

Introduction to Blessed Paisius Velichkovsky: The Man Behind the Philokalia

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by Fr. Seraphim Rose of Platina

DECEMBER 21, 1972, marked the 250th anniversary of the birth of Schema-Archimandrite Paisius Velichkovsky. This remarkable anniversary went almost totally unnoticed in the Orthodox world, which is so occupied with its worldly problems and its very struggle for survival. And yet, for Orthodox Christians of the 20th century there is no more important Holy Father of recent times than Blessed Paisius Velichkovsky. This is so not merely because of his holy life; not merely because, like another Saint Gregory Palamas, he defended the hesychast practice of the mental Prayer of Jesus; not only because he, through his many disciples, inspired the great monastic revival of the 19th century which flowered most notably in the holy Elders of Optina Monastery; but most of all because he redirected the attention of Orthodox Christians to the sources of Holy Orthodoxy, which are the only foundation of true Orthodox life and thought whether of the past or of the present, whether of monks or of laymen.

It is these very same sources—the Divine Scriptures and the writings of the Holy Fathers—which are the foundation of all genuine Orthodoxy in our own times. The observer of the Orthodox world today can see easily enough what "Orthodoxy" becomes when these sources are not made the foundation of life and thought.

The followers of unenlightened custom are themselves innocent; they merely accept what has been "handed down" to them. But not seeing the *meaning* and not knowing the *sources* of what has been handed down, they are easily led into error, accepting customs which the Church has allowed only out of her condescension or economy as if they were the best of Orthodoxy, and also improper customs of recent heterodox origin and inspiration, together with the pure and meaningful Orthodox customs handed down from the Holy Fathers. Under strict yet prudent pastors, such people can be guided in the true path of Orthodoxy; but in our own time of such widespread irresponsible Church leadership, these people are more often guided gradually into a path of ever greater and more senseless innovation and reform,

the clearest example of which is perhaps the Greek Archdiocese of America, where pews, organs, and Uniat spirituality and theology have become the new "customs" of an unfortunate people whose Orthodoxy has been stolen from it.

Far worse, however, is the state of those who, being unrooted in the true sources of Holy Orthodoxy, occupy the positions of pastors and theologians and in their "learned ignorance" seek to guide their flocks according to some fashionable intellectual current of the day. Such are the leaders of the "charismatic movement," swept off their feet by an experience which, while compatible with Protestantism and Papism, is easily discerned as a satanic deception by those who are rooted in and live in the Holy Fathers. Such also are the "theologians" of the "Paris" and other modernist schools who, being at home in heterodox modes of thought and life, dare to present the Holy Fathers themselves according to the disfigured modern understanding of them, transmitting neither their true message nor (much less) their Orthodox savor, giving rather an academic two-dimensional caricature of them, suitable only for presentation in decadent ecumenical salons and in lifeless academic journals.

Both of these types of "Orthodox" people are precisely those who are cut off *from the sources of Orthodoxy*, and who in turn help to cut others off from these sources. The movement of true Orthodoxy in our own times has seen with increasing clarity the need to separate itself from this pseudo- or semi-Orthodoxy and refind its roots in the true and unadulterated sources of Orthodoxy, the Holy Fathers. And this is precisely what the Blessed Paisius saw and did, making him a key figure for us today.

Having come to love the Holy Fathers and true Orthodox piety in his childhood, Blessed Paisius at the age of 17 saw that even in the best Orthodox school of Russia he was not being given the pure teaching of Holy Orthodoxy from the patristic sources, but rather something second-hand and accompanied by useless pagan learning; and, further, that an over-emphasis on the formal side of the Church's existence, greatly furthered by the Government in its attempt to make the Church a "department" of the State, promoted chiefly the idea that church-minded people, the clergy and even the monks, occupied a definite place in the apparatus of the Church *organization*. This overemphasis of a real but decidedly secondary aspect of church life tended to obscure the primary aspect: the love and zeal for true Orthodoxy and true piety, which are what inspire every genuine Orthodox Christian, whether clergy, monk, or layman. Seeing the difficulty of exercising his love and zeal in the Russia of his time, Paisius left his homeland in search of a place where his tender Orthodox conscience could mature in blessed freedom and in the opportunity to draw instruction and inspiration from the unadulterated sources of Orthodoxy.

Having come to spiritual maturity, Blessed Paisius then himself became a source and seedbed for the great monastic and patristic revival of Holy Russia in the 19th century. True patristic spirituality and its hesychast tradition, to be sure, never died out in Russia, not even in the 18th century, that age of pseudo-enlightenment when the Empress Catherine closed most of the Orthodox monasteries and strictly regulated the rest of them; no, it remained and provided the fertile ground on which the disciples and the example of Blessed Paisius were to

bear such great spiritual fruits. But it required the patristic bees of the great Elder Paisius, bringing back the pollen of the true and free tradition of Orthodoxy under the much more favorable climate of the 19th century, to cause the native Russian trees to give forth such a marvelous abundance of spiritual fruit.

Today the situation of Orthodoxy is rather different, and much worse, than it was in the time of the Elder Paisius. In place of the veneer of paganism and Latinism which never actually touched the heart of Orthodoxy, we have today a prevailing atmosphere of modernist heterodoxy and senseless "keeping up with the times" which has pierced the very heart of some Orthodox Churches so deeply that they will doubtless never recover, and their children are deprived of Orthodoxy without even knowing what they have lost. In place of the heavy hand of governmental bureaucracy, we see the far heavier hand of pseudo-Christian and pagan ways of life which are depriving Orthodox Christians of something which was almost untouched in the time of Blessed Paisius: Orthodox piety, the whole Christian way of life. And, to make this whole difficult situation virtually impossible, we are beset with self-styled reformers and revivers who neither know nor feel nor love what Orthodoxy is and would "restore" the faithful to the latest fashion of Protestant scholarship or piety. The 17-year-old Orthodox youth of today has usually not been raised properly and consciously in Orthodox teaching and piety, or, if he has, the ever-increasing tempo of paganized modern life acts powerfully to negate his upbringing; he has usually not come to love the Holy Fathers and the Divine services from childhood, and to hunger for more; and there is scarcely anywhere he can turn in order to correct the deficiencies of his upbringing and environment: of all the Orthodox seminaries in the free world, it is doubtful that any save the Russian-language seminary at Holy Trinity Monastery (Jordanville, New York) will even attempt to give him an education in genuine Orthodoxy. For such a youth not deeply grounded in Orthodoxy, the human side of the Church all too often becomes the center of attention, and the all too prevalent petty quarrels and injustices among church people are often sufficient to turn his attention away from the Church altogether, or if some religious interest remains to turn him toward one of the flourishing religious or social-cults of the day, or even to the widely-advertised life of drugs and immorality.

Truly, we are far more in need today of a return to the sources of genuine Orthodoxy than Blessed Paisius was! Our situation is hopeless! And yet God's mercy does not leave us, and even today one may say that there is a movement of genuine Orthodoxy which consciously rejects the indifference, renovationism, and outright apostasy which are preached by the world-famous Orthodox "theologians" and "hierarchs," and also hungers for more than the "customary" Orthodoxy which is powerless before the onslaughts of a world refined in destroying souls. It is of course true that the world, saturated in Holy Orthodoxy, which produced Blessed Paisius no longer exists; and it is likewise true that the numbers of God-bearing elders whom Paisius met and produced on his path, even in an age of spiritual decline, are simply unheard of in our own days, which are surely the days of the last Christians. And yet it cannot be that the flame of truly Orthodox zeal will die out before the Second Coming of Christ; nor that if this flame exists, Christ our God will not show His

zealots, even now, how to lead a true and inspired Orthodox life. In fact, *the message of Blessed Paisius is addressed precisely and directly to the last Christians*: in "The Scroll" he tells us that the Holy Fathers wrote their books "by the special Providence of God, so that in the Last times this Divine work would not fall into oblivion."

Do you hear, O Orthodox Christians of these last times? These writings of the Holy Fathers, even those dealing with the highest form of spiritual life, have been preserved *for us*, so that even when it might seem that there are no God-bearing elders left at all, we may still have the unerring words of the Holy Fathers to guide us in leading a God-pleasing and zealous life. Therefore, they are wrong who teach that, because the end of the world is at hand, we must sit still, make no great efforts, simply preserve the doctrine that has been handed down to us, and hand it back, like the buried talent of the worthless servant (Matt. 25:24-30), to our Lord at His Coming! Blessed Paisius teaches that "solely by Orthodoxy of faith, without the diligent keeping of all Christ's commandments [i.e., putting Orthodoxy into *practice*, with great effort], *it is not at all possible to be saved*." The time of the end, though it seems to be near, we do not know; however close, it is still future, and in the present we have only the same age-old fight against the unseen powers, against the world, and against our own passions, upon the outcome of which our eternal fate will be decided. Let us then struggle while it is still day, with the time and the weapons which our All-merciful God has given us!

The Life of Blessed Paisius is of special value to us because it is the Life of a Holy Father of modern times, one who lived like the ancients almost in our own day. All those deadly anti-spiritual currents which threaten now to enslave man completely godless humanism, soulless ecumenism, and the fierce Revolution that has brought them to power upon the ruins of civilization in a sea of blood either existed already or were born in his lifetime. The spiritual climate of his times was very similar to our own; many of our own temptations were his also; a number of our most pressing questions he answered for us. This virtual contemporary of ours struggled and was gloriously crowned, and God, seeing his labors, gave to him a hundredfold of spiritual fruits which are nourishing Orthodox Christians even to this day, and revealed in him the fount in modern times of the pure tradition of Russian Orthodoxy.

The reader of this Life must be cautioned, however, against reading it too "enthusiastically". Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov, the great 19th-century Holy Father who perhaps better than anyone else expressed the meaning of Blessed Paisius' life's work, warns us that "novices can never adapt books to their own condition, but are invariably drawn by the tendency of the book ... If a book speaks of unconditional obedience under the direction of a Spirit bearing Father, the beginner will inevitably develop a desire for the strictest life in complete submission to an Elder. God has not given to our times this way of life. But the books of the Holy Fathers describing it can influence a beginner so strongly that out of inexperience and ignorance he can easily decide to leave the place where he is living and where he has every convenience to work out his salvation and make spiritual progress ... for an impossible dream of a perfect life pictured vividly and alluringly in his imagination" (*The Arena*, Ch. 10).

The Life of Blessed Paisius is not meant to exalt the beginner (and we all, in our spiritually feeble 20th century, are "beginners") and make him think that he is capable of such a life; not at all. Elder Macarius of Optina, another 19th-century continuer of the work of Blessed Paisius, teaches that "the holy God-bearing Fathers wrote about great spiritual gifts not so that anyone might strive indiscriminately to receive them, but so that those who do not have them, hearing about such exalted gifts and revelations which were received by those who were worthy, might acknowledge their own profound infirmity and great insufficiency, and might involuntarily be inclined to humility, which is more necessary for those seeking salvation than all other works and virtues" (*Letters to Monks*, Moscow, 1862, p. 370). Four centuries earlier St. Nilus of Sora wrote, concerning the lives of holy men: "We who are burdened with many sins and preyed upon by passions are unworthy even of hearing such words. Nevertheless, placing our hope in the grace of God, we are encouraged to keep the words of the holy writings in our minds, so that we may at least grow in awareness of the degradation in which we wallow" (*Monastic Rule*, ch. 2). And even in the 6th century, St. John of the Ladder wrote: "Just as a pauper, seeing the royal treasures, all the more acknowledges his own poverty, so also the spirit, reading the accounts of the great deeds of the Holy Fathers, involuntarily is all the more humbled in its way of thought" (*The Ladder*, Step 26:25).

These are the words of the Holy Fathers of past centuries, when Orthodoxy was firmly rooted in the human soul and had transformed whole societies. How much more necessary is the humility they speak about in our spiritually uprooted and superficial 20th century!

We *must*, of course, continue to read Orthodox spiritual texts, such as the Life of Blessed Paisius, or we will spiritually wither and die. But we must at the same time humble ourselves and use the very height of the life described in these texts as our opportunity to "grow in awareness of our degradation," as St. Nilus so well says. We must properly apply the Life of Elder Paisius to our own spiritual condition.

Therefore, let all readers be aware:

1. *There are no more elders like Paisius today.* If we imagine there are, we can do irreparable harm to our souls "imagination" being precisely one of the forms of *prelest* or spiritual deception. We must learn to read of his life and deeds without being able to apply them entirely to our corrupt and degraded life. At the same time, we must have respect for our spiritual fathers and elders, who at least know more than we and try their best to guide their spiritual children under almost impossible conditions. Many young people today are seeking *gurus* and are ready to enslave themselves to any likely candidate; but woe to those who take advantage of this climate of the times to proclaim themselves "God-bearing Elders" in the ancient tradition they only deceive themselves and others. Any Orthodox spiritual father will frankly tell his children that the minimum of eldership that remains today is very different from what Blessed Paisius or the Optina Elders represent.

2. *The type of community which Paisius guided is beyond the capabilities of our times.*

Bishop Ignatius said that such a way of life was not given even to his times when Optina was at its height; and how much more has Orthodox life fallen since then! Such a "heaven on earth" could not exist today, not just because there are no God-bearing Elders to guide it, but because even if there were, the spiritual level of those who would follow is too impossibly low. Ours is the age of spiritual fakery par excellence, not of the ancient Spirit-bearing life. The Abbot of any Orthodox monastery today will tell you the same.

But let us therefore learn to make maximum use of the limited opportunities we do have (which still, after all, are "heaven on earth" if compared to the worldly life of today!), not demolishing our few remaining Orthodox communities with self-centered and idle criticism, nor unsettling ourselves and others by dreams of impossibly perfect communities.

3. Our times, above all, call for *humble and quiet labors*, with love and sympathy for other strugglers on the path of the Orthodox spiritual life and a deep resolve that does not become discouraged because the atmosphere is unfavorable. We Christians of the latter times are still called to work persistently on ourselves, to be obedient to spiritual fathers and authorities, to lead an orderly life with at least a minimum of spiritual discipline and with regular reading of the Orthodox spiritual literature which Blessed Paisius was chiefly responsible for handing down to our times, to watch over our own sins and failings and not judge others. If we do this, even in our terrible times, we may have hope in God's mercy of the salvation of our souls. Perhaps the chief function of the Life of Blessed Paisius for us today is to give us the courage to endure the frightful anti-spiritual climate of our times; for as our Saviour has warned us, even in the last times when "the love of the many shall grow cold," *he that endureth to the end shall be saved* (Matt. 24:13).

The Life of Elder Paisius which we here present was written by his own disciples, chiefly by Schema-monk Metrophanes of Niamets Monastery, and was published in its present form exactly 125 years ago (1847) by the God-bearing Elders of Optina Monastery as the first of the texts of the veritable patristic revival which they inspired in 19th-century Russia. It is much to be preferred to the 20th-century biography* in that it gives not only the *facts* of the Elder's life, but more importantly, the very *savor* of his struggles. It is itself a patristic text capable of guiding and inspiring the Orthodox believer today.

*Archpriest Sergy Chetverikov, *The Moldavian Elder, Schema-Archimandrite Paisius Velichkovsky*, two volumes, Petseri, Estonia, 1938. In the text below some passages (indicated in the footnotes) have been added to the original Life from this source, particularly where the words of Elder Paisius himself have been quoted. The author did research at Niamets Monastery and was thus able to use manuscripts written by Paisius himself; his whole tone and approach, however, are those of the worldly 20th century, and he does not do justice to the spiritual message of Blessed Paisius.

Taken from the Introduction to *Blessed Paisius Velichkovsky*, by Schema-monk Metrophanes, trans. by Fr. Seraphim Rose (St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1994 [1976]). Also mentioned in the book are the writings of Elder Basil St. Paisius spiritual father. At the time of printing these were not available in English. Fortunately, Elder Basils writings were recently published by St. John of Kronstadt Press, making available for the first time in English some very important introductory works on the spiritual life.

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This paragraph from *The Arena*, by St. Ignaty (Brianchaninov) is also *apropos* of this Introduction:

"Monastic obedience in the form and character in which it was practised by the monks of old is a lofty spiritual mystery. Its attainment and full imitation has become impossible for us. We can only examine it reverently and intelligently and appropriate its spirit. We show right judgment and evince salutary intelligence when, in reading about the rules and experiences of the ancient Fathers and of their obedience equally amazing both in the directors and in those who were being directed we see at the present time a general decline of Christianity and recognize that we are unfit to inherit the legacy of the Fathers in its fullness and in all its abundance. And it is a great mystery of God, a great blessing for us, that it is left to us to feed on the crumbs that fall from the spiritual table of the Fathers. These crumbs are not the most satisfying food, but they can prevent spiritual death, though not without a feeling of need and hunger and nostalgia." (p. 47)