

Fr. Dmitri Dudko: An Eye-Witness Account

The events described in the following account occurred in May 1974. After Fr. Dudko was dismissed from the Church of St. Nicholas on Preobrazhenka in Moscow, he was appointed to a parish far out of the city in the Orekhovo-Zuevsky district. However, in December 1975 he was dismissed from this parish too (see documents pp. 28-31). Keston News Service No. 24 reports the latest news: "Fr. Dmitri Dudko has been appointed to a church near Moscow. He is to serve in the village of Grebnevo, 35 kilometres from the centre of Moscow, where there are two churches. The Reuters report of 14 April, 1976, which supplies this news, gives no further details." The author of the following eye-witness account wishes to remain anonymous. Ed.

The Church of St. Nicholas on Preobrazhenka stands down a side road, shielded from the noise of traffic by a screen of buildings. From the road, you go through a green-painted fence into a garden, well-tended as monastery gardens are in medieval paintings. Well-dug, weed-free beds contain flowers and also what appear to be vegetables of a sort unknown to me. There are a lot of trees, and all this combines to give the place an air of great peace. The church itself, outside, is red-ochre and white, and very well-looked-after. It positively invites you in. Inside, at first, you can see nothing, not because it is dark but because it is so full. Six hundred or more people have packed in to hear the service. At least half of them are young, and a very large number of them, perhaps the majority of the young people, are men. Clearly, this service is something exceptional in that it appeals to the Soviet Union's intellectual youth.

After I had taken in the congregation, I was able to absorb the details of the church itself. In the West, I should unhesitatingly have said the building was eighteenth or late-seventeenth century. But, given the architectural lag I suppose it must be nineteenth century. The ceiling is flat, with a slight stucco decoration. The walls are covered with icons. The main iconostasis does not stand across the main body of the church but over in the far left-hand corner. It is from there that the service is con-

ducted. Half-way down the church is a large icon some eight feet tall, depicting the crucifixion. Above it, written in light bulbs, are the words *Khristos Voskres*, "Christ is Risen", and this, together with another iconostasis which boxes off the right-hand corner of the church, challenges the main iconostasis as the focus of attention, so that one is uncertain where to face during the service. In the event, some of the congregation face one way, some the other, according to preference. There is a choir, which sings a little flat and, at the back of the church, an open coffin containing the body of an old woman, from which comes a strong smell of spices. It is very hot, and the hat of the woman standing in front of me is made of some angora-like substance, which is constantly going up my nose. Somewhere in the church a mad woman is barking like a dog and pawing the ground. I wonder if I shall be able to last out the service without fainting, for in Russian churches there are no pews; the congregation stands tightly packed together for the three hours or more that the service lasts.

The service drew to a close and Fr. Dmitri stepped forward. I could not really tell how old he was; bald, with grey hair and beard, yet with a young face. Was he 40, or 60? He could be either, but the knowledge that he had spent some time in the camps led me to guess that he was much younger than he looked. When he spoke, his voice was very clear, his style of address and vocabulary rich in slavonic words contrasting pleasantly with those of the usual speeches you hear in the Soviet Union.

"First question : What is the meaning of Easter?"

"Second question : Why do Christians attach special importance to Easter? Answer : I have partially answered this in my reply to the first question, but a little more seems implied in this question, so I shall elaborate. . . ."

"Third question : What did you make of the article by . . . in the *Literary Gazette* of . . . Answer : As the person who asked this question may be aware, I was at seminary with the person who wrote this article and I should like to say. . . ." And so on.

This then was what made his sermons so attractive. Members of the congregation handed in written questions, which he would take away and answer at his next sermon, two weeks later. I can remember very few details of his answers. In fact, only two sequences remain in my mind. In the first, he was talking about a small boy whom he knew, who had asked his mother why Christ had come into the world and died.

"To save mankind."

"What, everybody? Even bad people?"

"Yes."

"Then he must have been a very good person indeed."

Thus impressed, the boy a few days later passed one of Moscow's many closed churches. He asked his mother why there was no cross on it. She explained that the church had been closed. The child then went up to the church and, to the consternation of the passers-by, drew a large cross on the wall. Finally, when his school teacher was explaining that God does not exist, and that this had now been quite definitely proved by the fact that the cosmonauts saw no God when they flew into space, this same child piped up:

"Then they were flying too low."

The other sequence I can remember is the following:

"Question: Why do you always attack atheists? Answer: On the whole I do not attack atheists, but atheism. I do this because atheism, by denying God, deprives man of his most urgent reason for living; and the thought of an after-life, coupled with Christ's teaching, helps us to be good. There are, of course, different kinds of atheists. There are those who lead a good life and who do good to others, without the compulsion of the judgment after death. These are very strong people and I respect them perhaps even more than those who do the same as they with the compulsion of the after-life. In fact, I should call them believers, as they believe in a moral code as strongly as we believe in God. However, there are other atheists for whom the removal of God means merely that men can be treated immorally with impunity, and who educate the young in the same way. These are the atheists whom I feel it my duty to attack."

What did it all mean? Well to me, then an atheist, just this. The immorality of Soviet society, its inhumanity and corruption, its lack of a moral code or credible ideals, means that Christ's teaching comes through to those whom it reaches as a shining contrast. It stresses the value of the individual, of humaneness, forgiveness, gentleness, love. It was this that appealed to the child in his example. As for me, the atheist, Fr. Dmitri that evening convinced me that the moral code of Christianity was not just something that could be cast aside as superceded; that, in fact, it had survived for two thousand years precisely because it did stress certain qualities essential in personal relations between men. The loss of these qualities is one of the most disturbing features of modern Soviet life.

On the way out, two of the old women who seem to make up such a large proportion of the population of this country, were talking behind me:

"I don't like all these young people coming here. They don't believe. They only come to listen."

"It doesn't matter that they don't believe. They will learn. Look at them! Fine, young, educated people. They will listen and learn."

"I don't believe it, and even if they do, it will be too late."

"It's never too late. . . ."

We drove back through the city. Past the bookshops with their slogans, portraits of Lenin, and huge piles of unsold and unsaleable political books. Back to the flat, to eat and drink and then to talk until six in the morning. Fr. Dmitri had certainly proved an interesting and important experience.

Two weeks later we went to the church again. It was even fuller this time. There was no coffin at the back, so it could hold more people. Even so, the congregation spilled out through the doors and into the courtyard. The time came for the sermon, and Fr. Dmitri stepped forward :

"There will be no sermon. The Patriarch has forbidden me to preach until I have had talks with him. Christ is risen!"

"He is risen indeed!"

There was much feeling in the response. Some of the congregation began to leave the church, many went over to the iconostasis and formed a queue, waiting their turn to be blessed by Fr. Dmitri. Others wandered about asking, "What has happened? Why is there no sermon?" Outside the church the people stood around for about three quarters of an hour, not knowing what to do, but not wanting to go away. One old woman began to shout angrily : "He's gone too far. Why did he have to? He's got a wife and children, and now they will take him away." She burst into tears and walked away out of the churchyard. Not long after, the rest dispersed. Many, including myself, believed that they had seen the last of Fr. Dmitri. It was to have been his ninth sermon.

Then a fortnight later, we once more made for the church. We did not expect much, except, perhaps, some police action. Sure enough, there was a KGB car, disguised as a taxi, parked round the corner, and a crowd of very obvious plain-clothes men standing a little way down the road. The church itself was noticeably emptier than before, containing only some four to five hundred people. Fr. Dmitri took no part in the service. Indeed, for most of it he was not visible at all, so that I thought that he must already have been dismissed, or sent to some remote provincial parish. I noticed that several of the old women were crying. Was it the emotional experience of the service, I wondered, or were they too, troubled by Fr. Dmitri's absence. However, about 20 minutes before the sermon was due to begin, he came out from behind the iconostasis for a few seconds, and then retired again, still taking no part in the service. At least he was alive and well and in Moscow. But would he preach? The time for the sermon came, and that part of the congregation which had been facing the large icon of the crucifixion, pressed down the church to join those facing the iconostasis. The atmosphere was tense. Everyone was anxious to know what would come next. Fr. Dmitri stepped forward

and spoke, his clear voice sounding even clearer this time, and containing a new note – defiance. I shall try to convey what I can remember of the sermon.

“Every legal code, including even ours, grants the accused the right to speak one last time in his own defence, before judgment is made. I am taking advantage of that right in addressing you tonight. Those of you who were at my last sermon will recall that I said then that the Patriarch had forbidden me to preach until I had had discussions with him. Since then, I have repeatedly tried to see him, but every time have been refused an audience. After a few attempts to carry out what I had understood to be an instruction to see him, I wrote the Patriarch a letter, which I shall read to you now :

Your Holiness, you have instructed me not to preach at the church of St. Nicholas until I have had discussions with you. I understand that there is no objection to me performing my religious duties, that the services are properly carried out, but that there is an objection to my sermons, to the form which they take and that I am alleged to have taken your name in vain. On that second point, may I say that, on the contrary, far from taking your name in vain, I have tried to defend it from those who would malign it. As to the form of my sermons, I did not intend, originally, to make them question and answer sessions. It simply turned out like that. Members of my congregation asked me questions on points of religion and morals that interested them, and I felt it my duty as a priest to answer them. The fact that these sermons drew such a large number of people, and young people, shows that my preaching must have appealed to something in them which drew them to the church. May I say that traditional preaching sometimes, perhaps one might even say often, does not reach out to modern Soviet youth, and thus does not bring them to the Church . . .”

I cannot recall how the letter ended, but when he had read it, Fr. Dmitri continued :

“After sending that letter, I again tried to get an audience with the Patriarch, and again was refused. Instead, I received a letter signed by the Patriarch’s secretary, relieving me of my appointment to this church, and telling me to place myself at the disposal of the Bishop of the Moscow region. I then wrote this second letter :

Your Holiness, I have received your letter ordering me to put myself at the disposal of the Bishop of the Moscow region. As a priest, I cannot refuse to accept the orders of a bishop or patriarch, and indeed I accept them readily, so long as I believe that they are doing God’s work. However I cannot accept these orders when they are merely the orders of the ungodly, using the Church as their vehicle. Accordingly, I am resigning from the priesthood . . .”

Once again, I can remember no more of the letter, but the essential is there. The sermon ended as follows :

“My congregation! Once before they have tried to get rid of me. That time the Public Prosecutor wanted me to be removed. That time I was saved only because of the intervention of you, my congregation, and the Prosecutor had to withdraw. This time, the ungodly are working through the Church, in order to confuse you. I appeal to you, my congregation, to stand by me once again and to save me. I have nothing else left. The ungodly are attacking me through the Church, illegally using the Church as their weapon, because I am doing God’s work as I see it. For this I, my wife and my children are being turned out of our house into the street. I appeal to you for support. I am, I stress, resigning from the Church, not because I no longer believe, not because I do not want to work in the Moscow region, but because the ungodly are using the Church for their own ends. I am resigning, I repeat, as a protest against the illegal power of the ungodly in the Church. I am resigning so that I can continue to do God’s work in my own way. It has become impossible as a priest. I shall do it as a man among men. Christ is risen!”

“He is risen indeed.”

At this point someone shouted, “What an outrage!” and for a moment it looked as if things might turn really nasty. But Fr. Dmitri said: “Please, don’t shout. That was merely a provocation. Don’t shout. Please go quietly.” He was not permitted to bless people, but was whisked away behind the iconostasis.

Once, after he had seen him on a previous occasion, a friend of mine had said, “Why does he do it? I can’t understand how he continues. He is quite different from Solzhenitsyn. I have spoken to them both. Solzhenitsyn simply was afraid of nothing and nobody, but this man is afraid, all the time. Yet he carries on.” I replied that I supposed that he felt that he had to, that life became meaningless to him if he could not carry out God’s work as he understood it, and that this was greater than the fear. Certainly, he must have known what risks he was taking. At his last sermon there was even a KGB man in plain clothes in the congregation ostentatiously holding up a microphone and taping every word he said. Yet he carried on.

Outside the church, the crowd stood around, waiting. People looked gloomy. I could hear the word “signatures” being repeated by a number of voices and gathered that a petition was being organized. A priest came out of the church and was immediately surrounded by angry old women. I could not hear his reply. I just caught the word “. . . the Patriarch . . .” said very apologetically, as he hurried away towards the street. Then Fr. Dmitri came out, propelled at the elbows by two plain-clothes KGB

men.* He made his way through the crowd, and people flocked to him to be blessed. He blessed them and kissed them. He went towards the lavatory in the courtyard opposite the church entrance. The two KGB men slammed the door after him and stood outside, eyeing the crowd apprehensively. They were both young. One, short, dark, possibly a Georgian or Armenian, bit his nails and looked at the crowd. The other, thin, fair-haired and pimply, just looked sick. Fr. Dmitri emerged. They took his elbows, but were uncertain how to move him through the crowd, as people were again coming forward to be blessed. Someone shouted some commands, the escorts looked relieved, and propelled Fr. Dmitri towards the back entrance to the yard, through a small gate, which was then slammed shut on the crowd. A voice could be heard, saying: "Down here! We've got a car ready."

And so he disappeared: the bravest man and one of the best men I have even seen. I shall never forget him.

May 1974.

As an appendix to the above eye-witness account we print a number of documents (pp. 28-31) about Fr. Dmitri Dudko. Our Hope (O nashem upovanii), the Russian text of the question and answer sessions, is reviewed on pp. 36-37. Ed.

* A footnote in *O nashem upovanii* (p. 194) states that these men were actually "young believers" who were protecting Fr. Dudko from provocations, and that he was not in fact arrested. But RCL's contributor claims that no one appeared to recognize these two men as parishioners and that everyone he spoke to or overheard at the time were convinced that Fr. Dudko had been arrested. *Ed.*

Fr. Dmitri Dudko Dismissed

Igor Shafarevich, mathematician, a corresponding member of the USSR Academy of Sciences and member of Sakharov's Human Rights Committee, is the author of the following document about Fr. Dudko. It is entitled "Let me give you an example . . ." It was written just after Fr. Dudko's dismissal on 23 December 1975 from the Church of Nikita the Martyr in the Orekhovo-Zuevsky district.

I heard that at the recent session of the World Council of Churches in Nairobi some time was given to discussing the situation of the Russian Orthodox Church, and that this discussion evoked considerable excitement. I can well imagine that there was considerable bewilderment and misunderstanding: much of that which determines the life of the Church in our country is simply impossible to explain to someone who has not lived our life. But it can happen that one concrete example, one human story can illuminate what seems incomprehensible in general terms. If there is one such example, it is the fate of the priest Dmitri Dudko.

The name of Fr. Dmitri became particularly well known in Moscow two years ago, when more and more people began to flock to his sermons and talks, so that in the end the church could not hold all the people who wanted to get in. At Easter the Church authorities suspended Fr. Dmitri, and at one time it seemed that he could not continue as a priest. But by that time he had become famous – not only in our country, but outside it as well. The most assorted people spoke out in his defence. What seemed inevitable did not take place. Fr. Dmitri was given another parish, although this time not in Moscow, but in the country, three hours' journey away.

The same thing happened here: the number of people attending the church multiplied several times, during services the church was filled to overflowing, people began to come from neighbouring towns and from Moscow, young people appeared in the church. Fr. Dmitri's life at that time however, was not easy: he was subjected to a house search, to KGB interrogation and threats,

and finally he was the victim of a severe car crash in which he broke both legs – it is a miracle that he is still alive. But one only had to meet him once to see that for him, all these difficulties were more than outweighed by the joy of serving as a priest. At the same time the texts of his sermons and talks in Moscow were being distributed more and more widely, they were hand-copied and re-typed, they were published in France and enjoyed an unusual success, and now they are being translated into other European languages.

Now, again at a great Christian festival, not Easter this time but Christmas, the churchwarden tells Fr. Dmitri that she will not allow him into the church to serve any more. Replying to the indignant believers she says: I'm not guilty, I was told to do it. The believers rush to the local authorities who say: It's not our fault, we received orders from Moscow.

Normal human logic cannot grasp this: how can a warden – a person elected by the believers to fulfil certain definite domestic functions – go against their will? Why do they not change the warden in this case?

But there is another logic according to which these events are quite normal. The instruction governing Church-State relations gives the authorities the right of veto over members of a church administration, as elected by the congregation (not to the church authorities, the instruction explains). The believers have the right to meet to discuss their affairs only with the permission of the authorities, and only after first giving notice of the meeting. Thus if the authorities do not want, for example, a new warden to be elected, then this will never take place. This is how the instruction interprets the clause in the Constitution about separation of Church and State.

To tear a priest away from his flock is like a doctor leaving his patients, or a teacher his pupils. But these comparisons are weak. It would be nearer the truth to say that it is like tearing a mother away from her children. No one would publicly take upon himself the responsibility for inflicting such a deep

wound on the souls of so many people. No, everything is done by some faceless "they", like spirits in the superstitious belief of primitive peoples. "I was ordered . . . I was told . . ." And there is no guarantee that this is the end of the matter, and not simply the beginning of more troubles still awaiting Fr. Dmitri.

We can help him, and I believe that no honest person, above all the Christian, will have any excuse if he does not try to do so to the best of his ability. The world is now criss-crossed with

links that can no longer be ignored. Eighteen months ago, the friendly voices coming from all corners of the earth lightened Fr. Dmitri's lot and protected him from worse misfortunes. We can defend him again now, unless we choose the path of silence and indifference.

Besides this, the Christian can pray for Fr. Dmitri, for his flock and for the suffering Orthodox Church.

I. R. SHAFAREVICH

Moscow, 25 December 1975.

Fr. Dudko's Parishioners Protest

On the dismissal of Fr. Dudko, many petitions were written to the ecclesiastical and government authorities by his parishioners. We print below two of these.

According to the 1929 Law on Religious Associations members of the parochial church council – in Russian dvadtsatka ("council of twenty" from dvadtsat' = twenty) – must be approved by the local Soviet. Without its permission no elected member can serve. In practice it is the dvadtsatka's small executive committee of three, and in particular the churchwarden, that possesses the administrative power within the parish. In addition the parish priest is now the "employee" of his parish's dvadtsatka thanks to a resolution adopted finally in 1971 at the General Council of the Russian Orthodox Church. It appears that a parish priest can be simply dismissed by his churchwarden at the orders of the local Soviet. This happened in Fr. Dudko's case.

The following Statement (signed by 42 parishioners) is addressed to the Executive Committee of the District Soviet by members of the church's dvadtsatka.

STATEMENT

We parishioners from the Church of Nikita the Martyr in Kabanovo are worried by the blatant infringement of legality expressed in the dismissal of the priest Dmitri Dudko from serving in church.

This was done without the knowledge

of the church's *dvadtsatka*. The churchwarden announced that she was told to break the contract with the priest on the orders of the Executive Committee of the District Soviet.

Such a decision, which breaks the law on the separation of Church and State, does not have the force of law and contradicts the Constitution of the USSR. We insist that this decision be reconsidered.

Fr. Dmitri Dudko is known to us as an honest educated pastor and we want him to serve in our church.

About 100 parishioners also signed the following Petition addressed to Patriarch Pimen (Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia).

PETITION

Your Holiness! The priest Dmitri Dudko has been serving in our church since September 1974. During that time we came to know him as a conscientious pastor, we came to love him. Fr. Dmitri's sermons, in which he called men to faith in God, to a moral life, helped particularly to create a healthy spiritual atmosphere in our church.

With great distress we learnt not long ago that the churchwarden of our church, Ye. I. Kharitonova, broke the contract with him without any agreement from the church's *dvadtsatka*. The churchwarden said that she received orders to do this from the Executive Committee of the District Soviet.

Broadcast Fr. Dudko's Sermons

The Russian Department of the BBC received the following letter from Fr. Gleb Yakunin and Lev Regelson. Although Fr. Dmitri Dudko no longer has a church in which to preach, the writers hope that by means of the radio his words might yet be heard in the Soviet Union. According to news received in April, Fr. Dudko has now been appointed to a church outside Moscow in the village of Grebnevo.

TO THE RUSSIAN DEPARTMENT OF THE BBC

Dear Fr. Vladimir (Rodzianko)! Dear programme editors!

The news has flashed round the world that the well-known preacher and Moscow priest, Dmitri Dudko, was dismissed from his parish on the eve of the Russian Orthodox Christmas.

The believers retained a faint hope that Fr. Dmitri would be transferred to another parish. But now, a few days later, Fr. Dmitri has received a decree from his ruling bishop, Metropolitan Serafim of Krutitsy:

"In accordance with my decree of 23 December 1975, and in connection with the cancellation of your contract by the executive body of the Church of St. Nikita in Kabanovo village, Orekhovo-Zuevsky district, Moscow region, you are released from your parish and transferred to supernumerary work."

This means that Fr. Dmitri will probably not receive another parish for a long time, and in fact those who removed him hope that this will never be the case.

The story of Fr. Dmitri's previous removal from the Church of St. Nicholas in Moscow is well known. Those who deprived Fr. Dmitri of his ministry in the Moscow church and transferred him to a distant parish calculated that in this way Fr. Dmitri would be uprooted from his flock in Moscow, and his sermons would no longer be heard by the believers. But they made a mistake. His former parishioners, Fr. Dmitri's spiritual children, mostly young people, went to him in the new parish, and the pa-

rishioners in the new church also grew to love him; so his sermons continued to reach people's hearts.

In our country religious life is still regulated on the part of the State by the 1929 legislation on religious cults (which is clearly discriminatory in character); this is intended to allow religion only a temporary, hidden existence, and to cause its fire to give no more than a faint warmth. But if religion begins to glow somewhere with a bright flame, then they try to quench it by any means, even if it by-passes the shackles of the 1929 legislation without breaking them. (Sermons during church services are not forbidden by this legislation.) Nor was there any disloyal political content in Fr. Dmitri's sermons. His sermons were recorded both by his zealous listeners, and by those who were watching him, and if there had been the slightest opportunity to accuse him of hostile political statements, this would certainly have been done long ago.

Fr. Dmitri's living, free, Christian word went into the hearts of his listeners and fanned their faith; it also gripped those who were seeking, those who doubted, unbelievers. Fr. Dmitri attracted young people — this was his main crime.

So now, unable to put a stop to Fr. Dmitri's pastoral work on the basis of the law, the godless atheists are dealing with him through the churchwarden and the ruling bishop. Those who have driven Fr. Dmitri from his parish hope that now, at last, Fr. Dmitri's sermons will cease to sound forth, and his religious influence will be cut off, but here too they are wrong, just as their attempts to halt the present process of religious renaissance and the return of Russia to God are in vain.

Dear programme editors!

The religious broadcasts on the radio, particularly from your station, are for many believers in our country the only source of important and objective information, of news about church events and religious life in our country and throughout the world. Your station has also served to spread the Word of God among those who have no other means of hearing it; it has served the cause of

the enlightenment and the renaissance of Russia.

Fr. Dmitri's preaching and pastoral activity are a striking example of how relevant the words of the Gospel are in our country today: "the harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few."

Your radio station has already spoken in its broadcasts about Fr. Dmitri and about his discussions with the believers and, finally, about his removal from the ministry. But Fr. Dmitri is full of determination to continue his church preaching, despite losing his parish.

We appeal to you with this request: if you would open a regular broadcast slot for Fr. Dmitri's future sermons (that is, if they reach you, of course), this

would not only be a joy to Fr. Dmitri and to his spiritual children, but it would also serve the cause of spiritual enlightenment and the conversion of unbelievers to God.

We would like to take this opportunity of joining with many other believers to ask that you should increase the volume of religious broadcasting in the Russian language.

16 January 1976

FR. GLEB YAKUNIN
LEV REGELSON

P.S: We do not object to this letter being published.