

# Editorial

Men of great sanctity have sometimes been formed in conditions aimed at their destruction. The Soviet labour camps, which in the 1930s swallowed up thousands of human beings, also produced some of the twentieth century's saints. Few of the Russian Orthodox bishops active in the 1920s were still alive at the end of the 1930s. "No one lives through life without his Gethsemane or his Golgotha" wrote Bishop German whilst in exile. He was able to see his situation as the way of salvation, of fulfilment, and in his letters (see *Documents* pp. 28-29) encouraged his spiritual daughter to accept all the problems and difficulties surrounding her life as God-given, for "God leads man to his spiritual goals by paths which from outside have an unpleasant and unhappy character". Peace was not to be found in security, in "a small flat, firewood, food", but could be discovered in the hardships of exile with all its deprivations. Bishop Afanasi is another saintly man, whose life continues to inspire the faithful in the USSR.<sup>1</sup> Born in 1887, he was confessed as a monk in 1912. In 1913 he took up an appointment in the Vladimir seminary where his gift for teaching led one of his pupils to write :

He, like an Angel, sang the praises of God before his young listeners and the sound of this song remained in the young soul – wordless but living.

In June 1921 he was made a bishop. Between March and September 1922 he was arrested four times and then exiled for two years. In exile he celebrated the liturgy every day, and every day he wrote to his mother in Vladimir letters which upheld her and many of his flock. In January 1925 he returned to Vladimir, but at the end of 1926 the local authorities advised him to retire. He refused and was arrested in January 1927. Accused of belonging to a counter-revolutionary organization, he was sentenced to three years in a labour camp. In January 1929 he was moved to the appalling conditions of a typhus-ridden camp in the Solovetsky Islands. Miraculously he survived and at the end of February, having been pronounced fit, was sent to the Turukhansky region for three years of hard labour. By this time, after suffering from typhus and dreadful hunger, he was hardly recognizable – thin, shaven. After his release he returned to his beloved diocese of Vladimir, where he found another

<sup>1</sup> See "The Way of the Cross of Bishop Afanasi", *Vestnik RSKhD*, No. 107, 1973, pp. 170-211.

bishop in office and the cathedral transformed into an anti-religious museum. He retired quietly to a small village and served humbly in the local church. In 1936 the authorities began to search for him. He was arrested, accused of creating a secret house-church and sentenced to five years in the White Sea labour camps. Now he had to fell trees. He spent August to October 1937 in the isolation cell, from which a few prisoners were taken and shot every night. Strangely he survived, and at the end of November returned to felling trees. After another spell in the isolation cell he emerged an invalid, weak and coughing. In this condition he had to walk 400 kilometres in July 1941 to a labour camp in the Arkhangelsk region where he remained until June 1942. In November 1943 he was again arrested, moved from one prison to another until, in July 1944, he was transferred to Siberia. Only in 1954 was he finally freed. But the old people's home which he entered proved to be another form of imprisonment. At last in 1955 he was able to retire to a small town, Petushki, in the Vladimir region.

Those who knew him described him as the embodiment of love. He was peaceful, good, kind. He laughed and enjoyed teasing people. During his years of imprisonment he kept all the Church's festivals. One evening a new prisoner arrived. He was a priest and was shoved towards a bunk. There, on the bottom tier, sat Bishop Afanasi reciting the evening office. He recognized the priest, but without showing any surprise and without greeting him simply said, "read", and made the newcomer help him complete the service. He would continually repeat the words of John Chrysostom "God be praised for everything"; he would think of all that the prophets suffered and found great comfort in the example of Maximus Confessor. In one letter he wrote :

There is no change in my situation. I sit by the sea and wait for the weather. I look at all this calmly, in the firm knowledge that our fate does not depend on earthly rulers, but on Him, who holds in his hands the fate of the rulers themselves. I am comforted by the words of the psalmist: "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh even from the Lord, who hath made heaven and earth."

In his last years his favourite verse from the psalms was "I am thine, O save me". He died in 1962.

XHJ