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Protopresbyter Thomas Hopko, 28 March 1939-18 March 2015.

Thomas John Hopko was born in 1939 in Endicott, a small town in upper New York State. His parents, John J. Hopko and Anna Zapotocky, were Carpatho-Russian immigrants who raised the young Thomas and his two sisters in the Church. Thomas Hopko rose out of these humble beginnings to attain high-ranking degrees of education, first at Fordham University (in Russian Studies), then at St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary. He went on to take a master's degree at Duquesne University, and finally a doctorate at Fordham.

In 1963, the same year as he completed his studies at St. Vladimir's Seminary, he married Anne Schmemmann, daughter of the great churchman Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemmann. Shortly thereafter he was ordained to the holy priesthood. He was recognized for his service to parishes in the Orthodox Church in America with the ranks of Archpriest in 1970 and Protopresbyter in 1995.

Concurrently with his parish ministry he taught at St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary from 1968-2002, eventually serving as the seminary's dean from 1992-2002.

His teaching discipline was Dogmatic Theology, which he had studied under Professor Serge Verhovskoy. Fr. Thomas learned much from many great émigré Russian theologians. But his main theological, pastoral, and ecclesiastical influence was undoubtedly Fr. Alexander Schmemmann. It was Fr. Schmemmann who set Fr. Thomas on fire, inspiring him with zeal for genuine life in the Church, through its teachings and its Liturgy. Unlike all of his mentors – Fr. Schmemmann, Fr. John Meyendorff, Nicolas Arseniev, Sophie Koulomzine, Serge Verhovskoy, and others – Hopko was an American-born Carpatho-Russian. And even as he rose, in his own particular way, to an equally great stature and influence in the Church, he could not help but feel himself to be “an uncultured peasant.” Yet his background, in its very “American-ness” and its humility, was an important part of what enabled him to speak with such genuineness and freshness, reaching new and broadly diverse audiences with the Gospel of Christ.

It would be impossible to count the lives that were irrevocably changed by the witness of Fr. Thomas Hopko. Seekers from outside the Church were moved by him to adopt the Orthodox faith. Orthodox Christians were brought more deeply into the Church's true life. Listening to Fr. Thomas, non-religious people were stirred to realize what “religion” truly is, and how the Church is not in fact a religion but a totally new life, lived according to the real Way, the genuine Truth, Jesus Christ. Encountering Fr. Thomas, Protestants and Catholics would often for the first time understand that Orthodox Christianity is not simply an exotic faith of “smells and bells” but the most rigorous, intense, and true experience of Christ that could be had.

Indeed, Christ and His Cross were at the center of everything that Fr. Thomas stood for, preached, taught, wrote, and lived. Christ and His Cross: not “the one true way to paint icons,” not “Church-state relations,” not Russian-ness or Greek-ness, not even “Orthodoxy,” as if it were an idol. Fr. Thomas shunned ideologies with a passion. Through his close association with the Russian immigrant community in America, his decades serving parishes of the Orthodox Church in America, his involvement (against his wishes) in Church politics, as well as his work in the ecumenical movement, he knew too well the human tendency to make “religion” into an idol and forget the one thing needful. And so, as zealously angry as he would get when he would see people lose themselves in squabbles about the Church Calendar, or whether to depict God-the-Father in an icon, or whether women always need to wear headscarves, this same zeal would drive him all the more intensely and joyfully to proclaim “the word of the cross” (1 Cor. 1:18). His preaching and teaching unfailingly reflected this zeal and joy, through his remarkable rhetorical charisma.

Listening to Fr. Thomas teach or preach summoned at least these three reactions:

1) We were chastened. We were brought to realize that our priorities were wrong, that we were misled by contemporary society to follow *its* priorities. Fr. Thomas truly knew the contemporary world, in all its diversity.

He read widely and deeply. He traveled broadly, for lectures and ecumenical meetings. He talked with anyone and everyone, listening to them deeply, and shaping his preaching and teaching in accordance with who people actually were. He did not retreat from the world's realities, neither was he seduced by them. But his understanding of the world, in its beauty and its tragic fallenness, fueled his teaching about Jesus Christ and what it is that Christ saves us from.

2) We were amused, sometimes even to laughter. This may sound shocking to some, but Fr. Thomas had a remarkable sense of humor, which he often brought to the service of his preaching and teaching. Sometimes it was a nervous humor, because this same man who spoke so much, so eloquently, and often so loudly, was at heart a shy person. But most often his humor came from the intelligent and highly perceptive mind of one who was observing the world as it was, from the perspective of how it is meant to be. Most real humor is rooted in irony, and there is none greater than the irony of the fallen world that is also host to the Kingdom of God. Fr. Thomas's humor was a vehicle of perceiving and expressing the heart of the Christian life.

3) We were inspired. The intensity, passion, breadth of knowledge, and the deep faithfulness with which Fr. Thomas spoke – not to mention his remarkable gift for public speaking – left his listeners speechless. Hearing him, we had no choice but to change our outlook, change our lives. Pray more. Attend church more. Go to confession. Harmonize our lives that had been split between the religious and the secular. Seek the One True God, who is known in the Scriptures, the God who creates the world by His Son Jesus Christ and His Holy Spirit. The God who gives us life, who inaugurates the Holy Church and its sacramental reality, who constantly calls us to him.

Fr. Thomas reached the world through many publications. Perhaps the most widely read were the series of four books rudimentary books collectively titled *The Orthodox Faith: An Elementary Handbook on the Orthodox Church*. These short books, originally colored blue, orange, green, and red – therefore often called “The Rainbow Series,” served as introductions to Orthodox faith and life not only for non-Orthodox but for people within the Church. Translated into Russian as “Основы Православия” (“Foundations of Orthodoxy”), distributed in Russia at first by the organization “Religious Books for Russia” and later through official channels, these books reached a wide audience in Russia during the immediate post-Communist period when catechisation became such an urgent task.

He wrote several other books touching areas of faith, life, fasting, church and society, and inter-Christian relations, as well as books on more controversial topics such as *Women and the Priesthood* (published in 1983, then revised in 1999), and *Christian Faith and Same-Sex Attraction* (in 2006, with a new revised version expected this month). In writing especially on this latter theme, Fr. Thomas sought to be completely faithful to the Church's tradition, but to apply it in a way that was true to the struggles and diverse experiences of people living today. His writing, like his preaching, was grounded in the real, the personal, the pastoral.

Fr. Thomas's broad churchly learning therefore came together with his pastoral love and sensitivity, and his complete honesty and genuineness with himself and with others. These rare qualities informed his publications, his decades of liturgical preaching, public lectures and seminary classroom teaching, his encounters at ecumenical meetings, and more recently, over 400 podcasts that he recorded for Ancient Faith Radio, available on the internet.

Fr. Thomas was also a loving husband to his wife the Matushka Anne Hopko, and father to his four daughters (Juliana, Catherine, Matushka Mary, and Alexandra) and to his son (the Archpriest John), to sixteen grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

Peter C. Bouteneff