



In Search of the Sinless Priest

Hegumen Afanasy (Selichev) was born in 1966 in the town of Petushki in Vladimir Oblast. After school and the army, he served as an altar server at the Dormition Church in Petushki. In 1993, he was tonsured a mantia monk at Bogolubsky Monastery in the Vladimir Archdiocese. He served as second priest at the Dormition Church in Petushki from 1993-95. From 1995-2000 he was abbot of the Dormition Kosmin Monastery in the village of Nebyloye. In 2000, he graduated from St. Theophane's Seminary in Vladimir. From 2000-2006, he was the builder and the rector of the Holy Hierarch and Confessor Afanasy Bishop of Kovrov in Petushki Church and Gymnasium. Since 2006, he has been the rector of the Archangel Michael Monastery in Yuriev-Polsky, in the AlexandrovDiocese.

Adam is still the same, and Christ is still the same, and devil is still the same

– When we read the history of the Church, we see that there were various conflicts — sometimes even between saints. How could this be?

– We always forget that the enemy of our salvation does not sleep, and his main task is to deprive Christians of peace and love among themselves. The main thing for us is to understand that God allows this to occur so that our actual spiritual state would be made manifest. Apostle Paul writes: “There must be variances of opinions among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you”. If these variances in opinions are used by the Church and by us, as members of the Church, not with malevolence and hatred, but to ascertain the truth, then dissensions of saints are beneficial for the Church. We all remember the strife of Apostles Peter and Paul. I think it was the apostle James who writes something against Apostle Paul in his epistles, and yet they all remain apostles. These conflicts are resolved by the Church in Christ's love.

There were also other dissensions that became true quarrels. There was the famous polemic of the archbishops of Constantinople and the archbishops of Alexandria. If we read, for example, the polemics of Cyril of Alexandria and Chrysostom, we would think it to be very coarse.

An amazing story happened with Chrysostom. When Archbishop Epiphanius of Cyprus came at the request of the Patriarch of Alexandria to sort out the problems of the Constantinopolitan cathedra, he had to face a very serious resistance from Chrysostom and was forced to leave. Moreover, when the two elders were parting, Chrysostom wished Epiphanius that he would not make it back to his cathedra, and, in return, Epiphanius wished Chrysostom that he would die in exile. Oddly enough, the prophecies of both saints came true: Epiphanius didn't arrive to Cyprus, dying during the journey, and Chrysostom died, as we know, while being persecuted. The Church, though, celebrates both of them as great saints.

We all remember how Venerable Sergius had to leave his own brother because there was no peace between them. However, even if this union of love was broken during the lives of the saints, I think that after their repose the Lord bound them together in the Kingdom of Heaven. So I am completely fine with that.



Since the Church is the Body of Christ, we see in the Church the realization and manifestation of the Chalcedonian Dogma: the union of the Divine and human in the Church, as they are united in Christ. We must not forget that the members of the Church are people just like everyone else, all with passions. We must fight these passions with the help of God, but sometimes, unfortunately, they overwhelm us. “Adam is still the same, and Christ is still the same, and devil is still the same” – you know, probably, this famous quote.

– The apostle Peter was a vessel of the Holy Spirit and the apostle Paul was also a vessel of the Holy Spirit. So if the Church ultimately sides with Paul in their dispute, does at some point the Spirit depart from Peter and remain with Paul?

– This is what I’m talking about. The fullness of the Church is not in any particular person — not in an apostle and not in a holy father. The fullness of the Church is in Christ Himself. It is manifested in what we call *consensus partum* – the consent of the fathers, and it is in this consensus that the fullness of the Spirit is made manifest. Curiously enough, though, it can be made manifest through a particular father, who acts against all members of the Church. Take Maximus the Confessor, for example.

– The case of Maximus the Confessor, of course, is outrageous. Can we say that he confronted the whole Church?

– No. Oddly enough, we can say that the fullness of the Church was squarely in one person, Maximus. This does not mean that all the others fell away forever. When they then reunited with Maximus, they were reunited with the Church. I don’t think we can say that Maximus confronted the whole Church. He was the spokesman for the aspirations of the Orthodox in the Church, those who did not have Maximus’ gift of a writer and of a polemist. They silently thought what Maximus said out loud. Do you understand? Very often, one person says what many people think. Surely there were presbyters and bishops who shared his point of view and didn’t communicate with the heretics. Only we do not know about them, because they were discreet in some small towns in the Asia Minor or in Assyria, glorifying God in their Orthodoxy and preserved the Church together with Maximus.



Photo: Sergei Chapnin

With strangers – as prosecutors, with our own – as defenders

– As for Maximus the Confessor, he was essentially tormented by those in church hierarchy, wasn't he?

– Yes.

-These days we are simply dying to spot some fault with our hierarchy. So you can say that Maximus was right, and his bishop was not?

– When we deal with a heresy, and more so with an obvious heresy, as it was in the time of St. Maximus the Confessor, everything is perfectly clear. Today, however, most of the allegations brought against our hierarchs have to do with the moral aspect of their lives. This is the denunciators' mistake, since, according to the well-known canon of the Council of Trullo, the only reason why a person can leave his bishop or priest is their open preaching of a heresy which has been denounced by the Fathers — or if this bishop's or priest's open sinful lifestyle becomes a source of temptation to his people.

Other than some unsubstantiated accusations, do our accusers have anything what they could present as evidence to the spiritual court? The spiritual court, be it good or bad, does exist. I, for example, have served for a little over 20 years under Metropolitan Eulogy's omophorion, who is a member of the spiritual



council, and believe me this is truly a holy man and he will never play a double game. I think that the rest of the members of the spiritual court are also Christ's hierarchs, as our metropolitan of Vladimir is. Why is the council not trusted? If you have any evidence – please present it before the Supreme spiritual court and have the issue resolved; but if you do not have the evidence – quit blabbering.

What else is of importance here: we regard other people's sins as prosecutors, while we treat our own sins as defenders.

-What is wrong with revealing something bad to the public?

– The devil is called a liar not because he lies. Essentially, he told truth to Adam and Eve, when he said “you will be, like God, knowing good and evil”. At the same time, his truth turned out to be worse than any bitter lie: it was said not to save, but to destroy. It is very often that our present day denouncers do just that. They think they will save the Church, but they destroy their own souls. This is so because, besides anything else, they commit Ham's sin. When you see your father's nakedness, what should you do? You should do what the older sons – Shem and Japheth – did: they covered the nakedness of their father and did not even look at him. And how did it all end? It ended with the blessings upon the older sons and the condemnation of Ham's descendants. This is horrible – God forbid one should end up in a similar situation.

We, Christians, treat clergy as our fathers. That's why laymen call priest “father”. It's very important. Have you called him “father”? Nobody forced you to do that? Nobody did. Therefore, if you consider, without hypocrisy or deceit, a person to be your father; if you are a priest and you commemorate your bishop “Our lord and father” – don't be a hypocritical liar! If you call him father – consider him your father, and consider yourself to be his son — but if you call him father but don't consider him one, then you are simply a liar — and if you are lying to a person, you are lying to God, too.

-You know how they'll answer you, Father Afanasy? That you just happen to have a good hierarch, because in some other dioceses they can get a hierarch of whom they have heard this and that ... How can one call him “father” and “lord” and kiss his hand?

-It will be hard, yes. There is no escape for us because we have been keeping the hierarchical structure of the Church since time of the apostles, and if we are not some kind of mindless renovationists, we will be living with this hierarchical structure of the Church till the Second Coming of Christ.

How should we live with this? At the Dreadful Judgment, God is not going to ask you how many people you have denounced, but what you have done in your life. Did you feed the hungry, did you give drink to the thirsty, did you clothe the naked, did you visit the sick? The problem with all those whistle blowers is that they try to save the Church, having not even begun saving their own souls.

Everyone has to realize, once and for all, that we all, both priests and hierarchs, remain human even after our ordination. You see, we do not receive deification at the ordination. We are normal people, sinful people. We have the same passions as all humans have and we are trying to fight our passions — most of the time just as unsuccessfully. We are common sinful humans, that's who we are.

– What is the line marking the lowest degree of moral corruption of a priest or a hierarch after which you just can't help but realize that you can no longer serve with him, and you have nothing



else to do but recognize that all the mysteries he celebrates are void of grace?

– This line is talked about in the canon of the Council of Trullo – preaching a heresy, that’s all. We must to understand that it is not a priest or a hierarch who performs the mysteries, but the Holy Spirit for the payers of the Church. Therefore, in the Church, the mysteries are preformed always, regardless of the moral qualities of the given priest. If the priest’s sins cry out to heaven – there are legitimate canonical actions to be taken.

-So if you serve in a parish and you know for sure that your rector is an adulterer and embezzler, you should not be concerned: the mysteries are accomplished and you should continue to kiss his hand as that of Christ’s?

-For me personally it is the case. How can you know for sure? Have you caught the priest in the act of adultery? If you have, then remember what one of our great ascetics said: “If I see my brother sinning on the city square with a harlot, I will cover him with my mantle, so that other would not see my brother sinning”. All in all, this is an absolute of Christian behavior which should have a place in every person’s life.

If somebody’s sin has to do with you personally, then do as Christ said: “If thou dost have something against thy brother, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone; if he will not hear thee, then take with thee two or three more; if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the Church; but if he neglects to hear the Church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican”. In our day and age, we speak about the spiritual court, for why should we scream during the Liturgy: “Look! He is an adulterer! Mysteries are not being accomplished!” Of course, not. It has become customary to scream about sins of our brothers and older brothers in the Internet mass media. It is easy to write: “I have a proof that the bishop is homosexual”. If you have it, go to the spiritual court — but if you have no proof, then you, according to canons, are liable to receive the canonical punishment which would be meted out to the one whom you were accusing, and this is the only way. Knowing this they are afraid.

– Don’ they, who in the Internet mass media juggle numbers and facts, thereby call the Church’s attention to the sin — or should there be an official petition with a signature and an incoming number sent through specific channels? Isn’t a public accusation made before the whole wide world in the Internet enough? Shouldn’t the court, that is the Church, find such an accusation worth her attention?

-I think that you can yell on the street whatever you want, while through the electronic mass media it can be done even easier and safer. But to stand face to face with the person whom you accuse it’s not as easy. Then if you cannot do it face to face, if it’s hard and painful, then it is not worth yelling. People who do that want to have the pie and eat it. This is not according to the Gospel, it is not Christian, it is not brotherly.



Photo: <http://www.taday.ru/>

Christians always live in apocalyptic times

-Contemporary monastic life — does it still exist — or is it that “the righteous are no more?”

-The righteous were no more back in the ancient times, but I will ask you, is there still Christianity?

-Good question.

-Why are we talking about monastics? Let us discuss this question: “Are there Christians in the Church?” It is not without reason that Christ says: “When the Son of man cometh, shall He find faith on the earth?” You say the righteous are no more. It is truly the case. There is a parable that monks came to an elder and said: “How is that possible, that you fathers are better than us. We live better than our disciples. What is going to happen down the road with everybody?” The elder told them, “Yes, the time is coming when monks will be as laymen, and laymen will be like demons, but endurance of suffering without murmuring will be counted for them as a podvig.”



I think we probably live in those times, but every generation for two thousand years thinks that they live in those times. Remember what Ignaty Brianchaninov writes about monasticism in the 19th century: “Everything is lost. Monasticism does not exist. Eldership does not exist and cannot exist, because the root is cut off.” He said that at the time when eldership was flourishing in Optina, when eldership was flourishing on Valaam, when it was flourishing in other monasteries – the eldership which sprang off from the root of Paisii Velichkovsky.

Here are more ancient times: Basil the Great writes in one of the letters to his brother: “You are asking how things in the Church are? Here is my answer: they are just like my body – everything is hurting, and there is no hope for healing.” This is the beginning of the 4th century — and even earlier, John the Theologian said: “Brethren, ye have heard that the antichrist should come, and even now already is in the world”. This is the end of the 1st – beginning of the 2nd century. See, Christians always live in apocalyptic times. Apostasy is not a process which comes upon us out of the blue. It began right after the Pentecost. You know, it is similar to what Averintsev wrote: “When you come into a church and enter the altar you think: this cannot be it; calm down – this is it.”

To speak about every specific Christian’s spiritual life is to speak about his personal relationship with Christ, his personal salvation. There is no need to talk about your neighbor’s, or your boss’, or your spiritual higher-up’s relationship with Christ, for the issue is with you: how do you follow Christ’s commandments? Do you personally live according to the Gospel?

In the Church “everything is bad”, as always. This must be understood and remembered. The Church is a human body, the theanthropic body. We are rotten members of the body and we should have no doubts about it. We have come, have been grafted to this Church body, so that our rottenness could be somewhat diminished by Christ’s grace, or perhaps even fully replaced by the Divine grace through repentance, through a podvig according to our strength, and for nothing else. We have come not to denounce others, nor to save them. We have come to the Church to save our dearly beloved selves. The fact that we see sins of others does not free us from our sins, nor from consequences of our sins.

-Listen, a neophyte comes to church all ecstatic with indescribable joy, for he has found the Lord. But once in church, he is bombarded with our sins: someone was rude to him, someone else stepped on his foot, the lady behind the candle counter did not welcome him, priest said something wrong ... How can we protect the people like that?

-Of course, by explaining those things to them. I personally was fortunate with my first spiritual father, my first rector, who told me right away to discern between the Church as the holy body and the human aspect of the Church. Remember Hieromartyr Valentin Sventitsky’s famous, chiseled formula: “Sins in the Church are not sins of the Church but sins against the Church!” All neophytes need to know this by heart.

People get disenchanted with us. Therefore, let us not charm them trying to get them to like us, to be in love with us. Definitely, it feels great when people look at you as if you were a saint, they adore you, they worship you, they follow you... These people must be explained that we are the same as they are. Otherwise, they will be disillusioned, like little girls: “I thought princesses never go to bathroom!”

What else is to be kept in mind? There are different kinds of sins. There are sins which are tempting to others and there are those which are not. If the person lifts up his sin as a banner, this is very bad. It would



be better for him to hang a stone around his neck and drown himself, as Christ says. But if he who has found out about a secret sin of another person begins to shout about it before the whole world, he becomes the source of temptation, not the one whose sin he makes public.

-Now outside of major cities – Moscow, St Petersburg – there are fewer and fewer monks. I do not think it has always been that way.

-I have read somewhere a very interesting thought that the closer we get to the end of the world, the closer Christianity begins to resemble itself as it was in the very beginning – religion of city dwellers. This is why all epistles of the apostles are addressed to the members of urban communities: Corinthians, Colossians, Philippians, Romans. The larger the city, the greater the percentage of believers. The farther away from Moscow, the population grows scarce and Christians are fewer. Hence, there are fewer of those who desire monastic life. Those who wanted to come in the 90's – have come. Now we have to educate those who would come.

This is not only a tendency here – look at Greece: a monastery with one archimandrite and a family which, being salaried by the state, takes care of monastery buildings and grounds. It is the same with the Catholics. It is not only the number of monastics that decreases but candidates for priesthood, as well. You must understand that monasticism – no matter how pitiful, no matter how lazy – when compared with the contemporary human race is still a podvig, even if it sounds rather pompous. To live without family and in obedience to a despotic abbot (this is me, just in case) – is truly a cross to bear, a heavy cross, too.

-Who are the people who join monasteries? Are they young or old? Have they been mistreated by the world? Are they losers, or the contrary is true?

-I am put in charge of a tiny monastery, therefore, I cannot give you a cross-section of contemporary monasticism. I would not call the men who come to the monastery mad at the world. I have two monks: one is a former entrepreneur, while another has been in the monastery since he was a teen – a Moscow boy.

I cannot even say it about myself: why have I become a monk. Just the time comes when you realize that you cannot live any other life. Apostle Paul's maxim – a married man seeks how to please his wife, while an unmarried man seeks to please God – has not been canceled. Yes, perhaps we, the monks of today, have not been very successful in pleasing God, but we came here with this aim in mind.

– There are 20,000 people in Yuriev-Polsky. Is there some grassroots movement towards monasticism, from among the people? Any of the locals on seeing you say: 'I want to be a monk, too?'

-You know, from among the local people I know only one hierodeacon who is now in a monastery near-by. For our 20,000 population we have three monasteries: two male and one female. Plus two parish churches. Altogether 5 open churches: three monastic and two parochial. Those who visit us have to travel to come to us – locals do not come.



Photo: <http://ok.ru/>

Do you have a myrrh-streaming icon? Thank God, no!

– Do you have relics? I was reading memoirs about formation of one famous monastery. I remember how the sisters were describing the process: first, they understood that since they had a monastery, we needed a wonderworking icon. They got busy with getting a wonderworking icon. Once they got the icon, they had to have a wonderworking spring. They got the spring, too.

-If you really want something you will get it. The Lord gives according to your heart. You know I remember the words of my first rector, when I asked him: “Father, do you have a myrrh-streaming icon?”



He answered: “Thank God, no” —but we have a holy treasure in the ancient white-stone 13th century St George cathedral, built in 1234 by Holy Prince Svyatoslav Vlevolodovich. The cathedral is a relic in its own right – it is the last white-stone pre-Mongolian temple in Russia, decorated with white-stone carving – a well-known monument. There, in the exhibit, is preserved the wonderworking white-stone carved crucifix, the so-called Svyatoslav’ Cross. According to the chronicles, Svyatoslav Vlevolodovich carved it himself in gratitude for deliverance during a storm on the Volga River near Gorodets. I can attest that in ten years I have personally known four instances when childless families were granted children after praying in front of the cross.

-What about the Orthodox people who make rounds from one monastery to another? Isn’t it said about them: “An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign”?

-I cannot decide for others. Yes, perhaps, some seek miracles. Maybe even a greater part of them. Heart of man is in the hand of God. Yet, those monastery visits for the sake of miracles may very well end with the person finding Christ. I, at least, hope it is so.

-There is an opinion that it would be easier to attain salvation in monasteries if there were no pilgrims. What is meant that quiet and peaceful life would be better ...

-If I lived in a large monastery, I would share this opinion — but my monks mostly sit in their cells and can meet a tourist only in church. Even in largest monasteries I did not see crowds of monks who eagerly mingle with the pilgrims.

-Do you have loyal pilgrims who visit mostly your monastery?

-We don’t, for people go where there is an elder, a spiritual father. What’s the use of coming to us? Brianchaninov’s words about 19th century monasticism come to mind, although 19th century was not so long ago, but we are even worse... Even thoughts about some kind of eldership, spiritual guidance, exorcism are far from us.

-Do you sense an intellectual divide in the Church today: one side being liberal, the other – traditional-patriotic?

-It, probably, exists on Facebook and in the capital cities. Here, in the real life, it does not. Both sides forget that Christ has entrusted us not with an academic corporation, nor a political party, but with the Holy Church, where everyone can find salvation, both liberals and conservatives. It would be illusory and spiritually deadly dangerous for a party to claim the Church as their own. Besides, the Lord will have allow for it.

Translated from the [Russian](#).