

Bishop Nikolai of London (+ 1932)

There is no Church without a bishop. It is a fact. Fortunate enough to have a bishop who is able to visit this country, the ROCOR Diocese in the British Isles and Ireland nonetheless suffers as it has had no resident bishop for decades. This was not always the case. Eighty years our diocese had not only the only Russian bishop in these islands, but also one who came from a missionary background and who bore the title, 'Bishop of London'. Who was he?



Bishop Nikolai (Karpov)

Ivan Ilyich Karpov was born on 13 Oct 1891 to a pious Old Ritualist family in Siberia. His grandmother, frightened that the new-born child might not live, had him baptized without recourse to a priest. Concerned by this irregular baptism, she made a vow that her grandson would grow up an Orthodox Christian. Her vow was fulfilled and in 1913 the future Bishop Nikolai graduated from the Orthodox seminary in Tobolsk in Siberia.



The Seminary in Tobolsk

Graduates of that seminary used to work in the remotest parts of Imperial Russia, taking the Gospel of Christ to the Nenets on the shores of the Arctic Ocean, to the mountains of Altai and Sayan and to all of eastern Siberia, reaching the shores of the Pacific Ocean and going onwards to Alaska. The future Bishop Nikolai always carried and honoured these missionary traditions with him. Thus he was later to teach the Orthodox Faith in the emigration in Yugoslavia and carry the Gospel of Christ to England.

Ivan did well at the seminary, as was demonstrated by his acceptance into the Moscow Theological Academy to continue his education. Here, on 16 November 1913, Ivan Ilyich Karpov was tonsured monk by the rector, the future hieromartyr Bishop Theodore (Pozdeievsky). He was given the name 'Nikolai', after St Nicholas, Archbishop of Myra in Lycia. Later Bishop Nikolai said that he did not remember being taught about monasticism in his youth, but he did recollect being told about the monasteries of Mount Athos and Kiev when he was very young.

After his graduation from the Academy with a Master's Degree in Theology in 1915, he taught at spiritual and educational institutions and preached at the monastery in Oboyan in the Kursk Diocese. The sources are unclear as to how long he stayed here, but in 1916, he took part in the canonisation of St John (Maximovich), Metropolitan of Tobolsk.

He probably left Oboyan with the Wonderworking Kursk Root Icon of the Mother of God in October 1919, when Bishop Theofan (Gavrilov) of Kursk and Oboyan took it abroad to safeguard it from the Bolsheviks. Bishop Theophan left for Belgorod, accompanied by several of the brotherhood of the Oboyan monastery. It seems that Nikolai was among these. The fact that Bishop Theofan later travelled to London with the Kursk Icon for Fr Nikolai's consecration to the episcopate was perhaps due to the fact that they had met him at that time.

Arriving in Yugoslavia (at the time called 'The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes'), Fr Nikolai was ordained priest and assigned to serve in various Serbian parishes. On becoming Archimandrite, Fr Nikolai was assigned to teach at the Serbian Orthodox seminary in Bitola in Macedonia. Here three of his fellow instructors were later canonised. These are: St Nikolai (Velimirovich) of Zhicha, St John (Maximovich) of Shanghai, and St Justin (Popovich) of Chelie. Just like his three fellow instructors, Fr Nikolai was well-known for caring for his

students and was much loved by them. During his tenure at Bitola, he enjoyed the greatest respect of the staff and students.



In Bitola

In 1928 Fr Nikolai was appointed to serve the parish of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia in London. Orthodox services had begun again in London in the 18th century, when an embassy church had been established. In 1919 the parish of the Dormition of the Mother of God was founded with nearly 400 members. This parish was comprised not only of Russian emigres – there were quite a few descendants of mixed marriages, who had lived in Russia and returned to England with wives and children.

Beginning in 1921, services were held in a former Anglican church called ‘St Philip’s’. Although the parish had been dedicated to the Dormition, it was known familiarly as ‘St Philip’s’. However, the parish was divided: Orthodox adhered to the Church Outside Russia, but ‘liberals’ and freemasons adhered to the modernist ‘Evlogian’ group, which was then under the Soviet-controlled Moscow Patriarchate. The two groups agreed to use the church building on alternate weeks.

Fr Nikolai possessed a rare combination of personal qualities that helped him to succeed in making peace in the London parish. His evident piety helped to win over the sympathy of all and he was always cheerful, energetic and sociable. He seemed to be transformed in the altar. He served with great reverence and his reading of the Gospel was filled with understanding and compassion. The Easter Liturgy was especially memorable and attracted many to the church, not only Orthodox, but Non-Orthodox. Even some Jews attended.

Having gained popularity, respect and love and the notice of Non-Orthodox, the announcement that Fr Nikolai was to be consecrated as Bishop of London was met with great joy. The consecration took place on 30 June 1929 and was remarkable as Bishop Nikolai was given the title ‘of London’. This was despite the custom that this title should be reserved for the Established Church of England.

In this way, Fr Nikolai became the first (and so far only) Orthodox Bishop of London in the nearly nine centuries since the Schism of 1054, when Rome had broken away from the

Church. Four bishops concelebrated at his consecration. These were: Metropolitan Antony (Khrapovitsky), First Hierarch of the Church Outside Russia; Archbishop Seraphim (Lukianov) of Paris and Western Europe; Archbishop Theofan (Gavrilov) of Kursk and Oboyan, guardian of the Kursk Root Icon; and Bishop Tikhon (Lyashchenko) of Berlin and Germany.



In London with Metr Antony (on right)

Metr Antony preached a sermon about the need not only to care for Russians, but also to bring Orthodoxy to the English. London had never seen such a distinguished gathering of Russian Orthodox clergy. As well as various senior priests, the Grand Duchess Ksenia Alexandrovna, the elder sister of the Tsar Martyr Nikolai II, resident in England in exile, was also present. Archbishop Theofan had brought the Kursk Root Icon with him to London. The Church Outside Russia had decreed that this Icon, the Directress of the Church, be present whenever possible at episcopal consecrations. The presence of the Icon attracted many to the service – Orthodox, Anglicans and others as well.

After Fr Nikolai had become Bishop of London, property was found for his residence. It was known as the Bishop's Residence or 'Podvorie'. Classes were held there for the parish children, with Bishop Nikolai teaching catechism. Three monks, Hieromonks Zosima and Kallistos, and Monk Vladimir, were brought from Milkovo Monastery in Serbia to help Bishop Nikolai. When on weekdays and Sundays the 'Evlogians' were holding services at Saint Philip's, services were conducted in the little chapel at the Residence.

Bishop Nikolai served in London for only three years. In August 1932 he went to Belgrade to take part in the meetings of the Church's Synod of Bishops who then cared for some 1,000 parishes worldwide. At the end of the Synod Bishop Nikolai fell ill with appendicitis. By oversight or inadvertence, he was not operated on in time, and he died in the night of 28 September / 11 October. His last words were, 'Put a candle in my hand, I want to go to heaven'. Having grasped the candle, Bishop Nikolai quietly departed into eternity.

The funeral took place the next day at the Iveron Chapel in the New Belgrade Cemetery. Bishop Nikolai's body was buried beneath the icon of his heavenly patron, St Nicholas, on the outer wall of the chapel. Metropolitan Antony (Khrapovitsky), Archbishop Theofan (Gavrilov) and Archbishop Germogen (Maximov) concelebrated. The funeral was spiritually

edifying and Metropolitan Antony could not refrain from crying. Archbishop Theofan preached a sermon about the deceased and Metropolitan Antony concluded: 'Death comes to us all, and sooner or later we must all leave. People have gathered at this funeral, not out of a sense of duty, but out of sincere affection, and this gives it spiritual beauty'.

It seems surprising to us that no-one has ever thought of bringing Bishop Nikolai's remains back to England. Perhaps it is God's Will for this to happen in the future.

To Bishop Nikolai Eternal Memory!