

Eulogy for Archbishop Nikon (Liolin)

Robert M. Arida

On September 1, 2019, Archbishop Nikon of Boston, New England, and the Albanian Archdiocese (OCA) fell asleep in the Lord after a long battle with cancer. His Eminence's repose has left an enormous void in the lives of his family and friends and in the lives of the two dioceses he lovingly pastored. In addition to his ministry within the OCA, Archbishop Nikon was a friend and strong supporter of the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania, under the leadership of Archbishop Anastasios Yannulatos.

From the very inception of *The Wheel*, Archbishop Nikon was an inconspicuous and ardent advocate of its mission to address issues of the day—issues that he knew could not be easily resolved by formal decrees and fiats. Generous in expending moral and financial support, His Eminence's silent input into *The Wheel* provided necessary encouragement to pursue its mission. In this issue, which focuses on various challenges the Church faces today, it seems appropriate to remember our benefactor, whose humble and unassuming demeanor revealed a true pastor and theologian.



In the name of the Father and of the Son
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Christ is risen!

Indeed, we gather around the relics of our beloved Archbishop Nikon to celebrate, to witness to the power of the resurrection.

To properly eulogize our departed hierarch, I would like to borrow a title from one of the short stories written by the great Catholic writer from the American South Flannery O'Connor. The title is *A Good Man Is Hard To Find*. Without a doubt, we stand around the body of a good man—a very good man—who showed us how a Christian is to live in this world. Here it must be stressed that based on my relationship with Archbishop Nikon, based on our conversa-

Archbishop Nikon,
2013. Photo: Inga
Leonova.



Wedding of Nicholas
Liolin and Sarah
Arthur, 1967. Photo:
St. George Albanian
Orthodox Cathedral,
Boston.



tions and based on observing him as he interacted with others, his goodness was in many ways the outcome of the relationship he forged with his wife, Sarah. She was truly the love of his life. In fact, within the family she was rarely referred to as Sarah. The bishop, his siblings and their wives, and his nieces and nephews called her “Honey.” Sarah was truly the sweetness poured upon his life. She was his comfort, the one who cared for him. She was the one who brought beauty, kindness, and patience into his life. She was for him the living icon of Christ.

To eulogize our bishop, I would like to focus on three basic characteristics of his life. They are integrity, humility, and courage. With regards to his integrity, allow me to share a quote from the renowned and clever Christian humanist, Erasmus. In

his *In Praise Of Folly* he writes the following: “What else is the whole life of mortals but a sort of comedy, in which the various actors, disguised by various costumes and masks, walk on and play each one his part, until the manager waves them off the stage?” Dare I say that we are counted as those who wear masks, we are people who consistently disguise ourselves as we hide from ourselves and from those around us. What we can learn from Archbishop Nikon is that these masks and costumes can be removed and that in doing so we can begin to look each other in the eye while forging a real communion of persons. By removing our masks and costumes, we can free ourselves of those things that put us into an existential corner where loneliness, cynicism, anger, confusion, and fear reign. Being a man of integrity, Archbishop Nikon wore no masks. He was who he was—free of guile and pretense. Not one for indulging in excessive ceremony, His Eminence would often, before leaving after a pastoral visit to his cathedral, quietly remove his monastic habit, put on his favorite Detroit Tigers jacket, slip into his car and drive home. Because he wore no masks, because he was free, he was able to draw near to others, while others, recognizing his humility, knew they could draw near to him. As a humble man, our bishop was quite self-effacing. Often he would say to me, “You know, I am not a theologian.” And often I thought to tell him—but didn’t, to my deep regret: “On the contrary, you are

Father Nick and
Sarah Liolin. Photo:
St. George Albanian
Orthodox Cathedral,
Boston.



a true theologian, who, with the implements of compassion, concern, and love, write theology on the hearts and minds of those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.” Never presuming to be an “academic” theologian, His Eminence would at times exhibit shyness, especially when it came to comparing himself to those who thought they were theologians. And yet it was this simple, unpretentious, and free man in Christ who stood as a great pastor and therefore a great theologian.

All of us here know that Archbishop Nikon was ill for a long time. Many of us know that he suffered tremendously, even though he did not always show it. His suffering was not only physical but was also brought on by loneliness and fear. Nevertheless, he was, as I saw him, a man of great courage—a humble warrior—who, while longing to be with his wife Sarah, also wanted to be with us—to live for us and for his dioceses. During the weekly visits my wife Susan and I would make, during the nightly visits of Father Mark Sherman, Archbishop Nikon would express in an almost desperate way his desire to get back to work.

Wanting to continue his ministry, Archbishop Nikon was aware, especially as the end neared, that he was in the midst of a battle that would ultimately defeat him. Yet he continued to fight. In addition to surgeries, he endured countless radiation and chemo treatments not only to prolong his life, but that he might also again be able to minister to others.

Four days before his repose, I remember His Eminence saying, as Susan and



Nicholas (right) and Arthur (left) Liolin as altar boys with Father Costa Belba, 1952. Photo: St. George Albanian Orthodox Cathedral, Boston.

I left his room, “I will never return.” His words turned out to be true. He never recovered from his illness, he never returned to active ministry. Nevertheless, his life and his death can continue to teach us to remove the masks and costumes we hide behind—the masks and costumes we wear so as to place us above the other. Archbishop Nikon’s life and death will continue to teach us that when all the masks and costumes are removed from our lives, we can enjoy the freedom of humility that enables us to serve the other even when, as was his experience, the other betrays and vilifies us. Our bishop will continue to teach us about the kenotic courage of the gospel that leads us to become less so Christ might become more.

Indeed, we gather around the relics of a very good man whose self-emptying life allows us to behold the power and glory of death swallowed up by life. Amen. ✽



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