



Priest Paul Florensky with his wife Anna Michailovna Florensky and his son Basil. Sergiev Posad, 1915.

INTRODUCTION

St. Paul Florensky and *Salt of the Earth*

by Abbot Herman and Fr. Damascene

The only biography of the great Elder of Gethsemane Hermitage, Hieromonk Isidore, is presented here for the first time in English. It was written in 1908 by the Elder's spiritual son, the philosopher and theologian P. A. Florensky (1882-1937). While Elder Isidore belonged to the thousand year-old tradition of Holy Russia and could be called typical of the monk-saints of his time, Florensky was a very unique phenomenon. The latter was at once a mathematical genius who became famous in the fields of astronomy, physics and electrical engineering; a gifted poet, musician and art historian; a linguist and etymologist who mastered Greek, Latin, most of the modern European languages and those of the Caucasus, Iran and India; as well as an original theological thinker and metaphysician. He was a personality of such rarity that up to today he has not been fully understood.

1. FLORENSKY'S EARLY YEARS

Fr. Paul Florensky was born into an aristocratic family in Transcaucasia on January 9th, 1882. His father was an engi-

neer of Russian descent, and his mother was Armenian. Although some of his father's ancestors had been priests, the young Paul was not raised in a religious atmosphere and was never taken to church. His first spiritual yearnings, therefore, were not the result of outside influences, but of an internal awakening to a higher reality. Through an experience of nature Paul began to feel awe before the unfathomable wisdom of God, the intrinsic goodness of creation, and the vastness of eternity.

Paul completed his secondary education in Georgia, where his remarkable abilities in mathematics became apparent. Upon graduating, he underwent a spiritual crisis that gave direction to his early yearnings. It was at this time, he wrote later, that "the limitations of physical knowledge were revealed to me." While before he had regarded science as the key to all the secrets of existence, he now realized that there was a level of existence it could not begin to reach. Interestingly enough, it was only after he had come to this conclusion that he felt free to use science in a practical way, within the lower—or material—order of being. "My striving toward the technical applications of physics," he wrote, "was instilled by my father, but was formed only when science ceased to be [for me] an object of faith. And later on, from that very crisis, came my interest in religion."¹

Florensky enrolled in the Physics and Mathematics Department of Moscow University, graduating in 1904. By this time his conversion to the Faith of his fathers—Orthodox Christianity—had become complete, and constituted the most important element of his life.

As one of his contemporaries put it, Florensky's whole character became marked by "an inward revolt against the world." He could not help but detest prescribed norms which were determined according to the way the world thinks. He saw this as merely wearing a mask that makes one accepted by

1. Autobiographical notes of January 1, 1921.

everyone, dragging out a comfortable existence at the expense of selling out one's highest aspirations toward Truth. His rebellion against "standardization" and prescribed behavior came not so much from his will as it did from his very nature, which had been marked since childhood with a stamp of uniqueness.

2. ELDER ISIDORE

In 1904 Florensky enrolled in the Moscow Theological Academy, which was then under the direction of a great hierarch who was later to share Florensky's fate of martyrdom: Archbishop Theodore Pozdeyev.

While studying at the Academy, Florensky came into contact with a man who was to deeply influence his whole approach to Christianity and the spiritual life. This was Elder Isidore, then living in a little cabin on the outskirts of Gethsemane Skete, which was near the Academy. Many of the monks at the *skete* regarded Isidore as something of an eccentric. The educated class paid no attention to people like him, whom they looked down upon as mere unlearned *muzhiks* (peasants). It was largely Isidore's own fellow *muzhiks* who appreciated the simplicity of his wisdom and the abundant love—that highest of Christian virtues—which was at all times to be seen on his radiant face. Florensky, who most of all loved what was genuine and unaffected, saw Isidore in the same way as did the simplest villagers; but as a philosopher and metaphysician he was also able to articulate his impressions and find their source. "Asceticism," he wrote, "produces not a *good* but a *beautiful* personality; the characteristic peculiarity of great Saints is not the goodness of heart which is common among carnal and even very sinful men, but spiritual beauty, the dazzling beauty of radiant, light-giving personality, unattainable by carnal men weighed down by the flesh."² This can be seen

2. N. O. Lossky, *History of Russian Philosophy* (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1952), p. 182.

as a direct expression of how Florensky regarded the ascetic Fr. Isidore.

In Fr. Isidore, Florensky also found an embodiment of his ideal of monasticism, an ideal characterized by *freedom of spirit*, freedom to live according to the laws of spiritual life, so vastly different from the ways of the world. Florensky, whom as we have seen hated all forms of role-playing, well knew that church figures were often much more artificial than laymen. Fr. Isidore, on the other hand, was at all times himself, in keeping with the ancient words of Socrates: "It is better to be than to seem." He refused to be governed by worldly codes of behavior, and broke them with charming ingenuousness. Absolutely fearless, he was at the same time possessed of profound humility. He was soft, warm, pliant and innocent—like a child, yet he could stand up to anything. For Florensky, Fr. Isidore—a lowly, forgotten old monk—was a giant who dwelt on another plane, a truly spiritual man who viewed things from a spiritual perspective and bore witness to the reality of the other world.

Fr. Isidore reposed in 1908; and, to pass on to others what he had gained from him, Florensky wrote the present book, *Salt of the Earth*.

3. MONASTIC YEARNINGS

The natural disposition of Florensky's character was strongly drawn to monasticism, but his spiritual father, the retired Bishop Anthony, advised against his taking this path. Bishop Anthony, a practical man and a shrewd observer of human psychology, spotted genius in Florensky—genius that might be subjugated and reduced to a common denominator under the rigorism of common monastic life. Florensky's inquisitive, analytical nature and limitless creativity were what moved him most of all, and were even more compelling than his monastic inclinations. Confining these impulses in a monastery, Bishop Anthony felt, would someday cause problems for Florensky's

personality, and thus he consciously diverted Florensky's energies into theological and scientific studies.

People speak of natural genius as a gift. As with natural beauty, our salvation does not depend on it, but rather on what we do with it. Florensky used his "gift" for his salvation by bearing it as a cross, since it was his very genius that prevented him from fulfilling his cherished desire of becoming a monk. It made it impossible for him to become "like everybody else," embracing the personal obscurity which monks should be seeking. But what a torture this was for him! The fact was, he *wanted* with all his heart to be like those simple, humble monks who go unnoticed by the world, never achieving outward greatness in anything, and yet pleasing God by the beauty of their quiet lives and so inheriting the Kingdom. But he could not change himself; he was different from the common lot. The words which he once wrote in reference to Pushkin could also have been applied very well to himself: "The fate of greatness is suffering from the external world, and inward suffering that comes from oneself. So it was, so it is, and so it shall be."³

As he bore the cross of rare genius, Florensky's suffering and tension only fed and strengthened his creative powers. He was compelled to find his longed-for monastic freedom outside the enclosure of a monastery, without the benefit of external monastic trappings, following an arduous path that eventually led to the freedom of dying for Christ.

4. SUFFERING

Florensky was elected to the Moscow Theological Academy's Faculty of the History of Philosophy in 1908. During his first few years of teaching at the Academy, he fell into severe depression. Many factors contributed to this: the death of his

3. Letter of Florensky to his mother from the Solovki concentration camp, 1937.

Elder Isidore, his not having entered a monastery, and his boredom with being trapped in a "standard" academic role, grouped together with scholars who had lost touch with the mystical Truth of church life. The cause of his problems, he said, "is a desire for something real, some kind of total contact, a guarantee of church life. I don't find this contact anywhere, only papers, never gold. I'm not saying that there's nothing gold in church, but I never find it. If I would not have believed, it would have been easier. But that is precisely the hard part: I believe there is contact, and if there is no contact, that means there is no Church and there is no Christianity. They order me to believe—and I believe. But that is not life."⁴

Thus, for Florensky, it was not enough to just go through the motions of church life, considering oneself and being considered by others to be a good, "churchly" person, experiencing the grace of the Church only vicariously, knowing that *others* have experienced it in truth and that it *objectively* exists. Florensky needed to know and feel it himself. As a teacher and writer, he wanted everything that came from him to be derived from the reality of his own experience. The most lofty philosophy had to be human, personal and living, not merely abstract and theoretical. It was his perseverance in achieving this, even more than his natural genius, that made him stand out among the thinkers of his age.

Valuable insights into Florensky's character at the time of his crisis have been provided by Fr. Alexander Elchaninov, who recorded the contents of their conversations. At the height of his inward suffering, Florensky told Elchaninov: "It is not difficult to kill much in myself, but what will be the result? I could have killed in myself everything connected with sex, but then my scientific creativity would have died within me first of all. You tell me that this is what should be done—that through such a death all the ascetics had to go. I know

4. "Iz Vstrech s P. A. Florenskim" ("From Meetings with P. A. Florensky"), *Vestnik* no. 142 (1984), p. 76.

that, but I'm not allowed to go to a monastery—they order me to give lectures. Why is it that from many writings—textbooks and so on, especially the seminary texts—there is a smell of death? It seems that everything is there—there is great knowledge and decent language, even thoughts; but why is it impossible to read them? It is because they were written by 'eunuchs.' And I could have written like that, but who needs such writings?"⁵

In his misery, Florensky felt closer to God. "I am noticing lately," he told Elchaninov, "that now some strange things occur to me. Formerly my prayer was never so strong as it is now, when it seems I am least of all worthy. I get the impression that God deliberately goes out to meet me in order to see what end I will come to. I sometimes have a strange feeling, absurd from a theological point of view, perhaps because I cannot properly express it. —I even feel at times sorry for God, that I was born such an evil one. . . . Yes, I can express it that way. If someone gets very angry, then people begin to agree with him and do what he wants. This is how God treats me now. Of course, it is mostly in trifles. Yesterday, for example, V. B. [who later became Florensky's brother-in-law] did not come home even when it got late. I was very upset. The expected time passed—he usually comes in around 11 p.m. I was terribly alarmed and began to pray, and hardly had I finished praying, when he stood at the door."⁶

At one point, Elchaninov and Florensky spoke about a certain Bishop Gabriel. "Yesterday at our place," Elchaninov records, "[the Bishop] served, and I was amazed at the solemnity and uniqueness with which he served. I asked Paul about this. 'You know my opinion of him,' he began with irritation. 'All this sounds false and theatrical. He pronounces the words, and one feels that the tone and diction are pre-planned, and that he looks around at what kind of impression they create

5. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

on others. It is quite possible that objectively all this is accepted differently. But I know him, and cannot free myself from this feeling. He knows well the church service, he loves it; but this precision and this effectiveness—is not the Orthodox way of doing things. In you there is obviously a Westerner; and to us, just the contrary, the church service is dear when it's conducted as it is everywhere in Russia: they stumble, it is ugly, and so on. —We like the look of the slaves,⁷ while you want even the *rags* to be unreal and have a silk lining. What I'm saying is evangelical, not just Orthodox. Why did Christ love so much the society of harlots and publicans? Just imagine—these were *real* harlots who would fight, conduct indecent talks, swear . . . and Christ preferred their company to that of the Pharisees. Just think, why is it said, 'The power of God is performed in poverty'? Poverty is not only weakness, not some poetic sickness like tuberculosis, but sinfulness, defilement. Christ was with sinners not only because they needed Him more, but because, for Him, it was more pleasant to be with them; he loved them for their simplicity and humbleness."⁸

Florensky's words strike a familiar chord for those of us in the West who would try to be Orthodox. Lacking the proper "feel" for the whole world of piety that has grown out of centuries of down-to-earth human experience in the Orthodox Church, we are all too prone to want our Orthodoxy looking "slick," to be attracted by outward glitter, correctness, precision. A kind of vain artifice attempts to cover up our emptiness. But our love of glitter may also result from the erroneous, deep-seated belief in progress—that, "after all, we mod-

7. This is a reference to a famous Russian poem (untitled) by Fedor Ivanovich Tutchchev (1803-1864), which ends thus:

Dear native land! While carrying
The Cross and struggling to pass through,
In slavish image Heaven's King
Has walked across you, blessing you.

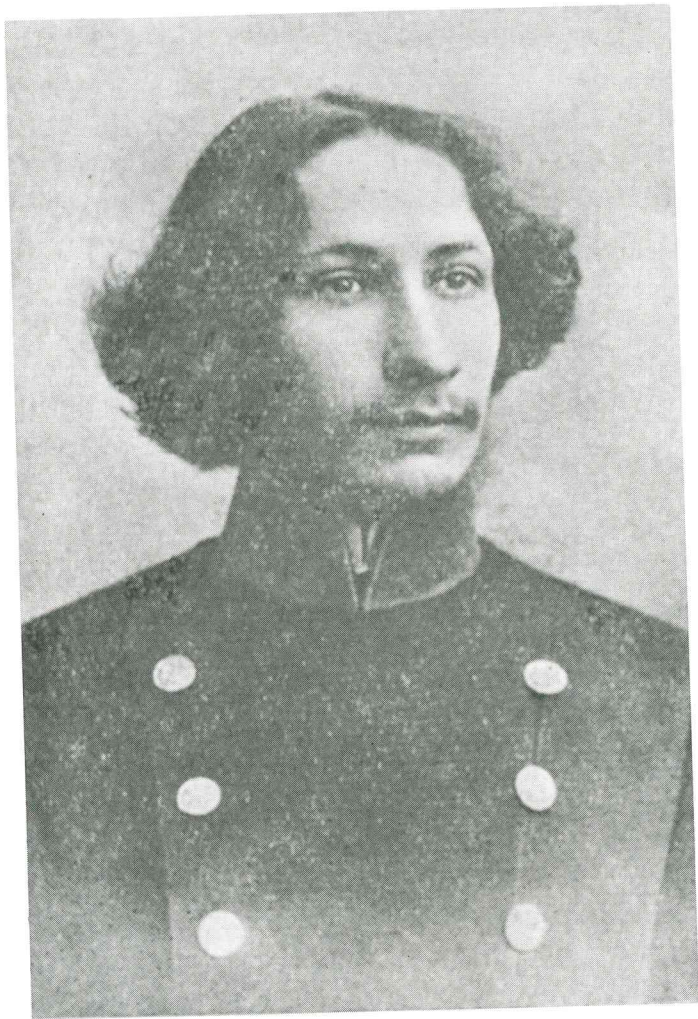
8. "Iz Vstrech s P. A. Florenskim," p. 74.



Top: New Martyr Priest
Paul Florensky (†1937).

Bottom: New Martyr Arch-
bishop Theodore Pozdeyev
(†1935), who ordained
Fr. Paul.





Florensky in 1906, at the time he knew Elder Isidore.



Elder Isidore in 1906, two years before his repose.

erns are more sophisticated than those before us." To us Westerners, the "look of the slaves," the ugly, the poor, the insignificant—is often repulsive, or at least beneath our dignity. To the Orthodox mentality of Florensky, however, it is endearing and deeply touches the heart—because it is *real*.

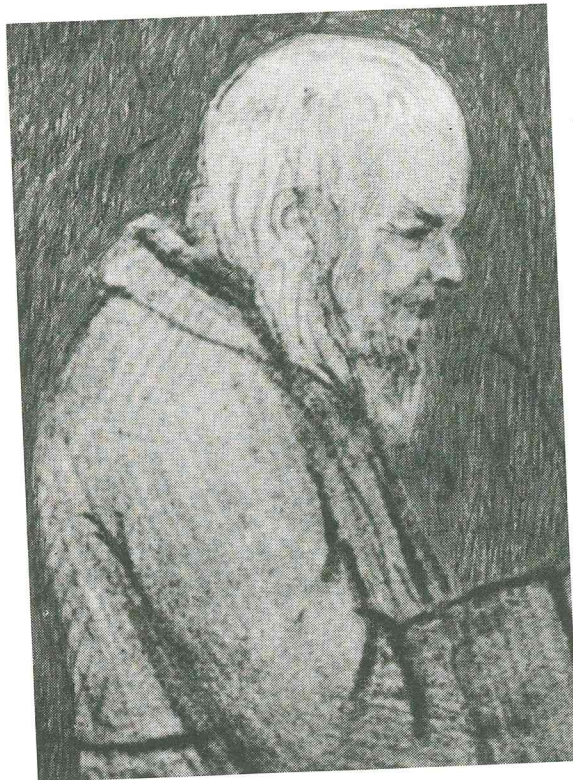
5. VISITS TO MONASTERIES; OPTINA

"I am sick of 'culturedness' and sophistication," Florensky said. "I want simplicity."⁹ He accepted Orthodoxy just as it was, and he shared in the direct, "grassroots" faith of the "masses." Other religious philosophers, such as Nicholas Berdyaev (who has unfortunately become more well-known in the West), wanted Orthodoxy on their own terms, playing with it and modifying it to make it somehow "worthy" of their inflated estimation of themselves and of their "higher" understanding. They had a theoretical regard and admiration for the simple people who composed the heart of Russia, but they were not amidst them, not a part of them and their faith; and thus they deprived themselves of genuine spirituality. About Berdyaev and other people of "the new religious understanding," Florensky wrote: ". . . They cease to see what is in front of their eyes, which is given to them, and which they do not know and do not understand inwardly; in pursuing everything they are deprived of that which is. . . . If only for a short time a calm sobriety would return to them, then perhaps they would see—these people of false understanding—that they have no solid ground under their feet and that they are speaking sterile words, words which they themselves are beginning to believe."¹⁰

A telling incident, which occurred at the time of Florensky's soul-searching in 1910, illustrates the disparity between

9. *Ibid.*, p. 71.

10. P. A. Florensky, *Stopl i Utverzhdienie Istiny (The Pillar and Foundation of Truth)* (Moscow, 1914), pp. 128-129.



Three spiritual preceptors of Fr. Paul Florensky.

Top left: Elder Anatole the Younger of Optina (†1922).

Top right: Archpriest Aleksei Mechiev (†1923).

Bottom: Elder Nektary of Optina (†1928).

Florensky and the religious intelligentsia with which he was associated in his work. Berdyaev, with an air of dilettantism typical of the intelligentsia, said that he wanted to make an "experiment" of a trip to the Zosima Hermitage to meet with the Elders. One of the Elders there at the time happened to be Schema-Abbot Herman, a former disciple of Elder Isidore. Elder Herman was a deeply spiritual man who had acquired prayer of the heart and had written a valuable book on the Jesus Prayer.¹¹ Florensky knew the Elder's stature, though outwardly the Elder was just a simple peasant.¹²

Berdyaev's friend, Novoselov, attempted to bring along many of the intelligentsia to take part in the "experiment." Florensky agreed to go, although, as it turned out later, he had wanted to go by himself, without so many intruders. For many of the others, going to see an Elder was like a novelty, like going to the zoo. For Florensky, it was a matter of life and death, a question of the soul's salvation.

Remembering his trip to the hermitage, Berdyaev wrote: "I went there together with Novoselov and Sergius Bulgakov. . . . In church, behind me stood P. A. Florensky, then not a priest yet. I looked back and saw that he was weeping. They told me later that he was going through a very difficult time." That night Florensky ran away, evidently with the intention of returning sometime without the others. As for Berdyaev, he was too full of himself to perceive the secret of divine wisdom, clothed in simple garb, without sophistication or fancy rhetoric. About the great Elder Herman, he only had these patronizing words to say: "He was a simple *muzhik*, without any education. However, he did leave an impression of being quite kind and benevolent."¹³

11. Schema-Abbot Herman, *Zaveti o Delanie Molitvennom (Testament on the Activity of Prayer)* (Platina, California: St. Herman Press, 1984).

12. Florensky mentions Schema-Abbot Herman, calling him a "holy Elder," on p. 128 of the present book.

13. Nicholas Berdyaev, *Self-Awareness* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1983), pp. 214-215.

At about the time of this trip to Zosima Hermitage, Florensky planned to accompany Bishop Anthony on a pilgrimage to Solovki Monastery in the far north of Russia. This was prevented by his marriage to a humble girl named Maria, the sister of his roommate. He was, however, able to make several pilgrimages to a monastery closer to Moscow: the great Optina, which kept alive the Orthodox tradition of eldership, disseminated patristic books and was largely responsible for the spiritual blossoming in 19th century Russia. At Optina, Florensky came under the guidance of Elder Anatole the Younger, who in turn sent Florensky and his other spiritual children to Archpriest Aleksei Mechiev,¹⁴ a saintly man who was in the Optina "lineage" and had a parish in Moscow. Florensky developed a close bond with both Fr. Anatole and Fr. Aleksei, and after the latter's death he wrote a eulogy filled with profound insights.¹⁵

6. THE PILLAR AND FOUNDATION OF TRUTH

In 1911, a year after his marriage, Florensky was ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Theodore Pozdeyev. While undertaking his pastoral and teaching duties, he defended his master's thesis *Of Spiritual Truth*, which was later to be amplified into the more lengthy *Pillar and Foundation of Truth*, Florensky's *magnum opus*. This highly original work, which he dedicated to the Church, combined his knowledge of theology, patristics, mathematics, science, medicine, history, linguistics and art. Filled with poetic inspiration, it deals with complex subject matter in simple, clear language, in Florensky's personal style. It is composed of twelve chapters with titles such as "Doubt," "Light of Truth," "The Comforter," "Contradiction," "Sin" and "Friendship." Each chapter, in accordance

14. See *The Orthodox Word* (Platina, California), no. 132 (1987).

15. *Otets Aleksei Mechiev* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1970).

with Florensky's experiential, personal approach to philosophy, is intended as a "letter" to a friend.

From the first published edition of *The Pillar and Foundation of Truth*, Bishop Theodore Pozdeyev omitted the letter on "Sophia," and then upheld the Orthodoxy of the remaining text. Although the omitted letter was included in subsequent editions, Bishop Theodore Pozdeyev's initial decision was probably for the best. Florensky, possibly in an attempt to formulate a conceptual basis for his experience as a boy of the wisdom of God in nature, made statements in the "Sophia" chapter which—although explicitly *not* pantheistic—could lead the undiscerning to ideas approaching pantheism.

Too much emphasis has been placed on Florensky's "sophiology" in the context of his whole life's work, both by his detractors and his admirers. We have mentioned it here only because he is often wrongly dismissed on the grounds of this one facet of his earlier writings. In discussing "sophiology" in connection with Florensky, it is important to bear in mind two things. First, it was Fr. Sergius Bulgakov, not Florensky, who attempted to create a complete theological system based on the Wisdom of God, or "Sophia," as constituting a kind of personal "World-Soul." Florensky only offered various sketchy speculations, drawing on what was already *there*, in Orthodox theology, iconography and liturgical traditions, leaving many questions unanswered. He realized that some of what he wrote in *The Pillar and Foundation of Truth* was "almost undemonstrable." "It is for just this reason," he stated to the "friend" to whom he addressed this book, "that I am writing 'letters' to you instead of composing an 'article.' I fear the making of assertions and prefer to question."¹⁶

Another thing to remember is that, after the publication of *The Pillar and Foundation of Truth*, Florensky of his own accord changed some of his earlier conceptions which were potentially dangerous to the purity of the Church's teaching, and

16. P. A. Florensky, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

moved away from his original "sophiology."¹⁷ Later in life, when he was asked about his book as a whole, he replied, "Oh, I grew out of that!"¹⁸ This, of course, is not to say that the book is then to be dismissed as a mere juvenile attempt, but rather that Florensky's mature philosophy should not be judged solely on the basis of this book's merits or shortcomings.

Not many years before his death, Florensky looked back on the investigations which had once found a tentative, unfinalized expression in *The Pillar and Foundation of Truth*. He saw his probings into diverse disciplines—science, theology, etc.—as an attempt to understand a single Reality from all different points of observation. "What did I do all my life?" he asked. "I investigated the world as a whole, as one picture and one reality. But I did this investigation at each given moment, or more precisely at each step of my life, from a particular angle of vision. I would investigate the relationships of the world by dissecting it in a particular direction, on a particular plane, and would strive to understand the make-up of the world from this plane which interested me. The planes were different, but one did not deny another—one only enriched the other. This resulted in a perpetual dialectic of thought, 'the exchange of planes of observation,' while at the same time viewing the world as one."¹⁹

In this statement can be found the essence of Florensky's relevance for modern man. In our age, when all truths are seen as relative and knowledge is fragmented into specialized compartments, it takes a unique man like Florensky to master the various disciplines and tie their discoveries together within the framework of one coherent world-view. Florensky's search for

17. Robert Slesinski, *Pavel Florensky: A Metaphysics of Love* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), p. 12.

18. From the personal reminiscences of Fr. Victor Iliencko (1892–), a former student of Florensky at the Moscow Theological Academy.

19. Letter from the Solovki concentration camp, February 21, 1937.

a single world-outlook as absolute Truth led him first to religion in general and finally to the Orthodox Church. It was there that he found the "pillar and foundation of Truth," and this foundation gave absolute significance to his investigation of relative things—for all things now had one unchanging point of reference. He came to be considered a "religious thinker" only because he was an honest and fervent man who would be satisfied with nothing less than wholeness and completeness in his philosophic vision.

7. THE CHURCH

Although Florensky is remembered in secular circles as a scientist and in church circles as a philosopher, it was neither science nor theology that, in the end, became the center of his life, but his priesthood. His retiring yet powerful personality, imbued with a mystical timbre, helped bring many to faith in Christ. When he served the Liturgy, he did so very peacefully, pronouncing every word clearly and not loudly. He was a "celebrant of the Divine," calling down grace from Heaven and being in awe before the mystery enacted in the Eucharist. He totally immersed himself in the church services, knowing that it is the direct encounter of Life in the Church, rather than abstract reasoning, that brings one to the Truth. "Orthodoxy," he once said, "manifests itself; it does not prove itself." And he found that manifestation in the worship of the Church.

Florensky believed that the criterion of what was genuinely "churchly" could not be merely conceptual, lying outside the experience of human life. It could not be the juridical criterion of Roman Catholicism, with its emphasis on hierarchy and legality, nor could it be the scientific *Sola Scriptura* criterion of Protestantism, which Florensky found to be also conceptual and therefore open to misuse. For Florensky, the surest criterion of the authenticity of life in the Church was what he called *spiritual Beauty*. We have already encountered this idea in connection with what Florensky said about ascetics. He saw

this beauty in Elder Isidore, about whom he said: "He listened to God's creation, and God's creation listened to him. Invisible threads united him with the hidden heart of creation. Not only was the world a sign for Elder Isidore, but the Elder himself was a sign for the world."

Thus, spiritual beauty manifests itself when one is united with all creation by being united in love with its Creator. This loving union both constitutes and is made possible by life in Christ's Church. Without it, Florensky felt, temporal and even eternal existence is meaningless. "I want real love," he wrote. "I understand life only as union; without this 'union' I do not even want salvation. I am not rebelling, not protesting. I simply do not have a taste for life nor for the salvation of my soul, as long as I am alone."²⁰ In another place he stated: "Without love—and for love it is necessary in the first instance to love God—without love the personality is broken up into a multiplicity of fragmentary psychological moments and elements. The love of God is that which holds the personality together."²¹

"Orthodox" literally means "right glorification." In Florensky's view, however, being "right" may have nothing at all to do with being Orthodox or being in the Church. A person may take precautions to be perfectly "right" merely out of insecurity, while faith in Christ remains lacking. In essence, being Orthodox actually means saving one's soul and changing one's heart, making use of the "right" forms in order to assist in this. It does not mean being right. As Florensky stated: "Half-belief, which is afraid of falling into unbelief, fearfully clings to the forms of religious life. Not capable of seeing in them the crystallized realities of Spirit and Truth, it evaluates them as juridical norms of law. It has an external attitude towards them, and values them not as windows to the light of Christ,

20. "Iz Vstrech s P. A. Florenskim," p. 73.

21. Lossky, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

but as the conditional requirements of external authority. The Christian consciousness, however, knows that the established ways of the Church are not accidental, and are offered by her as favorable conditions for salvation."²²

8. CONFESSING THE FAITH

In the years preceding the Russian Revolution, Florensky's enormous creative energies continued to be diffused into a number of areas. Although he liked to keep to himself, he nevertheless became the leader of various organizations and brotherhoods which promoted spiritual interests. From 1911 to 1917, he edited a theological journal, writing several articles for it. He kept in contact with many outstanding Orthodox thinkers of the time: Fr. Valentin Sventitsky,²³ Fr. Sergius Mechiev (the son of Archpriest Aleksei) and others. Not abandoning his other pursuits, he did research and had treatises published in the fields of mathematics, applied science and linguistics.

The Moscow Theological Academy was closed after the Russian Revolution, and Florensky was forced to take a different course in life. He now found work in official scientific posts, lecturing on the theory of perspective at a technical-artistic school and serving as one of the chief electrical engineers for his country. Several important scientific discoveries were made by him, including the invention of a famous non-coagulating machine oil. In published essays he anticipated the development of cybernetics; and one of his works, *The Doctrine of Dielectrics*, became a standard textbook.

With the Revolution, Optina Monastery became State property, and the Soviet authorities began to persecute the monks there. Elder Anatole, having been tortured and mocked, provi-

22. P. A. Florensky, "Christianity and Culture," in *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*, 1983, no. 4.

23. See *The Orthodox Word* no. 111 (1983).

dentially died on the night before he was to be arrested and taken away. The other Optina Elder of that time, Elder Nektary,²⁴ was sent to the village of Kholmishcha, from where he was in contact with Florensky and gave him spiritual guidance. This contact continued until the Elder's death in 1928.

During the years 1925-1927, the Soviets finally closed Optina, attempting at the same time to keep their bloody deeds hidden. Demonstrating his great love for this monastery and what it represented, Florensky boldly issued an urgent appeal entitled "Save Optina!"—which of course won him no favor in the eyes of the authorities.

Although many of his former activities were repressed under the yoke of the atheist regime, it was this very yoke that enabled him to reveal his full stature as a man. The freedom of spirit which had been inculcated in him through Fr. Isidore and other Elders now came to the fore, and he became a confessor for the Faith.

The Soviet authorities for whom Florensky worked, seeing his value as an extraordinary research scientist, wanted him to renounce his priesthood. Not only did he not comply, but he was daring enough to wear his priest's cassock, pectoral cross and hat while working in an official capacity as a scientist, even going to the Supreme Soviet for National Economy dressed as a priest. Fearlessly walking in with his shining cross hanging from his neck, he delivered lectures to groups of Soviet scholars and old professors. This evoked the wrath of the authorities, who feared that the young Soviet students might be influenced by the "scholarly *pop*" (a derogatory term for a priest), as they called him.

Several times the Soviets imprisoned Florensky, only to find him still unyielding to their demands that he renounce his priesthood. While this helped bring about his final incarceration, the major reason was undoubtedly his open and vigorous protest against the official church policy of the Moscow Met-

24. See *Ibid.*, no. 129 (1986).

ropolitan, Sergius Starogorodsky. In this Metropolitan, the Soviets had found a “yes-man” who was willing to submit the Church to the control of the atheist regime and deny the martyrdom of millions of Christians. Sergius even issued a declaration in 1927, in which he stated that the joys and sorrows of the Soviet regime were those of the Russian Church. To Florensky, it was abundantly clear that this was an act of falsehood. His whole nature reacted against it. God cannot be served, he understood, on the basis of a lie. As a leading anti-Sergi-anist spokesman who was known throughout Russia, Florensky had to be silenced.

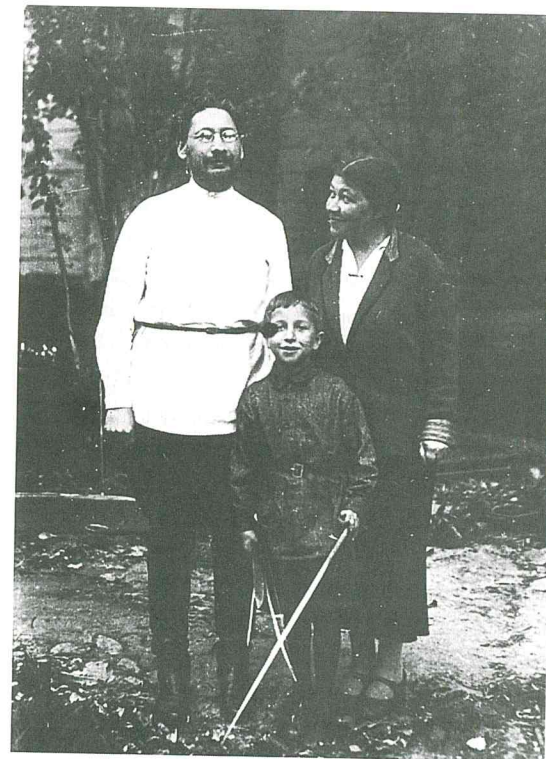
9. EXILE AND MARTYRDOM

In 1933, Florensky was condemned to ten years of servitude in a concentration camp. Of his remaining years, very little is known. Evidently he was first sent to a camp in Siberia where, still refusing to deny his Faith, he was sent to a yet worse camp on the island of Solovki. Before the Revolution, this camp had been a thriving monastery—the very Solovki to which Florensky had desired to make a pilgrimage as a young man. Now there as a prisoner, he must have thought back to his earlier aspiration of being a monk, which he now fulfilled in a different way, being cut off from the world and suffering for Christ in a monastery-turned-concentration camp.

In his book *The Gulag Archipelago*, Alexander Solzhenitsyn laments the imprisonment, persecution and death of Florensky in the camps, stating that Florensky was “perhaps one of the most remarkable men devoured by the Archipelago of all time.” According to Solzhenitsyn, Florensky was probably sent last to a camp in the region of Kolyma, where “he studied flora and minerals (in addition to his work with a pick).”²⁵

What enabled Fr. Paul to persevere through those long years

25. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago Two* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 670-671.



At right: Florensky with his wife Anna and his son Michael. Sergiev Posad (then called “Zagorsk” by the Soviets), 1932.

Below: Florensky after his arrest. February 27, 1933.



of exile and intense hardship? The answer can come only from his own words: "Through Christ we can attain realization, on Him we can build, with Him we can become complete, by means of Him we can live. . . ."26

According to official information, Fr. Paul Florensky was sentenced by resolution of a special troika of the Leningrad NKVD to the highest degree of punishment "for the carrying out of counter-revolutionary propaganda." On the day of the apodosis of the Feast of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple, November 25 (December 8 according to the civil calendar), 1937, Priest-martyr Paul Florensky was shot.²⁷

One final image comes down to us from a Solovki survivor. When, on December 8, Fr. Paul's body was being carried through the camp to the prison gates, hundreds of prisoners risked the rage of their captors to kneel as their spiritual father passed by.²⁸

As one who died for standing up for his Faith, Florensky was listed with the Russian New Martyrs and Confessors who were canonized in 1981. His name is to be found on the icon of the New Martyrs which was used in the glorification service.

Thus, for all Orthodox Christians who, like Fr. Paul himself, are free before God and are not hindered by political fears, he is SAINT PAUL FLORENSKY.

10. SALT OF THE EARTH

Florensky's singular work, *Salt of the Earth*, shows that he, unlike Berdyaev, Nicholas Lossky, Bulgakov and others of the Russian religious intelligentsia, understood that the heart of Orthodoxy was to be found in the simple, unsophisticated *muzhik* ascetics who had been touched by God. *Salt of the*

26. P. A. Florensky, "Spiritism as Anti-Christianity," in *Novie Put*, 1904, no. 3, p. 155.

27. From a manuscript, "The Life of Priest-martyr Paul Florensky," compiled by Florensky's grandson, Abbot Andronik (Trubachev), p. 49.

28. From the introduction by Donald Sheehan to Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 1996), p. 23.

Earth is not a standard Life of a Saint, any more than Florensky is a standard ecclesiastical figure. It is more of a literary "photograph" or "motion picture" of a Saint who otherwise would have gone unnoticed. As such, it is of inestimable value to people of modern times who are seeking to enter into the timeless spirit of Orthodox Christianity. The context of Elder Isidore's life has been taken away, and indeed the Elder lived on the very eve of its disappearance. Since we are now outside the Orthodox atmosphere which once nurtured Saints, standard hagiographical texts—composed *within* that atmosphere—often have very little to say to contemporary Christians, and thus the models of sanctity they depict do not have much effect on and do not influence new generations. Florensky's "literary photograph," on the other hand, helps the modern person to enter *into* that atmosphere, to see the Saint as Florensky himself sees him and to respond in a direct, personal way. After reading the heart-warming narrative of a loving spiritual son as he describes the daily trifles of Elder Isidore, one feels that one *knows* the Elder, that he is already a dear friend.

How was Florensky able to achieve this *tour de force* of modern hagiography, making *Salt of the Earth* a spiritual classic on par with *The Way of a Pilgrim*? He did this by combining two seemingly irreconcilable approaches to his subject: the way of science and the way of the heart.

As we have seen, Florensky was a modern man who was thoroughly abreast with the science of his day. As a scientist with an analytical approach, he knew that one had to make accurate observations and not distort the facts according to one's opinions. When one begins arbitrarily changing numbers in a mathematical equation, the answer will invariably be wrong. When describing Elder Isidore, therefore, Florensky retained the eye of a scientist, preserving the Saint's image undistorted. With Saints as with science, Florensky endeavored to leave things as they were, in order to let the truth come out.

It is often through the reality of everyday trifles that we catch glimpses of a higher Reality. That is why Florensky cher-

ished the whole of Elder Isidore, everything about him, even the little details of his cabin. Through keen observations and psychological hints, Florensky was able to indicate outward signs of the ascetic's inward activity, which was of course impossible to fully describe in words.

According to his same principle of leaving a thing as it is in truth, Florensky—even before the Revolution—did not want Sacred History taught in public schools. He wanted everyone to have the chance of an individual, independent conversion to Christ, on their own volition and under no compulsion, even stumbling on their way as they learn from experience what Christianity actually is, as Florensky himself had done. Forcing religion on children in schools, he said, creates *bezbozhniki* (godless ones).

Florensky's other approach in writing *Salt of the Earth*—that of the heart—is felt on every page, so there is little need to discuss it. It is of interest to point out, however, that whenever Florensky spoke of the heart, he did not speak figuratively, but literally. In *The Pillar and Foundation of Truth*, he quoted P. D. Yurkevitch in supporting his claim that, in spiritual literature, the heart is not an allegory: "The simple reading of holy texts—if we will only not misinterpret them according to prejudicial ideas—convinces us directly that the Holy Scripture precisely and with full consciousness accepted the heart as the center of all human phenomena, both of bodily and spiritual life. . . . The sacred writers knew about the exalted significance of the head in the spiritual life of a man; nevertheless, we repeat, they saw the center of this life to be in the heart. The head was for them the apparent height of that life which is originally and directly rooted in the heart."²⁹

The power of Florensky's writings lies in the fact that he speaks out of the experience of the heart, and reaches others on the elemental level of that experience.

29. *Stopl i Utverzhdenie Istiny*, p. 268.

11. PROPHECIES

Finally, a word should be said about the prophetic aspects of *Salt of the Earth*.

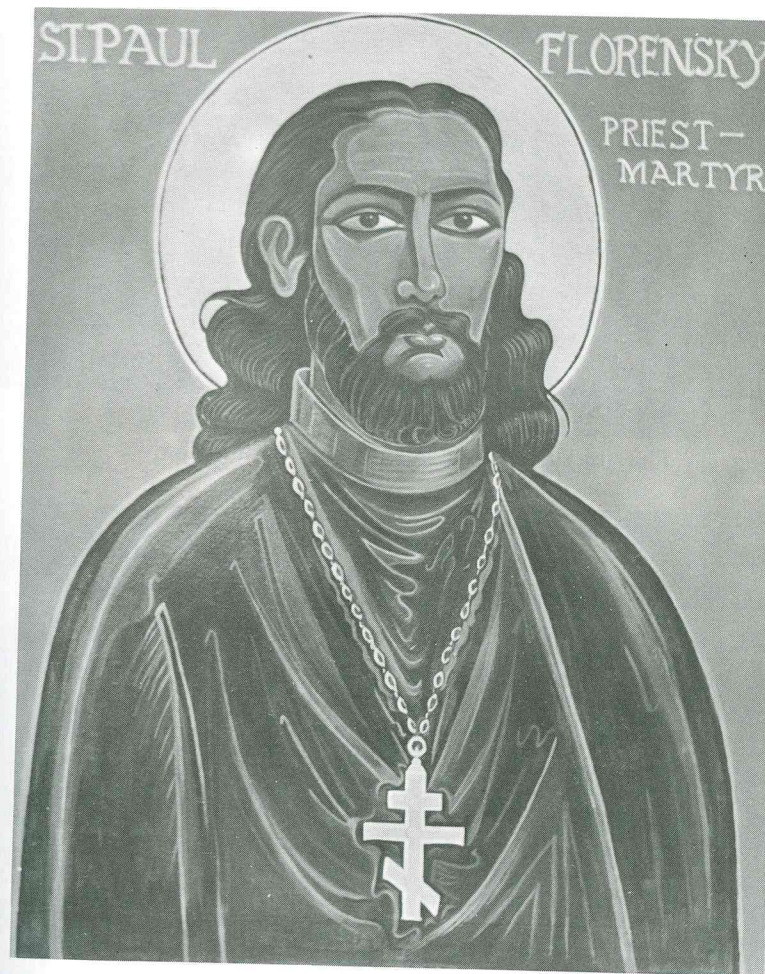
Many of the Russian ascetics of the 18th and 19th centuries prophesied what was to happen at the beginning of our own century, when Christianity would be persecuted and the Church in Russia would have to go into hiding. They saw that—even in their own day—church people had fallen for love of the external, and thus the Church would have to be purged and purified through suffering. These ascetics—whether hidden away in monasteries or pursuing a path of Christian struggle in the world—preserved the ancient Orthodox *blagochestia* (piety or active spiritual life). They were *the salt of the earth* (Matt. 5:13), and thus they could perceive the *savor* of authentic Christianity departing in an undetectable way. Isidore was one of them, one of the last "deposits" of this salt, and he too warned of the coming catastrophe. Over a decade before the devastating Russian Revolution and the advent of the Soviet regime, which produced more martyrs than the whole early period of Christian martyrdom, Florensky recorded these words of Fr. Isidore: "The time of Antichrist is quickly approaching. Christians will soon be so persecuted that they will have to go into hiding."

Towards the end of *Salt of the Earth*, Florensky hints at something else that is both prophetic and apocalyptic. He quotes a portion of a Bishop's sermon at Fr. Isidore's funeral: "We don't have real monasticism at present. It still has to be founded. Fr. Isidore was a forerunner of the monasticism which is yet to come, and which began in the far-off Thebaid."

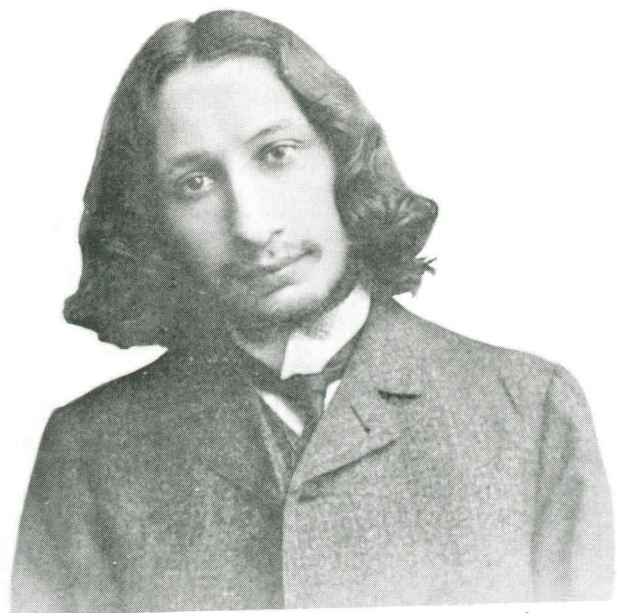
Taken at face value, the Bishop's statement was simply not true. Florensky, who was well aware of worldliness and fakery in contemporary monastic institutions, had also seen and val-

ued the high spiritual calibre of such monasteries as Optina, and so would never have subscribed to the idea that "real monasticism still has to be founded." He did, however, obviously see a grain of truth in the Bishop's words, or else he would not have included them out of all others. Judging from his last chapter, that truth is this: Isidore represented the only type of monasticism that can survive the deceptions and tribulations of the end times. It is the monasticism of the future.

But of what does this monasticism consist? Drawing from an ancient prophecy of St. Niphon of Constantia, Florensky indicates that it consists of *separation* from the ways of the world, and a humble willingness to be *concealed* and *hidden*. With what but this can one stand up to persecution while remaining true to one's conscience? Florensky points out that Isidore not only concealed himself from the world, but from church people as well. He did not want to be recognized by anyone, and was for the most part ignored because he could not fit into the categories of worldly thinking. As Florensky realized, a monastery or any other ecclesiastical institution that seeks recognition, respect or credibility will be bound to betray Christ when the trials come. In contrast to this he presented us with Isidore, who, in his utter simplicity, unpretentiousness, humility and unconquerable freedom of spirit, possessed the very virtues which will enable "the monk of the future," and indeed every Christian, to remain true to Christ in whatever circumstances he is placed.



Icon of St. Paul Florensky by Mother Nadezhda Russell, 1987.



Florensky in 1909, a year before his ordination.



View of Holy Trinity—St. Sergius Monastery, near the Moscow Theological Academy and Gethsemane Hermitage.



Florensky with M. A. Novoselov.



Florensky in 1932, a year before his final incarceration.