

## **HIEROMARTYR VASILY MARTYSZ**

(1874-1945); *Feast day: May 4<sup>th</sup>*

The Holy Hieromartyr Archpriest Vasily Martysz, was a Polish Orthodox priest, who began his career serving as a missionary in North America for 12 years, returning to his homeland not long before WWI. Following the war he was in charge of Orthodox Chaplains in the newly formed Polish army, a position he held for many years. He was martyred in May 1945, in the closing days of World War II by brigands who attacked his family without mercy because he was an Orthodox priest. Today he is the patron saint of Orthodox Christians in the Polish Army.

Vasily Martysz was born on February 20, 1874 in Tertyn that today is in the Hrubieszow region of southeastern Poland. His father, Alexander Martysz, was a judge, who after he retired, was ordained an Orthodox priest and served in a local parish. In 1884, when Vasily was ten years old, he accompanied his father on a trip to New York where he met Bishop Vladimir of the Aleutians. Bp. Vladimir, noting Vasily's singing during a church service, predicted Vasily would become a priest and invited him to serve in the American diocese.

Having decided to follow his father into the priesthood, Vasily attended the seminary in Chelm of which Bp. Tikhon, the future bishop of America and future Patriarch of Moscow was rector at that time. Upon graduating from the seminary in July 1899, Vasily married Olga Nowik, and was ordained a deacon. In December 1900, he was ordained a priest, and the couple sailed for New York.

Upon reaching the United States, Fr. Vasily was assigned to Afognak parish in the Territory of Alaska, a parish that covered Spruce and Woody islands near Kodiak. At Afognak he built the Church of the Nativity of the Most Holy Virgin. In order to serve the large area of his parish, he traveled by kayak and was away from home much of the time, although he continued to teach in the parish school. Through these difficult times, his wife, Olga, gave birth to two daughters. Because of the harsh life in Alaska and concern for the education of his daughters, in 1906, Fr. Vasily was transferred back to the lower United States, to Osceola Mills, Pennsylvania, where Fr. Vasily and Olga were blessed with a son. In the following years Fr. Vasily and his family accepted assignments in Old Forge, Pennsylvania, and then in Canada, first in Edmonton, and then in Vostok.

In 1912, Fr. Vasily and his family returned to Poland to be with relatives in Sosnowiec. Here, he became the rector of the local parish and a teacher at the girls' high school. The outbreak of World War I, however, disrupted their lives again. To escape the war front, the Orthodox clergy and their families were moved to safety in Russia. Then in 1919, after the Bolshevik takeover, as Polish refugees, they were allowed to return to their old residences in Poland.

Having gained its freedom following WWI, Poland began to organize an army, and in September 1919, Fr. Vasily was placed in charge of the military's Orthodox Affairs, with the responsibility of forming an Orthodox military chaplaincy, of which he became head in 1921, continuing in this position until he retired from it in 1936.

Fr. Vasily was also deeply involved in the affairs of the Church of Poland. He was an advisor and friend of the Metropolitans of Warsaw and All Poland, assisting them in their efforts to obtain autocephaly for the Polish Orthodox Church, which was finally obtained in 1925. Fr. Vasily became the Metropolitans' closest advisor, acting as the liaison between the Church and the Polish Head of State. At the twenty-fifth anniversary of his ordination on December 7, 1925, Fr. Vasily received a special award in recognition of his efforts in securing autocephaly for the Church of Poland.

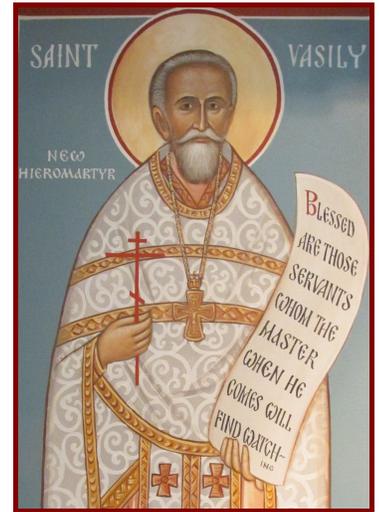
As part of his responsibilities as chief military Chaplain during the early 1920's, Fr. Vasily was active in organizing pastoral ministry among the many Ukrainian Orthodox refugees who were settled in camps in Poland. He visited the internees, and arranged for churches in the camps. On July 8, 1921, using his knowledge of the Ukrainian language, he celebrated the Divine Liturgy before 5,000 refugees, greatly improving their morale.

After his retirement from government service in 1936, Fr. Vasily and his family returned for a life of retirement to their home region of Hrubieszow. But, the invasion of Poland in 1939 by Germany drastically changed the lives of Fr. Vasily and his family. With the German occupation, naturally, the quality of life in their village declined. The mothers of Fr. Vasily and his wife both died. In 1943, his wife, Olga, died. His youngest daughter, Helen, and her family moved into his home. Then, on May 4, 1945, in the chaos of the last days of World War II in Europe, his household was viciously attacked by lawless bandits, who first beat his pregnant daughter, and then beat and tortured Fr. Vasily before finally murdering him by gun shot.

Fr. Vasily was buried, first, in the cemetery in Teratyn, before being re-interred in 1963 in the Orthodox cemetery in Warsaw next to his wife Olga and his mother.

Prior to the declaration of his Canonization on March 20, 2003, Fr. Vasily's relics were exhumed and placed in the Church of St. John Climacus in Warsaw. Then, on June 7-8, 2003, the rites of glorification of St. Vasily Martysz were celebrated in Chelm.

By **Sister Ioanna**, *St. Innocent of Alaska Monastic Community, Redford, Michigan*



*St. Vasily, on vestry door, at St. Innocent Orthodox Church, Redford, MI*