

Jessica Hooten Wilson

Foreword by LAUREN F. WINNER

**THE
SCANDAL
OF
HOLINESS**

**RENEWING YOUR IMAGINATION
IN THE COMPANY OF LITERARY SAINTS**





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Contents

Foreword by *Lauren F. Winner* ix

Introduction 1

- 1.** Holy Foolishness 17
- 2.** Communion of Saints 37
- 3.** Creation Care as a Holy Calling 61
- 4.** Liberating Prophets 83
- 5.** Virgin, Bride, Mother 109
- 6.** Contemplative and Active Life 135
- 7.** Sharing in His Suffering 161
- 8.** *Ars Moriendi* 183

Conclusion 207

Acknowledgments 209

Notes 211



Holy Foolishness

The world has its own center: fallen, lost, though many ways good. Christians have a different center. Christ is our center. That makes us stand out if we're faithful in ways that are odd. That's who the saints are. The saints are the odd wads who have stood out from society—cultures they would have been predicted to conform to.

—Ralph C. Wood¹

WHEN I FIRST READ Eugene Vodolazkin's novel *Laurus*, I was pregnant with my third child. The year prior, I had been pregnant two other times and lost both babies. We buried the second in our yard in a jewelry box. He had been so much bigger than I had expected, which made the loss that much heavier. I read *Laurus* when I was thirty weeks along, and I had endured fifty weeks of pregnancy without yet holding a baby. I was temporarily living in Southern California with my four-year-old daughter and two-year-old son while my husband remained for those four months at our home in Arkansas. I was on a sabbatical fellowship at Biola University, renting an apartment that continuously smelled of my neighbor's bulgogi and laundry lint.



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Because I shared a room with my two children, I would read on my Kindle at night so as not to wake those saints-in-progress from their dreams. I'd rub my rounded belly, skin tight from expanded womb, trying to catch my baby's foot when she'd kick me. It was in this state that I read *Laurus*—how Arseny, the hero of the story, lost his lover and their son in childbirth. Weeping along with him, I also knew how much pregnancy entailed being open to death as much as to life.

In *Laurus* readers receive a gift, a vision from another vantage point, where death is viewed from the perspective of the eternal. Life thus takes on a reordering. We see in *Laurus* a life lived in Christ. For me, this novel awakened a desire to be more than an ordinary Christian, to move toward the extraordinary, to be open to the mystery and the mystical, to celebrate God's providence even in suffering and pain. G. K. Chesterton says, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried."² In *Laurus* we experience the Christian ideal in all its difficulty. The novel transmits knowledge by the experience of reading it, such that one cannot say *Laurus* is "about" any certain plotline or reduce the novelistic truth to a sound bite. Instead, reading the novel introduces you to holiness; it becomes palpable in the life of this fictional character. His extreme sanctity increases our desire for holiness.

The story is set in fifteenth-century Russia, where the realities of sin and faith permeate all of life. Because the plague has killed both of his parents, our protagonist Arseny is raised by his grandfather Christofer, an elderly and devout healer who resides beside a graveyard so that it will be easy to carry his dead body a short distance for burial. Christofer trains Arseny in the art of healing. When Christofer dies, Arseny takes over as the medicine man for his village, Rukina Quarter. He falls in love with an abandoned woman Ustina, and she becomes pregnant. Ashamed of their unholy union, Arseny refuses to allow her to go to confession or to have a midwife at her birth, and thus she dies without forgiveness of her sins, and the baby dies as well. Arseny thereafter surrenders his life for the one he feels that he robbed from her, traveling the country to heal others, risking his

life during the plague, spending time as a holy fool, pilgrimaging to Jerusalem, and finally dying back in Rukina Quarter as a different man than the one who left. Some might even say a saint.

Laurus as an Icon

Protestant writer Frederick Buechner defines holiness in relation to how much we see God active in a person's life. "Only God is Holy," Buechner reminds us. "To speak of anything else is to say that it has something of God's mark upon it. Times, places, things, and people can all be holy, and when they are, they are usually not hard to recognize."³ When we see holiness in the life of Arseny, later named Laurus, we are seeing God at work. The character becomes what we have all been called to be—a living icon. While we are made in the image and likeness of God, the Russian Orthodox Church believes that the fall distorts this likeness. To imitate Christ is to restore the likeness. A Russian saint whom I admire, Maria Skobtsova, says we will become "the very incarnate icon of God in the world."⁴ Christ's likeness will be enfleshed in us in such a way that God's holiness shines through.

If you're not familiar with icons, they are more than mere illustrations or decorations in a church. In the icon tradition, the two realities of God and the world come together; the "icon transmits historical fact, an event from Sacred History or an historical personage, depicted in his physical form, and again, like the Holy Scriptures, it indicates the revelation that is outside of time, contained in a given historical reality."⁵ For the Eastern church, an icon bears the Holy Spirit as the saint depicted in the icon did in life, becoming a window to the sacred world, an invitation to participate in the divine light manifested in the holy person's biographical life. Each icon likewise manifests "the presence of the all-sanctifying grace of the Holy Spirit"; encountering an icon is thus an experience of the divine.⁶ In the icon, the saint's visage offers an encounter with God.

We reflect on ourselves as seen by the one who knows us better than we know ourselves. In a mysterious way, the icon provides a portal through which we envision God gazing at us.

For those who are skeptical, let me explain in a less mystical way. We have all met people who have revealed to us how God loves us—strangers whose attention never wavered when they listened to us speak, parents who patiently served us when we were sick and bed-ridden, friends who wept beside us when we mourned those we lost. We’ve experienced God acting through other people. The Russian Orthodox tradition would say such people are living icons, incarnate portals of God’s holiness.

If readers approach *Laurus* as a “fictional icon,” we might grasp again the old truths that Vodolazkin inscribes there. The phrase “fictional icon” would be antithetical to the Orthodox church, and I do not want to blur the distinction between mystical and aesthetic realities. *Laurus* should be read similar to how one reads an icon, yet the novel cannot be venerated as one would an icon because the “saint” narrated is not a real person. However, I do not think it is heretical to hope that through this artistic depiction of a saint, we may experience the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. *Laurus* is like a hagiographic icon, which, in the Russian Orthodox tradition, displays the saint, usually in the center, with the scenes of his or her life from left to right, top to bottom across the icon, so that readers may experience the story of sanctification simultaneously with the presence of the saint who faces them. What dominates is the providential order of events, the sense of a divine author or artist.

In Russian Orthodox iconography, each saint’s life is depicted in resemblance to other icons. Often the saint’s particular stories—no matter the time or place—are set within biblical scenery or ancient costume. The objective of depicting the saint is not individuality but transfiguration. In the mystical theology of the Eastern church, there is no notion of imitating models, but each saint participates in the divine life. Holiness is gauged by how much one’s life resembles the life of the incarnate Jesus Christ; humans are living icons of God, and

the icon written is then an “external expression of this transfiguration, the representation of a man [or woman] filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit.”⁷ When you read an icon, you may notice certain features that communicate whether this saint was a desert father, mystic, holy fool, and so forth, but many of the features will be identical—thin noses, small mouths, large eyes. Harmony and unity are emphasized over individuality. Within the icon tradition, *Laurus* reads like an assemblage of saints.

Living by Providence

Arseny’s story begins in the 6,948th year since the creation of the world and the 1,440th since the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ. He is born on the feast day of Arsenius the Great. In every way that he can, Vodolazkin reorganizes our imagination to see time according to the Christian perspective. Arseny’s story is part of a larger story, in which he is a character. From our place in the middle of our own stories, we often cannot understand what is going on, what God is doing with us. The beauty of reading a story like *Laurus* is seeing the whole picture, the life of the saint from beginning to end, a narrative in which the author has created order and meaning. In *Laurus* we vicariously experience the path to sanctification pursued by the title character, whose life journeys from healer to sinner to penitent to ascetic to holy fool to pilgrim to monk to hermit to saint.

Vodolazkin is an Orthodox believer, a historian, and an expert in medieval folklore who has worked for nearly thirty years in the department of Old Russian Literature at Pushkin House in St. Petersburg. He sets his novel in the Middle Ages so that he can depict a counternarrative to those of the twenty-first century regarding identity and purpose, the world’s order or disorder, and the relationship to the divine. In his own words, *Laurus* “describes the life of a saint and is written according to the rules of medieval poetics.” Rather than prioritize the role of the author in the creation of the

text, medieval writers saw themselves as humble scribes recalling old truths to the current culture, passing on traditions. In hagiography, the writers “would include in their texts fragments from other saints’ lives” without recourse to historical accuracy, any modern sense of cause and effect, or even consistency of fact within the narrative. For medieval writers, providence mattered more than time, the vertical plane more than the horizontal, and the unseen reality was more real than the empirical world. At the heart of medieval writing was Holy Scripture, which “set the tone for the majority of medieval compilations.” While the story may appear to be a collection of fragments, the divine reality gives the narrative its order.⁸

In the medieval world, Holy Scripture “gave meaning to the signs that were generously scattered in daily life,” and life was “a text written by God that excluded the ill-considered and accidental.” Knowledge of this truth has been lost, so the world may now have “any number of individual meanings. . . . Think of the blogger who describes, minute by minute, a day that has passed.” Contemporary readers lack the sense of an overriding narrative, or they choose meaning according to their dissonant beliefs, or perhaps some no longer permit themselves to desire a cohesive order.

To practice seeing our life as Laurus saw his own—as an ordered mosaic—I would recommend either journaling or practicing the daily examen. In twenty-first-century America, people lose interest in journaling when they exit eighth grade, but diaries provide a witness of how God has authored your life. From within certain seasons and moments, it is hard to see how that time fits within the whole story. Yet when you read a journal entry from several years prior in comparison to where you are now, you are able to see prayers that have been answered or justly received silence. You see that God was at work even when you doubted his presence. Similarly, the daily examen can provide a structure to your journals, or it can be silent reflection. If you follow the St. Ignatius method of daily examen, you will adhere to five steps at the end of each day: become aware of God’s presence, review your day in gratitude, attend to how you

feel about the day, pray over one feature of that day, and then look forward in hope to the morning.

Vodolazkin explains how medieval writers would draw together stories from various saints' lives into one, often borrowing from the lives of saints who shared the same name—since names are not accidental, “why shouldn't their fates resemble one another? And why not draw on the one to illuminate the other?”¹⁰ In his own novel, he alludes to these sources, quoting Arsenius the Great as the inspiration for Arseny's silence when he lived as a holy fool. The young healer also steals away from a prince's home, much like Arsenius the Great fled his palace life, and both the fictional hero and the desert father become hermits. Like the great saint before him, Arseny becomes renowned for his “ascetic struggle, spiritual detachment, prayer and tears.”¹¹ Later Arseny more closely resembles St. Arsenius of Komel, who copied books at a monastery and by prayer tamed wild beasts. We see Arseny as a young boy with a domesticated wolf, and as an old man he listens to a bear's complaints about the cold and temporarily shares a cave with it. The stories of Laurus's healings echo not only saints' narratives but also the biblical miracles of Elijah, Jesus, and the Lord's apostles healing the lame, the diseased, and the possessed. Vodolazkin ties in fragments of apocrypha and other tales, all weaved into one, or written into one icon.

Arseny as a Holy Fool

Arseny originally departed the home of his birth because he desired to surrender his life on behalf of the woman whom he loved and murdered, Ustina, as well as the baby who died because of his pride. Vodolazkin intends to counter our contemporary narratives of success and individuality with a story about sacrifice. Within our secular culture, we have similar stories of one person living on behalf of another who has died: think of *Titanic*, where Rose lives in place of Jack, or *Saving Private Ryan*, where the saved Ryan is commanded to

“earn this” by the dying Captain Miller. To be worthy of the sacrifice of another, these characters need to accumulate experiences that the dead missed: Rose rides horseback on a beach, and she attains the wealth and privilege she tried to give up; Ryan is surrounded by his family at Miller’s grave, a sign of his having achieved earthly happiness. What differs significantly in Arseny’s attempt to live for Ustina is that he, on her behalf, is attempting not satisfaction but *sanctification*. Only after living a life of sacrifice does Arseny conclude, “I wanted to give up my life for her, or rather to give my life *to her* for the life I took from her,” but “the fruits of my labors turned out to be so small and ridiculous that I have experienced nothing but shame.”¹² He confesses his inability to *earn* the gift of another’s sacrifice, a lesson he learned by the practice of sacrifice.

As readers we experience the rightness of Arseny’s renunciation of his life for Ustina as well as the realization that sanctification does not come as a result of effort. When Elder Nikandr accuses Arseny of murdering Ustina, he suggests that Arseny give his life for her. Arseny may not *will* his sanctification by effort, but his practice of asceticism, “the strength of his love,” “the strength of his prayer,” and the disowning of his very identity lead him to the place where he may receive mercy, both for himself and mystically for Ustina: “Mercy should be a reward for effort,” the elder says.¹³ When Arseny converses with Ustina after her death, he is not praying to her. He prays to the Lord; he prays before icons; he prays to saints. His conversations with Ustina should remind literary readers of Dante’s poetic figuring of Beatrice, his departed love. In these similar imaginations, love on earth draws us toward divine love. Through en fleshed icons of those we love, we experience the incarnate Christ. We see the face of the divine in others; we experience Christ’s love for us and practice our love for him in loving our neighbor as ourselves. Arseny demonstrates this to an extreme degree.

Arseny must learn that he does not belong to himself. His grandfather Christofer taught him that people are but instruments of God’s grace. Instead of seeing himself as the designer of his own story,

Arseny must disown his identity. He must be so humble as to see himself as a character in God's story, as a tool of healing and redemption, participating in God's work. At first, pride gets in his way when he will not provide a midwife for Ustina or take her to church to receive the sacraments. After her death, luxury prevents him from feeling her presence, and his fame keeps him from talking with God. While we often see asceticism from a distance as strange and unnecessary, when we read about Arseny's inner thoughts, we understand why he must forego the pleasantries of life. They distract him from his work as a healer. Hyperbolically, Jesus commanded us to cut off our hands or blind our eyes if they caused us to sin. Is it really so strange, then, to give up the wealth and fame of this world to focus on the unseen one?

Arseny arrives in Pskov having been bludgeoned in the head, wearing raggedy clothing, and speaking little—the Russian townspeople assume such a spectacle means that Arseny is a holy fool. When the ferryman asks Arseny for payment, the people respond, “Do not ask him for money . . . for this is a person of God before you, can you not see?”¹⁴ From our vantage point in the twenty-first century, we would think Arseny homeless or in need of asylum, but who would jump to the conclusion of holiness? Yet Russians in the fifteenth century held to a tradition of holy fools, those zealots for God who did not run off to the desert but dwelled in society, prophesying and reminding them of the realities of sin and grace. There are already two such fools in Pskov, and the townspeople categorize Arseny accordingly. His asceticism and silence are characteristic of holy fools.

Holy fool Foma, who resides in the town, declares Arseny a fellow holy fool. He defines the role as a life “wild and disparaged by people.” He encourages Arseny to embrace this calling: “Be outrageous. Being pious is easy and pleasant, go ahead and make yourself hated.”¹⁵ In opposition to how we normally consider the Christian walk—that of easy and pleasant piety—Foma describes holy foolishness as wild, outrageous, and hated. To be recognized by others as a person of God will mean that Arseny must live without the luxury and fame that he ashamedly enjoyed in the town of Belozersk. This

means that Arseny pelts demons with stones, talks to angels, attends christenings, and nearly dies several times from mosquitoes, freezing temperatures, and the violent attacks of sinners. He publicly struggles against the flesh, and the city cares for his needs. Through his practice as a holy fool, Arseny learns that good deeds may not be “enacted within oneself” but “are only for other people, and praise the Lord that He sends us these people.”¹⁶ Even the sanctification of a holy fool occurs in a community.

Stories like this of extreme holiness stoke the fire in my heart for Christ. The holy fool is a tradition in Russia, but it is not a universal calling. When we read *Laurus*, we are not meant to walk away from the book and become such an extreme saint. Dostoevsky’s *Underground Man* says of himself, “I have merely carried to an extreme in my life what you have not dared to carry even halfway.”¹⁷ That is the challenge: Can we move more than halfway toward that extreme sanctity? Reading the story of such holy fools as Laurus should compel us to reexamine our lives for how we may have settled.

We are scandalized when belief in Jesus Christ is shown to be transformative and all-encompassing, even when we cognitively know it to be true. In one of his most famous passages, C. S. Lewis writes, “We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mudpies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at sea. We are far too easily pleased.”¹⁸ In a novel such as *Laurus*, there is no room for half-hearted creatures. This challenge, though, is not a call for us to lead lives of extreme asceticism and hermitage but for us to recognize the ways we have become too easily satisfied with our comfortable faith. If God is holy and we are called to be holy, we have a long road ahead of us.

The pursuit of holiness is a way, a journey, a lifelong endeavor. Reading Laurus’s life, we experience Arseny’s choices—to hide Ustina, to save the princess, to leave Kseniya, to perform as a holy fool in Pskov—and a thousand other small choices of prayer, abstinence, and charity. Our small, seemingly insignificant choices are creating

a story, an icon that either leads the kingdom to flourishing or detracts from it. Every moment that we choose God's glory over our own moves us toward holiness. Are we choosing the world's wisdom or his foolishness? Have we dared to pursue holiness even halfway?

Death as Liberation

In Pskov, Arseny resides in a cemetery, similarly to how he lived next to one in his grandfather's house as a boy. His life is lived always with an awareness of the dead. During the plague, he had seen death hovering with its wings over the door of his parents' home. He can see when it is coming, and he weeps over those it takes. His grandfather has taught him not to fear death, "for death is not just the bitterness of parting. It is also the joy of liberation." When seen from God's perspective, "all are living," Christofer reminds him.¹⁹ In this imagination, death frees the soul from the confines of the body and its earthly limitations.

When C. S. Lewis lost his friend Charles Williams, he wrote a letter to his widow explaining that he now believed fully in eternal life: "We now verified for ourselves what so many bereaved people have reported; the ubiquitous presence of a dead man, as if he had ceased to meet us in particular places in order to meet us everywhere. It is not in the least like a haunting. . . . It is vital and bracing."²⁰ Arseny likewise experiences the dead always around him. In *Laurus*, Vodolazkin plays across life and death as often as he plays across time and space, these created realities that differ from eternal reality and our participation in the divine. Arseny is raised beside a graveyard; the black plague haunts the landscape with death; as a holy fool, Arseny resides in a cemetery; and there are stories in *Laurus* that use death as a character.

When Arseny visits the cave of St. Anthony and the caves of Theodosius, he speaks with the dead: "The saints were not exactly moving or even speaking, but the silence and immobility of the dead were

not absolute. There was, under the ground, a motion that was not completely usual, and a particular sort of voices rang out without disturbing the sternness and repose. The saints spoke using words from psalms and lines from the lives of saints that Arseny remembered well from childhood.”²¹ Notice that the saints speak through Arseny’s memory. They are not merely chattering away at him with individual voices. Here Vodolazkin toys with the line between believable and mystical.

Although Vodolazkin implies that death is an illusion, it is only so when perceived from this side of death—when we view death as a final end in which the person disintegrates into nothingness. Rather, from Vodolazkin’s Orthodox perspective, death has been overcome, so that life continues, though in a new way. Vodolazkin confronts contemporary readers with death’s reality and our false hunt for the “elixir of immortality,” which only exists in the triune and resurrected God.²²

The novel scandalizes readers who view time as a linear progression of events, for it trumps such conceptions with an iconic vision of time. How do you view time according to a God who exists outside of it? Might you pray for the salvation of people who have *already* died? Can you pray for events that have already occurred? The whole plot of the novel hinges on an eternal perspective of time. After Ustina dies, Elder Nikandr informs Arseny, “There is no already where she is now. And there is no still. And there is no time.”²³ Arseny does not comprehend these great mysteries, though he learns more about the possibility of this truth over the course of his life. Initially, Arseny trusts the authority of the elder. On his journey to Jerusalem, his friend Ambrogio (whose name, significantly, comes from *ambrosia*, the nectar of the immortals) opines, “I think time is given to us by the grace of God. . . . A person is not born ready-made. He studies, analyzes his experience, and builds his personal history. He needs time for that.”²⁴ Ambrogio can prophesy the future hundreds of years ahead of him, so that history and future play back and forth with the present. As the narrator tells readers in the prolegomenon, Arseny

“did not always understand what time ought to be considered the present.”²⁵ For us twenty-first-century readers absorbed in our present moment, this novel counteracts our limited vision with a more fluid experience of past and future.

Only when Arseny enters a monastery does he learn the rhythm of time—the monastic hours of prayer, the Christian calendar designating the practices of each day, saints’ festivals. In this world, he begins to sense that time is circular. His elder corrects him, likening the motion of time to a spiral: “This involves repetition but on some new, higher level. Or, if you like, the experience of something new but not from a clean slate. With the memory of what was experienced previously.”²⁶ The elder explains how the Bible exhibits the spiraling of time: for example, in the Old Testament is the first Adam, and then Christ in the New Testament is the second Adam. We see this idea played out in medieval literature: for instance, in *The Divine Comedy*, we see the pilgrim ascend in a circular motion but ever higher onto a new plane, spiraling in his ascent to God. The elder teaches Arseny that such an ordering of time, in its spiraling and repetitious nature, is for our benefit: “Repetitions are granted for our salvation and in order to surmount time.”²⁷ This insight provides the key to understanding the ending of the novel.

Hope and Redemption

As a hermit in the woods, Arseny, now called Laurus, comes to exist so much in God’s will that he functions according to eternal reality, which is outside of time. The narrator observes, “Laurus now sensed only cyclical time” and refers to events as occurring “one day” without other designations.²⁸ Drawing from hagiographic models, Vodolazkin clarifies, “Lives of saints consist of small storylines strung one after another along a time-based axis. With rare exceptions, they do not cause one another. . . . The cause of events is found in the realm of the providential.”²⁹ Without intention, Laurus wanders

from the monastery to a cave located near Rukina Quarter, where he is from. A new lost soul comes to him, much as Ustina had; her name is Anastasia, and she is pregnant with someone's child but will not name the father. We begin to intuit the similarities between the episodes: the beginning is repeated at a new register, as the elder had told him. The names are significant: Ustina connotes "justice," and Anastasia means "resurrection." The girl who did not receive justice is resurrected here in a new form, and her justice will be, for Laurus, a final mercy.

In the initial episode of his life, Arseny sinned in multiple ways against his love, Ustina: he hid her from the town, did not bring her a midwife as she requested, kept her from confession and Communion, and did not confess his sin of impregnating a woman whom he had not yet made his wife. In this second version in his story, Anastasia is a young girl and, although the child is not Laurus's, he claims it as such and publicly suffers disgrace. The pregnant girl cannot believe Laurus's sacrifice for her, that he is willing to be humiliated, to tell an "untruth" to protect her life. Laurus questions, "Did I really tell them an untruth?"³⁰ On the literal level, he is not the father of her child. On a spiritual plane, she is the resurrected Ustina, and he is receiving a great mercy by being allowed to repeat this moment in his life at a higher register. Earlier in the narrative, when the elder referred to time as a spiral, Arseny had asked, "Do you mean to say I will meet Ustina again?"³¹ Only now, in claiming Anastasia and her child, does Arseny imagine time as a spiral. The repetition has been granted to him for his—and Ustina's—salvation.

Readers may see hope for Laurus's salvation in the way that his body does not show signs of decomposition after his death. Contrast this scene to a similar one in another Russian novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Elder Zosima's flesh begins to rot because the faith of the people needs to be tested; they have trusted in the wrong ends. Poor Alyosha Karamazov, a novice under Zosima's authority, had hoped for the kingdom to come with Zosima's departure, that this man's holiness would bring about some sort of utopia. Yet he returns to the

church where the miracle of Cana at Galilee is being read over the departed and receives a vision of the transfigured saint, emanating in the light of Jesus Christ. Miracles still occur, but only after Alyosha has rescinded his false dreams of earthly vindication. In the *Laurus* narrative, the saint's body does not stink, but not because the novel is less realistic than Dostoevsky's masterpiece. Rather, the lack of decomposition is a sign of Ustina's, and the baby's, redemption. After Ustina and the baby died, Arseny became self-absorbed in his grief and did not attend to their bodies. Because of his sin, their bodies were disgraced in decomposition—bloating and filling with maggots. It's a heartbreaking opening to the novel. Only within this narrative does the miracle of Laurus's stenchless corpse become a beautiful sign of God's grace. Arseny entered Pskov covered in scabs and lice; his wretchedness contrasted with the grandeur of the city and made it appear more beautiful.³² The miracle must be understood within the logic of the novel; viewed against the wretchedness of the man's sins, we can experience the beauty of God's mercy to him.

The life of Laurus appears to be a series of unrelated scenes, fragments of stories that do not make sense. At the conclusion of the novel, the saint confesses to an elder, "I no longer sense unity in my life. . . . I was Arseny, Ustin, Amvrosy, and I have just now become Laurus. . . . Life resembles a mosaic that scatters into pieces."³³ We have been prepared for this moment since the novel's prolegomenon. The first line of *Laurus* reads, "He had four names at various times. A person's life is heterogeneous, so this could be seen as an advantage. Life's parts sometimes have little in common, so that it might appear various people lived them."³⁴ Rather than introduce our hero with a clear and absolute knowledge of his identity, the narrator begins with mystery followed by axiomatic knowledge about life, of which our hero will be an example. Before the narrative even begins, the reader is prepared to read a cohesive rendering of what seems to be several lives.

If we read the novel as an icon, we will understand how all the fragments cohere in a divine rendering. St. Dionysius the Areopagite

says, “All that was disorder in [Jesus Christ] becomes order; what was without form acquires form, and his [the saint’s] life . . . becomes fully illumined by light.”³⁵ For readers to perceive the divine light, we must practice seeing life through the eyes of Christ. At the end of the book, as Laurus receives his final name, the elder offers a way of interpreting the seeming disorder:

Being a mosaic does not necessarily mean scattering into pieces, answered Elder Innokenty. It is only up close that each separate little stone seems not to be connected to the others. There is something more important in each of them, O Laurus: striving for the one who looks from afar. For the one who is capable of seizing all the small stones at once. It is he who gathers them with his gaze. That, O Laurus, is how it is in your life, too. You have dissolved yourself in God. You disrupted the unity of your life, renouncing your name and your very identity. But in the mosaic of your life there is also something that joins all those separate parts: it is an aspiration for Him. They will gather together again in Him.³⁶

For the contemporary reader who does not believe in a grand narrative, a divine author, or a cohesive meaning to life, this exegesis sounds shocking. Yet because the words are not presented as didactic discourse, but rather occur in a dialogue and are contextualized within a setting, they retain the potential to be accepted as truth by even the most obstinate reader. Who is seeing rightly—Laurus, who feels life in its fragmented mosaic, or the elder, who presents the divine imagination? And which vision of life is more satisfying—the scattering of pieces or the gathering together in God?

Pursuing Holiness

In spring 2014, I lived in Prague with my husband and our then-four-month-old daughter; we were on a Fulbright Fellowship. I was teaching religion in American literature at Charles University in

the self-proclaimed most atheistic country in Europe. During my time there, I had the startling and discomfiting realization that my Americanness stood out far greater than my Christianness. Whereas Czech people, because of years of oppression by the Soviets, guard themselves from revealing to strangers what they think or feel, my American friendliness and generally open demeanor marked me as different. In my classes, the students found it perplexing that someone so educated could believe in things like a virgin birth, resurrection, and miracles, but they witnessed nothing in my life that seemed out of the ordinary. Never once did they, or any of my Czech colleagues, question how I lived. Why not? Wasn't I supposed to be living in a way that was foolish to the world? Shouldn't they have been looking at me and saying, "Something's different about her," or "I want what she has"? Except for my lack of Czech and my inability to keep a poker face in conversation, I never felt like an oddball.

After this season abroad, I started voraciously reading books on Christian living, such as Lauren Winner's *Wearing God: Clothing, Laughter, Fire, and Other Overlooked Ways of Meeting God* and works that I had previously had little attraction to, such as Jen Hatmaker's *7: An Experimental Mutiny against Excess*. I wanted to find practical methods of living differently that surpassed the tamed-down ethos of the greatest commandment: "Be nice to others, so they will be nice to you." In my search through these books, I discovered two things: First, what I was seeking was holiness (or sanctification); and second, in order for it to become compelling, I needed to imagine holiness embodied in a life.

Laurus taught my heart how to pursue holiness because the novel surrounded me with a company of saints. When Arseny reads *Alexander Romance*, the ancient story of Alexander the Great, he becomes its "most grateful reader" by memorizing it and living out his own narrative in response to the story that has become a part of him. His great-grandfather transcribed the narrative, writing on the first page, "It is I Feodosy, a sinner, who made a copie of this book in memory of brave people, that their deeds not go unremembered."³⁷ We must

remember the stories of the heroes and saints who preceded us so that their lives may guide our own. As Arseny recalls Alexander, Christofer, and other saints, so we should saturate our lives with their stories. *Stories of the Saints: Bold and Inspiring Tales of Adventure, Grace, and Courage* by Carey Wallace is a beautiful collection for children. *All Saints* by Robert Ellsberg offers stories of even non-canonical saints, one per day, to reflect on. And whether or not you are Eastern Orthodox, icons are more substantial reminders to imitate Christ than decorative, painted crosses or T-shirts that equate him with consumable goods (“I love Jesus and coffee”). I want to be an imitative reader of *Laurus*, to saturate my reading life with biographies of heroes and hagiographies of the holy, and to enclose myself with their images so that their way might become my way.

Devotional

From *Laurus*: “If history is a scroll in the hands of the Creator, does that mean everything I do and think is my Creator’s thinking and doing, rather than mine?”

“No . . . the Creator is good but not everything you think and do is good. You were created in God’s image and likeness, and your likeness consists, among other things, of freedom.”³⁸

Scripture: “We are fools for Christ’s sake, but ye are wise in Christ; we are weak, but ye are strong; ye are honorable, but we are despised” (1 Cor. 4:10 KJV).

Wisdom from the Saints: A certain monk once asked Saint Arsenius the Great what he should do when he read the Holy Scriptures but did not comprehend their meaning. Arsenius answered, “My child, you must study and learn the Holy Scriptures constantly, even if you do not understand their power. . . . For when we have the words of the Holy Scriptures on our lips, the demons hear them and are terrified. Then they

flee from us, unable to bear the words of the Holy Spirit Who speaks through His apostles and prophets.”³⁹

Prayer: Providential Author of History and the Word, enslave us to your freedom that we may not be conformed to the ways of this world but fit the contours of your Holy Scriptures. May we pursue more than halfway that holiness to which you have called us, even if it makes us appear to be fools in the eyes of the world.

Discussion Questions

1. What practices from Arseny’s life seem strange or unadoptable to you, and why? Silence? Fasting? Homelessness?
2. If your church tradition does not envision the dead in the same way as Arseny does, how do you think of the dead who have gone before us?
3. What are some stories that have made an impression on how you live? Think of those from your childhood, from the Bible, or perhaps repeated legends of family members.
4. Could Arseny’s story have been told in the contemporary world, or does it necessarily belong to the past? Is it possible to have holy fools in twenty-first-century America?
5. What are ways that you might practice a more extreme or zealous faith? How might you try to appear foolish to the world in imitation of Christ?

Further Reading

Frederick Buechner, *Godric*

Flannery O’Connor, *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away*

Kirstin Valdez Quade, “Christina the Astonishing”

John Kennedy Toole, *A Confederacy of Dunces*