

Wonder

Volume: 1 Number: 6 Theme: **Asceticism and Discipleship**

Title: **“Remember Your Leaders”** Author: **Mr. Andrew Boyd**

For a while, the stately portrait of the late Metropolitan Leonty was put into storage while the interior of the building bearing his name here at St. Vladimir’s Seminary was repainted. When they put the picture back up, some of my fellow students seemed confused. I myself witnessed four different people nonchalantly ask “Huh, I wonder who that is?” It broke my heart. The late Metropolitan, in my estimation, is a Saint, and one of the best leaders our young, American Church has ever had. We are required to look at him and his example and wonder not who he is, but how we can change ourselves to be like him.

My home parish is named after St. Alexis of Wilkes-Barre, and there is a rather nice icon of him on the right side of the iconostas. In that icon, St. Alexis is holding a scroll with a rather simple quote, “This is the teaching of your forefathers, your fathers, this is your faith through which all of us have come to salvation. Hold to it! Amen.” Our faith is dependent upon the remarkable people who have come before us and passed it down to us. How quickly our memory of them fades away as we become obsessed with our own personal stories.

Metropolitan Leonty was born Leonid Turkevich in 1876 in the Volhynia region in the Russian Empire which is now in Poland and the Ukraine. He arrived in America in 1906 as a married priest and was assigned to what is now St. Mary’s Cathedral in Minneapolis. He was also appointed to lead the new seminary recently set up in that same city. That seminary relocated to Tenafly, NJ in 1912, and Father Leonid went with it. He succeeded St. Alexander Hotovitzky as Dean of St. Nicholas Cathedral in New York City.

Father Leonid was selected to represent the American Archdiocese at the All-Russian Council in Moscow in 1917-1918, just as the Bolsheviks seized power and civil war broke out. He even claimed that he introduced the motion that led to the election of Saint Tikhon as Patriarch. He somehow managed to return to America, but witnessed the destruction of his homeland and home Church in the process.

The 1920’s were a tough decade for Father Leonid. St. Nicholas Cathedral was lost to the Soviet-backed “Living Church” through a series of court battles. There is an apocryphal story that Father Leonid would not leave the Church, even at the order of the court and that he was dragged out by the police. In 1925, his wife passed away leaving him with five children to take care of. Immediately the Church in America attempted to make him a bishop, but he initially refused so that he could take care of his children.

In 1933, he took monastic vows and the name “Leonty” and was consecrated as bishop of Chicago and the Midwest. Shortly thereafter, an All-American Sobor (Pre-cursor to our All-American Councils) was called to elect a replacement for the late Metropolitan Platon. Many tried to elect Bishop Leonty, but he insisted that Archbishop Theophilus, the most senior bishop, be elected. He continued to lead his Midwestern diocese, and had a hand in the reestablishment of seminaries in America in 1938.

In December 1950, following the death of Metropolitan Theophilus, he was elected Metropolitan at the 8th All-American Sobor. The vote was nearly unanimous as the Church recognized the decades of committed leadership that Archbishop Leonty had already accomplished. During his time leading our Church here in America, he blessed the establishment of the first English-speaking parishes, participated in the formation of SCOBA, revised the statutes of the Church, and took steps to heal the rift with our mother Church in Russia. He also led St. Vladimir's Seminary from the departure of Father Georges Florovsky in 1955 until the appointment of Father Schmemmann as dean in 1962. He fell asleep in the Lord on May 14, 1965, at the Chancery in Syosset which had been acquired through his work.

Metropolitan Leonty was a pious and ascetic man. He was extremely disciplined and kept the feasts and fasts of the Church strictly. He lived a simple and humble life. Many miracles have circulated around his life, and you often hear stories of him bi-locating, or being transfigured with the uncreated light, or hovering off the ground in prayer. While these stories are certainly amazing, I believe the way he impacted people, and the way he lived his life are far more amazing than anything supernatural. My mother grew up attending his cathedral, and when he walked in, completely dressed in white with a long, white beard, she thought she was looking at God himself. He radiated divine love. Father Alexander Schmemmann recalls many stories about Metropolitan Leonty in his writings. Every time Father Alexander would serve with him, Metropolitan Leonty would give him dollar coins for his Children, despite them being grown. He would also subscribe to the St. Vladimir's Quarterly every time he received it, so that the old Metropolitan would subscribe four times a year. Father Schmemmann shares this recollection:

Vladyka Leonty did not lead anyone, he did not build anything... ..nor was he an ascetic or a mystic living in the vision of the Spirit, delighting in his conversation with God as Metropolitan Vladimir. He was very much down to earth, very simple, and very much day-to-day. He stood in his place, which he did not seek and which he accepted as one more cross to bear with endless patience. He stood and blessed everyone and everything with his large, bony, warm hands, never waiting for great results, rejoicing in small things and was not saddened too much with failures. His somewhat sad but just a bit mischievous smile would say: Why are you worried? God will do everything if it is necessary, and it doesn't really depend on us too much. He never insisted on anything, he never imposed anything. If he was invited somewhere, he would go. If he was not invited, he didn't go nor did he ever look for invitations. If he went somewhere he would always bring a present: some small packet, a book or simply, a check. Money flowed through his hands and didn't stick to them. We can now recall, with shame for our Church that he would help out poorly paid priests, widows and other clerics, from his own pocket.

We need to be disciples of Metropolitan Leonty's simplicity. His asceticism was not about suffering or punishment, but a true asceticism of doing what's asked of oneself simply, and joyfully. He radiated the joy of the Kingdom, and the presence of Christ into the world, and that's what we are called to be. We need to be disciples of Metropolitan Leonty's legacy, joyful ascetics who are never accused of having money stick to our hands.

Discussion Questions:

What are the most striking aspects of Metropolitan Leonty's life for you? How would you respond to the many trials he endured?

Who passed down your faith to you? Are you conscious of how you model your faith to others?

Is being joyful a condition of being a Christian? How would you define joy? Is it the same as happiness?