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METROPOLITAN ILARION (OHIENKO) –
My Mentor and Consecrator
(Memories and Reflections)

It was the fall of 1952, precisely one year after my arrival from France (Paris) to Canada (Montreal), that I had the opportunity to become acquainted with Metropolitan Ilarion. I had arrived in Winnipeg to study at St. Andrew’s College. At that time the College was located in the North-End of Winnipeg, close to the current location of the Consistory of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada.

Metropolitan Ilarion was nearly seventy, while I was only seventeen. Perhaps it was in part due to my youth that this man left such an immeasurable impression which has remained with me my entire life. Here before me was a statesman, a celebrated scholar (professor, researcher and linguist), and above all, a Metropolitan.

One of the most distinguishing features of Metropolitan Ilarion, aside from his encyclopaedic knowledge and interests, was his love and dedication to work. His work had a pious character to it and appeared to be his personal service of God. He truly was labourious and was never without a task. I recall him being regularly at his desk, either busy reading or writing.

Among other things, he was also a gracious host. One could always count on him putting down his work and offering a cup of tea. His conversations were always fruitful and meaningful. This was not a man who spoke of trivial matters. As students, we always enjoyed being treated by our professor and Metropolitan.

For four years (1952-1956) I was guided by this individual, at what we later would call “the Old College.” Those were to be my formative years. His lectures, which he would deliver whilst sitting, were presented clearly and calmly by reading his own notes. Not only did I listen attentively, but also transcribed precisely that which he stated, for even then I knew that God does not send such teachers and mentors very often.

Despite the fact that I was the youngest of the students, Metropolitan Ilarion exhibited a particular esteem towards me and soon I became his “sub-deacon”. I was familiar with this responsibility and privilege from my time in Paris; there I had the opportunity to serve under Metropolitan Polikarp (Sikorsky). This was how it came to be that I took part in canonical visits conducted by the Metropolitan, as well as a means and purpose for regularly being at his residence. Notwithstanding my age, and the fact that this was my professor, we would engage in open and frank discussions on a wide array of topics. These were an extension of his lessons and of my studies.
Recognizing that I was still in the process of learning, very often my help would be needed more in a physical sense than with intellectual and philosophical matters. This was around the same time that Vladyka was publishing “Faith and Culture” and he needed help in taking things to the publishing house (Christian Press) or bringing them back.

Metropolitan Ilarion was not only my teacher but also my consecrator. He consecrated me not only into the deaconate but also into the priesthood. I was ordained a deacon in Dauphin and a presbyter in Winnipeg, at the Sobor of St. Mary the Protectress. This took place in 1959, some years after my completion of studies at St. Andrew’s College as I had decided to pursue a University education. I studied at the French language Universite de Montreal (B. Phil.) and graduated with distinction (magna cum laude). It should be noted that the Metropolitan was not in favour of this; not because he discouraged education, but rather because he worried that I would choose a secular life. At graduation, while handing me my diploma, he forcibly said: “Son! Return to the Church!”

Upon analyzing the historical role of Metropolitan Ilarion, one can conclude that his arrival to Canada marked a new era in the history of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Canada. Our Church would grow and become a Metropolia consisting of three eparchies (dioceses): the Central eparchy – centred in Winnipeg under the direct jurisdiction of Metropolitan Ilarion (Ohienko); the Eastern eparchy – centred in Toronto under the jurisdiction of Archbishop Michael (Khoroshy); and later, the Western eparchy, centred in Edmonton under the jurisdiction of Bishop Andrew (Metiuk) – a student and confidant of the Metropolitan.

The period during which Metropolitan Ilarion was actively doing the bulk of his pastoral work was the twenty-year period starting in the 1950’s and culminating at the end of the 1960’s. This was the golden age of our Church in Canada and God sent him to us at the most opportune moment. This was a time when we needed to broaden and strengthen our church life in Canada.

Furthermore, in 1951, by becoming “Metropolitan of Winnipeg and all of Canada”, Vladyka Ilarion started routinely and systematically visiting every corner of this vast country settled by Ukrainians. He would lecture, preach and teach anywhere and everywhere. His, as he called them, “canonical visits” were always well thought out and planned. Each one had its own specific goal and purpose. It was this way, that in a relatively short period of time, he came to know every priest and parish as well as each community’s individual potential and needs.

Metropolitan Ilarion, of blessed memory, was a multifaceted individual. As a bishop he sought to establish canonical order as well as proper liturgical practices. He took many opportunities to speak, lecture, write, preach and teach on those topics. As a scholar (“of the old school”), he – as was previously mentioned – distinguished himself with his vast knowledge and wide-ranging interests. One can find evidence of this in his works in numerous disciplines, including: linguistics, history, religion, culture and so on. As a professor and dean of the Theological Academy (this is how he referred to the Faculty of Theology at the Old St. Andrew’s College), Vladyka Ilarion shaped an entire generation of earnest clergymen.
A celebrated scholar, excellent teacher, ardent patriot and caring bishop (he called each one of us “his sons”), Metropolitan Ilarion became the pillar of Orthodoxy in Canada. For us as Canadians, he was the new Petro Mohyla. His authority, knowledge, pastoral care, canonical discipline and liturgical order placed our Church at a high standard. The “Era of Ilarion” was – beyond doubt – the “Golden Era” in the history of the U.O.C.C.

Metropolitan Ilarion invested over two decades of pious, tireless work and dedication to our Church in Canada. His repose (the 29th of March, 1972) was felt by all as a great loss. He did, however, leave behind quite an impressive following. Although he has passed on, Metropolitan Ilarion’s labour, to which he devoted so much time, often under difficult circumstances, continues.

In North America we have two Ukrainian Orthodox Metropolias – in the U.S.A. and in Canada. They are like two sisters but yet remain distinct. Their individuality can be attributed to both of their long-serving primates. Metropolitan Mstyslav (Skrypnyk) in the United States and Metropolitan Ilarion (Ohienko) in Canada. In other words each Church’s distinctiveness is a reflection of the latter’s influence and persona.

The importance and stature of the blessed memory Metropolitan Ilarion (Ohienko) will forever live in the heart and history of our Church in Canada. This was a man of an era. His legacy not only enriches us spiritually in Canada, but has also started to garner attention in Ukraine. This is a source of great pride for all members of the U.O.C.C. Personally I am grateful to God for having granted me the opportunity, whilst still in the formative stages of my life, to interact and learn from such a great person. I believe that that which I am today, is in great part a result of his influence, and for that I am eternally thankful.