

Saint Luke the Surgeon, Archbishop of Crimea (1877-1961) - Part I (Nectarios (Antonopoulos) of Sagmata)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



If you ever find yourself on the Holy Mountain or in other old churches, you will notice that many of them are painted red. If you ask the monks, they will tell you that the colour symbolizes the blood of Christ and His saints. It wants to remind us that, whereas the various religions or ideologies spread via propaganda, violence or oppression, the Church of Christ won people's hearts through weakness, the blood of Christ and the saints, martyrdom and witness. There is not a single Orthodox Church that has not experienced its own martyrdom. And nor is there a saint that has not passed through his or her furnace of sorrows, temptations or martyrdom.



In the 20th century, the Russian Church underwent its own harsh martyrdom. For seven decades an untold number of martyrs and confessors gave their blood in their own witness on the cross.

One such moving witness on the cross is the figure of Archbishop Luke, Professor of Topographic Anatomy and Surgery. A man of rare talents and gifts, he served others as shepherd and doctor with remarkable love and self-denial, continuing the tradition of the great Unmercenary Saints of our Church. His astonishing personality and his magnanimity are cause for amazement, admiration and also divine consolation.

At today's event we shall try to make a brief approach to this figure and a sketch of his life. But first let us travel together to the holy land of Russia to see the natural, social and spiritual environment in which Saint Luke lived. We are back in the 19th century, a difficult and turbulent time. The standard of living among the Russian people is very low. The living conditions dreadful. It is understandable that the new, nihilistic ideas that were gradually to influence a large part of the Russian population would find fertile ground. At that difficult time, a counterweight to the spiritual degeneration of the Russian people would be played by some monasteries and the figures of the great startsi (elders) Let us first visit the monasteries of Sarov and Divyeyevo, dominated by the figure of Saint Serafim Sarovskij. Countless numbers of people eagerly hastened to meet him. He welcomed them all with love and with the sweet greeting: "My joy, Christ has risen". The convent of Divyeyevo, which the saint assisted greatly, was built close to the monastery of Sarov. Not long before his repose, he foresaw and foretold all the terrible events that would take place. He said that there would be so much sorrow and so many martyrs that the angels would be hard put to it to collect all the souls. But he also foretold that, after seventy years, the Church would flourish again. In 1990, his relics and some of his personal effects were found in Saint Petersburg and translated to Divyeyevo. There are 250 nuns living at Divyeyevo who, on the orders of Saint Serafim, observe sleepless prayer (i.e. one or more of them is always at prayer).

Another famous monastery is Valaam, which stands on the verdant islands of Lake Ladoga. Monastic life began there in the 12th century. The central monastery was built first, then the many surrounding sketes. It is a quiet and very beautiful location. Also very important is the Monastery of Optina, which played a most influential role in the spiritual life of Russia in the 19th century. In a hundred years it produced 15 saints. These were the famous startsi. Thousands of ordinary people flocked to see them, as did the intellectuals and academics of the time. In Eastern Ukraine, the dominant foundation is the Monastery of Pochaev, a hallowed place

where the Mother of God appeared and where there is a rock with the imprint of her foot. This monastery was the rampart of the Orthodox against the Uniates.

We now find ourselves in 1877. It was on April 14 of that year that Saint Luke was born as Valentin Voino Yasenetskij. His home on earth was the town of Kerch, the ancient Greek Pontikapaio (Ponticapaeum) in the Crimea. In the 9th century the Greeks built the wonderful Church of Saint John the Forerunner at this site, one of the most important monuments of the whole Crimea. Today, in front of the church there is a bust of Saint Luke.

The saint's father was a pharmacist. But the shop did not do well and he decided to close it. Thereafter he worked as a public employee. The saint's mother was Maria Kudrim, who was well-known for her charitable works. Apart from Saint Luke, the Voino Yasenetskijs also had another four children, all told three boys and two girls. Since the financial circumstances of the family became more embarrassed, the parents decided to move to Kiev, the cradle of Russian Christianity. This is an extremely beautiful and very green city, which is split by the River Dnieper. In this river, the first Christian Russian prince, Saint Vladimir, baptized his people in 988 and established the Orthodox faith on Russian soil. The Voino Yasenetskijs lived in a house in the centre of the town on Kresatik Street. As a boy, little Valentin did not stand out. Everyone thought him average and said that he could not be expected to make anything out of his life. He was distinguished, however, for being serious, honourable, high principled and sensitive. His talent for drawing displayed itself from an early age. When he was in secondary school, he also took lessons at the academy of fine arts in Kiev. At the age of 15, he took part in a painting competition and won first prize.



Two worlds warred in his soul: doubt and faith. What had the greatest influence on his soul was the famous monastery of the Pecherskaya Lavra- the Monastery of the Caves. The monastery stretches over 70 green acres inside the town of Kiev, right above the River Dnieper. It used to house thousands of monks and has produced a

host of saints. Apart from the archaeological value and interest the Lavra holds for the visitor, it also has unique spiritual treasures. The older ascetics used to hew their cells underground and live the enclosed life there in unceasing prayer.

With the passage of time, two large labyrinthine catacombs were created and cells were hewn on either side of the corridors. The enclosed monks blocked their doors and left only a window. Every day the duty monk went by with bread and water and they lived on that. If someone did not take this frugal meal for three or four days, the others realized that he had died. They then closed off the window and the cell became his tomb. When, many years later, these cells were opened, they found that the relics of these ascetics were undecomposed. It is a unique phenomenon for anywhere in the world: a single place holding 118 undecomposed relics.

There in the catacombs we also find the skulls of other saints, from which myrrh flows. In some mysterious way, the skulls become moist. Every now and then the monks collect the myrrh and distribute it to pilgrims. The Pecherskaya Lavra is truly a hallowed spot. The whole of its life, the movement and the vibrant monastic tradition, which had continued for centuries, had a profound influence on little Valentin, who used to visit the monastery to draw pictures of pilgrims and monks.

At the same stage in his life, he was also influenced by the ideas of the great Russian writer, Tolstoy, with whom he established a personal correspondence. He quickly came to understand the latter's errors in matters of the faith and broke off contact. At this same time, he was also making a careful study of the Scriptures.

When he finished school he was unsure which career to pursue. Initially he enrolled in the School of Law, but stopped after a year. He then left to go to Moscow to study at the School of Fine Arts under the famous Professor Knir. But he quickly returned to Kiev. He had now become intensely interested in service to his neighbours, his fellow human beings. At this difficult time, he discussed his options with an educator, who urged him to study medicine. In this way he would be able to contribute a great deal to villagers, whose medical care was very substandard.

In 1898, he began his studies at the School of Medicine in Kiev, which had an excellent reputation for the quality of the courses it offered. From the very first years, he became particularly interested in anatomy.

He took a first in his studies, specializing in surgery. He took up work at once, mainly on ophthalmic cases. In those days, a very common problem was trachoma, a dreadful eye disease which, for many people, resulted in blindness. The young doctor, as he then was, introduced a difficult method and gave thousands of people

their sight.

Before he managed to get started working in the provinces, the Russo-Japanese war broke out and Valentin volunteered to serve with the Red Cross contingent. Together with other doctors he set out by train for the Far East. The journey lasted a month. They took up residence in the town of Chita and, despite his youth, Valentin undertook the running of the surgery department of the military hospital. He operated on wounded soldiers and performed operations, from the simplest to the most difficult, with consummate ease.

In Chita he became acquainted with Anna Vasilievna, a volunteer nurse who was conspicuous for her high moral standards. They married and four children were born to the marriage.

From 1905 to 1910 he worked in a variety of regional hospitals. The demands were enormous. He had to be surgeon, gynaecologist, pathologist, paediatrician, health-care worker and dentist.

At that time he came face to face with the problem of general anaesthesia. Its implementation had already begun, but, because there were no specialist anaesthetists nor, indeed, appropriate facilities, general anaesthesia was actually more dangerous than the operation itself. For this reason he attempted to find new methods of local anaesthesia. *And at the age of only 29 he discovered a new method of local anaesthesia to the sciatic nerve. This work was later submitted in the form of a thesis and was approved with flying colours.*

He often went up to Moscow to work on his thesis. In 1910, he moved to the town of Pereslavl Zalesky. He found himself in a beautifully picturesque place, but his working conditions left a lot to be desired. The hospital had 50 beds, but its facilities were primitive. There was no electricity nor X-ray equipment. Water had to be brought every morning, in a barrel, by a water-seller.

He was taken to the hospital every morning in a carriage and he utilized even this time. En route, he read teach-yourself foreign language books and managed to learn seven. He spent hours in the operating theatre, and would lock himself up in the evenings in his office, continuing his scientific studies by the weak light of a petrol lamp.

In Pereslavl Zalessky he carried out between 650 and 1,000 operations a year and was alone. *He was among the pioneering surgeons in Russia and ventured to undertake difficult operations on the kidneys, the stomach, the bile duct and even the heart or brain, with great success.*

Towards the end of his stay in Pereslavl Zalessky, he considered becoming involved in surgery on pus producing infections, concerning which little had been taught at university. And then something strange happened. He himself explained that he had put together a plan for a book, had written the prologue and then quite suddenly the peculiar thought came to him: "When this book is finished, it'll be signed by a bishop".

1917 was a difficult year, not only for him but for Russia as a whole. The country was in turmoil. The Tsarist establishment crumbled. It was followed by a succession of interim governments, political instability and the October Revolution. It was also in this year that Valentin's wife contracted tuberculosis. They were therefore obliged to leave Pereslavl Zalessky and move to Tashkent.

They made their home in a spacious house and Valentin was immediately appointed head of the surgical unit of the state hospital, which he set about organizing diligently.

The political situation worsened, however. Immediately after the October Revolution, the Civil War broke out, which lasted four years and caused havoc throughout the vast country.

Millions died. Numbers in the region of 20 million have been mentioned and, of course, there were also very many more wounded. There were also, however, other unfortunate victims, the children, who lost their parents and were forced to survive by scavenging. Valentin was at the hospital day and night, risking his life. The few hours he was at home, he had to look after his sick wife, see his children, cook, clean up, do the washing.

In 1918, he was the leading figure behind the establishment of the University of Tashkent and was elected Professor of Topographic Anatomy and Surgery.

The political situation was out of control; the civil war raged everywhere. The Tsar and his family were under house arrest in Yekaterinburg. In July 1918 they were executed without a trial.



The murder inflamed passions and increased brutalities. People were in despair. You could be arrested for the slightest thing. All that was needed was the merest slander. And something of the sort occurred with Valentin. He had told off a problematic, hard-drinking worker at the hospital and the man sneaked on him to the authorities. One morning as he was going into the operating theatre, he was arrested and carted off to Tashkent's railway station. They had already arrested 2,000 soldiers who had mutinied. They condemned them after summary justice, condemned them to death and then executed them on the spot. Valentin took a place in the queue and awaited his own execution. The hours stretched endlessly. Late in the evening, after a wait of 16 hours, some party official recognized him. He heard about the pack of lies, intervened and they let Valentin go. And this is where we see his magnanimity and his self-denial: *instead of going home, he went to the hospital. He went into the operating theatre at midnight as if nothing had happened and began work.*

But the terrible event worsened the already poor state of health of his wife, Anna, and, a few days later, she departed this life in the arms of her husband. She was only 38 years old and he was 43. They buried her in Tashkent Cemetery. Above her grave he wrote: "Anna Vasilievna, 38 years old. A pure heart who pursued the truth with passion".

Valentin was now a widower with 4 small children. At this difficult juncture, God provided the answer: a nurse of very strong faith, whose husband had died, agreed to raise his children and become a second mother to them.

At this point we should, perhaps, speak of him in his medical and surgical capacity. *Today he is considered the top surgeon of the 20th century in Russia.* As Professor and Academician Kasirski writes "*...His fame and skill were legendary. He could perform the most difficult operations without any problem*". He himself said: "*A surgeon should have the eye of an eagle, the heart of a lion and the hand of a woman*", meaning a very delicate sense of touch. Once he took 20 sheets of paper and a scalpel. He asked his children to tell him a number and he would cut that number of pages at one stroke. They said 7, and with one movement he cut the seven sheets, leaving everyone astonished.

Apart from his scientific expertise, he was also distinguished for his deep faith in God. He would call for His help during operations. He had an icon of Christ and the Mother of God hanging on the wall, with an icon-lamp in front. He would light it,

pray a while and then with the gauze and iodine make the sign of the Cross on the patient's body, where he would start the operation. Only then would he make the first cut.

Although Valentin was always close to the Church, at that time he participated more actively in the ecclesiastical life of Tashkent. This was a particular joy to the faithful. One day a clergy/laity trial was held in the Cathedral, the aim of which was to pass judgment on and remove from office the local archbishop, Innokenti. Doctor Valentin, as he still was, was called to the trial and he boldly defended the archbishop. Innokenti was cleared of the charges and much moved by the position taken by the doctor. When the court was dismissed, the archbishop waited for the doctor at the door and thanked him for his defence as they walked three times round the church. Suddenly the archbishop stopped, looked the doctor in the eye and said to him: "Doctor, you should become a priest". Without a second thought, Valentin answered: "Your Eminence, if it's the will of God that I should become a priest, I'll do so".



And, indeed, in January 1921, he was ordained deacon and thereafter priest. The ordination of the famous university professor to the priesthood was a bolt from the blue for Tashkent. The new priest undertook parish duties and preached the word of God at every opportunity. *He did however, have to deal with the ironic jibes of his colleagues and students, who thought he was of no further use to science. But he proved them wrong.*

Let us dwell for a moment, as a parenthesis, on the political situation which obtained then in the Soviet Union. The civil war ended in 1921. The victors engaged in a merciless persecution of everyone that came under suspicion, under the charge of being counter-revolutionaries and so on. The prisons were packed and the revolutionary courts sat without a break. The situation was to be made even worse by an unexpected event. Lenin became ill. In two years he suffered a

succession of strokes that in the end had him confined to a wheelchair. The battle for the succession began. Against all expectations, Stalin prevailed, a ruthless man who would not only be the death of millions of citizens, but even of his friends and comrades.