

Book Reviews

Pie-Eugène Neveu by Alexei Judin. Milan: Russia Cristiana, La Casa di Matriona, 2003, 205 pp., €8.26

Tre Vie: Arseny Zadanovski, Ilarion Troicki, Varfolomej Remov by Giovanna Parravicini and Ol'ga Vasil'eva. Milan: Russia Cristiana, La Casa di Matriona, 2002, 145 pp., €8.26

At 5 a.m. on 21 April 1926 the French Jesuit Mgr Michel d'Herbigny was waiting anxiously in the Church of St Louis of France in Moscow, ready to meet and later consecrate the first new bishop he and the Vatican had designated for their plan to reconstitute the crippled Catholic apostolic jurisdiction in Russia. A temporary visitor staying in a hotel, he was aware that the GPU was watching his every move. By 9 a.m. he gave up and commenced his mass. As he turned round at the 'Orate fratres' he saw coming into the church 'a sturdy, robust Russian peasant in a pelt jacket. It was him' It would be difficult to say who was the more shocked, d'Herbigny or Pie-Eugène Neveu, a pipe-smoking French Assumptionist priest from a working-class family who had held the fort in Makeyeva, a remote mining community in the Donbass coalfield, for the previous 19 years. As Neveu wrote to his superior, 'I left chilled to the marrow . . . I seemed to be a completely different person, so confused, incoherent and shattered that for eight nights I couldn't sleep a wink. I thought I was going out of my mind.' Thus the hapless and humble parish priest was dragged in to be protagonist in d'Herbigny's precarious scheme for reaping advantage from the schism and near collapse of the Orthodox Church and for reevangelising and bringing back the Russian 'schismatics' to the see of Rome. True, Neveu had done sterling work, first among French and other expatriate technicians, then, after these fled at the outbreak of war, among Polish miners. He had succoured the starving during the appalling famine. He had penned sensible comments to his superiors. Church historian Judin (Yudin) (also author of the previous life in this series, on Leonid Fedorov) points out how in 1918 Catholic priests in Russia breathed a sigh of relief with the new communist government's decree on the separation of church and state and believed that it signalled a new era for Catholic expansion. That year, Neveu was probably the first Catholic priest to preach in Russian. Stressing how many Russian peasants, together with their Orthodox priests, had been exploited, despised, maltreated and lied to by their landlords, he was convinced that they were ready to switch to a less compromised church which could also call on devoted and gentle nuns to provide the pastoral care they so lacked. But he also warned that there was no future for his church unless it switched to the Eastern Rite. By 1926, experience of famine, persecution and mass desertion even among his own adherents had disillusioned Neveu.

Patently, d'Herbigny completely misread the situation and the extent of the unwavering vigilance of the GPU. Is Judin's life a critique of d'Herbigny's intrusion as much as a biography? The headings of some of the sections suggest this. 'Victims', for instance, lists the dire consequences that befell the unfortunate priests who were designated bishops. Only a few were repatriated. Their fates and those of other fellow-Catholics were a source of unending anguish to Neveu. His French citizenship gave him an immunity, if a precarious one, whereas 'all those who've had any contact with me are condemned', as he reported bitterly to his superior. Little wonder that he recorded the names of the victims, 1500 of them, and not only Catholics but Orthodox and Lutherans. He felt powerless, increasingly avoided and isolated, especially after he had to take refuge in the French Embassy. He was forced to return to France in 1936 for reasons of health. Judin assesses his contribution in exposing the evils of communism to the West, and his possible influence on the 1937 papal encyclical *Divini Redemptoris* and later Vatican Ostpolitik. He reveals the exchanges he had with Nazis in Vichy France who tried in vain to enlist him to their cause. Among his far-seeing recommendations was the use of radio for the reevangelisation of Russia. He never lost the vision of his Assumptionist founder Emmanuel d'Alzon of a postrevolutionary Russia ripe for Catholicism – albeit with a Slav rite.

In *Tre Vie*, Parravicini, a researcher for Russia Cristiana and author of the chapter on Remov, introduces short biographies tracing the different paths of three outstanding Orthodox bishops, friends, on their way to eventual martyrdom.

The ministries of Arseni Zadanovsky, bishop of Serpukhov (1874–1937) and Varfolomei Remov, bishop of Sergiyev, were essentially pastoral. They were disciples of St John of Kronstadt and of Aleksei and German, the hermits of Zosima, and were renowned as *startsy* even before the Revolution. Arseni was also very close to Bishop Serafim Zvezdinsky, the nun Famar and the Moscow priests Aleksei Mechev and Nikolai Smirnov. He was noted for his holiness and asceticism, for books like *Asketicheskiye soveti* (republished in Russia in 1999) and for his encouragement of frequent communion and lay education. As heads of small non-political monastic communities immersed in prayer and solitude, both Arseni and Varfolomei managed to evade arrest for long periods and were available until the 1930s to penitents and disciples. Whereas Varfolomei, outwardly at least, adhered to Metropolitan Sergi's 1927 Declaration, Arseni disavowed it and was banished from his diocese and moved around in internal exile, joining the non-commemorators. He played an integral role within the True Orthodox Church, which he was accused of joining in 1931; he was released through lack of evidence. He was shot the day after his third arrest in 1937. His case notes testify to his prophecy that the people would rise and overthrow the communists, the Orthodox Church would revive, churches would be rebuilt and monasteries reopened. Vasil'eva sensibly provides us with ample extracts from his writings to give us the flavour of his gospel-centred teaching.

Varfolomei, however, had gone off on another, more tragic track, as a result of which he has missed out in the recent Orthodox canonisations. Patriarch Tikhon, when consecrating him, emphasised his 'feminine' side, his capacity for sympathy, for bearing other people's sorrows. Like his mentor German he was acutely sensitive to the diverse characters and needs of his many penitents. It was perhaps partly this – in comparison with the intransigence of Ilarion towards the Catholic Church – which rendered him susceptible to the approach of Neveu. Judin notes how strongly Varfolomei felt about the use of the punitive sanctions applied by the civil authorities against clergy who dissented from Sergi's Declaration. Parravicini suggests that the GPU agent Yevgeni Tuchkov, arch-fabricator of phantom antisoviet plots, may,

through an informer, have been instrumental in promoting their friendship. Varfolomei was by no means the only Orthodox bishop with whom Neveu had mooted the union of the two churches under the uncompromising leadership of the pope as the solution to the crisis, but he was the only one to make the crucial switch, which he did in 1932 (*Pie-Eugène Neveu*, pp. 158–59). Varfolomei was D’Herbigny’s intended first choice for his projected Russian patriarch under Roman jurisdiction. Neveu, who knew Varfolomei better and respected him deeply, rated him too much an ascetic and man of culture and scholarship to let himself be dragged into a tendentious political role. Varfolomei’s deposition, in which he confessed that the Vatican had officially designated him a collaborator of Neveu and that he had transmitted letters to Neveu from believers in internal exile, was almost certainly made by a man broken by torture.

In her account of Ilarion Troitsky, Bishop of Vereya, Vasil’eva selects vivid extracts from his own writings and from those who knew him which confirm the indelible impression he made. A handsome, brilliant monk – the best student in the Moscow Academy’s 50 years – he emerges vividly as a more visible and controversial figure than the other bishops, one actively involved in the major events of church life until in 1923 he was packed off to Solovki. Of the 1917 Local Church Council he wrote that it was a miracle that such a heterogeneous and variegated assembly, riven as it was by parties and diverse interest groups often primarily intent on preserving their own agendas, was transformed into a unity of believers animated and guided by the Holy Spirit. In a prophetic lecture he warned that the time was coming in which the crown of the newly created patriarch would be that of a martyr and confessor, called to deny himself in order to guide the vessel of the church through the tempests of life. Given normal conditions, Ilarion, one of Tikhon’s most trusted advisers, might well have succeeded him as patriarch. In Solovki, among so many captive bishops, in response to Sergi’s Declaration, he reiterated the danger of schism. There, too, he came to respect the Catholic Leonid Fedorov. As he lay dying in delirium from typhus, he repeated ‘Now I am free, they can’t do any more to me How lovely! Now we are far away from . . .’ He never finished the sentence.

JANICE BROWN

Catholiques de Bulgarie by Jean-Noel Grandhomme and Didier Rance. Paris: Aide a l’Église en Détresse, 2002. 327 pp. plus photographs

In his historical survey Grandhomme concentrates on the Bulgarian Catholic Church as a point of contact between East and West and on its Eastern-rite component, rather to the detriment of the Latin Rite, whose distinctive origins in Franciscan missions among Paulician ‘heretics’ are referred to only in passing. Utilising telling quotations from contemporary records, Grandhomme assiduously traces the wavering saga of the ill-fated ‘union’ in Thrace from the 1860s as the Catholic Church attempted to establish a foothold to convert the ‘schismatics’, until its almost total obliteration after the Ottomans reasserted control there in 1913. Catholic mission priests faced disillusionment as they realised that Bulgarian ‘conversions’ were not due to any longing for Rome, but to an implacable determination to wrest themselves from the grip of the hated Greeks.

It was the solicitude for refugees from Thrace and Macedonia of Mgr Angelo Roncalli, later Pope John XXIII, which led to the establishment of the Byzantine-rite exarchate in 1926. Although Grandhomme does not spell it out, Bulgaria was in effect

mission territory until well into the twentieth century; he records its reliance on expatriate Latin-rite bishops and religious orders to establish its impressive educational framework. His obvious sympathy for the Eastern-rite church reflects local antagonism to the Latin-rite church as a foreign body which failed to take into account indigenous culture, even though he fails to mention that many expatriate Latin-rite clergy and religious never bothered to learn Bulgarian and that as a result some of their pupils became fluent in foreign languages but barely able to speak their own. Alone in the communist bloc, the Eastern-rite church – which was tiny – was spared annihilation. But the thorough training provided by the Catholic educational system did produce a nucleus of clergy like Mgr Eugene Bossilkov and his fellow-martyrs who possessed the faith to withstand communist persecution – even though he and the other victims of show trials inevitably succumbed to brainwashing. After half a century of persecution and attrition the Catholic Church finds itself once again dependent largely on outside aid and expatriates. Another recurrent theme is that of seminarians defecting from the church during their sojourn in the West for training – as happened back in the 1860s and again in the early 1990s, as Mgr Georgi Iovchev admitted to me during an interview. There are obvious parallels between the situation in the postcommunist church and that in Bulgaria when it emerged from Ottoman domination into an independent state.

The moving interviews with survivors recorded in this book date back to November 1990 when the country was crippled by draconian power cuts and food shortages and Lukanov's government was still clinging on to power. The interview with Fr Gavril Belovedzov, who died last year, is peppered with frank comments. We feel his fury when after years of surreptitious eucharists in labour camp, Mgr Kiril Kurtev (first exarch of the Bulgarian Eastern-rite community) applied new limitations emanating from the Second Vatican Council which ruled out dormitories as suitable locations for mass, and his group had to deprive themselves of the sacrament. Priests who had during 11 years in prison learnt to suffer and live in unity and discuss wide-ranging projects they hoped to realise in freedom started to mistrust one another once back in parishes where they found themselves isolated and fearful even of parishioners who might report any contact to the secret police. In a moving sideline, Rance notes that Fr Gavril urged him to give money to Orthodox seminarians he saw in the street begging for subsistence so that they could study.

No account of Catholic survival would be complete without the accounts of the resourcefulness of the Carmelite nuns and Eucharistine sisters in particularly straitened circumstances. Sister Maximilienne, who as the young Marianne Proikova had made the trip to Poland in 1979 to greet Pope John Paul II and plead for Bulgaria and had been filmed by Kirche in Not, was in Sofia to meet and be embraced by him; her brother is now the exarch of the Bulgarian Eastern-rite community.

Unfortunately this poignant and balanced contribution to the series 'Martyrs et témoins de l'Est' was withheld for publication until after Pope John Paul's visit to Bulgaria in 2002 – a delay for which Patriarch Maksim and the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church are to blame. There is a useful summary of the reemergence of the Orthodox Church and the resultant schism, but rather more detailed and up-to-date information on how Bulgarian Catholics are coping with the rehabilitation of their church would also have been welcome.

JANICE BROWN

Russia Martire: la Chiesa Ortodossa dal 1917 al 1941 by Ol'ga Vasil'eva (translation of *Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov': dni trevog i nadezhd (1917–1941 gg.)* by Delfina Boero and Giovanna Parravicini, 1998). Milan: Russia Cristiana, La Casa di Matrona 1999, 253 pp., €22.

This book is one of the excellent series on Russian martyrs which are being made available to Italian readers, most of which, including this volume, should be translated into other languages. Historian Ol'ga Vasil'eva, a researcher at the Institute of Russian History in the Russian Academy of Sciences, is one of the younger generation dedicated to scrutinising the archives to uncover the persecution of the Orthodox Church.

The subject is very definitely martyrology. The author plunges straight into 1917 with the abortive Church Council of 1917–18 and traces the subsequent trials, divisions and resistance of the Russian Orthodox Church. There is no attempt to analyse the weaknesses of the church prior to the council or the reasons behind the hostility of the communist government. Vasil'eva's approach is factual, straightforward, succinct, always backed by thorough documentation. Her presentation of certain key documents is a major strength of the book. The confiscation of church valuables, and the destruction of bells, for instance, is covered in considerable detail. She carefully explains the ecclesiological background to the various groups who opposed Metropolitan Sergi's enforced declaration of 1927. Trotsky emerges clearly as the leading original protagonist of the destruction of the church and his tactics provided a template for future communist party intervention and manipulation of churches and clerics throughout the Soviet bloc until the end of the 1980s. She quotes: 'There is no one more capable of inventing spiteful accusations than a priest with a grudge.' A document of particular interest (pp. 180–81) which she came on by chance confirmed the key role of Trotsky's choice for 'special agent' to foster schism: Yevgeni Tuchkov, that sinister 'man in grey' mentioned by Patriarch Tikhon. It proves that he was the major formulator of the second part of the campaign to liquidate 'counterrevolutionary' organisations in order to crush the church. His name crops up again and again.

She also includes (pp. 188–92) the entire February 1930 memorandum to Smidovich, previously virtually unknown, which Ivan Nikolayevich Stragorodsky, Metropolitan Sergi's vicar, prepared for the latter so that he could reinforce his pleas for basic essential measures to alleviate the intolerable conditions for the church, clergy, parishes and believers. This was at the time when Pope Pius XI was drawing world attention to the desperate plight of the Russian church.

Vasil'eva presents concise biographies of the major church leaders so as to emphasise the invidious, often impossible choices that confronted them and the different types of martyrdom they endured. We are left to ponder the nature of martyrdom. As Berdyayev pointed out, it could be simpler to opt for an obviously heroic death rather than the path of abnegation involved in being prepared to collaborate with the communists. Patriarch Tikhon and Metropolitan Sergi were only too aware that they were not isolated individuals with only their own reputation and moral purity to consider. They had to keep some visible skeleton structure of the church, even as it was being all but annihilated, for the sake of the Russian people, and this involved an excruciating personal sacrifice.

The author intersperses the grim chronicle of oppression with well chosen passages which illuminate and inspire the reader. These include accounts of Easter in the Solovki labour camp in 1926 and 1927 by inmates Fr Pavel Chekhranov and Boris

Siryayev (pp. 163–67). Siryayev reveals how Archbishop Ilarion managed to get permission to serve the liturgy with the appropriate vessels from the museum of atheism, but overlooked the vestments. So the celebrants resorted to a friend, Volodya Bedrut, a skilled burglar, to remove the windows, collect the vestments, and later return them! We learn how the monk Tavrion, later one of the most sought-after *startsy*, overcame the canonical ban on serving the eucharist except over the relics of saints, and resorted to the practice of the early martyrs. Late at night, lying on his bunk, he recited the liturgy with a crust of his bread ration on a napkin on his chest. Two of the martyrs who were most revered, Metropolitans Kiril (Smirnov) and Serafim (Chichagov), had been disciples of St John of Kronstadt and adopted the monastic habit only after being widowed. Cheerfully ignoring monastic rules, Kiril drank prison soup despite the scraps of meat floating in it. As he hears the confession of the young Sergei Fudel' he confides: 'We priests treasure this sacrament as the most intimate part of our vocation.' 'Then', said Sergei, 'he clasped my head closer to his breast and I felt the freshness of the contact, the scent of his stole and all the warmth which flowed out of this artless man' (p. 223).

Though demanding intense concentration, in the end this is a deeply moving book which whets the reader's appetite for more of these biographies of martyrs that the publishers promise.

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