"Do not reproach me with the fact, my lords and brothers, that, the youngest among you, I dare write about holy miracles. I know my own poverty and both my conscience and my vice-stained mind fill me with remorse; and my many sins make this great work a difficult undertaking for me. And it is not my business, but yours, great and ancient fathers, to learn from the miracles of our saintly father Sergius, and to illuminate our crude spirits with this teaching and to proclaim it to future generations by writing. But I pray you, listen attentively: if I do not write, and you also do not wish to do it, who will then fulfill the royal injunction and who will proclaim the holy miracles, if our predecessors too have not written for so many years? Though I am a sinner, and am ignorant and without art for such a task, my character suits it and I experience the need to undertake it, but He who fulfills every good work is the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."

Simon Azar’in, cellarer of the Trinity-Saint-Sergius Monastery. The year 1646. (From The Tale of the Newly Appeared Well.)

1. To the Reader

LIVING religious experience as the sole legitimate way to gain knowledge of the dogmas—that is how I would like to express the general theme of my book or, rather, my jottings, which have been written at different times and in different moods. Only by relying on immediate experience can one survey the spiritual treasures of the Church and come to see their value. Only by passing a damp sponge over the ancient writings, can one wash them with living water and decipher the letters of the church literature. The ascetic saints of the Church are alive for the living and dead for the dead. For a soul that has become dark, the faces of the saints become dark; for a soul that has become paralyzed, the bodies of the saints are frozen in terrible fixity. Is it not well known that the hysteric and the possessed are afraid of saints? And are not those who sin against the Church forced to look away from it in fear? But unclouded eyes see as always the faces of the saints as radiant, "as the faces of angels." For a purified heart, these faces are, as always, inviting; as in the past, they cry out to those who have ears to hear. I ask myself, Why are the common folk, in their pure immediacy, involuntarily drawn to these saints? Why in their mute sorrow do the common folk find comfort in these saints as well as the joy of forgiveness and the beauty of heavenly celebration?

I do not delude myself. I firmly know that I have done no more than light a penny candle of yellow wax. But even this little flame trembling in my unaccustomed hands has brought forth a myriad of sparkling reflections in the treasure-house of the Holy Church. For many centuries, day
after day, the treasure has been deposited here—precious stone by precious stone, gold coin by gold coin. Like fragrant dew on fleece, like heav enly manna, the gracious power of God-illuminated souls has descended here. Like the finest pearls, the tears of pure hearts have been collected here. Here, both heaven and earth have heaped their treasures over many centuries. The most secret yearnings, the most concealed aspirations to God-likening; the azure moments of angelic purity that come after the storm; the joys of communion with God and the holy torments of ardent repentance; the fragrance of prayer and the quiet longing for heaven; eternal seeking and eternal finding; infinitely deep intuitions of eternity and the childlike peace of the soul; awe and love, love without end. . . . Ages have passed, but all this has abided and grown.

And every one of my spiritual efforts, every sigh that issues from my lips, summons the entire store of accumulated gracious energy to my aid. Invisible arms bear me over the flowering meadows of the spiritual world. Afire with myriads of myriads and leaders of leaders of looks, glistening, sparkling, playing like the beams of a rainbow or like an infinite number of radiant splashes, the treasures of the Church produce in my poor soul a state of fear and trembling. Uncountable and ineffable are the riches of the Church. I can take part of them for my own use; my eyes burn with greed. I reach in, and I grab a handful at random. I have not yet seen what I have grasped. What do I have in my hands? Diamonds, carbuncles, or emeralds? Or perhaps tender pearls? I do not know if my handful is better or worse than all that remains. But having, in the words of Athanasius the Great, taken "little from much," I know that I am dissatisfied in advance by my work, because my eyes burn too greedily at the sight of these treasures. What do a few small piles of precious stones mean when they are measured by the cubic yard?

And involuntarily I remember how the general spirit of this work gradually changed in my consciousness. At first my intention was to use no references, only my own words. But it soon became necessary to enter into conflict with myself and allow room for brief extracts. But the farther along I got, the more they began to grow and expand into large fragments, until finally, it appeared that I had to discard everything of my own and publish only the works of the Church. Perhaps that is the only right way, the way that consists in directly addressing the Church itself. And who am I to write about what is holy? "I know my own poverty and both my conscience and my vice-stained mind fill me with remorse; and my many sins make this great work a difficult undertaking for me." But if I nevertheless do attribute some significance to my Letters, it is an exclusively preparatory one, for catechumens. These letters are intended to

provide some sustenance for them until they are able to receive nourishment directly from their Mother's hand.

Ecclesiality—that is the name of the refuge where the heart's anxiety finds peace, where the pretensions of the rational mind are tamed, where great tranquility descends into our reason. Let it be the case that neither I nor anyone else can define what ecclesiality is! Let those who attempt such a definition dispute one another and mutually refuse one another's formulas of ecclesiality. Indeed, do not its very indefinability, its ungraspableness by logical terms, its ineffability prove that ecclesiality is life, a special, new life, which is given to man, but which, like all life, is inaccessible to the rational mind? And do not divergences in the definition of ecclesiality, the variety of incomplete and always insufficient verbal formulas for what ecclesiality is, empirically confirm what the Apostle told us: namely that the Church is the body of Christ, "the fullness of him that filleth all in all" (Eph. 1:23)? How then can this "fullness" of Divine life be packed into a narrow coffin of logical definition? It would be ridiculous to think that this impossibility disproves in any way the existence of ecclesiality. On the contrary, its existence is rather proved by this impossibility. And to the extent that ecclesiality is prior to all its separate manifestations; to the extent that it is the Divine-human element out of which the sacraments, the dogmas, the canons, and even to some degree the temporary, everyday routine of the Church have been crystallized in the course of Church history—to that extent one can preeminently apply to the Church in this fullness the Apostle's prophecy: "there must also be divergences among you (dei kai aireses en humin einai)" (1 Cor. 11:19), i.e., divergences in the interpretation of ecclesiality. Nevertheless, anyone who does not flee the Church receives into himself by his very life the unitary element of ecclesiality and knows that ecclesiality is and what it is.

Where there is no spiritual life, something external must exist as an assurance of ecclesiality. A specific function, the pope, or a system of functions, a hierarchy—that is the criterion of ecclesiality for Roman

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6 See the quotation from Simon Azar'in on the page preceding Chapter 1 of this book.

7 A catechumen is one receiving rudimentary instruction in the doctrines of Christianity, preliminary to admission among the faithful of the church.

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4 It would be presumptuous of me to define ecclesiality [tserkovnost' in Russian] when Florensky himself says that he cannot. Using Florensky's own language, ecclesiality is the essence of the church (existing before the institution of the church); "the Divine-human element out of which the sacraments, the dogmas, the canons, and even to some degree the temporary, everyday routine of the Church are crystallized in the course of Church history," Ecclesiality = spiritual life. Ecclesiality, as Florensky sees it, appears to be a peculiarly Orthodox concept, and he claims that only the Orthodox, among the branches of the Christian church, have preserved it in its purity.

5 I use the word reason to render razum (equivalent to the German Vernunft) and rationality/rational mind to render rassudok (equivalent to Verstand). The corresponding adjectives razumnyi and rassudochnyi are rendered as reasonable (used in the sense of pertaining to reason) and rational. "Reason" is the mind or intelligence in man that comes from God and is able to see things integrally; the "rational" mind comes from man and tends to oppose what comes from God. The rational mind must be "killed off" by an act of assent, self-sacrifice, and then it is replaced by "reason," the mind that is in its proper subservient place, i.e., subservient to spirit in man.
Catholics. On the other hand, a specific confessional formula, the creed, or a system of formulas, the text of the Scripture, is the criterion of ecclesiality for Protestants. In the final analysis, in both cases what is decisive is a concept, an ecclesiastical-juridical concept for Catholics and an ecclesiastical-scientific concept for Protestants. But by becoming the supreme criterion, a concept makes all manifestation of life unnecessary.

Furthermore, since no life can be commensurate with a concept, all movement of life inevitably spills over the boundaries marked by the concept, causing harm and becoming intolerable. For Catholicism (it is understood that I take both Catholicism and Protestantism in their extreme, in their principle), all independent manifestation of life is noncanonical; for Protestantism, it is unscientific. In both cases, life is truncated by a concept; it is rejected in advance in the name of a concept. If Catholicism is usually associated with a denial of freedom while Protestantism is decisively associated with an acceptance of freedom, both of these associations are incorrect. Catholicism also recognizes freedom, but a freedom that is defined beforehand; everything that is outside the defined limits is illegitimate. On the other hand, Protestantism recognizes compulsion, but only outside the predefined bounds of rationalism. Everything outside these bounds is unscientific. If in Catholicism one can perceive the fanaticism of canonicity, then in Protestantism one can perceive the equally great fanaticism of scientism.

The indefinability of Orthodox ecclesiality, I repeat, is the best proof of its vitality. Of course, we Orthodox cannot point to any one ecclesial function about which it can be said that it sums up all of ecclesiality, for what would be the sense of all the other functions and activities of the Church? Likewise, we cannot point to any one formula or book which could be taken as the fullness of ecclesial life. And if such a formula or book did exist, what would be the sense of other formulas or books, of all other activities of the Church? There is no concept of ecclesiality, but ecclesiality itself is, for every living member of the Church, the life of the Church is the most definite and tangible thing that he knows. But the life of the Church is assimilated and known only through life—not in the abstract, not in a rational way. If one must nevertheless apply concepts to the life of the Church, the most appropriate concepts would be not juridical and archaeological ones but biological and aesthetic ones. What is ecclesiality? It is a new life, life in the Spirit. What is the criterion of the rightness of this life? Beauty. Yes, there is a special beauty of the spirit, and, ungrasparable by logical formulas, it is at the same time the only true path to the definition of what is orthodox and what is not orthodox.

The connoisseurs of this beauty are the spiritual elders, the staryts; the spiritual relationship of spiritual children to their spiritual father.” (See Feodosiū’s memoirs in Sila Božitija i nemoshib cheloveka [God’s Power and Man’s Impotence], edited by Sergei Nils, 2d reprint edition [Sergey Posad, 1992], p. 171.) Feodosiū further points out that, in the Philokalia [see Florensky’s Note 135], Clement and Ignatius have named five distinguishing features of this relationship: (1) complete trust in the staryts; (2) perfect candor before him in word and deed; (3) complete eradication of one’s own will and complete obedience to the will of the staryts; (4) abstention from argument and disputation regarding questions of faith; and (5) complete and truthful confession of one’s sins and profoundest secrets. Rooted in evangelical, apostolic, and patristic teaching, starcestvo is an exercise whose purpose is to empty oneself of one’s own will and intellect, indeed of oneself. It is through the monk’s own will that Satan attacks him, and by entering into the relationship of starcestvo the monk closes the doors of his soul to Satan. He closes the doors to Satan and opens the doors to God’s radiance, and, at the extreme limit of saintliness, he is “defiled” [see note e on p. 94]. Essential to starcestvo is the relationship with another person. God is attained and Satan is defeated through another person. Many spiritual writers have pointed out the dangers of the solitary ascetic path (ibid., pp 171 ff).

Following Theophan the Recluse [See note a on p. 12], Feodosiū indicates that the staryts does not absolve or punish. His role is rather to understand and define the spiritual state of the one he directs, to explain to him how he has come to sin, and to indicate how he can avoid this sin in the future, and how he can extinguish the passion from which the sin arose (ibid.).

The practice of starcestvo has a long tradition in the Christian East. It flourished in the ancient Egyptian and Palestinian monastic communities in the 4th to 6th centuries. It was then transplanted to Mount Athos [see note d on p. 185] in Greece, and finally transported to Russia. In Russia, starcestvo is chiefly associated with Optina Pustyn [see note d on pp. 92-93].