

Contemporary Luminous Faces: Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, Part Two

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

During his years as a monk and a practicing physician, Metropolitan Anthony learned remarkable lessons that deepened his prayer life and heightened his sensitivity to even the smallest and most intricate matters. He recounts an incident from World War II:

"A German soldier arrived at the hospital where I worked as a surgeon. A bullet had shattered one of his fingers. During his rounds, the chief surgeon examined the finger and immediately ordered its amputation—a quick and simple decision that required only five minutes to execute.

"At that moment, the soldier asked, 'Does anyone speak German?' I replied in his language, and he then told me that he was a watchmaker. If his finger were amputated, he would never be able to practice his profession again. This event revealed to me that his identity as a watchmaker outweighed all other considerations. I learned then that giving priority to human concerns allows us to pray in a way that is firmly rooted in truth—enabling us to stand face to face in the presence of God and simply be with Him."

He was sent to Britain as a priest and learned English there. In 1950, he was appointed as an assistant to the Russian Patriarchal parish in London. Later, he was consecrated bishop of the Diocese of Sourozh, and in 1962, he became Archbishop of the Russian Orthodox Church in Britain and Ireland. He was later elevated to Metropolitan. He devoted himself entirely to the increasing pastoral needs of his diocese, particularly to the growing number of believers who sought his spiritual counsel due to his reputation for guidance, listening to confessions, and his deep prayer life.

One of Britain's prestigious publishing houses requested that he write his autobiography, but he refused, explaining:

"I cannot write an autobiography. All my life and work are entangled with the life and problems of people. To write about myself apart from them is impossible, yet, to speak of others, who have entrusted to me

their most intimate thoughts and emotions, the light and darkness of their lives, is not permissible. If I was to write about my own self apart from them there would be nothing left, a shell, a cymbal without a sound!"

He was known for the precision of his theology and the breadth of his intellect. He built everything in his diocese upon theological foundations. The committee he appointed to draft the diocesan constitution worked for twenty years to ensure that its articles aligned with ecclesiastical theology.

He was the first to receive converts to Orthodoxy with conscious discernment. He remarked:

"Our mission, as I and now my fellows understand it, is like this: We here are the voice of the Orthodox Church in the Russian tradition. We are not bound to convert people to Orthodoxy, but we should impart our understanding of Orthodoxy to them, the love of Orthodoxy..."

His spiritual talks, always rooted in Scripture, were widely admired. It was said of him:

"Metropolitan Anthony speaks Russian, English, French, and German in a calm and resonant voice. However, he often conveys the message of the Gospel most powerfully through his presence and example. He captures the attention of all who meet him and speaks with a profound spiritual commitment that surpasses language barriers, achieving communication where others either fail or only partially succeed."

Commenting on Christ calming the storm (Mark 4:35-41), he said: *"God helps us when there is no one else to help. God is there at the point of greatest tension, at the breaking point, at the center of the storm."*

He regarded participation in ecumenical circles as a testimony of faith and boldly bore witness among non-Orthodox Christian communities. He saw this as an authentic Orthodox mission, writing:

"Ecumenical work is not a betrayal of the Church and does not have to involve compromise... We need to be there, amongst those of other confessions, so they should encounter Orthodoxy and their own root

faith, but also to listen thoughtfully to the reproaches and accusations leveled against us."

He firmly taught that Christians cannot "construct" unity but must "grow" into it through increasing faithfulness to the Gospel.

In response to the success of his evangelism which brought subtle accusations of modernization or deviation from tradition, he clarified:

"Tradition is the living memory the Church creatively active from generation to generation. Traditionalism, however, is the moribund observance of what was done in the past... As you know, I am not a supporter of the 'modernization of the Church,' but the Church is obliged to look into the needs and problems of the contemporary world, and to respond to them in a language comprehensible to those who put the questions. That is what the Fathers of the Church did – seeking the 'the mind of Christ' and recognizing both the reality and justice of the demand for new ways of thought. This applies to all spheres of life, in particular to the language in which we proclaim the truth. Too often, sermons are pronounced in the dry language of scholastic theology and make no impression on the listeners."

Metropolitan Anthony received several honorary doctorates from British, Russian, and Ukrainian universities. His earliest books on prayer and spiritual life (*School of Prayer, Encouragement to Pray, Beginning to Pray, Living Prayer, The Essence of Prayer, God and Man, A Spiritual Journey, Encounter, Drawing Closer to Christ, The Living Body of Christ, Light Shining in Darkness, God and Humanity*) were published in Britain, later translated into several languages, and widely circulated.

He departed peacefully into eternal life on August 4, 2003, at the age of 89. He was eulogized as follows:

"While you have been loyal, an ambassador of your own Russian Orthodox tradition – and there has never been any doubt about that – you have been received and respected by all manner of other Christians as simply a strong, deep voice of the Christian Gospel here [Britain], and a great influence well beyond the Russian community." – Richard Chartres, Anglican Bishop of London

"Joy attracts people's hearts and souls. They recognized in you a spiritual shepherd and a person of complete integrity." – Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow

"He was a powerfully captivating personality who embodied all that we all aim to be: a combination of spirituality, intellect, knowledge, profound faith and devotion to Orthodoxy, together with broadmindedness." – Hegumen Ioann (Economtsev), rector of Russian Orthodox University of St. John the Theologian