

‘KEEP IT SIMPLE,
AND GOD WILL NOT FORSAKE YOU’
LIFE AND TEACHINGS
OF ST. LEO OF OPTINA
AND ST. THEODORE OF NEAMTS

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PUBLISHER'S FOREWORD

This is a life story of two spiritual mentors in the Eastern Christian Orthodox tradition, St. Leo of Optina (Nagolkin) and St. Theodore of Neamts (Polzikov). St Theodore was a disciple of St. Paisios (Velichkovsky). St Paisios re-established in several monasteries on Athos and in Romania, where he was father superior, the practice of incessant prayer to Jesus Christ. This practice is known as 'Jesus prayer' and he had discovered this practice in the writings of ancient Christian ascetics.

St. Leo and St. Theodore established the schools of inner prayer and revelation of thoughts amongst the monks in Optina and several other monasteries at the end of the 18th – beginning of the 19th century. Inner prayer, revelation of thoughts and admonishing through acting, amongst other methods of purifying and elevating the soul for the sake of receiving the Holy Spirit, were almost forgotten by that time. In the life of the clergy the stress was put on the obedience to the superiors in the hierarchy, strict complying to the church rules and following church services and the work of penance. The inner core of the monks remained often untouched by this, they couldn't open it to the light of the Gospel.

St. Leo and St. Theodore had to endure the hostility of some church hierarchs and monks, who didn't understand the necessity of inner work on the way to God. They did it firmly but at the same time full of love for their fellowmen and revived the spiritual mentorship amongst the Eastern Orthodox Christian clergy as well as the laity.

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CHAPTER 1. REVIVING OF THE OPTINA MONASTERY

It was 1797. A man of giant stature and build went humbly through the gates of the Optina monastery of the Presentation in the Temple. His eyes gave away that he had an outstanding mind and inborn keenness of wit. His name was Leo Nagolkin, and he was 29 years old.

It was not idle curiosity or poverty that had led Leo to this dilapidated monastery, but the fire of ardent prayer, burning in his heart.

Until that time, Leo had lived and worked in the city of Bolhov, Orlov province. He had an education, but he had no means of livelihood, so Leo began as a shop assistant of the merchant Sokolnikov and began selling hemp and hemp oil. Thanks to his intelligence and wit, honesty and loyalty to the business of his boss his sales “took off”. The money of the merchant was adding up, their trade expanded, and Leo could enjoy travelling to different cities of the province and Russia and contact with people from different social classes. It happened very seldom that anyone of the Bolhov merchants travelled outside the district to sell hemp, but he established contact with St. Petersburg merchants whom he also sold goods. For this he often had to travel to the city of Sukhinichi in the Kaluga province.

His splendid memory enabled him to be an excellent conversationalist. When conversing with him some took him for a fleet officer, others as belonging to the entourage of some nobleman, still others thought he was an industrialist, so freely could he speak about people with such lives and professions. Being constantly on the move and communicating with people, Leo gained a lot of knowledge of people, and experience.

All in all, the master grew rich moneywise and Leo mentally. Even a physical injury he received when he was travelling around on business could not disparage his firm step. And very few people knew that in the heart of the successful

salesman, to whom the boss was going to give his daughter in marriage, flared the spark of love for God. This spark of love God had given to him. It gently and secretly protected him with prayers from the hurricane winds of passions that lead to the heights of earthly life. That's why he gave up this worldly happiness and crossed the threshold of the holy monastery.

We return to the beginning of the story. It was not curiosity, nor poverty that had led Leo to this dilapidated monastery, but the desire to take the monastic vow.



Leo did not even suspect that just two years ago the monastery had been on the verge of disappearing, that in 1724 the impoverished monastery had been abolished by a decree of the synod, that it had been attached to the Belyovsky Transfiguration monastery. That the monastery fences, buildings, farmyard, and all church utensils had been disassembled and transported to Belyov. That only thanks to benefactors of the monastery, namely nobleman

Shepelyov, they had managed to defend the monastery from total neglect and destruction.

We'll leave Leo inside the monastery walls for now and try to describe the life and rebirth of the Optina monastery at the time.

In 1795 the city Kozelsk and with it also Optina came under the jurisdiction of the Moscow eparchy. The metropolitan of Moscow and Kaluga, Plato, made a tour to inspect the monasteries and churches of the diocese. When he was in the Kaluga region, he saw the small stone church with a blue dome studded with golden stars on the other bank of the river Zhizdra behind a blackened pole fence. It was the church of the Presentation in the Temple. Nearby stood a few rickety wooden structures - cells, household rooms... The poor monastery with three elderly monks (one of them blind) could barely keep up a prayerful life. Everything was poor, darkish and cheerless. He felt a gripping pain in his heart and tears came to his eyes. "Let there be a monastery here," whispered his mouth inspired by the Holy Spirit. He stood there for a long time with a grieving heart, and he became firm in the decision he had taken.

When he had returned to Moscow, he invited the father superior of the Peshnoshsky monastery, archimandrite Makarios, and instructed him to visit the Optina monastery, to revive it and to put it in order. Father Makarios appointed Peshnoshsky priest-monk Joseph to oversee the monastery. But, after spending a year there as a father superior, father Joseph resigned as superior because of an illness. Metropolitan Plato turned to father Makarios a second time: "Choose from your brethren a man capable to fulfil this task, Optina must be revived and become a coenobitic monastery with a hard way of life." Father Makarios said, "But I have no such man, your eminence. Should I really give you the gardener Abraham?" His eminence felt this was a kind of strange slip of the tongue of father Makarios and that made him want to meet this gardener. Father Abraham had to come to Moscow. Out of humility father Abraham brought forth all kinds of

arguments in an attempt to decline becoming superior: "...And I'm not healthy, and this assignment is far above my strength..." But whatever arguments father Abraham brought forth, vладыko was unbending: "You're not old, and God will give you strength. Bow to the inevitable and start to fulfil the service that I appointed you." And also, the mentors Samuel Golutvensky and John Peshnoshsky told him that this was the call of God, and... father Abraham set out for Optina.

He found the monastery in extreme desolation: "There wasn't even a towel for the servant to wipe his hands," said father Abraham, "and there was nothing to relieve the misfortune and poverty. I was just crying and praying, praying and crying." And also, the local Kozelsk people, soldiers and peasants caused many problems for the monastery. In his grief the father superior went to his spiritual mentor Makarios in Peshnosh to beg him to relieve him of his crushing burden. But father Makarios remembered the request of his eminence Plato to him not to leave Optina in trouble, so he ordered to harness horses to his cart and drove to an acquainted landowner taking father Abraham with him. "They," remembered father Abraham, "supplied me in a short time with everything necessary so that I brought two cartloads of various things to the monastery. Returning from collecting the loads, my mentor asked me to co-celebrate with him, and after the service and the common meal all of a sudden, he addressed the brotherhood with these words: "Fathers and brothers! To those who wish to go with father Abraham to build the monastery that he is entrusted with, I will not only put no obstacles in the way, but I will bless them with love to help this good cause." Several monks and workers volunteered to go to Optina. In the end there were in total 12 people. About the offences committed by the local population against the monastery, father Abraham wrote a letter to metropolitan Plato in the hope he would bring the violators to justice:

“They steal wood, they are fishing without permission in the waters of the monastery, they cut brushwood, which is needed for the monastery itself, they come at night and mow the best grass in the monastery meadows. On the 7th of May they carried off a couple of monastery horses and although the thieves were caught, the Kozelsk authorities do not help the monastery at all: they protect those thieves. Again, in May, during the distribution of the residents’ meadows for the cavalry, the Kozelsk authorities allotted also monastic meadows. In winter they ride through the monastery forest where a lot of trees were felled, near the very monastery. In summer they walk over our wood lots and sing so loudly that during the divine service it can be heard in the church. That’s why we think that the former father superior, father Joseph, resigned. Not due to physical illness, but because of the emotional trouble that comes from this agitation. Because of this many of the novices left the monastery, while others intend to go away, and also on this account this monastery cannot be put in order as befits it.” Under the petition were the signatures of hegumen Athanasius, the monks Parfenios and Ignatios, the novices Maxim, Gabriel, Michael, Onesimus, Yevstigney and Matthew.

Only a directive of governor Obleouhov at the request of metropolitan Plato put an end to the lawlessness committed by the local people.

Metropolitan Plato comforted the petitioners with the following resolution in response to the petition: “Holy monastic life prescribes to either avert all these misfortunes or overcome them with patience, and God will invisibly protect His servants if He sees their patience.”

The number of monks began to grow rapidly. Father Makarios endorsed and supervised father Abraham.

“Most of all I want to ask you to love all the brethren equally. Those you intend to tonsure monk, put them to the test first. Then ask them before God whether their promise to be committed to you and the monastery is firm, whether they will not leave the monastery without asking

your permission. And only then tonsure them. If you see that they want to only formally be tonsured, it is best not to take them. For each you will have to answer to God. The fewer the brethren, the less also will be the sorrow and confusion. May God give you and father Pimen spiritual love for each other and a clear conscience towards each other; then also the brotherhood will be peaceful." Thus, father Makarios wrote to father Abraham.

An exemplary internal order established itself in the monastery, the brethren endured want with Christian self-denial, prayerful trust in God and laborious obedience. Such a monastery appeared before the eyes of Leo.

CHAPTER 2. QUENCHLESS SPIRITUAL THIRST

“Accept me into the monastery, father,” Leo addressed himself to the father superior Abraham. Father Abraham looked intently at the young man standing in front of him. How could he not accept someone of blazing health, educated, with a keen and humble look? Leo spent two years in the Optina monastery as a novice. Two years of labours on the verge of his physical strength in humility and prayer.

The nephew of merchant Sokolnikov where Leo had worked as a shop-assistant, Maxim Sokolnikov, came to the monastery to be a novice along with Leo. Maxim was not inferior in strength to Leo. So, the two of them constantly amazed the brethren and the father superior with their feats of labour and brought significant savings to the empty treasury of the monastery as well. A bit urgently, just in one day it was necessary to connect two monastery lakes with a channel. To dig the channel in one day they would have to hire twenty people, provide them with tools, feed them during the day, and pay for the work at that. Leo and Maxim looked at each other, and they declared, for everybody to hear: we are up to that, in a day we will finish it. And to everyone’s surprise, they finished the job just as they claimed, and their reward was 15 pounds of bread. With similar labours two years went by.

Of course, the daily liturgical cycle in the monastery was performed conscientiously under the constant supervision of father Abraham. But as father Abraham wrote to emperor Alexander Pavlovich: “The divine services are performed in dire need, and that ...causes noticeable sorrow to the worshippers.” The monastery was in disorder, so the amount of heavy physical work was very big, which took away all strength. No doubt father Abraham had the gift of grace of the Holy Spirit. Otherwise, it would be impossible to explain how in 19 years he

accomplished works that would normally take a century. He managed to save the monastery from destruction, organize monastic life according to the coenobitic statute, finish the construction of the three-tiered bell tower and stone cells for the brethren on both sides of it, build a stone refectory with a wooden entresol and the same kind of building for the rectory. Many buildings were erected, including the stone Kazan cathedral. A nobleman who lived in Optina, Alexey Tatischev cultivated a magnificent garden between the buildings with fruit trees and flowers. Father Abraham also achieved to increase the number of monks in the monastery from seven to thirty. Next to the monks there were a lot of workers in the monastery.

When you are troubled by thirst you drink a glass of water. When you are troubled by hunger you eat. But what do you do when you are tormented by spiritual thirst and hunger? Once you have tasted the sweetness of prayer, experienced the bliss of God's presence in the heart, you grow constantly hungry, you start to constantly look for satiation. His hunger to learn the spiritual life forced Leo to turn to father Abraham with the request to transfer him to the Beloberezhsky monastery. A then well-known ascetic was father superior there: spiritual mentor Basilios (Kishkin), who had lived for a long time on mount Athos together with the disciples of venerable Paisios (Velichkovsky). Leo received the blessing to transfer and in 1799 he went to the Beloberezhsky monastery. As a sprout from a seed makes its way through a thick layer of earth to the sun, thus also the soul of Leo made its way to the light of God through works of obedience and humility. Through the efforts of father Basilios and his disciples the monastic life had been set going here as well. Vigil was served here properly, it lasted for at least 7 hours. Father Basilios was a man of inner work, he had studied prayer of the heart, for which after the evening church rules, he went into the woods, where he had a cell. There he spoke in silence alone

with the One God, and when night fell, he would come back to the monastery.

The establishment of peace and harmony between the brothers was his principal care, and where there is peace and harmony, there is Christ also. As for obedience, he gave them to everyone very felicitously. It often happened that the monks from gentry bore the burden of labours more patiently than those who were used to physical labours. Father Basilios himself liked physical work and appreciated it.



It sometimes happened that the brethren did not lock their cells when they set out to mow. In such cases father Basilios often went by the cells to see who was doing what and who needed what. During such a visit of his, he would sometimes leave there some consolation: bagels, cakes, a comb, and other things as required. And if a cell was filthy,

littered, he cleaned and swept it, but afterwards he would explain that the monk's cell should be clean and tidy, and that "your guardian angel esteems your work." But most of all he advised to try to stay in the cell with fear of God, to do readings of the God-bearing fathers and to do the Jesus prayer in the mind as if stringing these words to the heart, to make bows to the ground only up to one's strength, but often and with affection. "When you go to bed imagine yourself lying in a coffin waiting, because "Behold, the groom is arriving" (Matthew 25:6), and you will be judged." That's the kind of father superior with whom Leo acquired experience in spiritual work.

In 1801 Leo was tonsured into the mantle with the name Leo and ordained a hierodeacon, and then a hieromonk. There were different kinds of coenobites in the monastery: some were totally unable to subdue their passions and would start to put forward all possible requirements to father Basilios, others kept silent, and only a few had humility in their heart. So, it happened once that upon the occurrence of a church holiday the brethren who performed obedience in the choir refused to perform the service because they were unhappy with something. In this way they hoped to force the father superior to fulfil some of their demands. But the abbot did not want to give in to them and to humble them he called father Leo and another brother to sing the festive service. Father Leo had driven hay from the farm all day. He was tired and covered with dust, and he was just going to take a rest, when he was told the will of the father superior. Without any grumbling he went to the church and together with his comrade they sang the vespers and matins. Another occurrence shows the great kindness of father Leo. In the desert there was a brother who had fallen to delusions. Once, he went up the bell tower and cried: "Look! See! When I fall, I won't get smashed up, angels of God will carry me in their hands!" Father Leo was at that time working on an obedience. When he heard the hysterical screams of his brother, he abandoned his work and ran to the bell tower. He only

just managed to grab the edge of the clothes of his brother gone mad who leaned over the balustrade and was sliding down. Since he had enough strength, he could hold the man hanging in the air and keep him from falling. Then he pulled him inside the bell tower. Father Leo not only saved him from death, but also looked after the soul of his brother who had almost perished: He made clear to him he had been deluded.

Monastery walls and black robes do not save you from your passions. After all, also demons might help you pray. As soon as the slightest idea of being chosen, the slightest idea about you being different from other people visits your mind, consider that you have already embarked on the path of perdition. The pronoun “I”, “I”, “I” itself is the root of our vanity. Is it not better to say: “The Lord helped me...”, “My spiritual father gave me...”?

What reason prompted father Leo to temporarily move to the Cholnsky monastery is unknown. But we know that it is there, where father Leo met his future mentor and teacher schemamonk Theodore, a former disciple of the great spiritual mentor Paisios (Velichkovsky), father superior of the Moldovlachian monasteries. Many monks of the Cholnsky monastery profited from the spiritual guidance of father Theodore who was experienced in the ascetic life and had the grace of the Holy Spirit. But father Leo clung to him with all his soul.

CHAPTER 3. NEW FATHER SUPERIOR OF THE BELOBEREZHSKY MONASTERY

“As easily as someone gets lost on his way if he has no guide, even if he is very clever, just as easily someone gets lost if he goes the path of monasticism self-willedly, even if he has all wisdom.”

In 1804, hegumen Basilios left his position as father superior at the Beloberezhsky monastery. Someone had to be elected to take his place. All the monastic brethren gathered together, and they began to discuss who should be elected as father superior. “They can choose someone also without my presence,” thought father Leo, and he went to brew kvass. The brotherhood deliberated for a long time and came to the unanimous conclusion that apart from father Leo there was no one else to choose. All together they came to the kvass brewery and announced their decision to father Leo. According to his humility father Leo did not go against the decision of the brothers but changed his clothes and went with them to bishop Dositheus in Oryol. Bishop immediately approved the decision of the brotherhood. That’s how monk Leo became father superior of the Beloberezhsky monastery. However, the authoritative position of father Leo did not change his simple way of life. His precept: “Keep it simple and God will not forsake you” was his breath of life. So, if work compelled him to go somewhere, he went with one horse, in a simple cart and without a coachman. One day hieromonk Gabriel, a native of Karachevsky, turned to father Leo with the request to visit his birthplace. This was after the chirotony of Gabriel. “If the need arises to go there for monastery affairs, I’ll let you know,” said father Leo. The opportunity to go to those territories soon presented itself. “Father Gabriel! Get ready,” father Leo called father Gabriel to prepare for the journey. Father Gabriel had already made every effort. He had prepared to visit his relatives

gloriously: he had carefully packed his festive cassock and kamelaukion in a special hatbox. He thought he'd come in full dress to impress his relatives so to speak with his festive appearance. But imagine his disappointment! The hour of departure had come. They prayed to God, went out. Father Gabriel saw that they were given a cart with a front seat, drawn by a single horse. "Where's the driver?" asked father Gabriel. "What?" the father superior was surprised. "It is the habit...," said father Gabriel. Father Leo replied: "So that I have three drivers for one horse? Thank you! Why don't you sit down, brother, on the front, and if you get tired, I'll sit there. And what's this? A hat box and cassock? Well, I myself do not take my kamelaukion with me... But you, if you take your ceremonial dress with you, then you sit down at my place, and I will drive the horse." Immediately he sat down on the front. The confused father Gabriel was no longer glad he had taken his ceremonial dress. He took it to his cell at once and asked the father superior to take his place, and he himself took the place of the coachman. That's how easily father Leo corrected the pernicious intention of father Gabriel. Life in the monastery flowed in measured steps. Father Leo followed the statutes of monastic life, appointed obedience, led the worship, and spiritually nourished the brethren.

After some time, schemamonk Theodore¹ knocked at the gate of the monastery. Envy on the part of the brotherhood of the Cholnsky monastery about his spiritual dispensation had forced Theodore to leave the Cholnsky monastery and go to the Beloberezhsky monastery. Naturally he was glad to see that the father superior of the Beloberezhsky

1 Schemamonk Theodore formerly helped father superior Paisios (Velichkovsky) with his translations in the Neamts monastery. In Russia he lived in different monasteries and often suffered persecution for receiving other monks "to reveal their intentions", i.e. for spiritual guidance which was still unknown in Russian monasteries, even in Balaam (†1822, Svirsky monastery) [Russian church history, prof. P.V. Znamensky]

monastery was father Leo, with whom he became close spiritually when he lived in the Cholnsky monastery. But father Leo was even more pleased to meet his teacher. Yes, how couldn't he rejoice? The soul has no nerves, and when it is deadly sick, smitten with the sores of sins, a dying man cannot feel he is dying. He cannot even see his sins. Father Leo clearly understood that no one is more unfortunate and closer to perdition than someone who has no mentor on the path to God. He gladly accepted the spiritual guidance of mentor Theodore.

CHAPTER 4. SCHEMA MONK THEODORE, MENTOR AND TEACHER OF FATHER LEO

For four years father Leo was father superior of the Beloberezhsky monastery. In 1807 a fever was brought to Belye Berega.² Many monks were infected by it. Schemamonk Theodore, an ardent admirer of Jesus' life-giving commandments, mercifully cared for them. To strengthen his zealot the Lord also let him to become ill, and during his illness he announced to him through an angel, that no enemies' machinations can harm his soul. He grew very weak and for nine days he didn't eat anything. Everyone thought that the hour of death had come for the righteous man. All of a sudden, he lost his senses, his eyes were open and constantly remained in the same position, his breathing was barely noticeable, his body became numb, his lips lit up with a paradisiacal smile, a blush began to play on his face. For three days he remained in this unusual state, and then he woke up. Father Leo came running. "Father! Are you dying?" "No," answered Theodore, "I will not die, I was told that. Look, were there ever dying people with such strength? And with those words he gave him a hand. His favourite pupil hieromonk Gabriel came running. "I considered you to be great, but God showed me that you are very small," Theodore said to him to teach him and for his own good. He was enthralled and strengthened by Divine inner ardour, so after that he got out of bed, and only in his shirt, leaning on a crutch, supported by disciples, he rushed to the aid of his neighbour. Evidently something had been disclosed to him during his illness. We have no words to recount spiritual things, they can only be indicated with allegories. A few days before his illness, in the evening, when he reconciled his disciple with the father superior, father Leo, he felt in his heart an extraordinary consolation. He was unable to contain the sweetness and

2 Belye Berega. Village in the Bryansk province. (tr.)

he began to hint about his elevated experience to father Leo. The disease itself progressed strangely: during his illness father Theodore was in full possession of his faculties, but his face gave away the strong inner action of prayer. He could sense heat in his body, and he felt moderately weak. Then his soul soared out of his body and some invisible youth appeared. He could feel him with his heart. The youth took him by a narrow road to the left. "I have already passed away," thought father Theodore, "no one knows, shall I be saved, or shall I perish?" "You are saved!" replied a voice, and suddenly some force, similar to a rapid vortex took him and moved him to the right. "Try the sweetness of heavenly betrothals, which I give to those that love Me," said an invisible voice to him. With these words, he thought the Saviour Himself put His right hand on his heart, and he was enraptured by an unspeakably pleasant abode, invisible, ineffable by words in earthly language. And from this feeling he moved to another even more magnificent feeling, and then to a third, both of which, in his own words, he could remember only with his heart, he could not understand them with his mind. 'Then I saw a church, and in it on the right side, close by the altar I saw a hut in which there were five or six people. For these people, your death will be revoked, for them you will still live,' said the mental voice. Then the spiritual age of some of his disciples was revealed to him. Finally, the Lord announced to him the temptations that he will have to endure. He even saw the persons, who will direct their malice against him. But the divine voice assured him that the ship of the soul cannot be harmed by these ferocious waves, because the invisible ruler of this is Christ.

In a short time, without medication, mentor Theodore recovered. He desired to live a more solitary and silent life, and he spoke about this to the father superior, father Leo. The brotherhood built a cell in the forest for him, about two and a half kilometres from the monastery. He moved there together with hieroschemamonk Cleophas. In order not to part from father Theodore father Leo resigned as