

In Memory of Bishop Mitrophan (Znosko-Borovsky) of Boston

On the morning of February 2/15, 2002, on the feast of the Meeting of the Lord, precisely at ten o'clock, at the precise moment that the Divine Liturgy was beginning, Bishop Mitrofan reposed, following a short illness. A great, toil-filled, and edifying life came to an end.

It is not easy to write about a loved one after he has passed away; and His Grace was more than simply a pastor. Owing to his many labors, he was widely known in the Church and in social circles in both Russia and in the emigration, making this task even more challenging. Many disparate attitudes toward him developed long ago. I will leave the job of dispassionately evaluating him to Church historians of the future. But my feeling of debt – a debt of love and gratitude to Bishop Mitrofan for everything that he gave us, his junior pastors and pupils, obligates me to say a word in his memory.

Mitrofan Konstantinovich Znosko-Borovsky was born into the family of a parish priest on August 4/17, 1909, in the city of Brest-Litovsk. During the First World War, his father served as a regiment priest in the Eighth Finnish Infantry Division and was awarded a series of decorations for his valor, including a gold cross on a Saint George ribbon. Mitrofan's mother died of typhus when he was nine years old, and his older sister Olga took his upbringing upon herself. Two of his brothers – Arseny and Alexey – likewise served God as priests. Arseny, the older of the two, was tortured to death by the communists in 1925, while the younger Alexey, also now reposed, served in the Polish Orthodox Church and also suffered at the hands of the godless for his work in the Church, spending eight years in prison.

Upon finishing high school in Brest-Litovsk and deciding that he wanted to serve the Church, the student Znosko enrolled in Warsaw University's Department of Theology. At that time, the Orthodox Church in Poland was enduring trying times, as the Polish government was imposing Polonization on the Church. The young Mitrofan underwent a major struggle as he strove to defend Russian interests in the Department of Theology and consequently transferred to Belgrade University's Department of Theology as a recipient of a scholarship from Patriarch Varnava. Aside from studying theology, Mitrofan Konstantinovich visited His Beatitude, Metropolitan Antony, on a daily basis as obedience during his entire stay in Belgrade. These edifying meetings with the great hierarch gave the young Mitrofan as much, if not more, than his formal studies. During his time in Belgrade, the young student also became closely acquainted with Hieromonk John (Maximovitch), whose parents' house he visited and whose consecration to bishop of Shanghai he attended. A spiritual connection, as well as one of friendship, persisted between Father Mitrofan and Archbishop John until the blessed repose of the latter.

Having graduated from the Department of Theology in Belgrade in 1934, Mitrofan Konstantinovich returned to Poland. Upon passing all of the necessary exams and fulfilling all of the requirements of the Theological Faculty at Warsaw University, he received a Master of Theology.

Mitrofan Konstantinovich wed Alexandra Semenovna Tsibrouk – the daughter of an archpriest of the city of Belsk – and was ordained a deacon on September 1, 1935, in the city of Pinsk. On June 12/25, 1936, on the day of St. Onuphrius the Great, Archbishop Alexander of Pinsk and Polessye ordained Father Mitrofan to the priesthood at Yablochinsky Monastery.

His fifty-four years as a priest were the most intense and focused for Father Mitrofan in terms of pastoral work. Some dates serve as signposts:

Dormition Parish in the village of Omelenets, Belarus (1936-38);

St. Nicholas Church in Brest-Litovsk (1938-44);

Wartime travels in Germany and Austria, and Camp Moenchehof (1944-48);

Dormition Church in Casablanca (Morocco; 1948-59); and

Saint Seraphim Church in Sea Cliff, NY (1959-2002).

The Moroccan period was especially fruitful for Father Mitrofan in terms of pastoral work; the Hierarchical Synod appointed him administrator of the churches of Northern Africa. There, Father had to care for an émigré flock of many thousands dispersed across Northern Africa. Aside from caring for their souls, Father took part in building churches, and provided spiritual guidance for all of the local Russian social organizations. Archpriest Mitrofan Znosko was awarded a miter for his outstanding merits before the Church by ukase No. 1991 of the Hierarchical Synod. While in Morocco, Father Mitrofan kept close ties with Archbishop John (Maximovitch), who was then living in Paris and was closest in proximity to Africa of all the bishops. During this period, Father Mitrofan's older daughter, Anna, was cured of polio through the prayers of Archbishop John.

The last and most lengthy period of his service was in Sea Cliff, a suburb of New York. Father arrived in America at the age of fifty, already possessing an abundance of pastoral experience and many harsh life lessons (the early loss of his mother, famine, persecution at the hands of the Polish authorities for Orthodoxy and "Russianness," brutal interrogations by both the NKVD during the Soviet occupation of Brest), tempered by life's hardships, yet still full of strength and energy. Father Mitrofan was assigned directly to Metropolitan Anastassy, who directed him to visit monthly as obedience. The Metropolitan valued Father Mitrofan's talents and personal qualities, and he placed high hopes in him with regard to assisting in Church administration.

But one must mention that those who surrounded the Elder-Metropolitan, likely out of a series of personal agendas, regarded Father Mitrofan quite differently and Metropolitan Anastassy's hopes did not materialize. Father underwent much sorrow during his years of service in America: the hatred of certain individuals; attacks; undeserved slander; and absurd accusations of ecumenism, solidarism, and collaboration with the KGB, sometimes emanating even from Church circles. Father steadfastly endured, always remembering for Whom he had to bear these things. The Holy Gospel teaches that you can know a person by his fruit; therefore, it is appropriate to mention here as a statement of truth, with full responsibility for these words, that Bishop Mitrofan brought forth abundant spiritual fruits in both the emigration and in Russia through his living word and through print. As for his ill-wishers, their fruits are also clear to see: the Valentinite schism in Russia and the Mansonville schism in America, as a result of which these people find themselves outside the Church. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

The pastoral work of the reposed bishop was unique in its comprehensiveness and clear vision of a goal. The consciousness that he was Christ's warrior, standing on God's watch in the Church Militant, never left him. When making any decision, he was always guided by his pastoral conscience and the thought of what answer he would give before his Chief Shepherd Christ.

Strict toward himself, affectionate and forgiving toward others, he was truly a good shepherd, giving his life for his sheep. He saved many from death behind the walls of the NKVD during the Soviet occupation of Belarus. He also saved Jews, hiding them from fascist executioners and placing himself in mortal danger. Father lived through the life of his flock, rejoicing in their joy and sorrowing in their sorrow. He knew his parishioners, his "sheep." He "called them by name," and they followed him because they "knew his voice." His treatment of the infirm was instructive. He visited the sick in the homes and in the hospital every day while he still drove a car and often even afterward. More than once I heard him say: "I have to go to such and such a place, but I cannot right now, because I have people in my parish who are seriously ill or dying." Owing to this, he never took a vacation until a second priest was appointed to him, and even then he would go away exceedingly rarely. His concern for the sick was particularly palpable during proskomedia. He commemorated each name with such thoroughness and love, coming to church many hours before the start of Divine Liturgy. Father Mitrofan's flock repaid him with the same love; this was especially evident during the funeral service, which parishioners from Morocco, Germany, and even Brest attended.

Aside from his work in the parish, Bishop Mitrofan was an instructor to many pastors in our Church. In memory of his older brother, Priest-Martyr Arseny, His Grace taught at the Holy Trinity Seminary for many years without remuneration. During Bishop Averky's illness, he held the position of rector. I recall that, while he was the rector, there were some positive changes in the life of the seminary. Washing machines were obtained and set up, which meant that there was no longer a need for seminarians to travel to the neighboring town. Previously, seminarians had to go through the process of requesting permission to do so from the seminary administration. At the same time, the process of receiving consent for brief departures from the seminary grounds was simplified, sparing us unnecessary complications with our inspections. His Grace continued his tradition of visiting the sick.

I remember how I was once lying sick in bed. I had a high temperature and was unable to attend class for a few days. Suddenly, the door opens. Father Mitrofan, who had arrived from New York for his lectures, enters. He moved a chair close to my bed, sat down, and spent more than an hour with me. He gave me a good deal of attention, exhibiting a genuine interest in my studies and in me personally. Such visits are never forgotten.

For several years, Father Mitrofan taught various subjects at the seminary. During my time there, he taught Apologetics and Comparative Theology. His lectures were never dry, yet full of content. His formulations were accurate and precise. His comments about ecumenism stayed with me to this day: "If there is ever an ecumenical unification of churches, the resulting church will, in reality, be neither one, nor holy, nor apostolic." His Grace complemented his lectures with many examples from his rich life experience. For example, when he talked about Catholicism, his considerations were not based on something he read in a book but on personal contact with the Catholic Church in Poland. Father Mitrofan compiled a book on comparative theology that is now widely used in Russian theological academies and seminaries. He has also written: *In Defense of the Truth* (a collection of on Church and social issues); a collection of sermons following the annual cycle of services; and *Chronicle of One Life* (autobiographical sketches).

Many clergy made use of Bishop Mitrofan's fatherly suggestions in their pastoral practice. He helped many avoid unpleasantness in the order of service and, having himself undergone many trials, he shielded his brethren from ominous administrative exaction on more than one occasion.

In 1989, Father Mitrofan's loyal fellow-traveler in life, Matushka Alexandra Semenovna, departed to the other world. Having accepted this loss with Christian humility, Father Mitrofan

was called upon to become a bishop in 1990. He declined his lot several times on account of his advanced age, but finally accepted it as God's will.

Father Mitrofan's consecration to bishop took place in Montreal on November 11/24, 1992, the day the Church commemorates the appearance of the myrrh-bearing Iveron Icon of the Mother of God. The last nine years of his life, His Grace was the vicar of the Eastern American Diocese with the title of Bishop of Boston; until recently, he served and played an active role in Church life.

In our tumultuous times, when the Church is experiencing troubles, suffering blows first from one side and then the other, when it is difficult for us who live in the emigration to understand the changes in Russia, and the same events are evaluated in different ways, we often witness minds wander and spirits break. In these complex circumstances, Bishop Mitrofan's persona clearly rose above those surrounding him. While occupying the humble post of a vicar bishop, His Grace commanded enormous moral authority, and many bishops and priests-both those living abroad and those from Russia-came to him for advice. For all of us, he was a living link to the hierarchs: Metropolitan Antony, Metropolitan Anastassy, Saint John of Shanghai, and other pillars of our Church. The combination of erudition, pastoral experience, and superlative personal qualities helped Bishop Mitrofan provide exact and definite answers to questions posed to him. One could say that he was the conscience of our Church. His Grace's positive outlook on the changes in Russia was expressed in his last Nativity epistle: "Observing what is occurring in our homeland, I sense and see the nearing of a feast of the Sun of Righteousness, the day when Orthodox Russia, tempered by fire, will take her appointed place among the family of nations and will reestablish political and moral balance in the whole world."

Bishop Mitrofan's faith in a better future in Russia was not limited to words. He donated money, and not a mere ten-thousand, to charitable causes in the now-resurrecting Russia. In general, His Grace extensively took part in charity, and anyone who came to him for help would not leave empty-handed.

In conclusion, I would like to share with you a testament that Bishop Mitrofan gave me during my last visit, approximately a week before his passing, since these words relate not only to me but can serve as a spiritual testament to all clergy. Seeing me for the first time with a cross of my chest, His Grace, already weak and bedridden, told me: "I congratulate you on your ordination to the priesthood. Be prepared to endure human malice and slander for Christ. Be strict toward yourself, and remember that we are servants of the Living God, and not anybody's lackeys." These words were undoubtedly a reflection of His Grace's personal life-long pastoral experience.

Metropolitan Laurus, along with Bishops Michael of Montreal and Canada, Alexander of Buenos Aires and South America and many clergy, conducted Bishop Mitrofan's funeral on February 5/18 in Saint Seraphim Church in Sea Cliff. On the following day, February 6/19, Metropolitan Laurus served a festive panihida, after which Bishop Alexander conducted the burial of Bishop Mitrofan at the monastery cemetery, next to the grave of Matushka Alexandra Semenovna. Memory eternal to you, dear Vladyka!

Priest Andre Papkov

First published in Orthodox Russia, No. 5, 2002.

Translated from the Russian by Subdeacon Nicholas Ganson.