

## ARCHBISHOP ARSENY: A VITA IN PROCESS

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Father John Hainsworth – March, 2004

This vita will be successful if by the end the reader is entirely disappointed, because it will have inspired an interest in a great man of God about whom we can only know a little at this point. Archbishop Arseny (d. 1945) was a man whose life was writ large, filled with historic places and historic people. He worked tirelessly for the church side by side with at least three of the major saints of North America – Tikhon, Raphael, Alexis – and as well as with the many martyrs and confessors of Russia during the beginning of the Revolution. And yet, a definitive Vita remains unwritten, uncollected. There have been obituaries and memorial articles but still more needs to be done to gather the fragments of his extraordinary life and contribution to the church in North America. Much of this work is already being done now by Canadians who are inspired by Arseny's legacy in Canada and the United States and some who still remember him personally.

The question might arise as to why we would want to undertake such a project. The answer is simple: Archbishop Arseny was a key figure in a formative time of North American Orthodox history, and more importantly, his efforts at establishing the Church in the new land, as well as the zeal and great sanctity with which he undertook these efforts, are enduringly inspiring. Arseny's life is a true word of God for us all and we have much to gain spiritually from learning more about him. His life of 79 years took in the birth of modernity, the Russian revolution, the reformation of the Metropolia, the First and then Second World Wars, and so much more. The Archbishop also left an indelible mark on Orthodox life in Canada, where he is fondly, even passionately remembered to this day. In short, Arseny's life was such that we can learn as much or more about our history in general as we can about him in specific, and this cannot be said of everyone. Canadians today consider him a true Saint, and those who knew him have extraordinary stories of his sanctity.

Archbishop Arseny was born Andrew Lvovich Chavstov on March 10, 1866 in the region of Kharkov, South Russia. By his own description he was “born into the poor family of a village Church Reader,” and as a young boy worked as a shepherd tending “the flocks of the unspeaking sheep of my father and did not dare to dream of becoming the pastor of a flock with speech.”<sup>1</sup> Arseny's natural intellectual abilities were noticed early, and his family had decided, “in view of my alertness and love for school,” to send him to “the city, in the commercial branch, in order that I could stand on my own feet more quickly to help them with their large family.”<sup>2</sup> However, at an unknown age, his father died leaving him one of “five little orphans,” and as he was the eldest he was sent immediately to a school for clergy children where “eleven years of happy school life flew

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<sup>1</sup> *Speech of Archimandrite Arseny at his Elevation to the Rank of Bishop of Winnipeg*. Translator and date unknown. Full text provided on the World Wide Web at [www.russianorthodox.beliefnet.com/textpage2](http://www.russianorthodox.beliefnet.com/textpage2)

<sup>2</sup> *Speech*

by.”<sup>3</sup> He was then admitted to the Kharkov Theological Seminary, graduating with some distinction<sup>4</sup> in 1887 and being ordained Deacon and then Priest in the same year.

One of the least known aspects of his early life is his family life. At some point in the Kharkov seminary he married, but nothing about his wife is known yet or about the village parish he served in while a married priest. There is some question as to whether he had a child or not. Arseny claims not to have a child in the minutes of a libel case which he filed against two journalists who tried to sully his name by concocting and then publishing a story claiming that he fathered an illegitimate child (the mother of the child claimed under oath that she was paid for her signature to their story and the whole event was so obviously fabricated that Arseny’s case won handily). However, he does leave some money to a son in his last will and testament. Chances are, however, that he adopted a child either in Russia or in America where he founded an orphanage. In any case, however happy Arseny’s life was, it was not to last. As he describes: “Ominous clouds gathered over my happiness, a storm broke out, the thunder roared, and of my happiness remained only broken pieces... From the hands of God’s design I accepted the heavy lot of a widower priest in the prime of life.”<sup>5</sup> Neither the date of his wife’s death or its cause is not known with certainty. A memorial article in *The Russian Orthodox Journal* of November 1945, written just one month after Arseny’s death, mentions his ordination and assignment to a village church in Kharkov as happening in 1887 (substantiated by his own testimony in court), and then says, “three years later he took monastic vows.”<sup>6</sup> But, the article does not refer to his wife, either because the author (who is anonymous) did not know about her or left that information out on the grounds that it was not appropriate to an article about a Bishop. However, the fuller account of his life given in the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary *Tikhonaire* gives a different set of dates, as well as more information. The *Tikhonaire* provides the same date for graduation and assignment to the village church and it tells us that he was married and had a young son, but it gives a much later date for his monastic tonsure: “After serving as a parish priest for 13 years, Fr. Andrew [Arseny] received the monastic tonsure...”<sup>7</sup> Thus, there is a difference of 10 years between these articles, neither of which site their sources. So, either Arseny’s monastic tonsuring occurred in 1890 or in 1900 is uncertain, but in either case he was led “to the calm refuge of monastic life,”<sup>8</sup> and received the name Arseny, in honour of St. Arsenius of Konevits.

However, he was not led to that refuge of monasticism without great struggle. Somewhere between his wife’s death and his tonsuring, Arseny spent time searching for direction and consolation. The story is fascinating both for what it tells us about what he did after his wife’s death and for how it reveals the personality of Arseny himself, and it

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<sup>3</sup> *Speech*

<sup>4</sup> “Enraptured by the dream of becoming a pastor more quickly, I jumped ahead of my school-mates...”

*Speech*

<sup>5</sup> *Speech*

<sup>6</sup> *The Russian Orthodox Journal*, November 1945, V.19, Number 7. Page 21

<sup>7</sup> *The Tikhonaire*. Publications Department of St Tikhon’s Theological Seminary, South Canaan: Pennsylvania, 1985. Page 57.

<sup>8</sup> *Speech*

was not related in either of the accounts we have discussed, nor in any other. It is only to be found in his *Elevation Speech*:

“From happy and cheerful I became a rebellious man... And, O God! what kind of storms did not wrack my frail ship... But in this frightful desert of my life, the Lord did not abandon me. I see oases. Here I am – in the coffin nailed before its time; here I am – entangled in iron chains; here I am – with a bag on my back going from monastery to monastery bringing my pain and looking for consolation. I see myself concelebrating at God’s Altar with that godly man of the Russian lands, Father John of Kronstadt; I see myself in midst of the elders of Valaam monastery, surrounded by tales of the lives of the hermits.”<sup>9</sup>

This part of the speech raises more questions than answers. What did he mean by “in the coffin nailed before its time” or “entangled in iron chains”? And what was his meeting with Father Kronstadt like, and what did the great Saint say to him? The remarkable quality of this speech shines through in the drama and feeling of its presentation, but it is made more remarkable by the fact that it was spoken to a group of Bishops, clergy and laity at his Elevation to the Bishopric in Winnipeg. Certainly very few Bishops would relate such a story of their past in such a public arena and at such an occasion.

But having been led to his monastic refuge, Arseny was soon made Igumen (Abbot) of the Kuriansk Monastery in 1900. But he did not stay long. After two years he left for America. At this time Bishop Tikhon was recruiting priests and lay workers for service in the Orthodox New World, and Father Arseny being a natural preacher and fluent in many lesser Russian Dialects was ideal for the call. In Arseny’s words, “I accepted from the hand of God the fate of a preacher. The right hand of God transported me to the side of the New World – America.”<sup>10</sup> What is interesting is that he saw himself as accepting the “fate of a preacher”, a description which gives us an insight into how Arseny saw his role as a missionary in America, which was as a preacher, a sower of the Gospel. Little is known of his first assignments when he arrived except that by his own recollection he worked in parishes in Troy, Mayfield, and Simpson in the Eastern United States. Curiously, his work with the returning Uniats is not mentioned in any of the memorial articles and accounts of his life, even though it was substantial enough to incur a case of libel against him by Uniats frustrated by his success. Only he mentions this vital aspect of his early ministry, and in very passionate terms: “The Stamp of my apostolate are the believers in Troy, Mayfield, Simpson, and the brethren scattered in many places – which I brought back into the folds of the Orthodox Church and delivered from the tangles of the crafty Union.”<sup>11</sup> The Uniat return to Orthodoxy, as lead by St. Alexis Toth at the turn of the century, was a very contemporary issue when Arseny arrived, and Father Arseny would have certainly worked closely with St. Alexis Toth. In fact, in 1902, St Toth himself received “the parish of St. John the Baptist in Mayfield, Pennsylvania”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Speech*

<sup>10</sup> *Speech*

<sup>11</sup> *Speech*

<sup>12</sup> *Orthodox America: 1794 – 1976*. Constance Tarasar and John Erickson Editors. The Orthodox Church in America, Syosset: New York, 1975. p.51

and thus must have passed its care directly to Arseny. It is clear therefore that Arseny's role in the Uniat return to the Church was significant, although history has so far remained silent about the extent of this role.

Working side by side with St. Alexis Toth, Father Arseny nevertheless had another dream for the Church in North America, and it was one which he was to realize just 3 years after his arrival and one which was to win him a lasting name in the New World. With the blessing of then Metropolitan Tikhon, Arseny founded in May, 1906 St. Tikhon's Monastery and Orphan's Home in rural northeastern Pennsylvania. The story of his labours and feats of fund-raising are well documented in the literature of the day. Indeed, on the day of the monastery's consecration, Bishop Raphael, who had visited a year earlier, claimed that it was impossible "to pass by in silence those exemplary labors, struggles, works and endeavors, which were applied in an untiring way, always hoping in the blessing of God, of the respected Mayfield Rector, Fr. Igumen Arseny, for the realization of this glorious act – the founding of this Holy Monastery."<sup>13</sup> Father Arseny was named Superior of the new monastery with the rank of Igumen, an honour for which Father Alexander Hotovitsky, an eyewitness, claimed was met with cries of "Meetly Worthy!"<sup>14</sup> It is indeed a remarkable moment in history to contemplate: Metropolitan Tikhon, Bishop Raphael, and Father Alexis Toth processing together to the new monastery built by Father Arseny and concelebrating there. One eyewitness claimed, "Even though I had seen in Russia festive multitudes headed by Hierarchs, with thousands of vestments, the procession here was more impressive. This moment cannot be repeated! This feeling cannot be expressed! I could not expect anything more from this procession!"<sup>15</sup> Even Father Arseny's voice, claims the same witness, "was stopping, because of choking with tears."<sup>16</sup> Arseny in fact was elated "that all this took place here, in a foreign land, where yet we are so little known," exclaiming, "O Mother! O Holy Orthodox Church! Come and see! Behold your children who have come to glorify the Lord Whom you glorified!"<sup>17</sup> Such it seems was Arseny's vision, the firm establishment of the Orthodox Church in North America, and it is one which he states many times in his description of the founding of the monastery to be the chief source of his great joy at the event.

Yet, in his speech of 1926 at his elevation to the rank of Bishop, Arseny says nothing of the founding of the monastery, but passes on, for reasons unknown, from his duties as Pastor of Mayfield to his reassignment as Rector of Holy Trinity Cathedral in Winnipeg and rural Dean and Administrator of the Canadian parishes. He was assigned to Canada in 1908 by Metropolitan Platon who had just replaced Tikhon and soon after arrival Arseny applied his enormous energies to the building up of the Church there. From almost the moment he arrived in Canada, the Canadians loved him. He was fluent in Ukrainian and also in many of the Russian Dialects and so was able to preach in the native dialect of many parishes across the country. "It was in Canada," says the

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<sup>13</sup> *Tikhonaire*, 1985. p. 45. This particular *Tikhonaire* devoted a large section to the founding of the Monastery and has a wealth of pictures, essays, and first hand reports.

<sup>14</sup> *Tikhonaire*, 1985. p. 40.

<sup>15</sup> *Tikhonaire*, 1985. p. 39.

<sup>16</sup> *Tikhonaire*, 1985. p. 39.

<sup>17</sup> *Tikhonaire*, 1985. p. 36.

*Tikhonaire*, “that his rare missionary talents increased and bore fruit.”<sup>18</sup> Again his efforts were concentrated on receiving the Uniats back into the Church, as well as welcoming the many Bukovinians and Galicians immigrating en masse at that time. There many documented stories about Arseny’s sanctity, including ones which describe miracles associated with him. He was capable of being a strong disciplinarian, demanding order and beauty in the services, and equally capable of being a true pastor, kind, searching, understanding, and able to listen deeply and compassionately. He was loved deeply by his flock in Canada.

Arseny’s efforts in Canada were tireless, as he himself describes: “Through the depths of virgin forests, through the limitless prairies of wide Canada, I started searching for those who had gone astray, strengthening the faith of the weak, and instructing the growing generation with the light of the true teaching.”<sup>19</sup> His greatest tool was his preaching. It was in Canada that he gained the affectionate title, “The Canadian Chrysostom” for his extraordinary preaching talents. He became famous for his sermons, which being published in an Orthodox journal of the day, *The Canadian Field*, eventually were read in Russia by Czar Nicolas II. The Russian Emperor was so taken with his sermons that “in order to thank him for this ‘food for the soul’ (as he referred to the articles written by Archimandrite Arseny) – bestowed on him a gold pectoral cross, sent directly to him by His Majesty’s offices.”<sup>20</sup> For reasons again unknown, Arseny left Canada for Russia in 1910, only two years after taking up his new post. The Canadians were beside themselves, as one contemporary recalls: “In 1910, with the departure from Canada of this Chrysostom-Missionary, many, many people were dispersed, in grief and with regret, in various directions.”<sup>21</sup>

Very little is known about his life back in Russia. From his own account, he returned “with the title of missionary-preacher, then, as the director of a school for missionary-priests.”<sup>22</sup> Conjecturing from this statement, it would seem that Father Arseny’s success and experience both as a missionary and preacher worked to have him recalled to Russia to teach other future Orthodox missionaries. In any case, little is known about his departure or his activities, although some stories are recorded, but without reference to sources. The *Tikhonaire* claims that he was “assigned as Superior and Director of the Grigoriev-Bizyukovsky Monastery... in the Kherson District (Crimea) of Southern Russia.”<sup>23</sup> It also claims that “while he was there, the Bolshevik Revolution broke out and seeing the terrible sufferings and terrors being inflicted on the Church of Christ and His Faithful, Archimandrite Arseny joined the White Armies.”<sup>24</sup> An account of his service in the White Army is given by Arseny himself in his usual descriptive style: “as a missionary preacher, under the whistling of the bombs, the explosion of shrapnel, I comforted the soldiers, and wished to give my life for my brothers.”<sup>25</sup> There is a story

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<sup>18</sup> *Tikhonaire*, 1985. p. 57.

<sup>19</sup> *Speech*

<sup>20</sup> *Archbishop Arseny: The Canadian Chrysostom*. Archimandrite Antony (Tereshchenko). Full text provided on the World Wide Web at [www.russianorthodox.beliefnet.com/about](http://www.russianorthodox.beliefnet.com/about)

<sup>21</sup> *Archbishop Arseny*

<sup>22</sup> *Speech*

<sup>23</sup> *Archbishop Arseny*

<sup>24</sup> *Archbishop Arseny*

<sup>25</sup> *Speech*

given by *The Tikhonaire* which claims Arseny was captured at one point by the Bolsheviks “and sentenced to be shot, along with several others, on the following morning.”<sup>26</sup> According to the story, Arseny spent the night praying and preparing for sure death, but in the morning, “shortly before he was to be shot, a detachment of German soldiers appeared and rescued the condemned men.”<sup>27</sup> After this miraculous escape, Arseny fled to Serbia and in 1920 entered a monastery there and settled down, thinking “that the book of my life was written up and ready to be closed.”<sup>28</sup>

The Canadians, however, would add more pages. Having received news that Father Arseny was still alive, they petitioned Metropolitan Platon with some insistence that he be returned to them as Bishop. Platon complied, and in 1926 letters were sent to Belgrade to arrange his consecration. On June 6<sup>th</sup> 1926, Father Arseny was consecrated as Bishop of Winnipeg, Auxiliary of the North American Archdiocese. Bishop Arseny’s response to this was typical of him: “I am coming. My heart is ready. O my God! Ready!”<sup>29</sup> He traveled to New York for a meeting with the Metropolitan, then spent a short time visiting his beloved St. Tikhon’s Monastery and then arrived in Winnipeg to take up residence at his new cathedra. However, by all accounts, Bishop Arseny had come back to a very different Orthodox Canada than that he had left 16 years earlier. The so-called “Living Church” had risen since the Revolution and was causing great trouble, as were various Ukrainian nationalist groups. According to Archimandrite Tereshchenko “a whole book could be written, outlining in it all that Vladyko Arseny suffered in Canada after his return, but it would be a catalogue of horrors. His Eminence had to wage war against the ‘ill weeds’ on several fronts, and it was difficult at times to distinguish who was one of ours, and who was on the other side.”<sup>30</sup> Still Arseny pressed on, traversing the vast country, preaching, founding monasteries in Sifton and Bluffton, Manitoba, and throughout Alberta. He even traveled as far as Vancouver, British Columbia, where he concelebrated with Metropolitan Platon in the consecration of a new church there on August 9<sup>th</sup>, 1929.<sup>31</sup> He was very active in directing the church, frequently convening clergy assemblies and Sobors, and although he was a strong leader and a passionate defender of Orthodoxy, he was known to be unusually ecumenical both in his relationship with other sometimes non-canonical Orthodox churches but also with other Christian confessions. Nevertheless, as an Orthodox Bishop, Arseny was an unwilling figurehead in the politics of his day. Thus, while convening a clergy assembly at the home of a priest, “a band of hooligans, still calling themselves ‘Christians’, armed with stones and wooden stakes, broke the windows and doors and shooting through them into the house where Vladyko Arseny and a gathering of clergy had assembled to celebrate the Divine Liturgy the next morning.”<sup>32</sup> Arseny was badly wounded in the leg, getting leg poisoning from the bullet, and it was this, and not any lack of desire to continue, that forced him to retire from active service in Canada. According to a Church Directory of

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<sup>26</sup> *The Tikhonaire*, 1985. p. 57

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>28</sup> *Speech*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>30</sup> *Archbishop Arseny*

<sup>31</sup> Further information can be found in the Parish Background section of the Holy Resurrection Church web site on the OCA Online Directory of Parishes: [www.oca.org/OCA/pim/oca-ca-vanhrc](http://www.oca.org/OCA/pim/oca-ca-vanhrc)

<sup>32</sup> *Archbishop Arseny*

1936,<sup>33</sup> he was re-assigned briefly to Detroit and Cleveland retiring after only ten years of service in Canada to St. Tikhon's Monastery, leaving a legacy which remains in the Canadian Diocese to this day.

Bishop Arseny was elevated to the rank of Archbishop for his tireless work, and soon after, when he was expected to enjoy quiet retirement, astonished just about everybody by applying to the Holy Synod for the blessing to establish St. Tikhon's Pastoral School (later Seminary), which he did in the Fall of 1938. The opening of the School was another feat of tireless labour and ingenuity on Archbishop Arseny's part, and the speed and apparent surety with which he accomplished it were nearly miraculous. Typically, he was loved by the students who, according to *The Tikhonaire*, "each year would on his birthday and name's day, would honor him with bouquets of flowers."<sup>34</sup> Archbishop Arseny, in the years following his retirement, was never idle. We hear of him visiting local parishes, blessing altars, such as that of St. Nicholas Church in Olyphant, Pennsylvania, on December 19, 1940, or traveling to assemblies and special occasions.<sup>35</sup> Finally, on October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1945, at the age of 79, Archbishop Arseny died in Moses Taylor Hospital in Scranton, Pennsylvania. The funeral and interment took place on October 9<sup>th</sup> at St. Tikhon's Monastery attended by Their Graces, Archbishop Vitaly, Bishop Alexy, Bishop Makaray, and Bishop Leonty, and more than fifty priests, Hieromonks and Deacons, as well as students and friends.<sup>36</sup>

So much remains to be said about this remarkable man. It is obvious that his contribution to the Orthodox Church in America and Canada was memorable and foundational. He shared as passionately the same missionary vision as the great saints and Fathers of Orthodoxy with whom he worked. He was capable of being all things to all people. He was a married priest, a widower, a father, a parish priest, a monk, an Igumen, a Dean and Rector, a traveling preacher, a prisoner, a Bishop, a founder of monasteries and pastoral schools and orphanages. He walked in the company of great men and women of the faith in every part of his life, and in every country he lived. He was a learned man, an eloquent man, and a humble man. Indeed, he was most of all humble. If he has remained in the background, if his extraordinary life and contribution to the Church have gone unsung it is because his accomplishments were never for their own sake, but for the Church, in which he knew he was only a servant. His was not a zeal for self advancement, it was a genuine zeal for the Kingdom of God, for the Gospel, and it is significant that he is best remembered as a master homilist, as a Canadian Chrysostom. His was a life of service, of sacrifice, of love for the Church. In a word, his was a life lived in response: response to the call of priesthood, response to the call of the North

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<sup>33</sup> See in SVS Library, call number, BX 496 A5 S6, p. 163. This is further substantiated by a sentence in the ROJ memorial article of November 1945 (see footnote 6)

<sup>34</sup> *Tikhonaire*, 1985. p. 58.

<sup>35</sup> The last recorded public occasion attended by Archbishop Arseny was that of the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Russian Orthodox Church in America celebrations. There are pictures of him concelebrating with the other Bishops of America at the Pro-Cathedral of the Holy Virgin Protection, in New York City, October 7-8, 1945. See *The Russian Orthodox Journal*, November 1944, V.18, Number 7. Page 3-4. Of the event itself, it was said that "Never before in the history of our church had there been an occasion such as this."

<sup>36</sup> His Eminence, Metropolitan Theophilus was unable to make it back to Pennsylvania from San Francisco in time for the funeral services.

American mission, response to the call of God wherever it would lead. And we hear his response, even on the eve of his return as Bishop to Canada,

“I am coming. My heart is ready. O my God! Ready!”