

Benjamin, Metropolitan of Petrograd and those with him



Metropolitan Benjamin, in the world Basil Pavlovich Kazansky, was born in 1872 (or 1873 or 1874), in the village of Nimensky *pogost*, Andreyev *volost*, Kargopol *uyezd*, Olonets province, into the family of a priest.

Of his childhood he wrote: “In my childhood and adolescence I immersed myself in reading the lives of the saints and was enraptured by their heroism and their holy inspiration. With all my heart I sorrowed over the fact that times had changed and one no longer had to suffer what they suffered. Times have changed again, and the opportunity has been opened to suffer for Christ both from one’s own people and from strangers!”

In 1893, he entered the St. Petersburg Theological Academy and in 1895, he was tonsured and ordained to the diaconate. On May 19, 1896, he was ordained to the priesthood. In 1897 he graduated from the Academy, and was appointed teacher of the Holy Scriptures in the Riga theological seminary. In 1898, he became inspector of the Kholm theological seminary. In 1899, he became inspector of the St. Petersburg theological seminary. In 1902, he was made rector of the Samara theological seminary with the rank of archimandrite. In 1905, he became rector of the St. Petersburg theological seminary.

On January 24, 1910, he was consecrated Bishop of Gdov, a vicariate of the St. Petersburg diocese. Bishop Benjamin was a learned and irreproachable monk who placed the interests of the Church above everything else, even going so far as to speak out openly against Rasputin. After the February revolution, on March 6 (or May 25), 1917, he was elected archbishop of Petrograd and Ladoga by a majority vote of

the people of Petrograd (including the workers), in place of Rasputin's appointee, Metropolitan Pitirim, who had been arrested and removed from his see. On June 17, 1917, he was renamed Archbishop of Petrograd and Gdov. On August 14, he was raised to the rank of metropolitan. In the same month, he was made a member of the Holy Synod by the Local Church Council that had just opened. On January 26, 1918, by a resolution of the Council, he was appointed archimandrite of the Alexander Nevsky Lavra. He took part in the opening of the Theological-Pastoral school of the Petrograd diocese, and also took an active part in the organization of the Theological Institute.

In March 1922, the communists started confiscating church valuables on the pretext of giving help to those starving in the Volga region. Metropolitan Benjamin objected to confiscation, but he did bless the voluntary donation of valuables. In this he was motivated both by compassion for the starving and by concern to avoid the bloody clashes between communists and believers which had taken place in other cities.

At first the Petrograd communists adopted a conciliatory attitude, and agreed to the metropolitan's proposals with regard to the voluntary donations and the control of funds raised by the parishes. However, the authorities in Moscow disapproved; they wanted not cooperation with the Church, which would raise the Church's prestige, but war against Her. So the metropolitan was told that there would be no voluntary donations or control by the Church, but confiscation.

As the day set for the confiscation approached, the population of the city grew restless. Then on March 24, *Petrogradskaya Pravda* published a letter signed by 12 clergy who were to become the pillars of the future renovationist or "Living Church." They accused the Church of "playing politics" and being "counter-revolutionaries," and demanded the confiscation or unconditional surrender of the Church's valuables to the authorities. However, the peacemaker metropolitan succeeded in defusing the situation by sending two of the twelve, Vvedensky and Boyarsky, to *Pomgol*, the Soviet Committee for providing help to the starving, to negotiate an agreement. The upshot was that permission was obtained to substitute other possessions for the consecrated vessels (whose handover the Patriarch had forbidden), and the appropriation went ahead in a peaceful manner. This agreement negotiated with the

Soviet authorities was to become the main basis of the prosecution's case against the metropolitan at his trial.

In spite of this, there were clashes between the authorities and the ordinary believers. Thus on March 15, a large crowd gathered at the Kazan cathedral to protest against the forthcoming requisition. On March 26, soldiers were summoned to disperse a crowd at the Nativity church. On March 30, during another demonstration against requisition at the Znamenskaya church, the police beat up the crowd. On April 14, at the church of St. John, a 2,000 strong crowd pelted the commission with stones and rang the bells. On April 21, violence was again displayed against the members of the commission at the St. Vladimir church, and again on April 26, at the Protection and St. Andrew cathedrals, and on May 4, at the Putilov church. The Bolsheviks replied with repressions. They staged more than 2,000 trials, shot about 10,000 people and sent hundreds of thousands to the camps.

In May 1922, Patriarch Tikhon was placed under house arrest. Profiting from this circumstance, Vvedensky and other members of the group of 12 succeeded in usurping control of the central ecclesiastical administration in Moscow. In mid-May a Higher Church Administration (HCA) was set up, and the schism became entrenched.

The renovationist or "Living Church" schism stood for acceptance of the revolution, more privileges for the lower, married clergy, the acceptance of married bishops and twice-married priests, the new calendar, and other innovations in church services. They also proclaimed some clearly heretical teaching. Metropolitan Benjamin vigorously defended the teaching of the Church against the renovationists, as we can read in this account written by the Catacomb Bishop Peter (Ladygin) (+1957):

When Metropolitan Agathangelus issued this epistle [accepting the leadership of the Church as lawful patriarchal *locum tenens*], he was immediately arrested and exiled to Siberia. But Eudocimus, Antonin, and Leonid then consecrated the protopriests Vvedensky, Krasnitsky, Stadnik, and others to the episcopate, while they made themselves metropolitans. They created a Higher Church Administration

which was confirmed by Soviet power. Then they became the ecclesiastical rulers throughout Russia. They created a program [of 28 points], in which it was said that “our Lord Jesus Christ is not God, and the Mother of God is not a Virgin” and other points which go against our Church and the decrees of the Ecumenical Councils and Apostles

Then in Moscow this Higher Church Administration began to demand that all the bishops and priests should recognize them, while all those who did not recognize them were thrown into prison. The three metropolitans Vvedensky, Krasnitsky, and Boyarksy went one evening to Metropolitan Benjamin and suggested that he also unite with them. He said, ‘I was elected to this see by the people. Without the people I cannot decide. Tomorrow is Sunday; the people will be free. We shall ask the people to assemble at the Alexander Nevsky Lavra. Then you explain to them what renovationism and the Living Church are.’

They all agreed to this. That same evening Metropolitan Benjamin phoned the deans of Leningrad that they should immediately announce in all the churches that some metropolitans had arrived from Moscow who had suggested that he accept renovationism.

‘Tomorrow, May 28th [new style], I shall serve in the Alexander Nevsky Lavra. At the end of the liturgy the representatives of the Living Church will explain what renovationism and the Living Church is And I shall ask the whole people and all the believers who are interested in Church matters to come at ten o’clock to the Lavra.’

On May 28th, 1922, the people began to come together from the whole of Leningrad, and in front of the entrance they placed notebooks in which everyone’s name could be recorded. From these notebooks it is calculated that 12,000 people gathered, as well as the clergy from every church. Three people — Archimandrite Macarius, Hieromonk Seraphim, and Hierodeacon Herman — wrote down everything that happened and sent it to me in Odessa.

At the end of the liturgy, Metropolitan Benjamin addressed the people, saying, 'There have arrived from Moscow representatives of the Living Church. They propose that we accept their teaching. I cannot do this without you, who elected me. So I have invited all of you who are interested in Church affairs. Listen carefully. They will explain their program to you, and then I will express my own opinion!'

Then, on the ambon, Metropolitan Benjamin appointed eight members of the presidium: the metropolitan himself, four clergy, and three laymen. Then he declared the session open.

Vvedensky came out onto the ambon. He began to explain his program. 'Brothers and sisters, up to now,' he said, 'we have been subject to the Tsar and the metropolitans. But now we are free, and we ourselves must rule the people and the Church. More than 1,900 years have already passed since it was written for us that the Lord Jesus Christ was born from the Virgin Mary and is the Son of God. But that is not true. We recognize the existence of the God of Sabaoth, about whom our whole Bible and all the prophets have written. And we recognize them. But Jesus Christ is not God. He was simply a very clever man. And it is impossible to call Mary, who was born of a Jewish tribe and herself gave birth to Jesus, the Mother of God and Virgin. And so now we have all recognized the existence of God, that is, the God of Sabaoth, and we must all be united: both Jews and Catholics must be a living people's church.'

When he had said this, the whole people cried out, 'We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ is the Son of God and God, and we recognize the Mother of God to be a Virgin!'

Then Krasnitsky came out and said, 'Brother and sisters, the baptism of small children has been accepted by us. But when the child is just born he does not know or understand anything. They baptize him, put a little cross on him, and he grows up with the obligation of wearing this cross and

not taking it off. But when he has grown up, he will learn and know everything — the cross will be quite unnecessary for him. So we do not recognize the baptism of young children, and when he comes of age let him be baptized and wear a cross. In the same way we do not recognize marriage: it is unnecessary and wrong. Why bind people? It should be like this: they should get together, register a civil marriage, and if one doesn't like the other, then let them go off in search of another and let him take another woman. We have freedom now. So we do not recognize any saints or relics. Nor do we recognize monasticism. We don't need any monasticism. Before, bishops had to come from the monks. This is wrong, because a man cannot live without a woman, nor a woman without a man. Bishops must be married, and priests also. It used to be that if a priest's wife died he had to remain a widower until his death. That is wrong. Now there is freedom. We can take a second and a third wife.'

Then Boyarsky came out. He said, 'Although Vvedensky said that Jesus Christ is not God but a clever man, and the Mother of God is not a Virgin, I do not agree with this. I recognize that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and the Mother of God a Virgin.... But baptism, marriage, holy relics, monasticism — I do not recognize!'

When he had said this, the people cried out, 'We do not need your explanations. We do not want your new Living Church!'

There was a disturbance and shouting among the people. Metropolitan Benjamin began to calm them down. When the people had settled, Metropolitan Benjamin said to them, 'You have all heard all the explanations of the representatives of the "Living Church." Perhaps there is someone who will agree to join them. But I cannot, because this is the same blasphemy which was previously preached by Arius and his followers. And so I, in accordance with the rules of the Apostles and the Ecumenical councils, am obliged to

anathematize all the leaders of this living and new church and their followers.’

Then he immediately turned towards the Royal Doors and said, ‘In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and of the All-pure, immaculate and Ever-Virgin His Mother, the Theotokos, I anathematize....’

And there and then the protodeacon pronounced anathema on all the teachers and followers of the ‘Living Church.’ But while they were chanting anathema, Vvedensky fled out of the sanctuary through a side door into the courtyard of the Alexander Nevsky Lavra, and informed the GPU by telephone of what had happened. But Metropolitan Benjamin began to preach and give further explanations to the people. While he was speaking, there appeared representatives of the Soviet authorities and arrested Metropolitan Benjamin and the four bishops and three laymen who had been appointed members of the presidium.

Immediately, they took them out into Gorochovaya Street, where the GPU was situated. All the people who had been in the Lavra went there and demanded that the authorities release the metropolitan and those who had been taken with him. The whole people gathered, and towards the evening of May 28th about 30,000 people had gathered in the square of the GPU. No one left; they continued demanding their release, but the authorities did not release them. It was already late in the evening when the people were dispersed by the cavalry.”

The next day Chekists arrived at the residence of the metropolitan and arrested him. Meanwhile, Vvedensky took over the chancellery. Without turning a hair, he went up to the hierarch for a blessing. “Fr. Alexander,” said the metropolitan peacefully, “you and I are not in the Garden of Gethsemane.” And without blessing the schismatic, he calmly listened to the statement about his arrest.

On May 29, the administration of the diocese passed to his vicar, Bishop Alexis (Simansky) of Yamburg, the future false-patriarch. On

the same day, Metropolitan Benjamin was brought to trial together with 86 other people. They were accused of entering into negotiations with Soviet power with the aim of annulling or softening the decree on the requisitioning of church valuables, and that they were “in a plot with the worldwide bourgeoisie and the Russian emigration.” He was given many chances to save himself in a dishonourable manner. Thus even before the trial Vvedensky and the Petrograd commandant Bakaiev had come to him and given him the choice: either revoke the anathema against Vvedensky or face trial. But the metropolitan refused to revoke the anathema. (His deputy, Bishop Alexis, having recognized the HCA to be lawful, did revoke the anathema, on June 4. According to A. Levitin and V. Shavrov, he did this because the Chekists threatened him that if he disobeyed Metropolitan Benjamin, he would be shot.) Again, during the trial, the judges hinted that he might save himself by naming “the authors” of the proposition he had sent to *Pomgol*. The metropolitan again refused, saying: “I alone did it – I thought everything over; I formulated, wrote and sent the proposition myself. I did not allow anybody else to participate in deciding matters entrusted to me as archpastor.”

Also on trial with him were most of the members of the administration of the “Society of Orthodox Parishes,” the superiors of almost all the churches of Petrograd, the professors of the Theological Academy, the Theological Institute and university, members of the lower clergy, and simple people “of various ranks and callings” who had fallen into the hands of the Bolsheviks during the street disturbances that took place during the requisitioning of church valuables – 87 people in all.

Vladyka was called an “enemy of the people” who was working in agreement with the world bourgeoisie. He was given many chances to save himself in a dishonourable manner. Thus even before the trial, Vvedensky and the Petrograd commandant, Bakayev, had come to him and given him the choice: either revoke the anathema against Vvedensky or face trial. But the metropolitan refused to revoke the anathema. (It was revoked by his successor, Alexis Simansky, who became the second Soviet Patriarch in 1945.)

Again, during the trial, the judges hinted that he save himself by naming the authors of the proposition he had sent to *Pomgol*. The met-

ropolitan again refused, saying, “I alone did it; I thought everything over; I formulated, wrote, and sent the proposition myself. I did not allow anybody else to participate in deciding matters entrusted to me as archpastor.”

The renovationists Krasnitsky and Vvedensky testified against Metropolitan Benjamin during the trial, which was staged in what had been the Club of the Nobility. Three witnesses came forward to defend the metropolitan. They were immediately arrested, so no one else came forward.

Once the prosecutor Krasikov prophetically remarked, “The whole of the Orthodox Church is a counter-revolutionary organization. It follows that the whole Church should be put in prison!”

In the thirties this is precisely what happened, when the whole of the True Church was either imprisoned or driven underground.

During the trial, Metropolitan Benjamin said: “I, of course, reject all the accusations made against me and once again triumphantly declare (you know, perhaps I am speaking for the last time in my life) that politics is completely alien to me. I have tried as far as I have been able to be only a pastor of human souls. And now, standing before the court, I calmly await its sentence, whatever it may be, well remembering the words of the apostle: ‘Take care that you do not suffer as evil-doers, but if any of you suffer as a Christian, thank God for it’ (*I Peter 4:15:16*).

The defense lawyer Y.S. Gurovich delivered an eloquent speech, in which he said, “If the metropolitan perishes for his faith, for his limitless devotion to the believing masses, he will become more dangerous to Soviet power than now.... The unfailing historical law warns us that faith grows, strengthens, and increases on the blood of martyrs.”

Gurovich’s speech was greeted by tumultuous applause. Then the final word was given to the defendants (there were 16 in all). When the metropolitan rose to speak, he first expressed sorrow at being called an “enemy of the people.”

“I am a true son of my people,” he said. “I love, and always have loved, the people. I have dedicated my whole life to them and I felt happy to see that they — I mean the common people — repaid me with the same love. It was the Russian people who raised me to the high position I have been occupying in our Russian Church.”

This was all that he had to say about himself. The rest of his speech dealt with explanations and considerations for the defense of the others. Referring to some written documents and other facts, he exhibited extraordinary memory, logic, and calmness.

A reverent silence followed the metropolitan's speech, which was broken by the presiding judge. He addressed the metropolitan in a gentler tone of voice than before, as if he also was affected by the spiritual strength of the defendant.

"All this time," he said, "you have spoken about others; the tribunal would like to hear about yourself."

The metropolitan, who had sat down, rose, looked at the presiding judge in a puzzled way, and asked in a low, clear voice, "About myself? But what else can I tell you about myself? One more thing perhaps: regardless of what my sentence will be, no matter what you decide, life or death, I will lift up my eyes reverently to God, cross myself, and affirm: 'Glory to Thee, my Lord; glory to Thee for everything.'"

On July 5 (6, according to another source), Metropolitan Benjamin was convicted of "organizing a counter-revolutionary group, having set himself the aim of struggling with Soviet power." Ten people were condemned to be shot; the others were given prison sentences of varying lengths. Those condemned to be shot were: Metropolitan Benjamin; Bishop Benedict (Plotnikov) of Ladoga; Archimandrite Sergius (Shein), the superior of the Trinity-St. Sergius *podvorye*, Protopriest Bogoyavlensky, the rector of the Theological Institute; Protopriest N. Chukov, the superior of the Kazan cathedral (later Metropolitan Gregory of Leningrad); Protopriest Cheltsov, the superior of St. Isaac's cathedral, Protopriest N. Ognev, professor of the Military-Juridical Academy; P. (or G.L.) Novitsky, I.M. Kovsharov, and N.A. Yelagin. The rest were sentenced to various terms of imprisonment. However, six of those sentenced to death had their sentences commuted to long terms of imprisonment on appeal.

Over a month passed before the sentence was carried out. In a letter from prison, Metropolitan Benjamin anticipated the position of the Catacomb Church, saying, "The reasoning of some, perhaps outstanding pastors is strange: 'We have to preserve our living forces,' that is, give in to everyone for their sake! Then what is Christ for? It is not the

Platonovs and the Chuprins and the Benjamins and those like them who save the Church, but Christ. That point on which they are trying to stand is destruction for the Church – it is wrong to sacrifice the Church for oneself. Now is the time of trial. People are sacrificing everything for the sake of political convictions.... Cannot we Christians display a similar courage even unto death if we have some faith in Christ and the life of the age to come?”

And in another letter he wrote, “It is difficult, hard to suffer, but according to the measure of my sufferings consolation abounds from God. It is difficult to cross this Rubicon, this frontier, and give oneself over wholly to the will of God. But when this is done, then man abounds in consolation and does not feel even the greatest sufferings; filled as he is in the midst of sufferings by an inner peace, he draws others to sufferings so that they should imitate that condition in which the happy sufferer finds himself.... I talked about this before to others, but my sufferings had not reached their full measure. Now, it seems, I have to go through everything: prison, trial, public mockery and demands for my death as if the people applauded it, the ingratitude of men, their betrayal, inconstancy and similar things, anxiety and responsibility for the fate of others, and even for the Church Herself.

“My sufferings have reached their height, but consolation has also increased. I am joyful and calm, as always. Christ is our life, our light, and our peace! With Him it is good at all times and in all places. I do not fear for the fate of the Church! We pastors should have more faith. We should abandon our self-reliance, our intelligence and learning and (human) strength, and give place to the grace of God.

“...I am joyful and peaceful, as always. Christ is our life, light, and rest. With Him it is always good.”

On the night of August 12/25 to 13/26, 1922, Metropolitan Benjamin, **Archimandrite Sergius, George Novitsky, and Ioann Kovsharov** were shaved and dressed in rags so that the firing squad would not know that they were executing clergymen.

Archimandrite Sergius (Shein), who had acted with great courage throughout the trial, prayed aloud, “O Lord, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Archimandrite Sergius was born in 1866, in the village of Kolpna,

Novoselsky *uyezd*, Tula province. In 1893, he graduated from law school, and he later occupied various government posts. In 1913, he was a member of the Fourth State Duma. In 1917-18, he was a member and secretary of the Local Council of the Russian Orthodox Church. He took part in the enthronement of Patriarch Tikhon and delivered the welcoming speech. On September 12, 1920, he was tonsured into monasticism and was soon made superior of the Trinity *podvorye* in Petrograd. In 1922 he was arrested and condemned with Metropolitan Benjamin.

Yury Petrovich Novitsky was born on October 10, 1892. He was a professor-jurist and president of the Society of Orthodox Parishes of Petersburg, that organization to which the trial ascribed a leading role in the resistance to the requisitioning of the church valuables. He was a very pious man from his childhood, while he was already a professor of criminal law in Petersburg university he practised almsgiving. During the trial he refused to recognize that he was guilty: "If there is need for a sacrifice in this affair, I am ready to meet death without complaining. I ask you to forgive the rest."

Metropolitan Benjamin went to his death calmly, whispering a prayer and crossing himself.