

October 23

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Ambrose (1812-1891) and the fathers of Optina monks

Today the Orthodox churches commemorate Ambrose, perhaps the greatest starets, or spiritual father, of Optina Monastery in Russia.

Aleksandr Michailovich Grenkov (as the future starets was baptized) was a child with a lively and creative mind, but such fragile health that he was forced to limit the many activities in which he was interested. Encouraged by his spiritual father to become a monk at the hermitage of Optina, Ambrose met the other two great starcy of that monastery, Leonid (1763-1841) and Macarius (1788-1860), who made him their disciple. Taking his suffering upon himself in prayer, Ambrose came to know himself and discovered the secrets of human nature in the depths of his heart, as well as the pathway towards reconciliation with God. As he came to understand that God's power is most genuinely revealed in weakness, he became a spiritual father known for his kindness and gentleness. He used his discernment not to judge others, but to suffer with them. Paraphrasing the apostle Paul, he liked to repeat, "It is God's kindness that pushes us towards conversion."

When Macarius died, Ambrose became the spiritual father of Optina, and began to call upon all Christians to support society's marginalized and outcast. His life inspired Russian literature from Dostoevsky to Tolstoy, and it was said of him, "From Ambrose an unfathomable abyss of love opens outward towards every person."

He died on the evening of October 10, 1891, and on his tombstone his disciples sealed his life with the following words: "To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so as to save all."

BIBLICAL READINGS

Heb 13:7-16; Lk 6:17-23

THE CHURCHES REMEMBER...

WESTERN CATHOLICS:

Servandus and Germanus of Mérida (?), martyrs (Spanish-Mozarabic calendar)

COPTS AND ETHIOPIANS (13 bàbah/teqemt):

Zacharia of Scetis (4th-5th cent.), monk (Coptic Orthodox Church)

Pelagia the Penitent (4th-5th cent.), virgin (Coptic Catholic Church)

LUTHERANS:

Johannes Zwick (d. 1542), poet at Constance and in Switzerland

ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS AND GREEK CATHOLICS:

James, brother of the Lord, hieromartyr and apostle

Ambrose of Optina, monk

Synaxis of the saints of Volinia (Russian Church)

OLD CATHOLICS:

James, the brother of the Lord, martyr