

IN MEMORIAM

Metropolitan Filaret of Minsk

Jim Forest

Metropolitan Filaret of Minsk's death on January 12, 2021, released a flood of memories.

I first met Filaret in April 1984. I was one of several people from the West invited to participate in a discussion of "Violence, Nonviolence, and Liberation" he hosted at the Moscow Patriarchate's Office of External Affairs. At Filaret's suggestion, I arrived in Moscow several days before the meeting started. A member of his staff, Tatiana Tchernikova, took me to churches, museums, and other points of interest. Tania proved to be not only an excellent guide but a deeply-rooted Orthodox believer. In the course of our time together, we visited all the open churches in Moscow (not so many in those days) plus several "museum churches," as well as the Tretyakov Gallery and other museums. We also drove to the Saint Sergius-Holy Trinity monastery. It was my first visit to Russia and it left a profound impression.

To tell the whole story of my subsequent visits to what was then still the USSR would take a book—and there is such a book, or rather, two books. With the cooperation of the Church, and notably Metropolitan Filaret, I was able to write *Pilgrim to the Russian Church* (1988) and *Religion in the New Russia* (1989).

In one of my early conversations with Filaret, I told him how impressed I was with the services I had attended. He re-

sponded by reminding me that the Russian word for Orthodoxy, *Pravoslavie*, meant not only "correct teaching" but also "the right way to give glory."

Talking about church-state tensions, Filaret said this was not only a problem in the USSR. He pointed to the crisis in relations then going on between the Greek Orthodox Church and the government in Greece, as the state no

Metropolitan Filaret of Minsk and Slutsk.
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longer tolerated the Church's having so much land and control of property. "We see once again," said Filaret, "as we have said to the bishops in Greece, that what we fail to do ourselves others will make us do. This is a lesson we [Russian Orthodox Christians] have had to learn with much pain."

Filaret told me of a group of visiting Americans he had met a few days before: "It surprises many visitors to see how vital the churches are here. Many people do not expect to find a living church in the Soviet Union. They think opposition can destroy a church. In the United States, I often have the sense that believers are without a positive understanding of suffering. But attacks are not so terrible for the Christian! Christians have suffered before. We are ordered to suffer. But the Savior is with us, he is with the whole world, and he will give his peace to the whole world."

One problem for Western visitors trying to understand the Russian Orthodox Church, Filaret observed, is that in the West theologians try to explain everything, while Orthodoxy chiefly expresses itself through imagery, music, and liturgy: "We tend to try to conceal our spiritual life. When you try to

put what is deepest in life into words, you find there are no words. What you want to say is clear, but there are no words. This is the reason our church is not famous for books of theology."

At the end of a conversation on a subsequent visit in the spring of 1987, Filaret asked about my family. "Your wife is part of what you are doing, just as the wife of a priest shares in the priesthood. Your wife is a *matushka*, and she should come with you to Russia. You haven't yet seen my part of Russia, White Russia. I am inviting you and Nancy. It isn't just a polite word. I ask you and Nancy to come this summer. You will be my guests."

The following July, Nancy and I took the train from the Netherlands to Moscow and for two weeks were Filaret's well-cared-for guests. If there were space, I would tell many stories from that visit, but let me share just one segment from Nancy's journal. We were in Smolensk that day. It was Nancy's first Orthodox liturgy:

I have never been in a congregation of such unqualified religious concentration. I had a sudden sense of being at the center of the universe and knew that each of us had this in common.

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Both pages: Met. Filaret visits the author's parish, St. Nicholas of Myra in Amsterdam, in December 2009.

The fact of standing rather than sitting may have something to do with remaining attentive to the activity in the church rather than slipping into private daydreams or plans for the rest of the day. You can't help but pay attention to the sensuous drama going on, the brilliant iconostasis, the constant singing, the incense. All these things pulled me again and again to the business at hand, the eternal present, with its music. I had such a deep sense of spiritual connection.

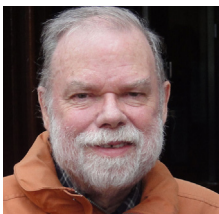
The church was crowded. There were the usual deeply pious old women, among them one woman on her knees at the front rail, eyes fixed on an icon, crossing herself and bowing over and over again. Russian tourists moved in and out, watching rather than participating. Despite the almost continuous motion among the people and the clergy, and the constant music from the

choirs, there was a powerful sense of attentiveness and stillness.

No one hushed the children in the church. They obviously enjoyed being there. We noticed a priest and his family in a vacant choir stall. One daughter looked to be about twelve and her little sister about four. The older sister was holding the little one up on the rail and they were hugging and stroking each other. All the while, the older girl joined in singing the words to all the prayers and hymns.

It was such experiences that led us to visit the Russian Orthodox parish of St Nicholas of Myra in Amsterdam and, in the spring of 1988, to seek chrismation. It was a step we might never have taken had it not been for the hospitality and kindness of Metropolitan Filaret.

Eternal memory! ✨



Jim Forest is the international secretary of the Orthodox Peace Fellowship. His books include *Praying with Icons*, *Ladder of the Beatitudes*, *Confession: Doorway to Forgiveness*, and *The Road to Emmaus: Pilgrimage as a Way of Life*. His autobiography, *Writing Straight With Crooked Lines*, was published by Orbis Books in 2020.