

Made Perfect in Faith: A Second Volume

More Sermons on the Lives and Works of the Holy Church Fathers

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Saint Filaret, Metropolitan of Moscow

One of the spiritual giants of nineteenth-century Russian ecclesiastical history is Saint Filaret, Metropolitan of Moscow from 1821 to 1867, whose life we now consider.

Saint Filaret lived through difficult period for the Russian Church. First, in the previous century, under Tsar Peter, the Patriarchate had been suppressed and the Russian Orthodox Church made a department of the government. Thus, the Church was no longer able to act with complete freedom.

Second, for several centuries the Church itself had been subjected to what is sometimes called the “Western Captivity,” which refers to the recasting of Orthodox theology according to the style and techniques of Western scholasticism. Scholasticism sought to harmonize ancient pagan philosophy—especially that of Aristotle—with Christian theology and focused especially on human reason and dialectical argumentation as methods for teaching Christian truth. To some Orthodox churchmen, scholasticism seemed advanced and modern, although it was in reality far inferior, from a spiritual standpoint, to the Apostolic-Patristic theology of traditional Orthodoxy.

Third, many Russian intellectuals were assailed and, in part, captured by a host of ideologies and philosophies originating from Western Europe, ideologies and philosophies the source of which was the so-called Enlightenment, a grossly misleading term to say the least. Moreover, the

corrupting influence of Freemasonry took hold of many among the aristocracy.

Finally, in reaction to the menace posed by the onslaught of foreign ideologies, the ruling establishment sought stability through rigorous censorship and the quashing of any public expression of thoughts that were deemed the least bit novel or unfamiliar. As a consequence, even in the realm of theology, censorship was often heavy handed. While lesser men may have retreated into silence when faced with such challenges, throughout his life Saint Filaret responded with courage.

Saint Filaret was born in 1782 in Kolomna, a city approximately seventy miles southeast of Moscow. His father was a Priest and, consequently, at an early age he was enrolled in the local seminary. An outstanding student, he eventually transferred to the theological academy at the Holy Trinity-Saint Sergius Lavra where he excelled in his studies. Upon graduation, he was selected to teach Greek and Hebrew and, shortly thereafter, “appointed Preacher at the Lavra and Professor of Rhetoric, for he was a consummate orator who knew how to enflame souls with love of virtue.”¹ His mentor, Metropolitan Platon of Moscow, wrote of the Saint, “as for me, I write like a man; but as for him, he writes like an angel.”²

In 1808, the Saint was tonsured a monk, given the name Filaret, and ordained a Deacon. Soon thereafter, he was transferred to the Theological Academy in St. Petersburg where he was appointed Professor of Philosophy. There, he taught Holy Scripture, Church History, the Holy Canons, and Dogmatics. It was during that time that he was ordained a Priest. Less than a decade later, he was awarded the doctorate in divinity and was consecrated Bishop. As Bishop, he served successively as vicar to the Metropolitan of Moscow, Archbishop of Tver, Archbishop of Yaroslavl, and finally, from 1821 to the close of his life, Metropolitan of Moscow and Kolomna.

Saint Filaret was an exemplary Hierarch, taking very seriously his duties as Metropolitan of Moscow. He insisted, for example, that clergy uphold the highest standards of comportment. It is written that he “never stopped working and never took a holiday. Nobody knew when he slept for, at whatever time of day or night his servant made his appearance, he was always found at his desk.”³ The Saint left a substantial body of written works. These include theological works, catechisms, handbooks, and collections of sermons. Extant also is a collection of his correspondence in

¹ Hieromonk Makarios of Simonos Petra, *The Synaxarion*, Vol. II, p. 182.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 183.

which he imparted guidance to members of his flock. Additionally, he translated several books of Holy Scripture from Church Slavonic to modern Russian, as part of a project to translate the entire Holy Bible into modern Russian, an endeavor that took fifty years to complete.

Saint Filaret fell asleep in the Lord on November 19, 1867 at eighty-five years of age.

Education in the Orthodox Faith loomed very large in the estimation of Saint Filaret, not only the education of the Russian elite but of the other social classes as well. Curiously, during the age in which he lived education in the Faith was frequently rejected by the Russian nobility, intent on various frivolities, and the intellectual classes, absorbed, as we have already noted, by the transitory ideological fads emanating from the West. Painfully aware of this, the Saint scolded his flock in a sermon delivered in 1841 on the Feast Day of Saint Alexis. Following is a portion of his words:

“[T]he gift and duty of being a teacher is not intended for everyone, and the Church finds few worthy to be called theologians. However, in Christianity no one is allowed to be completely uninstructed and remain ignorant. Did not the Lord call himself a teacher, and his followers disciples? Even before the Christians were called Christians, they were called, to the last one, disciples. Is this merely an empty title, signifying nothing? Why then did the Lord send apostles into the world? Above all, it was in order to teach all people: ‘Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations....’ If you do not wish to study and try to understand Christianity, then you are not a disciple, you are not a follower of Christ; then the apostles were not sent into the world for you; you are not what all Christians have been since the beginning of Christianity. I do not know what you are and what is to become of you.”⁴

Allow me to call your attention to the Saint’s mention of the importance of the word “disciple.” He notes that Christians were first called by the name “disciples” and asks rhetorically if that word has any genuine meaning or is merely an empty title. Let us attempt to answer that question.

The word “disciple” comes originally from the Latin noun *discipulus*, which means a learner or pupil. That word, in turn, is derived from the Latin verb *discere*, which means to learn. Significantly, the English word “discipline,” which signifies a branch of knowledge and, additionally, the development of self-control, character, and orderliness, also derives from the

⁴ Georges Florovsky, *The Ways of Russian Theology, Part Two*, trans. Rovert L. Nichols, ed. Richard S. Haugh, Vol. VI in *The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, (Vaduz, Liechtenstein: BÜCHERVERTRIEBSANSTALT, 1987), p. 307.

same Latin roots. So, a disciple, in its Christian context, indicates one who is learning the teachings of Christ, a task that should last a lifetime. And, since that learning is not for purposes of mere abstract contemplation, we may say also that one who is learning the teachings of Christ necessarily seeks to apply the knowledge thus gained to achieve self-control, to build character, and to live an orderly and God-pleasing life, which is the whole point of the learning.

Now, Saint Filaret was speaking to his own flock, Russian Orthodox Christians of the mid-nineteenth century, people living in a milieu as different in many ways from our own as one can possibly imagine. Yet, as is the case with the writings of all of the Holy Church Fathers, the admonition of Saint Filaret is timeless and is as much applicable to our own era and place as it was to the Russia of the 1840s.

If we are Orthodox Christians in the true sense of those words, then we are “disciples,” we are “learners” or “pupils,” of Christ Jesus and of His Church, the Holy Orthodox Church. There are nominal Orthodox Christians who are not only ignorant of the Faith, but ignorant of their ignorance, and it is to them that Saint Filaret addressed the words, “... then you are not a disciple, you are not a follower of Christ; then the apostles were not sent into the world for you; you are not what all Christians have been since the beginning of Christianity.”

If we are Orthodox Christians in the true sense of those words, then we must spend a goodly measure of our time reading the kinds of books that enhance our knowledge of our Faith and of what God expects of us. A vast collection of works, one that could occupy us for decades, is readily available in English or in whatever language is most useful for each of us. Some are written in the demanding terminology of high theology, while others use a less complex vocabulary—again, whatever is most useful for us. There is literally something for everyone. To be sure, discipline is necessary. People use to effortless works of fiction or vacuous television watching may find spiritual works somewhat challenging, but persistence will overcome these difficulties. And, with that persistence, before one’s eyes the wisdom of God and of His universe is gradually revealed.

Are we to be among those who, out of laziness, are ignorant of our Orthodox Faith? Are we to be among those to whom Saint Filaret points an accusing finger and says, “I do not know what you are and what is to become of you”? Let that not be so. Let us become true disciples, true pupils, of the Lord.