

**LEST WE FORGET: ARCHPRIEST PAUL SCHNEIRLA
1916 - 2014**

1/30/2016

Antony Gabriel
Feast of St. Anthony the Great

Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city. Rev. 22:14.

In 1959, Metropolitan ANTONY of Blessed Memory insisted on my entering St. Vladimir's Seminary and blessed Lynn Georges, my future wife, to likewise attend St. Vladimir's, being the first female student.

Father Paul was our professor of Old Testament. His classes were the most unusual of all our professors. The faculty was comprised of men: Florovsky Arseniev, Meyendorff, Schmemmann, Verhovskoy, Kesich, and one woman, Sophie Koulomzim, all were from Paris or other Eastern European countries. Father Paul was our only native-born American whose terms of references were familiar to us. His whole demeanor was American "of the old school."

His lectures were fast pace, witty and extremely informative. He made the prophets come alive, and his analysis of the sources was provocative. No one slept in his class, and "woe" to anyone who missed a lecture, so much material was packed into each of his classes held at Union Seminary. I must say that the early years at St. Vladimir's on West 121st Street were extremely interesting and enlightening as we were set on the journey to the holy Priesthood as one big family, living and studying in cramped quarters.

The services in the small chapel made our prayers and supplications come alive and are indelibly etched in our hearts and minds. Father Paul was culturally and intellectually distinct from the rest of the faculty. In those days we were immersed in the ancient rites as incarnated in the Slavic tradition, while Father Paul contemplated and preached the relevance of the Western liturgical tradition as well as his Antiochian tradition.

In fact, we made interesting observations in his debate with Alexander Schmemmann on the varieties of liturgical traditions. This exchange was published in the St. Vladimir's Quarterly many years ago. I shall never forget that Father Paul was adamant that Churches cannot be identified solely on the basis of a "rite." It was his contention that the Universality of Orthodoxy is precisely in its variety of liturgical traditions in the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, that existed prior to the division between East and West.

Father Paul and his wife, Shirley, in order to get us out of the drab conditions of that old and cramped apartment building at Union Seminary, would invite us to their apartment at Park Avenue and 87th Street. They entertained faculty and students among other guests, such as the local Melchite priest, with wonderful generosity. These evenings were intellectually stimulating and great fun. We looked forward to all these occasions as Shirley was the most gracious hostess overseeing every detail to ensure her guests were well-fed and contented.

We were living in the "heady days" of the sixties when unity movements emerged on the North American scene. We all thought we were moving towards "the Omega" point of history with the

convergence of all faith communities toward oneness. Father Paul was both a forerunner and a leader of all that was best in mankind. Whether his ecumenical encounters or the pursuit of Orthodox Unity, Father Paul was an activist and an authentic sober leader respected by all who encountered his genius of articulating what is true. He was at once subtle but poignant and profound.

Father Paul left an indelible imprint in every organization that he associated himself with. These included the Standing Conference of Orthodox Bishops; The National Council of Churches; The Orthodox Theological Society; and the North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation. He was either appointed executive secretary or president of these bodies as well as maintaining his position in the Antiochian Archdiocese of North America. This was due to his clarity of thought and strokes of his pen. Because of his editorship of The Word Magazine, he gave literary credibility to this monthly journal. He was appointed General Secretary of the Archdiocese Board of Trustees by Metropolitans ANTONY and PHILIP. During his long tenure as General Secretary he presented succinct and lucid minutes of each Board meeting and of every Archdiocesan Convention. He was a close associate of the late Protosyngellos Ellis Khouri. He kindly arranged to replace a center amethyst that had fallen out of Father Ellias' cross. Father Paul's son, Peter, who worked at the time at Harry Winston's, the New York jeweler; generously replaced the stone with a truly unique gem. It was modeled after Metropolitan ANTONY's pectoral cross.

Metropolitan ANTONY loved Father Paul: they had a symbiotic relationship all through their years together. Saidna had so much confidence in his friend that he appointed him Ecumenical Officer to represent him in these circles. I remember as a deacon being at St. Mary's when Alexander Turner, then head of the Western Rite movement, was formally received into Orthodoxy. Father Paul, who nurtured the Western Rite, was made Vicar General, a position he held until his retirement. Based on the Encyclical of the late Patriarch ALEXANDER and the foresight of Metropolitans ANTONY and PHILIP, Father Paul literally launched the Western Rite with Orthodox content, thus allowing North Americans, used to their own traditions, to be fully integrated into the Antiochian Church of North America.

Father Paul, a scholar in all aspects, was likewise a pastor "par excellence." He served parishes in Iron Mountain and in Ironwood, MI, Allentown, PA and finally at St. Mary's in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. I believe he and Father Nicholas Ofeish hold the record of the longest serving Pastors in the Archdiocese, shepherding their flocks over sixty years.

William Sutfin Schneirla, taking the name, Paul, was ordained by Metropolitan ANTONY in 1942. One Sunday when serving together in Iron Mountain, MI, the newly ordained, Father Paul, could not find a hand cross for His Eminence, so he handed him the processional cross. Looking at this large cross, ANTONY quipped: "I asked for a hand cross not a German war club!" There was great levity in their relationship.

Shirley purchased and donated the house next to St. Mary's in Iron Mountain, MI for use as the parish rectory. Characteristically, she never mentioned this gift to the church to anyone. Father Paul and Shirley were a team. It would be impossible for any clergyman to do the work that Father Paul did without the assistance and love of his wife. Shirley immersed herself in the ministry, lending her hand in whatever endeavor Father Paul was engaged. She was his stalwart partner. She was proud to learn I was close to her relative, Bishop Lauriston Scaife, an Anglican Bishop of Buffalo.

During our years at the Seminary, I was frequently invited by the Metropolitan to do chores around his home or to chauffeur him on his Archpastoral visits. Father Paul wanted me to have another view of the Bay Ridge parish in Brooklyn so he decided to invite myself and Bishop ANTOUN to worship and

have lunch one Sunday. He asked me to preach. I was so full of enthusiasm that I gave an overblown “theological” talk while Father Paul stood chuckling behind the altar. He told me afterwards: “Do you think anyone understood one word of your homily? Remember keep it simple and to the point.” It was a lesson learned to this day.

When I was writing the history of the Antiochian Church in North America, Father Paul wrote the foreword, having checked all the historical sources and data for total accuracy. Only when I had his “stamp of approval” did I submit the manuscript for publication. If he “sealed” it, I knew the most knowledgeable person had given his approbation.

Shirley and Lynn developed a strong bond. Father Paul alleged that Lynn was his only student to receive an A in his course on the Old Testament. For years at every Archdiocesan Convention, the Schneirla’s, Lynn and I had very extensive meals together, whether lunch or supper. Each encounter was intellectually challenging. Father Paul would also engage in Church banter. His encyclopedic mind knew both ecclesiastical trivia and major events in the Orthodox world.

We often sat together during the Divine Services or at the head table at conventions and I shall never forget the anecdotes he whispered for my ears only. His humor was pointed and fun-loving – one could always see the insight and clarity behind his amusing remarks.

Father Paul was a keen observer of humanity and he cut through “the mustard” in his perceptions of people and events. It was my joy to maintain constant contact with him and Shirley through the years and after he retired. When asking about his health one could always look forward to his quip: “Never better, never better.” But this man would “truck” no nonsense if he asked you a question and expected a specific answer.

The sudden loss of Shirley particularly wounded his soul as their lives were interwoven like no other over a 71 year marriage. Their combined heritage and talents served them well throughout their years together, as an enlightened and devoted couple.

Father Paul was born on April 11, 1916 on a gold mining property owned by his family in Ophir, Alaska. In 1942 he married Shirley Dillon Warriner Page of New York and Far Hills, New Jersey. His mother’s side of the family - the Sutfin’s - arrived from Holland in 1676 and settled in what is now called Bay Ridge, home of Father Paul’s last parish. Father Paul was a mixture of German and Dutch ancestry; a cultural heritage he wore well.

Father Paul and Shirley were the parents of Dorothy and Peter; their son, Billy, died unexpectedly of pneumonia at six years old. During the wake, Metropolitan ANTONY’s sister, Adele, collapsed at seeing this beautiful young child before her in a small coffin. It was Billy’s mother, Shirley, who consoled her, telling Adele she had to be strong. Such was the innate faith of the Schneirla’s. Father Paul stood stoic as ever, celebrating the Liturgy, the following Sunday according to Dr. Robert Haddad. They bore their sorrow with dignity; it was a combination of their family’s tradition and constancy that carried Father Paul and Shirley through this very tragic time in their lives. A parent’s worst nightmare. When we lost our granddaughter at nine years of age – Shirley and Father Paul consoled us with their love and complete understanding having shared a similar trauma. Parents and grandparents losing children have their own language.

It was a distinct privilege and honor to have known Father Paul and Shirley all these years. In their unique way they touched the lives of those whom they served with grace. I will remember forever when our childhood friend, Steve James, died while packing to come to Montreal for our anniversary

celebration. He passed into eternity during the week of 9/11. When we arrived for the funeral in Bay Ridge we were blocked at every turn due to traffic constraints. Finally making our way to St. Mary's there was Father Paul sitting on the steps waiting for us to arrive before conducting the service. Knowing our long friendship with the James' family, he turned the service over to me to preside – a simple gesture of priestly hospitality. This was striking as I was some years his junior but he never stood on ceremony or so-called protocol.

As a sign of our friendship and remembrance, Father Paul's daughter, Dorothy, sent me the jeweled cross that was presented by Archbishop DEMETRIOS of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese in appreciation for his outstanding contribution for Orthodox unity in North America. I wear this cross proudly as a symbol of a great and wonderful friendship. Father Paul was a man of many parts. He neither wore his intellectual depth on his sleeve, nor the externals of the Church he converted to.

Also he could as easily exchange recipes as he would quote one of his favorite poets, Rilke. Imbued with history, he modeled his clerical garb after that of the pioneers of Orthodoxy in North America: Saints Tikhon and Raphael, who wore suits and top hats to be a part of the landscape. Metropolitans ANTONY and PHILIP understood this all too well.

Nearing his end, Metropolitan ANTONY spent one of his last evenings listening to Elie Abu-Madey's recorded poem: "Who am I", in Arabic. He later called on Father Paul to accompany him to Boston when he entered the Lehi clinic, and where the Archbishop later reposed unto eternity. It was Metropolitan ANTONY who first grasped the significance of Father Paul's substantive qualities as a spokesman for American Orthodoxy and especially for the relevance of the Antiochian Archdiocese in "the new world."

I must say I think Father Paul's best role was his dedication to the mysteries of Orthodoxy, the pride of his choir and serving as a pastor of St. Mary's. Incidentally, Metropolitan PHILIP would choose St. Mary's to celebrate the Palm Sunday Liturgy. This was a moment of joy for Father Paul. It's interesting to note that he was still blessing homes just prior to his retirement. I might add that Peter and Dorothy lived their lives fully and completely with their parents in whatever rectory they found themselves, experiencing their parents' mission and chosen calling.

As I conclude this article, it is noteworthy that the history of this Archdiocese is finely woven into the fabric of Paul and Shirley's lives. It is well-known that their ministry and profound pursuits made the Church, and all whom they encountered, richer and better for the journey they made during their long and fruitful lives.

May Paul and Shirley rest in the palm of God's loving hands.

Memory eternal.
Lest we forget: Archpriest Paul Schneirla
January 17, 2016