

Metropolitan Ireney: Unswerving faith in the midst of constant change

On March 18, 2001, the Orthodox Church in America marks the 20th anniversary of the repose of His Beatitude, Metropolitan Ireney.

Born in 1892 in what is today the southeastern corner of Poland, Metropolitan Ireney witnessed many changes in the life of the Orthodox Church throughout the world and particularly in North America. Having responded to our Lord's call to pursue the priestly vocation, he served numerous parishes in his homeland and held various administrative positions. The chaos that descended upon Central and Eastern Europe during World War II forced him

and his family to leave their native land, thereby opening a new era in the future Metropolitan's life. With dedication and genuine humility, he began ministering to the countless Orthodox Christians in German displaced persons' camps who sought comfort and hope in the Church.

After a brief pastorate in Belgium, the future Metropolitan arrived in the United States in 1952 and began to serve the faithful in McAdoo, Pennsylvania. With the death of his wife the following year and his subsequent election to the episcopacy, another chapter in his life began, as he was selected to oversee the Orthodox Church in Japan which had been placed under the jurisdiction of the Metropolia after World War II. In 1960, he was named Archbishop of Boston and New England and served as assistant to the ailing Metropolitan Leonty, whom he succeeded in 1965.

The 1960s were a time of change in the life of the Church in North America. New parishes began to spring up in suburban areas. English gradually became the dominant – and in a growing number of places, the only – language used in liturgical worship and parish life. Concurrent with these new realities, the Metropolia had entered into a dialogue with the Moscow Patriarchate which led to the granting of autocephaly in 1970. While Metropolitan Ireney had spent most of his pastoral life abroad, he proved to be an ardent supporter of autocephaly, leading the Church into its present era while personally embodying the many issues that the Church had been facing for the better part of the 20th century. Despite the fact that he was foreign-born and spoke little English, he never lost sight of the vision that had motivated the missionaries to North America that had preceded him – the vision of an Orthodox Church in America that was capable of bringing the Good News of Jesus Christ to all who would respond to it.

Perhaps the greatest lesson we can learn from Metropolitan Ireney's ministry and tenure as Primate of the Orthodox Church in America is his unswerving faithfulness to and trust in the will of God. He faced the uncertainties of World War II, the ravages of life in displaced persons' camps, adjustment to life in America, readjustment to life in Japan, and the reaffirmation of the vision of those who had labored in North America for nearly 200 years before him. His life was one of necessary flexibility and adaptability in the midst of constant change and uncertainty. Herein we find the gift which he has left us as we build upon all that we have received and all that we have yet to face in this new millennium. May his memory be eternal, and may his life and vision and tenacity inspire us now and in the years to come.



Metropolitan Ireney with Bishop, now Metropolitan, Theodosius.

+ Theodosius
+ THEODOSIUS

Archbishop of Washington
Metropolitan of All America and Canada

HIS BEATITUDE, THE MOST BLESSED IRENEY

A Biographical Chronology

OCTOBER 2, 1892/ Born John Bekish in Mezhirech, Lublin Province of the Russian Empire, in what is today southeast Poland.

1914/ Graduation from the Kholm Seminary.

1914-1916/ Psalm reader.

AUGUST 1, 1916/ Ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Seraphim of Belsk. Appointed to serve in the military chaplaincy and as Assistant Rector of the Cathedral in Lublin.

1917/ Awarded the nabadrennik and skufia.

JULY 12, 1919/ Appointed Rector of the parish in Guscha, Lublin Region.

AUGUST 2, 1924/ Appointed Rector of the parish in Lishnevka, Kovel Region.

JUNE 22, 1925/ Appointed Rector of the parish in Belskoye, Sarnen Region.

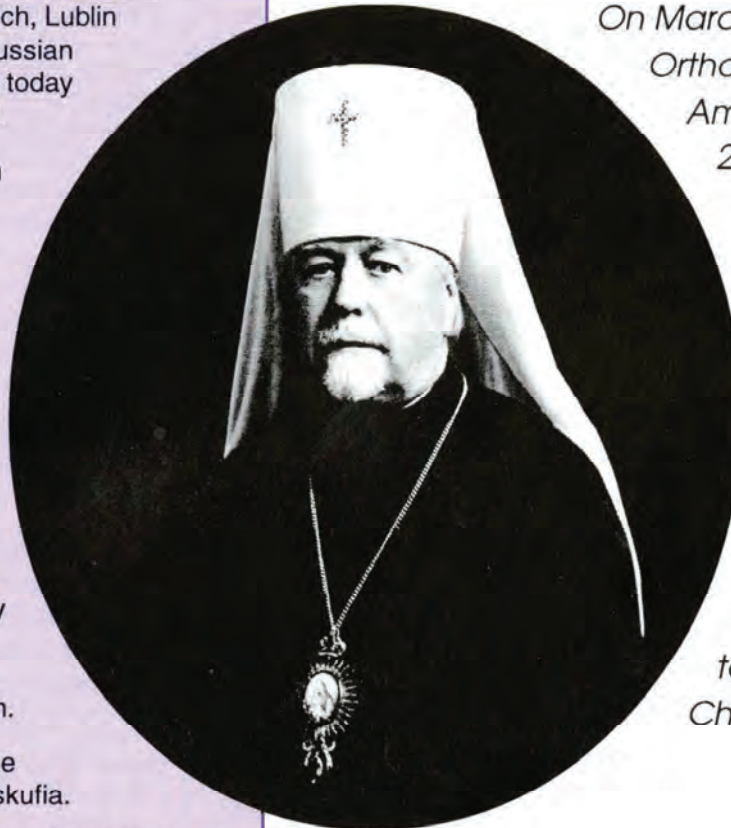
SEPTEMBER 1, 1926/ Appointed Rector of the parish in Poliza, Sarnen Region.

DECEMBER 11, 1928/ Appointed District Dean of the Second District of the Sarnen Region and awarded the kamilavka.

1929/ Awarded the gold cross.

1934/ Appointed Rector of the parish in Kamen-Kashirsk and elevated to the rank of Archpriest.

Tribute: METROPOLITAN IRENEY



On March 18, 2001, the Orthodox Church in America observes the 20th Anniversary of the repose of His Beatitude, Metropolitan Ireney. From humble beginnings in war torn Europe, he literally bridged the gap between the historic "Metropolia" and today's Orthodox Church in America.

In Appreciation

"A loving pastor and friend, the one I call my mentor."

His Eminence, the Right Reverend Archbishop DMITRI
Archbishop of Dallas and the South

Among those of the departed whom I regularly remember at the Liturgy are the bishop who ordained me to the priesthood and His Beatitude, Metropolitan Ireney. The Metropolitan was my greatest supporter in 1968 and 1969, when I was being prepared for the episcopacy. His kindness and willingness to give up his time to instruct me I will never forget. He was indeed my bishop, my friend, and my teacher.

Metropolitan Ireney was Primate when our Church was offered its autocephalous status and, in a sense, he was responsible for the acceptance of the Russian Orthodox Church's offer. While he had some

difficulty giving his support to the move at first, he came to realize that the gift of autocephaly was crucial to the Orthodox presence in America and that it was not the past that concerned us, but the future.

Even now, some thirty-four years later, I have a vivid memory of my "teacher's" opening the door of the Chancery Office, looking at me, and asking if I was ready for my lesson. The late Metropolitan was deeply concerned about my ability, or lack of it, to serve in Church Slavonic, and he faithfully came, day after day, to give me the opportunity to read for him. Perhaps like some other students, I did not always look forward to the lessons. Later, however, I realized that his was a labor of love and that I was very fortunate to have such a hierarch's interest in me and my future. As it turned out, I was able to put my Slavonic to good use in my first episcopal assignment, as Bishop of Berkeley, Auxiliary to the late Archbishop John of San Francisco. There I actually celebrated more regularly in Slavonic than in English. I was very grateful for all the attention he had given me.

Another related incident that stands out in my memory is the night, back in 1968, of my "big test." I was to celebrate the entire Vigil service in Slavonic without another priest or a deacon serving with me. On this depended my permission to return temporarily to my old parish in Dallas, which was without a pastor at the time. Several priests and deacons, all Russians, were in attendance, and some of them could not resist the temptation to whisper corrections to me. The Metropolitan, on the other hand, told them to be quiet in a rather firm tone of voice. At the end, a brief pat on the shoulder and a "*molodets*" [Russian for "well done"] were my assurance that I had passed his test.

Metropolitan Ireney was a stickler for liturgical propriety, and he did not hesitate to correct us if we did something wrong. He was a kind of "living *Typikon*," and always knew what was called for within any service. I learned to appreciate then, and still appreciate to this day, his attention to detail and his willingness to correct my mistakes.

Finally, Metropolitan Ireney was a friend to many. He sent out dozens of greeting cards to priests, deacons, other bishops, and laypersons alike on every important occasion. He was a loving pastor and friend, the one I call my mentor.

May his memory be eternal! ■



Metropolitan Theodosius presides at Metropolitan Ireney's funeral.

MAY 1, 1934/ Appointed District Dean of the First District of the Kamen-Kashirsk Region.

JANUARY 1, 1935/ Appointed to the Consistory of the Polish Orthodox Church.

MARCH 1, 1935/ Appointed District Dean of the Third District of the Pinsk Region.

JANUARY 1, 1936/ Appointed Assistant Rector of the Pinsk Cathedral.

1937/ Awarded the palitsa.

AUGUST 26, 1938/ Appointed Rector of the parish in Luninetz and District Dean of the Luninetz Deanery.

OCTOBER 1, 1938/ Appointed Chairman of the Luninetz Missionary Committee.

1940/ Awarded the jeweled cross.

JULY 1944/ Evacuated with his family from Pinsk and Luninetz to Germany, where he ministered to Orthodox faithful in displaced persons' camps.

OCTOBER 1947/ Raised to the dignity of Mitred Archpriest and moves to Belgium.

AUGUST 1, 1948/ Assigned Rector of Holy Trinity Church, Charleroi, Belgium and later assigned District Dean.

MARCH 20, 1952/ Arrives in the US.

MAY 8, 1952/ Assigned Rector of Holy Trinity Church, McAdoo, PA.

MARCH 31, 1953/ Matushka Xenia Bekish dies and is buried in the parish cemetery in McAdoo.

MAY 15, 1953/ Elected Bishop of Tokyo and Japan, then a diocese of the American "Metropolia."

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MAY 28, 1953/ Tonsured a monk with the name Ireney and elevated to the rank of Archimandrite.

JUNE 7, 1953/ Consecrated Bishop of Tokyo and Japan by Metropolitan Leonty (Turkevich) and other hierarchs at Holy Virgin Protection Cathedral, New York.

1954/ Bishop Ireney is instrumental in reopening of Tokyo's Orthodox Seminary.

MAY 9, 1957/ Elevated to the rank of Archbishop.

JUNE 14, 1960/ Transferred to the Diocese of New England and appointed Archbishop of Boston and New England and Special Assistant to the ailing Metropolitan Leonty. Concurrently, he serves for a brief time as Administrator of the Archdiocese of Canada.

1965/ Following the death of Metropolitan Leonty on May 14, Archbishop Ireney is elected Locum Tenens by the Great Council of Bishops.

SEPTEMBER 23, 1965/ Elected and installed as Archbishop of New York and Metropolitan of All America and Canada at the 12th All-American Sobor.



Metropolitan Ireney during his days as a priest in displaced persons' camp in post-War Germany.

Total commitment

Metropolitan Ireney was imbued with profound faith from generations of his Orthodox Christian ancestors.

Serge G. Troubetzkoy

Archivist Emeritus, Orthodox Church in America

During World War II, Father John and his family were forced to escape the invading army. They relocated to Germany, where Father John served as a chaplain in refugee camps, ministering to thousands of displaced persons. After the war, he lived and served in Belgium for a few years, after which he and his wife came to the United States. Within a few months, he was appointed parish priest at Holy Trinity Church, McAdoo, Pennsylvania.

Shortly thereafter, Father John's wife died. As there were few qualified candidates for the episcopacy at that time, he was almost immediately tonsured a monk, taking the name Ireney, and was consecrated Bishop of Tokyo and Japan, as the Japanese Church was at that time a Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church of America.

In 1960, Bishop Ireney was reassigned as Archbishop of Boston and New England, and also served as assistant to the elderly Metropolitan Leonty, aiding him in primatial duties. After Metropolitan Leonty's death, Archbishop Ireney was elected Metropolitan of All America and Canada. Shortly after the granting of autocephaly in 1970, I retired from my former place of employment and became his private secretary at his residence in Syosset, New York.

Metropolitan Ireney never succeeded in learning to speak English. Nevertheless, he tried hard to use his limited knowledge of the language, often with humorous results. I recall how Father Schmemmann once called me to say that he had received an Easter card from the Metropolitan which read, "Happy is Risen!" When he was unable to attend Metropolitan Council meetings, he had difficulty accepting some of the decisions that it had made and that necessitated his approval. Some Council decisions were totally disregarded.

Metropolitan Ireney liked to work and attend meetings. I recall how, one summer, I returned from a two-week vacation in Canada. The limousine service left me off at East Norwich Inn, where I left my luggage and walked the mile or so to the Chancery. Metropolitan Ireney was waiting for me in the driveway. "Let's go," he exclaimed. "We have a lot of correspondence to attend to."

Through the generous monetary gifts he received from the faithful during his many archpastoral visits, Metropolitan Ireney was always ready and willing to help people who were in need. I remember how, when Saints Cosmas and Damian Adult Home on Staten Island initially faced financial difficulties, he donated \$50,000 to overcome a temporary crisis. I also remember how he had made \$9,000 and \$5,000 donations to Saint Vladimir's Seminary, and how he had given considerable donations to many other institutions, organizations, and individuals. By the end of his life, he had helped countless people by freely giving away his money while never asking for

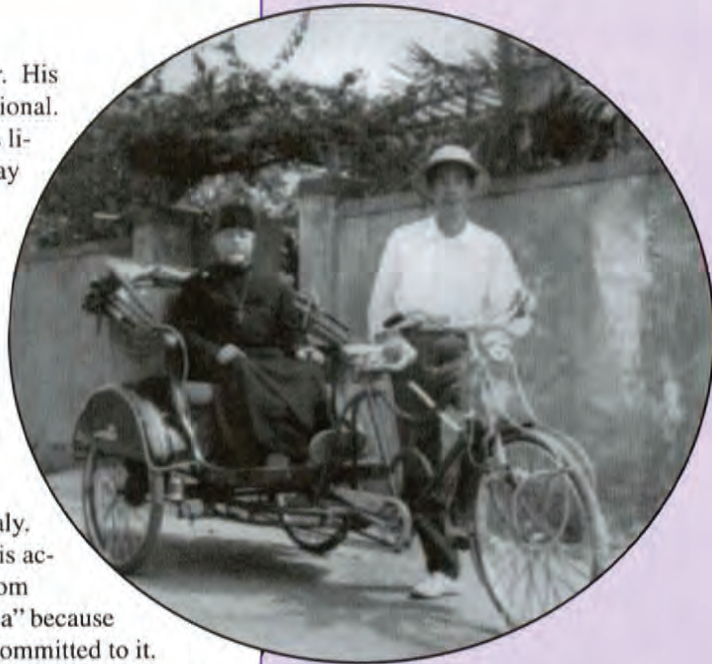
reimbursement or acknowledgment.

Metropolitan Ireney was a man of deep prayer. His manner of liturgical celebration was strictly traditional. He never altered the services in any way, and his liturgical style reflected his deep faith. One Sunday morning after the Liturgy, his staff was waiting for him to bless our breakfast. After some time, I was asked to see what was causing him to delay. When I entered his room, he looked at me in dismay and said, "First I must read my Post-Communion Prayers." On another occasion, I had been surprised to find him pacing on the veranda for some time, deeply engrossed in prayer.

One of Metropolitan Ireney's most important actions was his wholehearted support for the negotiations leading to the granting of autocephaly. Many who otherwise might have looked upon this action with dismay accepted the historic change from "Metropolia" to the "Orthodox Church in America" because it was evident that the Metropolitan was totally committed to it.

In retirement, Metropolitan Ireney lived in a two room apartment at Saints Cosmas and Damian Adult Home, where the chapel is dedicated to his patron. While still residing in Syosset, he had been hospitalized frequently, and I visited him sometimes twice a day. One morning he asked me, "Where are you from?" I replied, "Syosset." He then said, "Tell me. Is Troubetzkoy still there? He is a good person."

When Metropolitan Ireney was dying, he was constantly in prayer. His doctor asked me why he was always covering his face. I explained that, during the funeral service for a bishop or priest, the deceased's face remains covered. Metropolitan Ireney did, in fact, die with his face covered at the very moment of his repose. ■



As Bishop of Japan, Metropolitan Ireney traveled in native style!

APRIL 10, 1970/ The Russian Orthodox Church grants autocephaly to the "Metropolia," henceforth known as the Orthodox Church in America.

JUNE 9, 1970/ In conjunction with the granting of autocephaly, Metropolitan Ireney is granted the title "His Beatitude" by the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America, as is appropriate for the Primate of an Autocephalous Church.

OCTOBER 20-22, 1970/ Presides at 14th All-American Sobor/1st All-American Council, which formally and enthusiastically approves reception of autocephaly, in part due to Metropolitan Ireney's total commitment to its attainment.

1974/ Due to failing health, Metropolitan Ireney requests the Holy Synod to elect a Temporary Administrator to carry out day-to-day governance of the Church. On May 15, Archbishop Sylvester (Haruns) of Montreal and Canada assumes this position, working together with Metropolitan Ireney, who continues to approve all actions and decisions.

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A faithful witness

Regardless of the setting, Metropolitan Ireney was surely faithful to Christ and His Church.

Archpriest John Nehrebecki

Rector, Christ the Saviour Church, Paramus, New Jersey

I first met Metropolitan Ireney at Holy Trinity Church, McAdoo, Pennsylvania, after the death of his wife and the people's Matushka. It was to this parish that Father John Bekish had been assigned after he arrived in the United States. He hid the fact that he was a Mitred Archpriest, and at Deanery functions he would stand at the end of the line during liturgical celebrations.

Father John was later elected Bishop of Japan. Having been tonsured with the name Ireney, he was nominated by Archbishop Dimitri (Magan), who told me how, despite his sadness, Father John with tears obediently accepted his new duties as the Orthodox hierarch of faraway Japan while serving as the Vicar of Metropolitan



Metropolitan Ireney with Greek Orthodox Archbishop Iakovos [top] and with Fr. George Afonsky, now retired Archbishop Gregory of Alaska, in St. Sergius Chapel at the OCA Chancery in Syosset.

MARCH 9, 1977/ Metropolitan Ireney announces his intention to retire, effective October 25, the opening day of the 5th All-American Council. Bishop Theodosius (Lazor) of Pittsburgh is elected Primate of the Orthodox Church in America. In retirement, Metropolitan Ireney resides at SS. Cosmas and Damian Adult Home, Staten Island, NY, which he was instrumental in establishing.

MARCH 18, 1981/ After a lengthy illness, Metropolitan Ireney reposes in the Lord. On March 21, he is buried at St. Tikhon's Monastery. ■

Leonty. When visiting the United States, he stayed in one little room with a single cot, joyfully performing all assignments given to him.

In the 1960s, when I felt mortally wounded because of the difficulties I was enduring in my parish, Metropolitan Ireney dismissed the "enemies [who] rose up against me" from the conference room at the old Chancery on New York's Second Street and gently asked me, "What do you want?" I was peacefully left to remain in Paramus and organize nine more new parishes. When I had to seek outside employment, he offered me the largest parish in the United States.

Every time I was called to the Second Street Chancery because of some whispering campaign as to "what

I was doing," Metropolitan Ireney would ask about the well being of my wife, Matushka Eugenia, and all my "little children." I never went home empty handed; he always gave me some music to give to Matushka and "her beautiful choir." He was always concerned about the priests' wives and enquiring about their families, assuring himself that their transfers were gentle and timely for the needs of their school-aged children. And on "payday," he would sneak out of the cathedral to the Second Avenue Post Office to send postal money orders to widowed matushki in Western Europe. He was very charitable to them and concerned about their well-being.

In 1970 autocephaly was received. Father Alexander Schmemmann shocked the Holy Synod by not agreeing to be a "leader" in the delegation which was to travel to Moscow to receive the *Tomos*. Metropolitan Ireney asked what he could do for Father Alexander, whose reply was to send Father John Nehrebecki in his place. The nomination changed my whole worldview of the Church and Orthodoxy and my innate love for Russia.

Once there were accusations that "Nehrebecki" was celebrating the Burial Service for the Departed on the eve, rather than the morning, of burial. Once again I was called to Second Street for a meeting. Metropolitan Ireney, Archbishop Kiprian, and Archbishop Sylvester met me. After a lively discussion, I was invited "upstairs" to have lunch with the "Three Hierarchs." The Metropolitan donned his large white apron and began to serve us. He suggested that I mix my drink with lemon, while the others had club soda with a little fermented grape juice. First we discussed Russian Church history (I wasn't lost) and then Russian Literature (I began to shine). The conversation then turned to Church Slavonic (I kept up) and Orthodox Church history in Poland (not bad) and Polish Literature, during which I blurted out all that I knew about Henryk Sienkiewicz and his *Trilogy*, with *Fire and Sword*, *Pan Michael*, and the *Deluge*. At the end of the discussion, Metropolitan Ireney commented, "He knows Russian, Slavonic and related subjects well, and *still* serves in English." I went home walking on the first cloud!

Shortly thereafter, Father Joseph Pishtey, the Chancellor, died. The Burial Service was celebrated in the *evening!* Metropolitan Ireney smiled at me and asked me to eulogize our venerable Protopresbyter and first Chancellor of the Orthodox Church in America.

As I write these little remembrances, my laughter is mixed with tears. May His Beatitude, Metropolitan Ireney be beatified and given eternal rest. Even though he may have sinned, there can be no doubt that he was faithful to Christ and His Holy Church. ■