheveled. If you tried to tidy her up, she'd shoo you away, saying, "Get out of here!" Only before Communion would she put on clean clothes and behave more neatly.

My mother possessed the gift of clairvoyance. Once, a heavy burden fell upon me, and thoughts crowded my mind so much that I couldn't pray. Suddenly, someone behind me struck my shoulder hard: "Did you find me? I've been looking for you all night!"—Mother Anastasia said loudly. And immediately I felt at ease. With a prayerful tap of her hand, she drove away the evil one. She responded to my thoughts time and again. It was hard for me. "And Mother isn't even looking," I thought. Right then, she came over and looked silently straight into my eyes. I said, "Please pray for me; my heart is heavy."—"Father is alone in his room; run to him quickly." When I arrived, Father, smiling, asked, "What's the matter?"—"My heart is heavy," I replied. He ran his hand over my chest and said, "The Evil One, my child, is troubling you. It will pass." And, indeed, it all passed.

1970. Palm Sunday

During the Liturgy, an elderly woman began to feel unwell, but she couldn't get out into the street because of the crowd. Mother was sitting on the left choir loft and asked us to help the elderly woman make her way up to the choir loft. Then she sat her down next to her and rested the woman's head on her shoulder. Less than ten minutes later, the elderly woman stood up and thanked Mother—she was completely well again. But Mother fell ill. She often took the illnesses of others upon herself. It was hard for her, and she even admitted once: "I took pity on a seriously ill person, so now I have to suffer."

In August 1970, plans were made to demolish the church guardhouse, which Father had refused to bless for demolition during his lifetime. The workers were scheduled to arrive the next day and begin demolition. We were all grieved that Father's blessing was being violated. Mother Anastasia fell seriously ill the day before and asked that the room be closed off and no one be allowed in. She lay there all night until three o'clock in the afternoon. At three o'clock, she jumped up, ran out of the room, and said, "Well, everything's fine now; I feel better." Immediately afterward, the village headman entered with an official, and

the official forbade the demolition of the gatehouse and the start of construction. Of course, this was due to Mother Anastasia's prayers.

Coincidence or Miracle

In July, around the feast of the transfer of the relics of St. Sergius of Radonezh, Mother told us: "Tomorrow, get ready to go to the saint's hermitage in the village of Dolinka, where Father served his sentence." We didn't take this blessing very joyfully, since we were engaged in hard work—we were painting the church and were very tired. We began to refuse: "We're tired; we want to rest." But Mother said, "You'll rest right there. And you'll clear your heads better than at home."

On the morning of St. Sergius's feast day, the sky was overcast, and a light drizzle was falling. But when the prayer service began, it started pouring rain. We were all delighted: "Now we won't have to go; we'll get to rest." After the service, we went to Mother, hoping that now she wouldn't bless us to go on the trip. But as soon as we opened the door, she immediately asked, "Well, are you going?" We hesitated, exchanged glances, and said, "As you bless us."—"Go right now, without delaying a single minute. God be with you!" Reluctantly, we got ready and set off. But first, we stopped by Father Sebastian's grave to receive his blessing.

Upon arriving in Dolinka, we went to our destination—the prison ward where Father had spent his final years of imprisonment. We walked a long way to the forest, then through the forest, while the rain just kept falling and falling. We walked and admired the beauty of nature, noting how skillfully and evenly the tree-lined avenues had been planted—by the prisoners, including our Father. Then we sat down under a tree, enjoyed a hearty meal, rested, and continued on our way. We forgot about the rain, which had been falling nonstop. We felt wonderful; warmth and joy filled our hearts. We walked and reminisced about Father. There were puddles and mud under our feet, but walking was easy—it even seemed as if we weren't walking at all, but flying. By five o'clock in the evening, we arrived at the ward where Father was staying. The rain stopped immediately, the sun peeked out, and this place, surrounded by a forest planted by the prisoners, looked wonderful. But when we headed back, the rain started pouring again. And we, having spent the whole day in the rain, were completely dry. We were very happy, joyful, lighthearted, and refreshed. Late in the evening we arrived home, told Mother about it, and she said, "Father himself walked with you and sheltered you from the rain." We all thanked Mother very much for such a restful outing.

One summer, the sisters who lived with Father on Nizhnyaya Street were getting ready to go out to the field to dig potatoes. Mother Anastasia asked to go with them, too. She took a large sack and put galoshes, scarves, sweaters, stockings, and other things into it. She stuffed the sack full. The sisters laughed: "What are you doing, Mother? The bag will be heavy to carry."—"I'll manage—let's go!" They arrived in the field and began working. Suddenly, a cloud rolled in, the wind picked up, rain poured down, and it immediately turned cold. Mother began dressing us and covering us with whatever she could find, handing out the entire bag's contents. We all thanked her.

Taisia Grigorievna Fomina

I was very close to Mother Anastasia; she was even closer and dearer to me than Father. Mother Anastasia—she was true love. She would scold others, but she pitied me my whole life. She walked the path of holy foolishness; it was hard to understand her. Take her own brother (who lived in St. Petersburg)—he thought she was crazy. Her family loved her very much, and when she started acting strangely, everyone wept for her. Mother felt sorry for her relatives; her sister Marina came here three times, back when Father was still with us. And our family traveled to see her brother in St. Petersburg and met him (he looks like her—she was very beautiful in her youth), and he received Holy Communion. But they couldn't understand that she was of sound mind.

She went about her business discreetly, without openly displaying her wisdom, and sometimes in such a way that she was beaten, scolded, or considered harsh. I remember Mother scolding one of our sisters for taking something without asking: "You're this and that, and may your hands wither away!" And I walked up and said, "Mother, I once took something from you without permission, too." She turned and said, "Here's my corner, here's my property—take whatever you want, and don't tell me." Mother needed to humble that sister in some way. But she had nothing of her own. Whatever was brought to her—she needed it all, she'd take it all—but five minutes later she'd have nothing left; she'd given it all away. And those in whom she saw

great need or sorrow, she favored more than the rest. Someone might grumble that she favors one person so much, while another suffers such a tragedy that nothing can bring them joy.

Or—for example, they'd sit down at the table. Mother would give some to one person, push a plate toward another, then to a third, and she herself would sit there as if she were eating. Yet she remained hungry. And she even said to me once: "Tasia, I've never once had my fill of bread."

From a young age, Mother suffered from a serious women's ailment; she was offered surgery, but she refused, even though the illness caused her severe physical suffering. When, while still young, she consulted an elder at Optina Pustyn about this, he said, "These are your chains." And Mother bore these "chains" until the very end. In addition, she had sore legs, very swollen, with bulging veins, and terrible cramps. She endured it all and never took any medicine. This was her labor, her feat throughout her entire life. Perhaps she wore felt boots and galoshes simply because other shoes didn't fit her.

Mother sang in the choir; she had a beautiful voice. And though no one saw how she prayed, everyone knew that she prayed for everyone.

At the church, Mother worked tirelessly, washing and cleaning everything. She made very tasty kvass and oatmeal jelly. Wherever she went with Father, she carried the jelly with her. If Father went to the Melkombinat, she went with him. She could even walk there, and she knew all the houses Father visited. Once he went to the Melkombinat to visit Alexandra Sofronovna—her husband had esophageal cancer, and Father went to give him Holy Communion and conduct a prayer service. And while they were praying in the house, Mother went out to tend the vegetable garden. And when Sofronovna came out and looked at the garden, she felt sick. The priest's wife had pulled up all the cucumbers that were supposed to be blooming by then, stuck them in the ground with the tops down and the roots up. "Mother! What have you done! I'd take a stick and beat you!" And the next day, such a frost set in— —that everything in the garden froze. But Mother had already cleared Sofronovna's garden in advance, so she caused her no loss.

And it used to happen that she'd come, work for someone, do everything she could, and then, so that no one would praise her, she'd put on someone else's felt boots and leave. "Mother, why did you put on someone else's felt boots?"—"Oh, are you worried about the boots?" Wham! She'd toss one boot in one direction, the other in the other, and off she'd go barefoot. Should we thank her or scold her? Everyone was at a loss—it's a very complicated matter.

Here's another story for you. Mother is walking through the church, shoving everyone aside. She approached Mother Tamara, knocked her off her chair: "Come on, get up—I'm going to seat a sick person!" She chased the elderly Mother Tamara away and seated Aunt Lisa, who was much younger than her. The sisters grumbled, "Come on, Mother, are you playing the fool?" And what do you think happened? Aunt Lisa soon fell ill. She felt terrible, so they admitted her to the hospital, and she felt terrible there, too. Then they discovered she had cancer. Mother didn't give her blessing for the surgery; she foresaw that the person would die. And young, healthy Aunt Lisa died six months later. But Mother Tamara lived another fifteen years. That's all there is to it. To us, it seems like eccentricity, but she had her own way of doing things. But Mother—she was such a loving person; she was the kind of person you just don't find anymore.

Antonina Ivanova

Some guests from Moscow came to visit Father. They took a taxi at the train station, and before reaching Mikhailovka, the car got stuck in a pothole. (The roads were bad—bumpy, with mud up to the knees.) The car was spinning its wheels and couldn't get out.

Then they came to Mother and said, "Mother, the guests are on their way; they've fallen into a pothole and can't get out." "Well, let's go pull them out," Mother said. She got dressed and slung a shovel over her shoulder. She walked over to the car, took a look, tapped the back of the truck bed with her shovel, and said to the driver, "Hey, buddy, get in and drive—why are you messing around?" He gave her a very strange look but didn't rush to start the car. She said again, "Start the car!"—this time in a commanding tone. And when Mother speaks in a commanding tone, no one can resist. The driver got chills down his spine. He got in the car, started it, and the car shot out of the ditch. The driver was stunned. He drove the guests to the church and then drove off.

The next day, he came by to thank Mother, brought some gifts, and asked, "How were you able to pull the car out? You would have needed a bulldozer here." She replied, "Look, the Lord helped!"

Anna Shevchuk

I arrived in Karaganda after Father Sevastian had already passed away, and Mothers Anastasia and Agnia had also passed away. I came from Ukraine to enroll in the correspondence program at the institute and stayed in Mikhailovka with Father's spiritual children during the exam period. I began to visit the Mikhailovka Church from time to time, even though I was far from religious at the time.

On my first visit to Karaganda (which was in December), I overheard a conversation in the church that tomorrow was Father's name day, and that a parastas would be held that evening. I didn't know the church rules back then, and I didn't understand what a "parastas" was. And that night, I had a dream. A priest was leading me by the hand across the churchyard; a crowd of people was gathered around us, but I could see him only as if through a fog; I could only hear the people calling out, "Father Sebastian, Father Sebastian!" And Father seemed to wave his hand—as if to say, "Wait, I don't have time right now"—and led me across the courtyard, pointing out everything: "This is our prosphora room; this is the refectory." And where our gate leading to the street is, there seemed to be a lawn with a small stream running through it, and two matushkas were sitting there, pouring out a drink. And people call them by name: Mother Agnia and Mother Anastasia. Father stops, the nuns give me some water from the stream, and I find myself in the church. In the middle of the church stand our priests: Father Peter, Father Alexander, Father Paul, and Father Vladimir, reading prayers and commemorating Father Sebastian. And then I woke up.

In the house where I lived, there was a portrait of a priest hanging on the wall. I woke up and asked, "Whose portrait is this?" "Father Sebastian's," my hosts replied. "And I just saw him in my dream." "Well," they said, "that means you're 'one of us.'"

And a few years later, after graduating from college, I stayed in Karaganda, where I still work as an accountant at St. Michael's Church.

During my first year working at the church, out of habit I was still wearing makeup. Then, during Holy Week, I stopped by a store where they were selling French mascara. I wanted to buy it, but I didn't have any money on me. "Oh well," I thought, "I'll come back another time and buy it." And then I saw it again in a dream: the church, everyone exchanging the sign of the cross and saying, "Mother Anastasia, Mother Anastasia!" And the priest's wife was exchanging the sign of the cross with everyone. "But she doesn't even know me," I thought. And suddenly she comes up to me: "Christ is risen!"—and taps my Easter egg with hers, breaking it. And she's so joyful, hugging me. Just then, Father Alexander Kiselev approaches us; he's holding my makeup bag and says, "Mother, how are you going to get by with these?" I look, and there's that terry-cloth mascara lying there. I felt so ashamed. "Mother," I say, "I didn't buy it—I was just thinking about it!" But she hugs me: "Oh, don't worry about it, don't worry,"—as if to say I shouldn't wear makeup. And she keeps feeding me all sorts of things.

All of this really struck me—after all, I'd just popped into the store on a whim, and she knew everything and was worried.

And Mother Anastasia put me on the choir loft in the church. When I came to pray, I would stand there and sing along quietly. But then I had a dream that the church was full of people, the priests were standing in the middle of the sanctuary as if they'd come out for a solemn procession, and Mother Anastasia was standing on the choir loft in simple, everyday clothes (as she usually wore) and calling me. And I got scared—how could I go up there when the priests were standing right there! Then Mother Anastasia took me by the hand, led me up to the choir loft, placed me in front of the icon of the Savior, and said, "Recite the 'Our Father.'"

And she stood there, waiting for me to begin. And I began to recite it aloud. After that dream, the choir members started pulling me up to the choir loft: "Just sing." And they said to Father Alexander, "Why is that girl just standing there?" They put me on the choir loft, and that's how I ended up staying there.

Maria Fyodorovna Orlova

I was seriously ill—I had a skin disease. Both assistant professors and full professors treated me; there were slight improvements, but then huge sores would reappear on my arms. I hadn't been to church for a long time, and when I came, Mother Anastasia asked, "Why haven't you been here for so long?" "Mother," I said, "I'm so miserable—look at my hands! I can't even go to work; everyone avoids me." She said, "Ugh! What's the big deal! That's nothing! Spit on your finger and rub the saliva over your sores in the shape of a cross." And right there in front of Mother Anastasia, I started doing just that. I came home and kept spitting and rubbing them nonstop. And my sores went away instantly. It happened so fast! They were red and inflamed;

at first they darkened, then turned blue, the sores began to shrink, and, thank God, everything went away. That's the story. But when I went to the hospital, they'd put me on a chair—as if I were some rare specimen—so all the students could see what a rare, profuse case of exudative erythema I had.

Olga Sergeevna Martynova

My niece Irina worked as a warehouse manager. One day, thirty imported bedspreads arrived at their warehouse. Whether Irina and her employees were trying to pull a fast one or something else—God only knows—but when the store employees came to the warehouse to pick up the bedspreads, they simply signed for them. The paperwork was brought to the store, but the bedspreads remained in the warehouse. The delivery slip is there, but the bedspreads are missing. But someone let the cat out of the bag; the store was quickly shut down, sealed off, and an audit commission moved in. My niece didn't sleep all night; early in the morning she came running to me: "This and that," she said, "what should I do?" I couldn't give her any advice: "Let's go," I said, "to Mother Anastasia and see what she says." We went. Mother Anastasia was in the choir loft; we approached her and explained that the documents were in the store, the bedspreads were in the warehouse, and we faced prison if this matter came to light. What should we do? "Nothing!" says Mother Anastasia, turning to Irina: "Go right now, find the truck they use to empty the toilets, take the bedspreads, drive to that store, pull into the courtyard, and wait there. A cleaning lady will come out of the store with two buckets—don't go near her. After a while, another cleaning lady will come out, also with two buckets. Go up to her quickly, give her the bedspreads, and say, 'Throw them wherever—as long as they're inside the building.'"

Irina did just that. She found the right car, drove to the store, and they let her into the courtyard—a car like that wouldn't raise any suspicion; after all, they'd come to clean the restrooms. Irina let the first cleaning lady pass, rushed up to the second one, who took the bedspreads, tossed them inside the store—and that was it. That was the end of the trouble. The recording was there, and the bedspreads were there.

Here's another story. The time came for my son, Stepan Stepanovich, to apply to college. I went to Mother: "Mother," I said, "Stepan is applying to college; we need to help him." She said, "Oh! That's very simple. Find out when he'll be taking his exams, and on those days come to church and bring forty ten-kopeck rolls here. We'll pray here, and he'll get B's." So that's exactly what I did. He took his first exam—I brought forty rolls. They were snapped up in no time, handed out to everyone. My son came back from the exam and brought home a "four." The same thing happened for the next exam. There were four exams in total; I brought forty rolls for each one, and my son got "fours" on all of them. And so, thanks to his mother's prayers, Stepan Stepanovich was admitted to the institute.

Nina the Peasant Girl

One Friday, the staff at the hospital where I worked persuaded me to eat some sausage. The next day, I went to church and attended the Liturgy. After the Liturgy, Mother Anastasia began handing out holy water to everyone and said to me, "Come here." I went over, and she started beating me and shouting to the whole church, "Oh, you pig! Oh, you pig!" I was scared—what did she mean by "pig"? "Mother," I shouted, "give me some holy water!" But she wouldn't give it to me and kept hitting me. People gathered around: "They're beating the little Ukrainian girl!" And Mother shouted, "She's a pig!" The sausage, apparently, was pork.

So she flogged me, I calmed down, and went to Father Sebastian for a blessing. I approached him, and he said, "Nina! It's your name day today!—so they flogged you—well, here's some prosphora for you!" That's how they communicated by spirit.

Monk Sebastian (Khmyriv)

One day, Mother Anastasia came down from the porch where the right choir stands, walked through the church, and called out: "Who wants a scarf? Who wants a black scarf?" She approached the other porch, and there Motya Minaeva said, "Mother, give me a black scarf—I don't have one." But she replied, "No, you don't need one," and kept walking. And by the door, at the exit, our nanny was standing there, trembling: "Oh, she's probably going to give me a black scarf—this must be a sign of some terrible misfortune." Mother Anastasia approaches her and asks, "Do you need a scarf?" "No," says our nanny, "I have three black scarves; I don't need one."

"Well, since you have three, here, take this one too." And she gave her the black scarf. She foresaw that our nanny would take the veil.

Sister Evnikia (Khmurova)

Mother Anastasia recounted: “When I was blessed to become a holy fool, my first task was to take a bag and go begging. But I didn’t want to. ‘Send me,’ I said, ‘to do any kind of work, just not to beg!’ ‘No, no, not to work—go beg.’” I took my little bag and went. It happened to be some kind of holiday; the young men had gathered, and there I was, walking with my bag, dressed in rags. I heard the young men saying, “What a beautiful girl!” I thought, “What should I do? They’re talking about me, after all.” And they said, “If only we could dress her up—just imagine who she’d be!” So I climbed into some little shed, took a handkerchief, blew my nose, and wiped it on myself. And they said, “Oh,” they said, “she’s ugly! She’s ugly!” And then I felt better, and I went on my way. “Ah!” I thought, “I’m already a fool! So now I have to act like a silly girl.” And that’s how I spent my whole life.”

At Optina Pustyn, Father Sebastian heated the elder’s cell and went to meet him at church. But the elder had foreseen what Nastya was up to in the cell, so he didn’t leave the church. She opened the door, sat down on the threshold, propped the door open, and just sat there. And what weather it was! And the snow was flying in! Father Sebastian came to add some firewood, but the cell was full of snow, and Nastya was sitting by the door, half-dressed—wearing only a dress and a shawl. She sat there, propping the door open, refusing to let him close it. And Father Sebastian pleaded, “Come on, Nastya, let me close the door!” But she remained silent. Then Father Sebastian gently picked her up, carried her to another spot, closed the door, and began stoking the stove. After all, she’d been chased and beaten there, but Father Sebastian never hit her. Even then, he could see her future. And when he’d heated the cell, an elder from the church came by.

And later, in Karaganda, Mother would sometimes rebuke her. We had one family living at the Melkombinat; they had a cow, and they sold everything from that cow at the market—both sour cream and milk. They were a little greedy. Once they prepared some sour cream to sell, but then they went off somewhere themselves. Mother Anastasia came, used that sour cream to make dough, and baked a whole mountain of doughnuts—here, eat! She used up all the sour cream. The owners grumbled at her, of course. And another time she came while they were at the market, picked some cucumbers from their garden, and piled them up. When they came back, they were so upset (disappointed. – Ed.): “What on earth is this! How long we walked, how much we tended them!” That was in the evening. And at night, out of the blue—a frost, which completely destroyed everything in the gardens. They grumbled, but Mother made it clear that I know what the Lord will provide and what will happen tomorrow and the day after.”

And sometimes Father himself would rebuke people’s sins through her. Once, when there was no church yet and Father was praying at the Melkombinat, after supper he began assigning everyone their places to sleep. He told Mother Anastasia, “And you, go spend the night at Stepanida’s.” She went to Stepanida’s. She knocked on the door: “Let me stay the night!” “We don’t have room,” they replied, and wouldn’t let her in. It was winter. But since she had been blessed to spend the night at Stepanida’s, she would rather freeze than leave. So she lay down on the doorstep. But, of course, she could not freeze to death thanks to the priest’s prayers. In the morning, the owners got up, opened the door, but it wouldn’t open—Mother Anastasia was lying on the threshold. It had snowed during the night; she was buried in snow. She jumped up, brushing herself off: “Oh, I’m sorry, I disturbed you.” But the priest had sent her on purpose to pierce the cruel hearts of these people. Then they rushed to Mother Anastasia: “Mother Anastasia! How could you do this! How could this be!” After all, she was sick and practically undressed, and it was a cold winter night. Their hearts, of course, were pricked with remorse: “We treated her that way, even though we had a place to spend the night.” And afterward, they went to Father to repent; they finally realized what the matter was.

Another time, when the priest had just finished serving a memorial service in the church, Mother Anastasia jumped up and grabbed something from the memorial table. And Father began to beat her with his staff: “You,” he said, “did you put back what you took?”—“No, Father, I didn’t.” “Then why did you take it? A memorial service is a sacred act. To take something from a memorial service—you must pray. Can you pray?” Mother Anastasia, of course, could have. And she didn’t need that pastry anyway. It was Father and Mother Anastasia who exposed those who reached in and grabbed things from the memorial service. For them, it was a lesson—they remembered that the memorial service is sacred, and they long remembered how Father beat Mother Anastasia with a stick.

When we buried our mother, after the funeral, both I and a servant of God named Nadezhda—who had helped at the funeral—developed blue spots on our right legs that looked like Siberian sores—they itched

unbearably, we felt nauseous, and our heads ached. We suffered until the ninth day; our legs swelled up, and both she and I felt terrible. On the ninth day, Mother Anastasia arrived for the memorial service. “Mother,” I said, “we’ve got something strange on our legs since the funeral.” She said, “Here are some boots. Here, put on my boots.” One of them was a huge cloth boot, and the other was a leather one from her left foot, which was a bit smaller. She handed me the cloth one: “Here, put these on, and we’ll go to Vespers right away.” But how could I walk in them? You could fit three or four feet in them—they were that huge. Nadia’s was smaller, the one for the left foot. We put my mother on my father’s boots with buckles, and she said to Mother Irina [Schiigumenia Irina (Koroleva), 1916 – † October 17, 1993. Buried at Mikhailovsky Cemetery]: “Give them some sticks to hold.” So she brought some gnarled sticks from the yard. My stick was a little better, though, while Nadia’s was really all knotty. And so we walked to church with our sticks, wearing those boots. I was wearing a black velvet dress and a new white batiste scarf. And Mother Irina had wrapped herself in this dirty, torn half-shawl. I said, “Why on earth are you wrapped up in some rags like that? I tied her leg with it. Don’t you have anything else to cover yourself with?” “Nooo,” said Mother, “it’s fine, it’s fine.” Well, if it’s fine for her, then what’s it to me? We arrived at the church. Motya the nurse saw us: “Wow!” she shouted, “They’re acting like holy fools! They’re acting like holy fools!” She didn’t know that Mother Anastasia was healing us, that our legs were hurting terribly. Then I started lighting the candles, and I set my batiste scarf on fire. Mother Irina ran over: “Oh, oh, oh!” she said, taking the scarf off me. “Here, take mine,” she said, covering me with her own tattered half-shawl. And I had to go for the anointing, but the church was packed with people. Of course, I was a little embarrassed; everyone was saying, “Why aren’t you dressed properly?” But what could I do? My leg was hurting. Oh well. We went home, and Mother Anastasia said, “Don’t go out tomorrow; stay home and don’t eat anything all day (it was the Feast of the Beheading of John the Baptist). And as for your legs—they’ll be just fine! And your head won’t hurt either.” Nadia and I came back from church, looked at our legs—and nothing was wrong! Everything had healed, and the pain had subsided.

Maria Nikitichna Obraztsova

Mother Anastasia was quite the mischievous one. So Father would be getting ready to go somewhere, fill up the car with girls, seat the mothers, but leave Mother Anastasia behind. She’d go, “Ooh!”—bang on the car and shout, “Give me something to throw on!” Meaning, something to wear. And it didn’t matter to her whether it was winter or summer—she’d run ahead of Father, almost half-naked. He’d arrive, and she’d already be there. She never once fell behind. But she served him faithfully. And Father loved her.

Lydia Vladimirovna Zhukova

When Mother Iulia was dying, she told me: “Lida, Mother Anastasia, when she was also in poor health, used to say, ‘When they take Father to Optina Pustyn, don’t forget me.’ That’s how Mother Anastasia scolded Iulia, and Iulia, in turn, scolded me.”

In 1975, Metropolitan Joseph (Chernov) visited the Mikhailovskaya Church once again. His Eminence often spoke of Mother Anastasia: “Mother Anastasia is prophesying, she is prophesying.” And during this meeting with him, Mother Anastasia began to say her goodbyes: “Bless me, Your Eminence, forgive me—we will not see each other again.” But Your Eminence did not want to accept this prophecy. That summer in Alma-Ata, when students from the Moscow Seminary came to visit him, His Eminence, sitting at the table, turned to one of them—Pyotr Veretennikov—and said, “Look, Petya, we’ll go to Tselinograd, and from Tselinograd we’ll stop by Karaganda and confront Mother Anastasia.” But that did not happen. Circumstances unfolded such that His Eminence flew directly from Tselinograd to Alma-Ata, and on September 4, 1975, Metropolitan Joseph died in the hospital during surgery.

Mother Anastasia died on April 13, 1977. Before her death, she was tonsured a schema nun. She was buried at the Mikhailovsky Cemetery.

Archpriest Mikhail Neigum

I know for certain that Mother Anastasia was a holy person. She possessed a holiness that was not immediately apparent. The important thing is that she always hid her spirituality. Her spirituality only became clearly evident, for example, when certain predictions or prophecies came true. But in general, I think she was even intentionally a bit rough around the edges—she walked with a sway, shuffling her feet all the time, and would say all sorts of little remarks to everyone. And if you judged her by her appearance or her behavior,

there would have been absolutely no hint of a life of spiritual elevation. It was only after Father Sebastian's death that she began to behave "more normally"; before that, she was completely unapproachable, and those who knew her only superficially perceived her as crazy. But when Father Sebastian died, and the people who had lived alongside this holy man suddenly began to quarrel among themselves, Mother Anastasia managed to make all of this less obvious. She calmed everyone down and brought peace to the situation. And most of the people around her simply experienced her love and kindness firsthand.

I was born into a Lutheran family. I started attending church a few years after Father Sebastian's death. Then I left to serve in the army, and when I returned, I went through a "turbulent phase"—I wouldn't listen to anyone and, for a time, was completely out of control. Many people close to me sort of distanced themselves from me. But my mother could make me eat potatoes with motor oil, drink raw eggs—which I couldn't stand—or ride the bus wearing a woman's shawl, as if I were some kind of weirdo. And that was fine; I'd go along with it, even though I was already an adult by then—I'd ride across the whole city wearing a woman's shawl. She might say, "Go run on one leg along the path," and I'd go and run on one leg along the path around the church. And why did I run? Because I felt such a deep affection for Mother Anastasia as I did for no one else on earth—that much is certain. It was also because, despite all her simplicity and roughness, Mother Anastasia was a very sensitive person—it's even hard to imagine such a thing.

I loved Mother very much. Although, perhaps I didn't love Mother Anastasia herself, but rather I liked her kind attitude toward me. I didn't really see her, as it were. I only saw her big felt boots in galoshes; I saw that everyone held her in high esteem, that she had drawn me close to her, and I took pride in the fact that she treated me well. I spent a great deal of time in her company. Wherever she went, I followed her. They would go to Mother Evdokia's, where they would eat, read the lives of the saints, and I was there with them the whole time. I simply tried, without even realizing it, to be near holy people. Mother didn't speak much; she didn't tell me anything. And everything was so quiet and peaceful there. I didn't want to go anywhere; I didn't want to go home. I just wanted to be near her—that was all; I didn't need anything else.

Later, I enrolled in a theological seminary. Once, I needed to return from vacation to Sergiev Posad, and I bought a plane ticket to Moscow. But Mother wouldn't let me go. She forcibly stopped me, as if mocking me. She took me into her cell and began talking to me. But I was pretending to be a model student—hopping on one leg, drinking raw eggs. I acted as if I were very obedient. So when Mother was talking to me, I mentioned once that I had a plane ticket and needed to hurry. But she paid no attention to it. But I really wanted to go to Moscow back then; I was dying to get there. And so, when she held me up and I was running late, I naturally felt upset. I was angry; I was grinding my teeth. At that very moment, I even doubted her holiness, her insight. I even insulted her in my thoughts. But she simply took my ticket away and wouldn't let me go.

And when it turned out that the plane had crashed on takeoff and everyone had died... well... that was a whole different story... I didn't even tell her what had happened. And she didn't say a word to me... I flew out the next day on the same flight.

I would sometimes visit Mother Agnia. I felt a little differently toward her; I could see that she was a very sick person. All her fingers were twisted—she had polyarthritis, dropsy, and some other ailments—and she could barely move with the help of a tall little table, yet she never showed that she was in pain. And this woman (as I later recalled) also moved me deeply. Usually, when it came to Mother Agnia and Mother Anastasia, the women liked to whisper that these mothers were—wow! WOW! I didn't pay much attention to that, but still, Mother Agnia touched my soul. Mother Agnia was like a little baby, a delicate little baby, very, very old. She had a voice like a little baby's, and she spoke to me like a little baby.

I can't say anything particularly special about the nuns. The only thing special about them was that they were truly clairvoyant and truly God-pleasing beings. Outwardly, they behaved like humble, quiet grandmothers. True, Mother Anastasia would sometimes get angry—that is, she could speak very harshly. But that didn't affect me. With me, she was always like a loving grandmother. And once I sensed that Mother Agnia was also speaking a little harshly to someone. But that didn't concern me either. She treated me with love... so as not to scare me away. A boy had come from a different religion, and she didn't want to scare him away.

Now, as I look back on my whole life, it becomes clear that there was nothing in my life but sin, and that I am deeply indebted to the nuns. And I know with absolute certainty that it is only through their prayers that I am still alive in this world. I give great thanks to God that there was a time in my life when I was close

to such people. I believe I am with them now and always. Not a single day has passed without my communicating with them, and every day I ask them for help.