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Missionary on a Mountaintop (Fr. David Hudson)

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Romanian Monastery

«You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.» —Matthew 5:14 One of the paradoxes of Orthodox missiology is that in order to reach the world with God’s message, the saints have often been sent into the wilderness. From there, their lives radiate the power and grace of God in such a way that the world flocks to them, and «the wilderness blossoms like a rose.»

For the fullness of the Christian gospel that has been preached by Orthodox Fathers and Mothers through the centuries does not consist simply in intellectual propositions, but in the power of lives transfigured, «deified,» through communion with God. «That . . . which we have seen with our eyes . . . and our hands have

handled . . . we declare to you» (1 John 1:1-3).

Such a paradox in our times is represented by Father Rafail Noica, the modern-day Romanian *sihastru* who lives on a remote mountaintop in the Western Carpathians. The word *sihastru* means «solitary» or «hermit,» but also has connotations of quietness, being related to the words «hesychast» and «hesychasm»—that state of union with God marked by profound clarity and peace of soul.

Father Rafail is a «spiritual grandson» of St. Silouan the Athonite, and his skete is under the protection of the same saint. It has been jokingly said that practically the entire Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church has made the climb up to St. Silouan Skete to try to persuade Father Rafail to come down and serve as bishop, but he cannot be moved from his obedience of retreat from the world.

Father Rafail is quite serious about his mission of prayer and communion with God, so much so that he does not receive many visitors. In each case, he seeks guidance from the Holy Spirit, and only if he feels the Spirit gives him a word for his visitor will he meet with him. Father Rafail sees his words as holy mysteries, as part of the holy mystery of confession and the mystical relationship between the disciple and the *duhovnic*, or spiritual father. And the words of the *duhovnic* to his disciple are not to be discussed with others.

Father Rafail is affectionately called «the other Noica,» being the son of a famous contemporary Romanian philosopher. He himself is a convert to Orthodoxy, for although baptized Orthodox, he was not raised to understand and live the Faith, and became a convinced Baptist before discovering Orthodoxy. «

At home I received little Christian education. We went to church from time to time, especially at Pascha, we lighted a candle, then we went home and ‘knocked eggs,’ » says Father Rafail. (This refers to the Orthodox Paschal custom, in Romania and elsewhere, of knocking hardboiled reddyed eggs together in a contest to see whose egg breaks last, while saying «Christ is risen!» with the answer: «He is truly risen!»)

«Once, when I began to realize that there is not only an Orthodox Church, but also a Catholic Church, that there are ‘repenters’ (evangelicals), . . . I asked Mama why there are so many churches.» His mother, an Englishwoman and an Anglican also lacking a thorough Christian upbringing, answered: «The difference is that Orthodox and Catholics think you must worship God with all the beauty which He created in the world, with icons, with music, with everything that is beautiful, while Protestants think that you have to forsake all those things, for they are not essential, and to concentrate on prayer, in a simple form, without anything that is

not essential.» Rafail remembers:

I have always had a tendency to be drawn to simplicity, to what is essential.... Mama's explanation impressed me and left me with a certain sympathy for Protestants . . . and I found a community of Baptists [years later in England], led by a truly remarkable man.... I participated in the religious life, detached from exterior forms, with the thought that I had found, in that Baptist form . . . a more purified, more simplified form of worshiping God. At the beginning of my searchings I didn't know whether there really were differences between the various ways of worshiping God.... I made the circuit at one point of all the churches in the part of London in which we lived; I met the Pentecostals, the Congregationalists, the Salvation Army, and others and eventually . . . someone introduced me to a Baptist church where I remained . . . especially because of the preaching of the pastor, a man for whom I still have the highest respect.

Rafail became a very active and convinced Baptist for about a year and a half, until his spiritual journey led him to a Romanian enclave in Paris, where he had gone to study. There he found himself among Orthodox Christians again, and he says:

But there was a problem. I had begun now to have a Protestant theology, through which, among other things, I rejected reverencing icons, counting it a kind of idolatry, and I even started to think: could it be that a demon is taking advantage of me and making me go now to Paris, to live among the Romanian emigrants . . . and thus to return to «the heresy of Orthodoxy»? For I knew I had the seeds still in me. For from baptism I was Orthodox, but I left myself to the will of God, who is Almighty. . . .And I couldn't resolve this crisis, to keep myself from Orthodoxy. So one evening, in my great fear of falling from this «pure» faith which God had revealed to me, I began to pray fervently for the Lord to keep me, wherever I might be, so as to not fall back into heresy. And praying fervently, a thought came to me like a serpent and said: «But what if Orthodoxy is right and Protestantism a mistake?» And I didn't accept to respond, for I couldn't see what response to give, but I tried an ascetic approach: «No, I must remain faithful to the Lord.» And I cast out the thought. But again the thought came to me from the other side: «But God knows all things and you don't. What if He knows that Orthodoxy is true?» I thought about it, but I only responded: «Impossible: I hold my ground, God has shown me, leave me alone with this foolishness!» And so this battle continued on many occasions, and I couldn't escape this serpent which—slippery, isn't he? sometimes from the left, sometimes from the right—kept coming, twisting, inescapable, until I entered into a kind of panic. It seemed he had wrapped himself around my throat. I said: «Lord, I want to remain faithful to You. If Orthodoxy could truly be right and Protestantism not, then you have to convince me. But You must convince me as God. You have to speak to my foolishness. You, as God, must speak to the hidden

places of my heart in such a way as I, the ignorant one, can understand You.»



Baptist Church

In Paris, Rafail came into contact with a believer whose simplicity, humility, and depth of Christian life impressed him deeply.

And, not so much through conversation as through a difficult trial through which the Lord took me, little by little the Mother of God drew me back to the Church in which I was born and baptized, this time with the discovery that the Orthodox Church is not just a Church among others, but is, pure and simply, the God-given nature of man. And it historically took the name of true worship, a very beautiful and meaningful name, a name which reveals, if you will, that which the true Fathers sought, not seeking worldly glory, nor truer philosophy, but seeking a single thing: to remain in the true worship, revealed by God Himself; they sought to preserve unadulterated that vision of human nature. The Lord took me through Protestantism and, like a good Protestant, I started reading the Bible. And in the Bible I got especially stuck at the sixth chapter of the Gospel of St. John, where the Lord Jesus speaks so clearly and openly about Holy Communion, but not as a symbol. He speaks there about His Body, saying that whoever doesn't eat the Body of the Son of Man and doesn't drink His Blood, does not have life in himself. And I tried to understand what that means, why He speaks so concretely. But I consoled myself a bit seeing that even the Apostles stumbled at these hard words. . . . I asked an Orthodox Christian to tell me why the Orthodox show so much devotion to their priests, even kissing their hands. And he said to me, so kindly and humbly: «Why, I don't know; personally, I kiss the hand that can give me what I cannot have

without a priest.» And I asked him: «What's that? What can a man give you that you, as a man like him, can't have?» And he answered, still kindly and humbly: «The precious and all-holy Body of our Lord and Savior.» And then I suddenly realized that this was what we call in the Church «Mystery,» and for the first time I understood more concretely, more consciously, what Mystery means. I too believed in Mystery.

Through that humble and kind Orthodox Christian —»through whom the Lord hit me over the head«—Rafail returned to the Church through confession and communion, and has remained in the Orthodox Church ever since. «Speaking of wandering,» Father Rafail says,

I'll share with you how I experienced it. I found myself in the Orthodox Church, whose atmosphere I knew. I was in my Father's house, but a stranger, and I have experienced both painfully and joyfully the state of the Prodigal Son. Painfully, because I have lost so much time. . . . But in the context of my life, without that wandering away, maybe I wouldn't have found the way, although . . . only God knows to what extent it was wandering and to what extent the providence of God, what I call my wandering. So, objectively, it is wandering, but subjectively, only God knows. For, if I had not gone away, if I hadn't experienced Orthodoxy as a convert, maybe I would have never been able to see it in its radiant beauty, the single truth of history.



St. Silouan the Athonite

Not long after his conversion to Orthodoxy, Father Rafail received the call to monasticism and entered the Monastery of St. John the Baptist in Essex, England, where he was tonsured in 1965 by Archimandrite Sophrony, the disciple of St. Silouan. In the late '90s Father Rafail, still under obedience to the same monastery, withdrew to the silence of the mountaintop in the Western Carpathians of Romania, where he carries on his secret mission of intercession and of being a spiritual father to those the Holy Spirit brings to him.

His whereabouts are only vaguely known, and those who manage to find him are begged not to tell anyone where he is. «The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit» (John 3:8).

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