

My Heart is Ready, O God

Reflections on the Calling of St. Arseny to Mission in Canada

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In meditating on the life of St. Arseny of Winnipeg (Canada)¹ it is interesting to realize how many times it appeared to him that his life and ministry were at an end; for example, when his young wife died, and he slept in a coffin² in chains and in despondency; when he returned from Canada to Russia in 1910 in much physical pain, depressed and weakened by the rigors of his travels and worn out by deprivations suffered in the course of his labours on behalf of the faithful in Canada;³ and again when he was captured by Bolshevik forces and prepared himself for death after being sentenced to be shot.⁴ However, these and many other struggles in the midst of a very fruitful life and ministry contributed to preparing his heart for being

¹ "The Life of Archbishop Arseny," *The Canadian Journal of Orthodox Christianity*, Volume I, No. 1, Winter 2006, <<http://www.cjoc.ca/pdf/TheLifeofArchbishopArseny.pdf>>

² *Ibid.*, p.5

³ *Ibid.*, p.10

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.12

consecrated as bishop of Winnipeg and returning to Canada as shepherd of the Canadian faithful in 1926. He is recorded to have responded on the occasion of his elevation to the episcopate with the words "I am coming. My heart is ready. O my God! Ready!" (Psalm 107).⁵

What does it mean to say "My heart is ready;" how can one know that one's heart is ready; and why might St. Arseny have chosen these words on this occasion? I would like to offer the following reflections about how these words, "My heart is ready," perhaps point to a fulfillment of all the other previous "deaths" and "resurrections" in his life, a fulfillment in which, by his cooperation with the grace of God, St. Arseny achieved (was granted) significant victory over the passions, which state is mentioned often in the Orthodox ascetic/prayer tradition. If this was his state, his personal desires would have been conquered and his own willfulness put to death, and his heart set free to seek only the will of God, and to give himself totally to the mission to which he was being called. The Fathers and saints of the Church repeatedly refer to the beatitude of the Lord "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God," in speaking of the importance of the heart being cleansed through many trials and labours and through many years of prayer, if one is to be able fully to discern, to receive, and to understand the will of the Lord.

Two passages of Scripture should be enough to remind us of the significance of the heart and its cleansing if we are to be in communion with God and to be able to lay down our lives on behalf of others and for the glory of God, as we were created to do.

Then the Lord saw man's wickedness, that it was great in the earth, and every intent of the thoughts within his heart was only evil

⁵ Ibid., p.13

continually (Genesis 6:5). What comes out of a man that defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man (Mark 7:20-23).

The statement of St. Arseny "my heart is ready, O God" is taken from a passage which occurs with nearly identical wording at the end of Psalm 56 (quoted below) and at the beginning of Psalm 107:⁶

8. My heart is ready, O God,
My heart is ready;
I will sing, and I will sing a psalm.
9. Awake my glory;
Awake harp and lyre;
I will arise at dawn.
10. I will give thanks to You, O Lord,
among the peoples;
I will sing to you among the Gentiles,
11. For Your mercy is magnified to the heavens,
And Your truth to the clouds.
12. Be exalted, O God, above the heavens;
And Your glory above all the earth.⁷

Of course, his many years in the monastic life (in which life the whole Psalter is chanted very frequently in the course of the daily services), would make St. Arseny very familiar with the wording of the Psalms and the setting in which those words occur. In addition his experience of oversight of four monasteries in four countries up to the

⁶ The psalm and verse numberings are according to the Septuagint version, and the translation is that of the *Orthodox Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008) (Hereafter designated by *OSB*).

⁷ Psalm 56: 8-12 (vs. 12 is a repetition of vs. 6).

time of his consecration,⁸ suggest his depth of spiritual life and understanding.

Psalm 56 is set in the context of David fleeing from King Saul and hiding in a cave, a symbol of the tomb. The first part of the psalm depicts great upheaval and struggle and persecution by enemies who seek David's life. These words calling out to God in the midst of opposition and struggles apply very well to the life of St. Arseny, and of course reflect above all the life of our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. The last half of the psalm, quoted above, begins with "My heart is ready," and speaks of escape and relief and victory, praising God among the nations. These verses may be understood not only as deliverance from physical death, but also from the traps of the evil one and from the torments of heart and mind by which the enemy and his servants assault us and try to drag us into the pit (vs. 7). One can appreciate how appropriate are the concluding verses of thanksgiving, joy, and bearing witness to God's love and power and mercy among the nations. The notes to this Psalm in the Orthodox Study Bible state that this psalm "prophesies the death and Resurrection of Christ,"⁹ and by implication our own dying and rising in Christ.

How were these words "My heart is ready, O God" understood within the monastic or ascetic/prayer tradition of the Orthodox Church? Unexpectedly, in my regular readings of the saints, these words "My heart is ready, O God" presented themselves in two writings of the ascetic/prayer tradition of the Orthodox Church. Both writings use this text as a description of one of the last stages of the spiritual journey, in which stage stillness of heart (*hesychia*) and freedom from the passions are experienced. One reference is found in

⁸ "The Life of Archbishop Arseny," pp. 6, 8, 12, 13.

⁹ *Orthodox Study Bible*, p. 719

The Ladder of Divine Ascent by St. John of the Ladder (6th century in Egypt), and the second in the work *The Path of Salvation*, by St. Theophan the Recluse (19th century in Russia).

St. John of the Ladder, in describing "stillness," which is the 27th of 30 steps on the ladder to full communion and union with God, says the following: "Stillness of the body is the accurate knowledge and management of one's feelings and perceptions. Stillness of soul is the accurate knowledge of one's thoughts and is an unassailable mind."¹⁰ A bit later he says:

A hesychast is like an angel on earth. With the paper of love and the letters of zeal, he has freed his prayer from sloth and carelessness. Openly he cries out: "O God my heart is ready" (Ps. 56:8). He says "I sleep, but my heart is awake (Song of Songs 5:2)."¹¹

St. Theophan, who produced his own unique description of this journey to spiritual perfection, refers to this passage in his work *The Path to Salvation*, in the short, second-to-last section, entitled in the English translation "Living Communion with God Occurs in a State of Hesychia [stillness], Which Brings Passionlessness." In this section he chooses to summarize, paraphrase or in most cases quote from the above mentioned 27th step of St. John of the Ladder's work. He quotes in full the passage which I have reproduced immediately above, in which the hesychast is described as one who openly cries out: "O God my heart is ready."

¹⁰ St. John of the Ladder, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982) pp. 261-2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 263

In conclusion, it seems not at all unlikely, both that St. Arseny knew these works on the spiritual life,¹² and that his exclamation at his consecration to the episcopate on the eve of his final mission to Canada "I am coming. My heart is ready. O my God! Ready!" is, in fact, a conscious declaration of the freeing of his heart from self-will, and its full possession by God. "My heart is ready, O God" is, as St. John of the Ladder and St. Theophan the Recluse claim, the cry of the hesychast.

However, there is perhaps one more important thing to be gleaned regarding St. Arseny's call to mission in Canada, and something more to be understood about St. Arseny and his mission from this exclamation: "I am coming. My heart is ready, O God. Ready!" Here I will draw attention to the short sentence "I am coming" and the call from stillness, "My heart is ready," to mission.

Whereas psalm 56, after describing a process of struggle against enemies and death, *ends* with deliverance and the exclamation "My heart is ready, O God" (and what follows), in contrast psalm 107 *begins* with these words (and those that follow), and goes on to speak at length of mission and the establishment of the rule of God over the nations, and the acknowledgement of His glory by the nations.

This missionary thrust is already anticipated in the "My heart is ready" passage where it goes on to declare "Be exalted, O God, above the heavens, and Your glory above all the earth" (verse 6 in both psalms 56 and 107). It is interesting that in the Divine Liturgy, after

¹² I have not had time or means to do the research which might confirm St. Arseny's knowledge of these two writings, but it has been a well-entrenched practice in Orthodox monasticism to have the *Ladder of Divine Ascent* read at meals during Great Lent. Also, it is not at all improbable that St. Arseny would be familiar with the writings of St. Theophan the Recluse, who died a half a century before him in the same part of the Orthodox world.

the participation of the congregation in the offering of Christ and in the Eucharistic communion, the priest exclaims "Be exalted, O God, above the heavens, and Your glory above all the earth." It is a fitting statement making a bridge between the relief from the spiritual warfare, peace of soul and forgiveness given in communion in the Body and Blood of Christ, and the call to proclamation to the whole world of salvation in Christ – the mission of the Church.¹³

Psalm 107 is actually composed of parts from two other psalms. The final section of psalm 56, "My heart is ready," with which it begins, has already been discussed above. Both that passage and a concluding section from psalm 59, make up Psalm 107. Both sections, occurring as the conclusion of their original psalms, express relief from struggle, and victory over sin and death in that original setting, but in psalm 107 these sections from psalms 56 and 59 are combined to herald the beginning of something even more, a missionary expansion of the knowledge and praise of God among the nations.

Derek Kidner, an Old Testament scholar from an evangelical Protestant ethos, makes this intriguing comment about psalm 107 (LXX) or psalm 108 (Western versions), and the sections from the two psalms which make up this psalm:

Two psalm-endings of David, 57:7-11 and 60:5-12, have been joined to make this single piece. Each had begun under stress, with David hunted in Psalm 57 and defeated in Psalm 60; but each had ended strongly. The new psalm starts at this more positive point in each of them, and so provides for a situation which is certainly

¹³ This verse is used on Ascension Day, as well as after the Eucharist, in Orthodox worship and is understood to be a prophecy of the ascension and enthronement of Christ at the Father's right hand. "Be exalted above the heavens, O God, and Your glory over all the earth" (vs. 6) is thus addressed to Christ in His ascension, while vs. 8 "I shall be exalted . . ." with the following description of the enthroned Christ extending his rule and working throughout the nations, is a declaration of the risen Christ regarding the extension of His mission through the Church.

chastening (11), but whose challenge is that of an inheritance not yet seized (10ff.; cf.9), rather than a defeat not yet avenged (cf. Ps. 60: 1-3, 9ff.). For our use, the earlier psalms may well provide for times of personal or corporate peril, but the present one for times which call for new initiatives and ventures of faith.¹⁴

This possible final missionary stage of the spiritual ascent, beyond stillness and dispassion, is hinted at in the 30th and final step of the ladder in *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* which deals with faith, hope and love. Of course, love overflows to others.

St. John says that "love grants prophecy, miracles."¹⁵ These gifts are for manifesting the glory of God and bringing others to him. Though St. John speaks somewhat obscurely, perhaps because he does not want to draw attention to his own apostolic ministry in which he was called out from stillness to exercise a most fruitful ministry in guiding others in the spiritual journey, nevertheless he seems to say that the highest spiritual state is the calling of apostleship and missionary endeavour, born out of love. In the very last words of his work, he stops speaking and allows "love" to speak. This "love" personified [or "Love" Itself?] indirectly points to the great apostle to the nations, St. Paul:

So let this ladder teach you the spiritual union of the virtues. And I am there on the summit, for as the great man said, a man who knew me well: "Remaining now are faith, hope, and love, these three. But love is the greatest of them all" (I Cor. 13:13).¹⁶

This final stage of the spiritual ascent, that of mission, though only hinted at by St. John, is made very explicit by St. Theophan in the

¹⁴ *Psalms 73-150* (London:Inter-Varsity Press), p. 387

¹⁵ St. John of the Ladder p. 289

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 290

very last words of his work *The Path to Salvation*, where he refers to the examples of St. Anthony the Great, the father of Egyptian Monasticism and St. John (of the Ladder, from whom he has been quoting repeatedly), as those called beyond stillness and dispassion to mission. After speaking of having been filled with the love of God and it being “no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” as the summit of the spiritual journey and its conclusion, he adds one last comment:

Inasmuch as such a state is the fruit of stillness when practiced sensibly, God does not leave all hesychasts in hesychia forever. Those who have attained dispassion through stillness, and through dispassion have been made worthy of most sincere communion with God and God’s indwelling are dispatched from stillness to serve those seeking salvation. They serve these seekers, enlightening them, guiding them, working miracles. St. Anthony the Great and St. John in the desert both heard a voice amidst their stillness that led them out to labors of guiding others along the path to salvation – and we all know the fruits of their labors. The same thing occurred with many others. We know nothing higher on earth than this Apostolic State. Here we conclude our overview of the order of a God-pleasing life.¹⁷

St. John of the Ladder and St. Theophan the Recluse, teach that the exclamation, “O God my heart is ready,” is the open declaration of the one who achieves stillness of heart and mind, and is able to receive God’s will and teaching into his or her heart without barriers. These are those referred to in psalm 56, who are delivered by God from the torments of the passions and achieve stillness of soul.

¹⁷ *The Path to Salvation: A Manual of Spiritual Transformation* by St. Theophan the Recluse (St. Paisius Abbey: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1998), p. 325.

Others still, beginning from this state, as in Psalm 107, hear a further voice from God, calling them out of stillness into mission, and to the spread of the knowledge of the glory of God "over all the earth."

To summarize: on the one hand, the statement "My heart is ready, O God" is the open declaration of the one who has achieved stillness and dispassion, and is ready to receive revelation from God, without resistance or confusion of heart or mind. On the other hand, "I am coming" is the open response of the one hearing the voice of God calling him or her beyond stillness, to apostolic mission.

Is this Voice, calling the hesychast out of stillness to mission, the Voice which St. Arseny heard and to which he was replying when he made his response at his consecration and sending to Canada? Did he recognize the voice of God in the voice of the people of Canada, who sought his return to them, with the acknowledgement this time by the whole Church, that he was their God-given shepherd? The shepherd knows his flock and the sheep recognize their true shepherd's voice. The flock recognizes the shepherd from his devotion to his flock, and implore him to manifest the presence and ministry of the Great Shepherd in their midst. The shepherd responds in love:

"I am coming. My heart is ready, O my God! Ready!"

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