

“I am in the battlefield and and there is no peace”

Interview With Father Dmitri Dudko

In our February issue we published a review of Dmitri Dudko's book, Our Hope (St. Vladimir's Press, Crestwood, N.Y.), a fascinating instance of samizdat, which recorded Dudko's dialogues with Russian believers and nonbelievers about the state of religion in Russia today. At the end of the review it was noted that nothing had been heard from Father Dudko recently. The following interview was published in Russkaya Mysl (Russian Thought) in Paris and translated from the Russian by Olga S. Hrubý. (We reprint it by permission of the documentation service, Religion in Communist Dominated Areas (RCDA), New York.) —The Editors*

Dudko: I received your questions and I think that they are quite interesting and relevant, so I am glad to respond.

Question: Do you think that the young people's interest in religion is now increasing and growing stronger, or declining? How could you explain it?

I believe that the interest in religion on the part of the young people at the present time is increasing and growing stronger, not declining. The increased interest may be explained by many motives; however, the most important explanation is the complete disillusionment with irreligiosity, even on the part of the so-called atheists. I presented the essential motive from the human point of view, but from my religious point of view the essential explanation is as follows: the process of faith has taken place and is spreading. As a priest I am observing that process and I can see that it is taking place even outside one's consciousness, since among the people who are coming to be baptized are some who have no idea of Christianity. Yet when one asks them, “Do you understand that you must believe in the resurrection of Christ and life eternal of men which from our modern point of view sounds quite improbable?” they reply that this in particular has brought them here, because otherwise everything would seem totally meaningless. This is why I say that the process of faith has occurred and will only grow, never decline.

There are rumors that many party members are having their children baptized. What does such a phenomenon mean? Are such party members not real believers or not real Communists?

Yes, there are many Party members who are having their children baptized. Moreover, there are many party members who are getting baptized. Well, just the other day I baptized a party member, his wife, and their three grown children. That phenomenon means (I say this as a

paradox) that they are real believers and real Communists. If the Communist stands up for what is right, then how could he deny the truth that all that is essentially human in him is searching for immortality?

Do you think that Christianity and communism could coexist in the USSR? Would the Church in the USSR disappear in the end?

I think that they could coexist, as the evidence would indicate, but they cannot get along; the Communists are fighting with other Communists in the same way. There will always be the Church in our country because our country is Christian in its character and now Christianity finds its most favorable ground here—with all this suffering and persecution. This is not a case of a drowning man grabbing at a straw; this is a real instinct of salvation. My outlook is optimistic: we should find a common language with communism, and that language is not a language of unbelief but of faith, because you cannot bring up a Communist on unbelief. Our common language is that all of us—the believers as well as the Communists—are God's creation; we are made in His image, therefore we must understand that we are brethren and that will be the end of fighting one another.

How could the relations between the Church and the government be described? What problems and frictions are there? What could you say about tolerance? Do you know how many churches were closed, for example, last year? Have some new churches been built in new towns? Are there enough Bibles, prayer books, etc.? Are there enough clergymen and students in theological seminaries?

The relations between the Church and the government are ambiguous. On the one hand the Church officially considers herself free and independent, on the other hand she is not being tolerated and is being persecuted. This is an old tension: The government believes that the Church is encroaching on its existence and completely fails to understand that the Kingdom of the Church is not of this world, that the Kingdom of God exists in human souls even here, on this earth, and that

*Since then Father Dudko has been the subject of articles in *Time* magazine and other Western media.

the people in whose souls is the Kingdom of God will be good citizens—the government just cannot comprehend this fact and hence, all that tension, hence, all that intolerance.

It is difficult for me to say how many churches were opened and how many closed in the past year. I believe that they were only closing them down. To open a new church—that would be the greatest miracle in our country. No new churches have been built in new towns, although I am told that somewhere in one of the new towns a church was built. However, I believe that it was just wishful thinking taken for a fact; indeed, we Russians often are such optimistic dreamers.

There are not enough Bibles and prayerbooks in our country. Even if millions of copies would be printed, it would not be nearly enough. Rumors have it that a printing of about fifty thousand copies of the Bible will be published soon. I am afraid that it will remain in the storage or some “good” people will steal it all. The Bible should be available normally on the free market, but that has not happened yet. For that reason it will take a long time before there are enough Bibles, prayerbooks, and any kind of religious literature in our country. As for the priests and theological students in our country—compared to the thirst for religion—that is like one millionth part of a drop in the sea.

In the history of the USSR there were periods of repression and periods of tolerance toward religion; even under Stalin the policies fluctuated. Is the present period similar to any period of the past?

There were no periods in the history of the USSR when religion was tolerated; it is true that the policies fluctuated. This period resembles all of the previous periods in one: all kinds of policies have been used, yet religion has survived, so what could be done about it? One should ask the high and mighty, although in fact they would not have any idea either what to do. I dare answer for them: without religion everybody and everything is in danger of destruction; it is time to understand that..

As concerns relations to religion, has the government's policy affected—and does it still affect—the internal and spiritual affairs of the Orthodox Church, i.e., liturgy and prayer, or relations between the priest and the believer?

The government's policy cannot affect liturgy and prayer. On second thought, it surely can. The greater the persecution, the more sincere the prayer. As for the relations between the priest and the believer, it does affect them; the priests are running away from the believers or betraying the interests of the believers. That is our tragedy.

Are there any rules of political conduct for the priests, either written or unwritten? I mean, do you know what could and what could not be said in a sermon? What is your personal situation at this time?

There are neither written nor unwritten rules. There are only views of the individual officials and the telephone. Of course I may be exaggerating; there are some

written rules, but we do not know them. There are too many “Soviet secrets” in our country.

My personal situation at present is this: I am in the battlefield and there is no peace. At first the prosecutor's office and the secret police pressed me directly, then the higher hierarchy took turns with the secret police agents, and now the dean of my church is pressing me. Well, of course, the secret police agents and the higher hierarchy are in fact behind him. I can tell from what he says about the source of my sermons and about my spiritual children. He calls my sermons propaganda and my spiritual children a mob. The secret police agents used the same expressions. And I can see that the high hierarchy is backing him by the arrogant way he cuts down and twists the worship service; he is trying to turn worship into a stage show, playing upon the believers' unenlightened instincts. As an educated deacon said recently watching the dean's service: “Externally it is pride, internally—mutilation.” The impression: material prosperity without any concern whatsoever for the believers' souls. Well, it is not only our dean who is acting that way, because his “experiment” does not seem to worry the higher clergy.

Thus far I am still in the parish, but how long, that I don't know. Whatever comes, I must do as much as I am able. What can help me? Prayers of the believers and your publicity. If a criminal is brought to light, then he begins to fear something.

More recently official Soviet propaganda attacked Father Dudko, along with other leading dissidents. It was charged that Dudko's father was a rich kulak. According to RCDA the charge is completely false. The following is from Dudko's response to these attacks.—The Editors

O Lord! The blood of people tortured to death, shot, strangled, dead of starvation and cold, the moans of the Russian land are echoing in my ears as I stand before the altar of God...

Liars and slanderers want to stand in judgment...

The Gulag Archipelago is their indictment. The ghost of my martyred father stands before me accusing them....

They say that I am a son of a *kulak*.

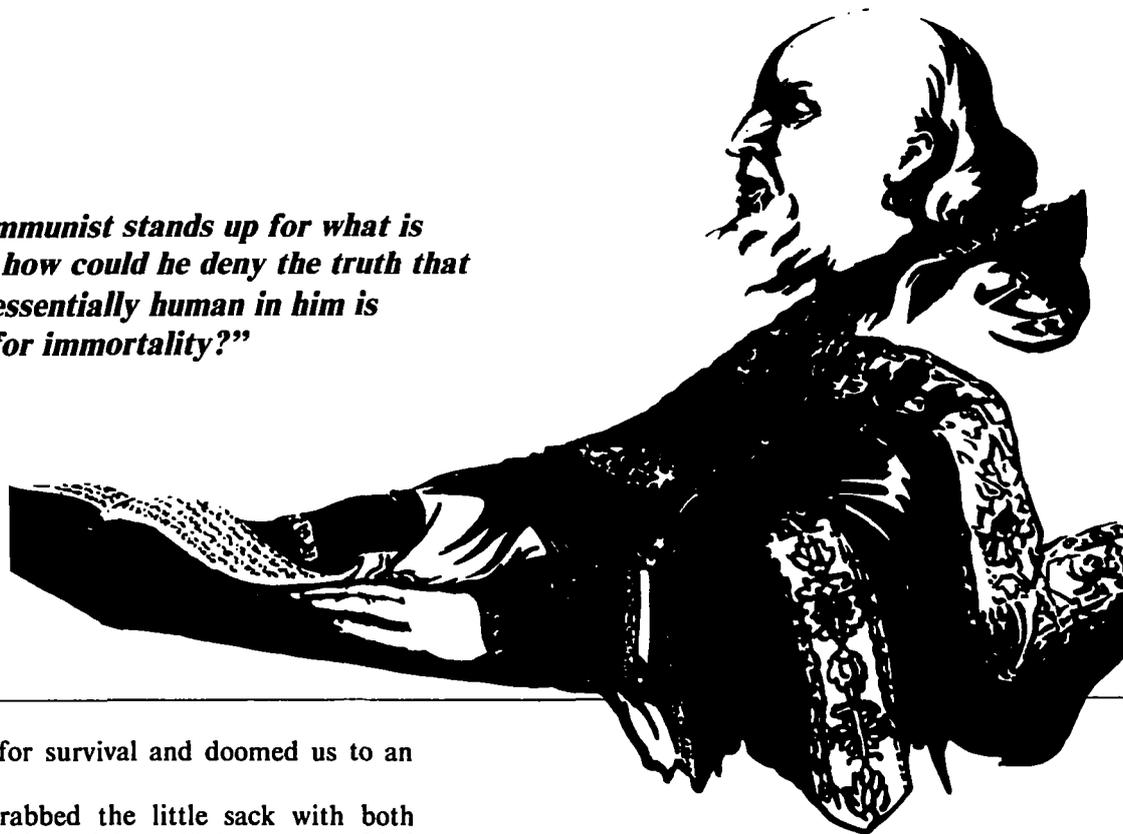
I remember the unforgettable scene which I wrote down in my own hand during an interrogation while I was facing my second trial in the camp.

It was in 1933. We had nothing left. We were all swollen from malnutrition. It was still winter. Spring was coming and with it the time to sow—our last hope: perhaps we would have a good harvest. God will be merciful unto us sinners.

My late father had gathered somewhere about eighteen pounds of grain and guarded it (I use the word “guard”—and not “save”—deliberately because one “guards” something that is sacred) to use it as the last resort or for sowing. And then the godless, brutal agents of the law arrived to confiscate it.

It should be clear to everyone that it was even more cruel than if it were murderers who had come. Murderers might kill on the spot, but those agents came to rob

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From jacket design for *Our Hope* by Fr. Dmitri Dudko.
Courtesy St. Vladimir's Seminary Press

us of our last hope for survival and doomed us to an unbearable torment.

My late father grabbed the little sack with both hands. His hands held it as tight as if they were welded to it. He was thrown to the floor, kicked, and dragged, yet they could not snatch the little sack away from him.

They beat him; they pulled out his beard. He endured it all but still would not let go of the little sack.

And we, his young children (I, the oldest, was eleven years old, my brother Volodya was nine, my brother Kolya was seven) and our weeping mother, an illiterate peasant woman with a great, kind heart—I remember how she would take the smallest part of our family's meager rations—we all stood by and cried.

Finally my father let go of the sack. With malicious joy the godless ones left our house; only Satan himself, having committed his wicked deeds, would depart in such a way.

My father remained lying on the floor like a corpse and we stood by paralyzed by our shock and grief. Later, much later, he was arrested and we were left to die of starvation.....

That was the kind of *kulak* my father was, and I am the son of such a *kulak*. And they want to put me on trial....

It is not enough for them that they destroyed my childhood, that I had to spend all of my youth in labor camps, that I returned home exhausted and balding. I am now fifty-five years old, which is not a very old age, but I look like an eighty-year-old man.

It was not enough for them that in a traffic accident in 1975 both my legs were broken and because of improper treatment I also suffered internal injuries. Only my brain and heart were spared, but then again, even they were affected when my lungs became edematous.

All that was not enough for them. They accused me of slander, as if I had invented their sinister deeds to slander them.

Whenever dark clouds gather over me, the shadow of my martyred father appears before me and I ask for his prayers. Then everything is easier for me to bear.

During the time of my accident my mother would appear to me in dreams. Once she even brought me a coffin—could it be that they are preparing for my death?

When Solzhenitsyn was arrested for the last time, he thought that he could not last much longer. I am two years his junior, but my physical strength will not last much longer. Naturally, miracles do happen. A miracle happened to me when, after my accident, I could walk again without crutches. I am walking, serving God, and praying.

Lord, may Thy will be done. Forgive those who know not what they do. If there are unfortunate people in Russia, it is they—the godless, for they do not realize their crime—and that is the most terrifying thing of all.

A certain Nazi tried at the Nuremberg trials allegedly realized his crimes, grabbed his head in anguish and cried: “I am guilty; judge me without mercy!”

Yet those who do not realize their crimes want to stand in judgment....

They want to put me on trial because I have not forgotten how they shot to death the Russian czar with all his children and servants. They cannot forgive my prayers for the murdered czar of Russia. Now I no longer pray for the czar, but rather implore him to pray for me in heaven. O great saints of the Russian land, great martyr Nicholas and all your long-suffering family, pray to God for us!...

They want to put me on trial because I have not forgotten how they destroyed the Russian peasants, how they uprooted them and drove them into the freezing

**CONGRATULATIONS OF RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH
ON THE 60TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE GREAT OCTOBER SOCIALIST REVOLUTION**

To Mr. Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev, Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the USSR, and to Mr. Aleksei Nikolayevich Kosygin, Chairman of the Council of Ministers

Dear Leonid Ilyich and Aleksei Nikolayevich:

Expressing the will of the episcopate, clergy, and laity of the Russian Orthodox Church, which is an integral part of the Soviet People, we extend to you and through you to all high-ranking representatives of the state authority in the USSR our heartfelt congratulations on the remarkable occasion of the 60th jubilee of the Great October Socialist Revolution.

Our Motherland has come to this great national Holiday with wonderful accomplishments in all spheres of its life—in economics, science, and culture. All these attainments are the fruit born by the selfless labor of our Country's citizens belonging to different nationalities that compose one fraternal family, every particular member of which is inspired by the high ideals of a just society without classes.

We note with deep satisfaction that the believing citizens of our Fatherland, the sons and daughters of the Russian Orthodox Church among them, have made and continue to make their contribution to the nationwide exploit of the building-up and perfection of our society, of our mighty power. This contribution reflects the deep patriotism which is characteristic of our Church.

As the citizens of the Soviet Country, we all are full of enthusiasm realizing the fact that from the very first day after the Revolution our Great Motherland has become a luminary for the millions of the oppressed, deprived, hungry, and poor inhabitants of the Earth. The Great Revolution that was carried out in our Country in 1917 has set an example for the peoples of the world to follow to gain power and progress. Today we can witness that many coun-

tries, the peoples of which have chosen the way of socialist development, are following the example of our Fatherland. It is likewise evident that the defeat of colonialism and exploitation is also the result of the Great October Socialist Revolution....

We witness with gratitude that the peace and patriotic activity of the Russian Orthodox Church does not pass unnoticed by the Leadership of our Country, as has become evident during the last decades, the reward being the four Orders of the Red Banner of Labor conferred upon the late Patriarch Aleksei and the same Order conferred this year upon the present Patriarch Pimen....

On the threshold of the seventh decade of the Soviet State we think it our duty to declare that the episcopate, clergy, and laity of the Russian Orthodox Church shall try to be as effective as before in their patriotic and peacemaking efforts for the good of our beloved Fatherland and for the establishment of peace, friendship, and cooperation among peoples....

With a sincere and deep respect,

Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia †PIMEN

Members of the Holy Synod:
Metropolitan of Leningrad and Novgorod †NIKODIM

Patriarchal Exarch of Western Europe,
Metropolitan of Kiev and Galicia †FILARET

Patriarchal Exarch of the Ukraine,
Metropolitan of Krutitsy and Kolomna †YUVENALY

Archbishop of Gorky and Arzamas †NIKOLAI

Bishop of Poltava and Kremenchug †FEODOSY

Bishop of Irkutsk and Chita †SERAPION

Metropolitan of Tallin and Estonia,
Chancellor of the Moscow Patriarchate †ALEKSEI

cold and starvation. And now the villages are left without their population; only the wind of godlessness blows through them, and Russian women cry in the country. All the young people have gone to the cities and there is no one to work in the fields....

They want to put me on trial because I have not forgotten how they killed our priests, how they shot them, tortured them to death in prisons or crucified them over the church altars or stuffed them in barrels of tar. There is nobody here today to guide the people to righteousness.

They want to put me on trial because I have not forgotten that millions were shot to death and millions of victims of famine, cold, and disease are buried under the snows in the north.

They want to put me on trial because I am concerned for souls devastated by godlessness, for widespread alcoholism, for rampant vice and the disintegration of family life, for Russian churches destroyed, for countless ruins in our Russian land.

They want to put me on trial for trying to help our people to stand up without relying on the atheists' promises and charity to recognize our true immortal values and say emphatically and irrevocably: NO!

We have had enough of atheism, disappointment, despair, and corruption. We want to believe!

Our Russian people are thirsting for faith just as an

earth scorched from the heat thirsts for rain. Everything is burned out, everything is devastated.

O Lord, has Thou forgotten and forsaken us?

The people of Israel, who for many centuries did not have a homeland, have found one, while we, who are allegedly living in our own country, have lost it.

We have nothing left. All had been destroyed, shot to death, bricked up, buried—only wolves of atheism are howling over the Russian land....

Hear us sinners. Thou hast let us fall into the hands of the godless ones for our sins. We all pray: Have mercy upon us for the sake of Thy great loving kindness!

And forgive us.

Soften their hearts of stone, enlighten their dark minds so they might see their deeds, become fearful for them and repent.

I can see that they too are tormented, because they have to live in the void of their godlessness. They are tortured without sanctification, dying with a curse on their lips, as the thief on Thy left side died, O Lord!

Those they tortured—those are the blessed ones. At Holy Liturgy I am aware that a great multitude of Russian martyrs and all the Russian people who bear the mark of suffering are praying with me. I am fortunate to be able to pray with them. I can hear a voice full of love and grace: "Forgive them for they know not what they do...."