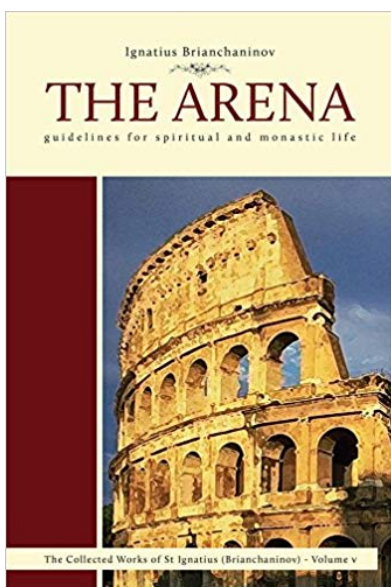


**Ignatius Brianchaninov, *The Arena: Guidelines for Spiritual and Monastic Life*. Works of Ignatius Brianchaninov (Book 5), second edition. Jordanville, NY: The Printshop of St Job of Pochaev, 2012. 352 pp. ISBN-10: 9780884652878, ISBN-13: 978-0884652878.**

*Reviewed by: By Matt Segel*



Written towards the end of his earthly journey, Bishop Ignatius's (Brianchaninov) *The Arena* is an important and apparently well-known guide for monastics. While there are behaviors appropriate for monastics that evidently may not be applicable for those of us who live in the 'world,' the insights gleaned from a life spent in the pursuit of God's truth with all one's heart and soul have awareness that can assuredly help us in our own spiritual journey.

Dmitry Brianchaninov was born in 1807, in the manor of Pokrovskoye to one of the wealthiest landowning families of the Governorate of Vologda in Russia. He was educated at Main Military Engineering School in St. Petersburg. Although successful in his studies, he was deeply dissatisfied with this life and turned to a life of prayer. In 1827 he fell seriously ill and was permitted to leave the army. He began pursuing a monastic vocation, and in 1831, took his vows and received the name of Ignatius. He was ordained a priest shortly afterwards. Amazingly, Emperor Nicholas I (1796-1855) remembered Brianchaninov from his days at the academy and made inquiries about the young man. Told that he left

and had taken monastic vows, the Emperor had him located and ordered him to return to the capital where he was made, at age 26, archimandrite and superior at the Maritime Monastery of St. Sergius in St. Petersburg, with instructions to transform it into a model community. He spent 24 years as superior and was in 1857, at age 50, consecrated Bishop of the Caucasus and the Black Sea. He retired only four years later to the Nikolo-Babayevsky Monastery on the Volga to devote himself to spiritual writing, and it was at this point when he wrote works that were subsequently collected in *The Arena*.

Following the patristic tradition, the book is organized in two sections, each with 50 lessons. The first section contains lessons on the spiritual life, and the second section contains lessons on how to act as a monastic in a community.

I am relatively new to the Orthodox faith. Part of what has spoken to my heart has been the writings of monastics. St. Theophan the Recluse, Elder Theaddeus, and also St. John of Kronstadt stand out as writers who have helped to shape my outlook. I have read much of the *Philokalia*, but find the language and concepts to be difficult and advanced. I listen to a podcast called “The Arena,” and so when I saw this book in the church library I felt called to check it out.

There are debates about the relevance of monastic commentary as it pertains to laymen. This debate seems to be valid as the demands placed on individuals living in the ‘world’ dictate the need for work and family that are not present, in the same way, in a monastery.

Some initial thoughts on *The Arena* is that it is a very accessible book. Bishop Ignatius spent much of his life counseling important and educated people in Moscow and St. Petersburg. He seems to understand how to communicate with ‘sophisticated’ and ‘worldly’ people. His style is approachable, logical and understandable.

The book is not an easy one to review, and in fact, it is impossible to do it thoroughly. The reason is that each lesson is worthy of a lengthy discussion. One could spend much time on this book digesting each lesson. Then, of course, I am entirely unworthy of discussing such a great man’s work. He dedicated and spent

his life seeking to live according to God's Commandments, and I myself come to believe that saying prayers in the morning, afternoon and evening is an accomplishment. In acknowledgment of this, I will focus this review on a discussion of a couple of the lessons that stood out as meaningful in my life as a layman trying to understand the Orthodox Faith.

Brianchaninov's discussion on Love and prayer will be areas that I will try to devote most of my focus, as well as how those fit in the continuum of the counsels as a whole.

The book is written in a style reminiscent of the works found in the *Philokaleia*. There are 50 counsels for the spiritual life of a monk, and 50 much briefer "Rules of Outward Conduct for Novices." I have chosen to focus on Chapter 15 – "Love for Our Neighbor Is a Means of attaining to Love for God," and Chapter 19 – "On Attention at Prayer."

Before beginning with that it is relevant to see how these counsels fit into Bishop Ignatius' broader message. He begins *The Arena* stating that a monastic must make his life work a study of the Gospels. Why? Because God's commandments are found in the Gospels. He further states that monastics will be judged on how faithfully the commandments are kept. The Lord says in Matthew 22:37-40: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." This is how Bishop Ignatius sets up Chapter 15 titled "Love for our neighbor is a means of attaining love for God." Love is such an interesting topic to me. Love in the American, Western society that I am a part of has many meanings. The diversity of usage brings the concept of love, and the word itself, into so many scenarios of life that, at times, the meaning of the word gets blurred into other emotions. What is Godly love, or rather, what would be the only real love that stems from a Godly place? Brianchaninov stresses the need for Godly love by citing such church luminaries as St. John the Theologian, St Anthony the Great, St John Kolovos, and St. Mark the

Ascetic. He goes on to say that our human concept of love is deeply flawed and not to be trusted. For Brianchaninov, loving ones' neighbor means:

1. Do not bear resentment,
2. Do not say reproachful, abusive, sarcastic or caustic words,
3. Maintain peace, as much as you are able,
4. Humble yourself in his presence,
5. Do not seek revenge,
6. Get out of the habit of arguing and quarrelling, reject it as a sign of pride,
7. Speak well of those who speak evil of you,
8. Pray for those that wrong you,
9. Do not condemn or judge whether a person is good or bad,
10. Keep your eyes on the one evil person for whom you must give an account before God. Yourself!

For me, these are practical and tangible steps. Five *dos* and five *don'ts*. However, Brianchaninov stresses that we can never forget why we are doing this: Love for the Triune God. So, if we fail in any of the above, we must repent and seek forgiveness from God. We also must make this but a start. Once this love for neighbor, these practical expressions of *dos* and *don'ts*, of common courtesies, are established as a way of life, we are to move further towards God through prayer, humility, focus, and diligence. Our journey, after faith and catechism, must move towards actions, for as long as we are living in the world.

This kind of practical concrete advice, which *The Arena* is full of, is so crucial to those of us who live in a confused world that has confused us. We are turned around, awash in relativism and hedonism and all its effects, both positive and negative.

I forget who I am, spiritually, and why I am here, spiritually. Brianchaninov's answer is prayer. Thankfully, Brianchaninov provides practical help concerning prayer: "Stand at prayer before the invisible God as if you saw Him and with the conviction that He sees you and is looking at you attentively." This is how we should approach prayer. Once we are in prayer, what does it mean to attend. Brianchaninov is a generous man: "The rapt attention which keeps prayer completely from distraction and from irrelevant thoughts and images is a

gift of God’s grace.” For me, words like this are comforting. Of course, it means that I don’t have the gift, but there are glimpses every now and then. These glimpses are the reward in “return for perseverance and patience in the practice of prayer.” He also offers practical advice – say prayers with unhurried pronunciation, expect a bit of monotony and effort – “we need to force ourselves to pray throughout our life, and few indeed are the ascetics who, on account of the abundant consolation of grace, never need to force themselves.” Expect to be distracted. This kind of advice is encouraging.

From the topic of prayer, on which Brianchaninov spends a considerable amount of time, including in-depth discussions of the Jesus prayer, he then moves to counsels on how to identify and avoid the numerous pitfalls a monk may encounter.

Now there are steps that may not be applicable to lay people in North America. Brianchaninov says in our focus Chapter 15 that we must avoid talkativeness, gossip, close acquaintance, and familiar conduct. Avoiding gossip is a good idea in any context, but the rest may be difficult for most people to avoid, especially in contemporary America.

Nonetheless, Brianchaninov writes in a style that is motivating. He provides a brilliant step-by-step method is largely relevant for laymen. I could not recommend this book more.

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