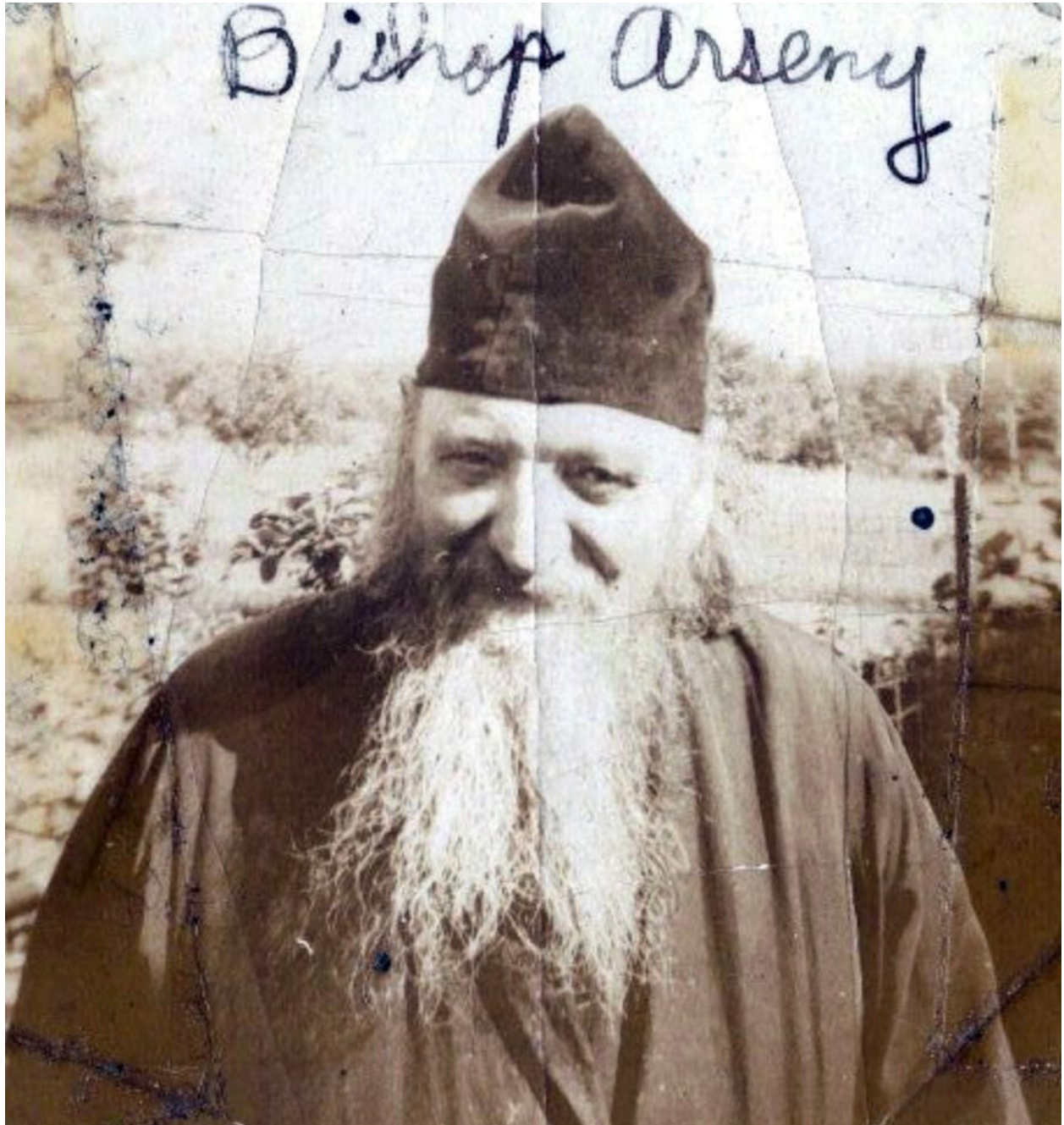


Paradox of Sanctity (Archbishop Arseny (Chahovstov) of Winnipeg)

by Fr Gregory Scratch



As Christians we should recognize paradox after paradox in the scriptures, and life of the Church, that on the surface seems to make no sense. Yet, we are called to live out those paradoxes, regardless if they are the Beatitudes sung at every Liturgy, or to "love our enemies" (Mt. 5:43) and ultimately to "lose our life that we might save it" (Mk. 8:35) by "taking up our cross and following Christ" (Lk. 9:33).

We see Abraham and Sarah, given the promise that their descendants will be greater than the stars of heaven, despite being barren, and we see the image of a serpent being raised -bringing healing to the sick and suffering Israelites in Sinai. The most profound paradox of a Virgin birth of the Incarnate God; Jesus Christ "light of light, true God of true God" "who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men" (Phip. 2:6-7)

We also see these paradoxes in the life of the Church. We are hierarchical, yet at our core we are conciliatory, we have Canons and rules, yet also have economia and flexibility. We are steeped in tradition, yet are ever meeting current circumstances, we look back with reverence on our history and stories, but are always looking forward to the future of the Kingdom. As we consider the 76th anniversary of the repose of Archbishop Arseny (Chahovstov) of Winnipeg (Oct. 4th 1946), we see how our broken, mortal and sinful humanity can, by Grace, be recognized and revered as holy, as "Saints".

Each paradox presents us an opportunity to find resolution in the person of Jesus Christ. It is in His abiding presence, manifested by the Holy Spirit, that the infinite encounters the finite to fill it eternally, and the Lord of Glory meets a sinful humanity to redeem it eternally. For those who have responded to the call of the Lord, all those paradoxes (that we struggle to understand) are smoothed over and made clear and plain. We see in those who have cried out like Isaiah "Lord send me" (Is. 6:8),

exemplary lives and the manifestation of faith in God. We see the perfection in all the virtues, which are crowned by standing up for the faith, even unto the shedding of blood. We also see the manifestations of wonders and signs (miracles) as signs of God. Indeed, these are the "holy ones of God", these are the Saints of our Church.

In sharp contrast to the perceived notion that saints are made when the Church Hierarchy says so (a "top down" process); the Orthodox Church's method of recognizing a Saint, has always been somewhat of a "bottom up" process. The faithful (of one region or another), continue a relationship they had with those who served them even after their death, bestowing the description of "holy" because they did the Holy work of God. Sometimes those descriptions change from describing their actions (so-and-so did holy work), to defining them by those actions (so-and-so is holy because they did that work). In short, calling them a "Saint". Sometimes (but not often) the Church Hierarchy will take notice of these holy people, and proclaim their sanctity by Glorifying or Canonizing them.

Our encounter with Archbishop Arseny, started over a hundred years ago as a missionary in the United States, and then in Canada. From his first assignments in Eastern Pennsylvania assisting St. Alexis Toth's mission of reuniting Ukrainian, and Carpatho-Rusyns to Orthodoxy, to the founding of St. Tikhon's (in 1905) monastery and pastoral school (1910) a source of blessing for over a century.

In 1908 he was assigned to Holy Trinity Sobor in Winnipeg MB with the task of organizing and founding parishes for the thousands of Ukrainian and Romanian settlers flocking to the Prairies (and the continued work reuniting them to the Orthodox Church). This led to a golden era in the life of the Church in Canada.

After a return to Russia for health reasons, and the ensuing chaos following the Russian Revolution, he was elevated to the Episcopate in Serbia to be the bishop of Canada at the request of Metropolitan Platon.

When he returned to Canada (in 1926), the ecclesiastical order he had put in place 25 years earlier was in ruins. Communities and families were divided, and violent and mindless acts committed even in the name of Christ (Lord have mercy!). He was wounded by agitators in Canora Saskatchewan (He would suffer these injuries for the remainder of his life), and suffered the slander of lies and evil among his detractors.

Yet his work in these difficult and dangerous times, ensured that communities like ours at St. Nicholas in Narol (and many others) had a future that transcended nationality, politics, and culture. Through his constant proclamation of the Gospel narrative "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away." (Mt. 24:35). Suffering from his injury, his tireless work in serving a diocese that stretched across six provinces, and his age, Archbishop Arseny was compelled to retire in 1937 at the monastery he founded, where he passed away in 1946.

It is impossible for us today to consider the challenge of traveling across this country multiple times in the days before air travel, yet those thousands and thousands of kilometers were at heart, the missionary witness of God's love for humanity; built upon the foundation of Christ with the tools of humility and repentance.

In light of all this, the question is, how are we to understand the life and role of our Blessed Archbishop Arseny in the Church? Is he a Saint or not?

These labours indeed demonstrated his irreproachable faith in God, and perfection in all the virtues, by seeing how he served out of love, and how he loved those whom he served. His work was crowned by standing up for the faith, proclaiming the unity of the Orthodox Faith that stretched beyond nations, politics and cultures; even unto

the shedding of his blood in being shot for his unwavering fidelity to Christ and suffering slander for His sake. And finally, his work manifested the miracles of God.

For me this last point is so very poignant; that although the parish I serve is surrounded by scores of empty Churches, in a culture that wants nothing to do with Christianity, or does not want to pay the cost of that life in Christ; there is a community that Archbishop Arseny laboured in and for all those years ago. A growing community of young families, individuals, seniors, professionals and students (most of whom have no historic or cultural connection to Orthodoxy). This is truly a miracle of miracles, and the work of Archbishop Arseny (among many) can't be discounted.

There is no doubt in my mind that Archbishop Arseny did those holy works of God, and is indeed holy, a "saint" in every sense of the word. His was a journey to reconcile the paradox of "becoming by grace everything that God is, by nature" (St. Athanasius) as exemplified by his loving and dedicated service to God and neighbour alike.

Yet, who am I (even as a priest) to say who a Saint is -or not a Saint; after all this is a "bottom-up process", because the recognition of sanctity is the work of the faithful who have and are encountering a relationship with Archbishop Arseny, even if through their participation in those labours. Yet we can recognize that someone like Archbishop Arseny is "holy" because he did the Holy work of God, and we call him "holy" (even call him "saint") because he manifested the love of God that not even death can end.

The road to Canonization and Glorification is not an easy or simple one (and if we are being honest, it shouldn't be an easy or simple); but neither is living a Christian life. Indeed, there are many paradoxes that confront us in our life in Christ, let alone

administer and facilitate the work of our parishes. But life still goes on, and the Lord still manifests his saving presence. How is this any different in how we consider the legacy and life of Archbishop Arseny. For the impossibility of living a Christian life finds the same resolution in how we consider the life and work of Archbishop Arseny; that of the Lord's call to us to be "Saints" and His grace to accomplish that.

Christ indeed desires to make us saints, and consecrate our lives as Christians, and it is only by His love, a divine love, that a finite and mortal humanity can be transformed into icons of His "image and according to His likeness" (Gen. 1:26). It is how the conciliatory nature of our Church can be Hierarchical, for they spring from the same font that is Christ, the King of Glory, and yet He has come that He "might serve" (Mt. 20:28). It is how our Canons and rules can be applied with economy and flexibility, for the "Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath", as He is the "Lord of the Sabbath" (Mk. 2:27-28). It is how the present circumstances of life can find context in our rich tradition, for our tradition leads us to "the Way the Truth and the Life"(Jn. 14:6). It is how looking forward to the Kingdom has been already manifested throughout history with every saving encounter with Jesus Christ. And on this anniversary of Archbishop Arseny's repose, how our relationship with him, as broken and sinful as he might have been, is reconciled and healed, revealing what is Holy. A life in, with, and through Jesus Christ.

We should not get hung up on the question of whether such a holy man like our Archbishop Arseny is a "Saint" or not; or if he will ever be formally glorified or not. These considerations are ultimately redundant, because they do not change the relationship in Christ, we have with him and with the miracles manifested through him (like the abounding life at my little Church outside Winnipeg). His love, work and prayers offered to the Lord on our behalf, did not end 76 years ago when he fell asleep in the Lord. Rather they began anew, stretching into the eternal Kingdom of God.

Truly, this is a paradox that makes no sense, but neither does the Lord taking on our human nature, and suffering death upon the Cross in His love for humanity. It is only in Christ that this paradox (and all those paradoxes) reveals the wonder of God's love. And by extension, reveal in Archbishop Arseny that love manifested around us. Regardless of what prefix he has in front of his name.

By the prayers of our loving and dedicated Archbishop Arseny, may we have the eyes to see this.