Chapter Four

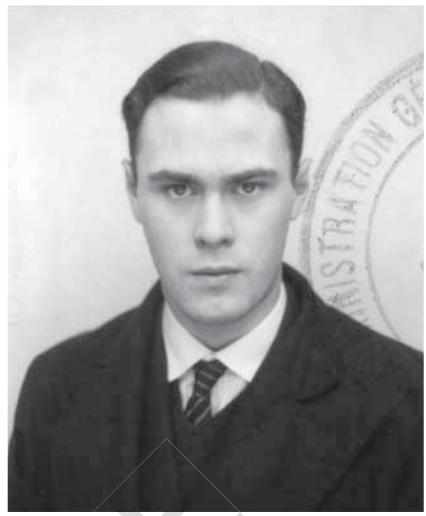
Surgeon in the French Army and Monk in the Surgery, 1937-1949

As soldiers of Christ let us go forth into life with new hope and with new strength, let us bring into this cold world our own fiery, victorious joy, so that every soul might rejoice, so that all fear might be dispersed, so that the light of Christ might shine forth upon all people, upon all without exception, and cry aloud: "Glory be to God in the highest and on Earth peace, good will towards man." Amen.[1]

In 1937, Boris Eduardovich Bloom fell ill. He came to visit his family for the Easter feast. Father and son spent some time alone together, during which they talked, opening their hearts and minds to one another as never before "with a deep communion of silence at the root of our meeting". When Andrei returned from his hospital practice, his father was dead. "I was not even upset I hadn't said goodbye to him," he recalled many years later. "We had said everything that needed to be said to one another during that last talk."[2]

In that same year Andrei and his mother became naturalised French citizens. This ensured that, when war finally broke out in 1939, he was subject to call-up and drafted into the medical corps of the French army, having completed his medical studies at the Sorbonne but not yet submitted his doctoral thesis. Before departing for the army, he took his preliminary vows in secret as a monk. During training, Afanasii's having put him "under obedience" to anyone set in authority over him took on an almost ludicrous aspect, "going to the limits of perfect absurdity" under the hail of orders from the corporal in charge of new recruits.[3] Much later, Bishop Anthony was to describe ideal obedience, whether to the promptings of God or to a spiritual director, as the attitude of a dog in training, all eager attention and wagging tail. Possibly Afanasii's injunction helped him to pass easily from the training camp to a commission as field surgeon. He never, though, depicted his soldier self as an example of disciplined humility or conformism, but told rather how he got into trouble for exhorting a pompous young superior officer not to make a fool of himself before his men by constantly

puffing up his own authority and, on a later occasion, after he himself was commissioned, how he was subjected to boycott by his own mess for letting down their dignity as officers by wading in to clean out a filthy surgery with his own hands – obviously a task for other ranks. Anti-communist by conviction the young surgeon certainly was, but also, by nature, a true egalitarian and a free spirit.



Passport photograph, 1939

We know very little about Andrei's brief war record, except that he was awarded the *médaille d'honneur* for active devotion in tending the wounded as leader of a mobile unit under enemy bombardment and that his fluent German brought him into immediate contact with hospitalised prisoners: the man with the broken hand whose shattered finger he managed to save from the quick and easy option of amputation on learning he was by trade a watchmaker; the bewildered farmer's boy afraid to die alone whose hand he held through the night when off duty; and the young Nazi whom he could not help admiring for his defiance in the face of death: "I am not at all sorry to die because we are beating you all along the line."[4]

They were indeed! Andrei, no pacifist, was as fiercely opposed to National Socialism and the ambitions of the Third Reich as he was to communism and always maintained he would have volunteered for the army had he not been called up. What he did volunteer for as the German army swept into Paris and the French demobilised was to stay on and accompany the military hospital in which he was serving to help them evacuate to unoccupied territory, for which we have the evidence of a friend with whom he met up on the way, who needed to return to Paris and to whom he unhesitatingly gave "all the money he had" to help him on his way, having first extracted a painful bee-sting.[5] Here too we have some evidence from loving women and children, such as the daughter of a nurse who served under him in one of the hospitals where he worked, who wrote years later on reading one of his books to tell him that her mother had often told her she would have died had young Dr Bloom not taken time off from his wounded soldiers to heal her of some virulent childish sickness.[6]

When finally demobilised in the environments of Pau, Dr Bloom discovered that his mother and grandmother had been evacuated to the Limoges region, where he eventually found them in a little village:

Mother was ill, Grandmother was old, and I decided we would return to Paris and see what we could do there. My first idea was to join France Libre. However, this proved impossible because by this time the Pyrenees were blockaded. Possibly somebody with more initiative would have managed it, but I did not.

We reached a village near the demarcation line of the Occupied Zone, and I went to the town hall. I was then in full army uniform, apart from my jacket, which I had bought in order to hide as much of my uniform as possible, and I went to the Mayor to explain that I needed a pass. He said to me, "You know that this is impossible. I am afraid that I would be shot for it." Nobody was allowed to cross the demarcation line without a German pass. I went on and on persuading him, and finally he said to me, "You know what we shall do: I will put a piece of paper here on the table, which has to be filled in, and here is the mayor's stamp. You will take it and stamp the paper – and then you will steal it. If you are arrested, I will say that you stole them from me." That was all I needed. I needed papers, and if I had been arrested they would not have started asking him, they would in any case imprison me. I filled in the papers and we crossed the line, which was also very amusing. My mother, grandmother and I were in different carriages, not for conspiratorial reasons but simply because there were no other seats available. In my compartment there were four old French ladies, who were trembling with fear because they were convinced the Germans would tear them to bits, and a totally drunk French soldier who shouted the whole time that if a German should appear he would kill him at once: boom, boom, boom. And the old ladies believed it: a German inspector would come in, the solider would shout, and we would all be shot for it. I was travelling in a certain state of apprehension because under my jacket I was in full army uniform and army personnel were not allowed to enter – or rather they were allowed to but they would be immediately taken to prisoner of war camps. I decided that I needed to stand up in such a way that the inspector would not look at me below the shoulders, and therefore suggested to my travelling companions that as I could speak German they should give me their passports and I would deal with the inspector. When the German officer came in, I jumped up, stood right against him, almost pressing myself against him so that he would see nothing except my jacket, gave him the papers, explained everything, and he even thanked me for it. . . .[7]

On their return to Paris, Andrei continued at least loosely attached to service in military hospitals and, throughout the occupation, contrived to subsidise the family budget by taking on supplementary replacement

In uniform with mother and grandmother before leaving for the front, 1939

teaching in a variety of subjects at the Russian school. At a time when the Lossky family were fully engaged with the Resistance, when Mother Maria and her associates were doing all in their power to save Jews and others directly threatened by the Nazi regime and Father Afanasii was – without qualm of conscience – issuing false certificates of baptism to any who came to him for help, Andrei Bloom was recruited by an elderly French doctor he had known before the war to the French medical Resistance. He and his medical friends falsified x-rays when young people conscripted to work for the Germans behind the lines were sent in for examination. The one thing the occupying authorities were really careful about, he recorded, was infection, and tuberculosis ruled you out for working in Germany. Soon, he was leading a double life, moving men and weapons under cover in medical vehicles, treating the wounded, circulating literature. He and his mother took a solemn oath not to betray anyone else involved in these activities, even should one be tortured in front of the other – the Gestapo's methods had very soon become notorious. Indeed, Mother Maria (Skobtsova), her son Iurii, Father Dmitrii Klepinin and their friend Bunakov Fondaminsky, a convert from Judaism, were arrested early in 1943 and perished in concentration camps. Father Afanasii, twice detained but on each occasion released, was subjected to constant harassment by the occupying authorities, particularly after the invasion of

Russia.[i] Andrei himself was rounded up only once, by chance for being out after curfew, and subjected to a hair-raising interrogation by a suspicious French policeman who, convinced the name Bloom was English, refused to believe he was a Russian-born citizen of France: "The Russians all have heavy cheekbones and slitty eyes – we have been told so," he kept repeating, glaring at his captive's neat features and burning brown eyes. "You've got us mixed up with the Chinese," Andrei assured him. His interrogator decided to try another, ideological tack, and asked his opinion of Hitler and the Third Reich. Convinced he had been detected and the man was playing with him, Andrei decided on a last fling and told him – in no uncertain terms. To his utter amazement, the officer's face lit up in response. He was ordered to get out of the guardroom before worse befell him. "I did nothing very heroic in the Resistance," was his own assessment in interviews.[8]

Bloom's teaching at the Russian school is better documented and was recalled with enthusiasm. One pupil, Veronica Lossky, recalls:

> He was much loved, particularly because he was quite different in manner from the others [the other teachers], he was not authoritarian, indeed it was as though he were our equal (not all that much different in age, he must have been about 20 [in fact, by that time, he was nearer 30, but that is how she remembers him] and we between 10 and 12). There was a spirit of camaraderie, but that didn't mean a free-for-all. He was fair without the constraint or outward discipline that everyone else imposed on us, which irked us and made us giggle. If he asked anything of us we wanted to do it because he would explain and it was reasonable. He was simply intelligent in his way of maintaining discipline and he was not, as a result, strict. He was just fair, requiring what was really essential.[9]

At the same time, Andrei continued steadfastly to pursue his double vocation. In 1943, Afanasii finally received him as a full monk under the name Anthony in honour of the founder of the Kievo-Pechersky Monastery. There was a last barrier: Andrei had asked to be professed "in secret" so that he might continue to practise as a doctor and support his family, but Afanasii, at this final stage, demanded that he make a total commitment. You could not, he said, strike a bargain with God and "have it both ways". However, when the young man, finally broken in spirit, agreed even to put his new hard-won profession and his beloved dependants in the hands of

i. The Germans were originally inclined to go easy on White Russian émigrés, seeing them as potential allies against communism, but after the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, when Stalin allowed the Patriarch to speak unscripted on air and he appealed to all Orthodox to defend their country, they became suspicious and hostile, particularly towards the Moscow Patriarchal Church.

God, his spiritual guide gave his blessing to his taking them back upon his own shoulders and continuing as a "secret" monk. As the Metropolitan said in his deeply affectionate memoir of Afanasii, it was for God to provide the ram for sacrifice – Abraham did not slip off to market beforehand to purchase a substitute for his only son. It would not have been the same thing at all. In fact, though, the "secret" was a pretty open one. According to Anthony's friend Nikolai Lossky, "everybody knew" and one of his pupils at the Russian School, Marina Fennel, remembers: "He defended his thesis the day I was sitting my baccalauréat and we bumped into each other in the corridor of the Sorbonne. He was in tearing spirits. I think it was very soon after that that he was professed monk, in secret because he wanted to go on supporting his family."[10]

The thesis, rather surprisingly for a monk who has been working as an army surgeon, is an elegant and strictly clinical defence of a non-invasive operation technique perfected by Dr Picot, to remove via the "vagino-perinal route" fistulas situated far up the vagina on the wall of the bladder, often the result of a hysterectomy. It gives a description of four alternative methods, detailed case histories of various operations, and due consideration to the critique of Picot's method by other surgeons who tended to ascribe his remarkable success rate to his skill in operating rather than to his chosen way of entry which, they felt, constituted an operation in itself before the fistula is reached and might lead to interior damage to either bladder or vagina. Bloom's thesis concludes with a rebuttal of these criticisms which draws on the support of an eminent oncologist, Dr R. Couvelaire, to prove that Picot's preferred method of carefully negotiated anatomical separation rather than cutting is less likely to cause bilateral damage than other means. The thesis, presented on 28 July 1943 for Bloom's doctorate in Medicine, is dedicated to Professor M. Couvelaire, honorary Professor at the Faculty of Medicine, Commander of the Legion of Honour, Croix de Guerre, "who has been so kind as to do us the honour of accepting the direction of this thesis: in token of my profound gratitude"; to Dr G. Picot, surgeon of the hospitals, "who has done us the single honour of entrusting to us the exposition and the defence of the beautiful technique of which he is author"; and to Dr Roger Couvelaire, hospital surgeon and professor of the faculty, "who inspired this thesis and in whom we have always found a most reliable guide and constant support". There is also an "in memoriam" for Professors R. Gregorie, A. Havelacque and F. Ratlevy, "who have been our unforgettable teachers", for Monsieur Joyet-Lavergne, Inspector of the Academy, and for Jacques Millet and Raoul Combes, Professors of the Faculty of Science at Paris, "who taught me to love and know the natural sciences"; and, no doubt lest anyone who had helped him in any way might feel slighted or forgotten, a dedication to "my teachers at the faculty and in the hospitals". On the front page, there are two more, less formal dedications:

Aux miens.
A mes amis.[11]

That the now fully qualified Dr Bloom did not take advantage of the freedom from monastic rule essential to active life in the world is clear from many small fragments of recollection.

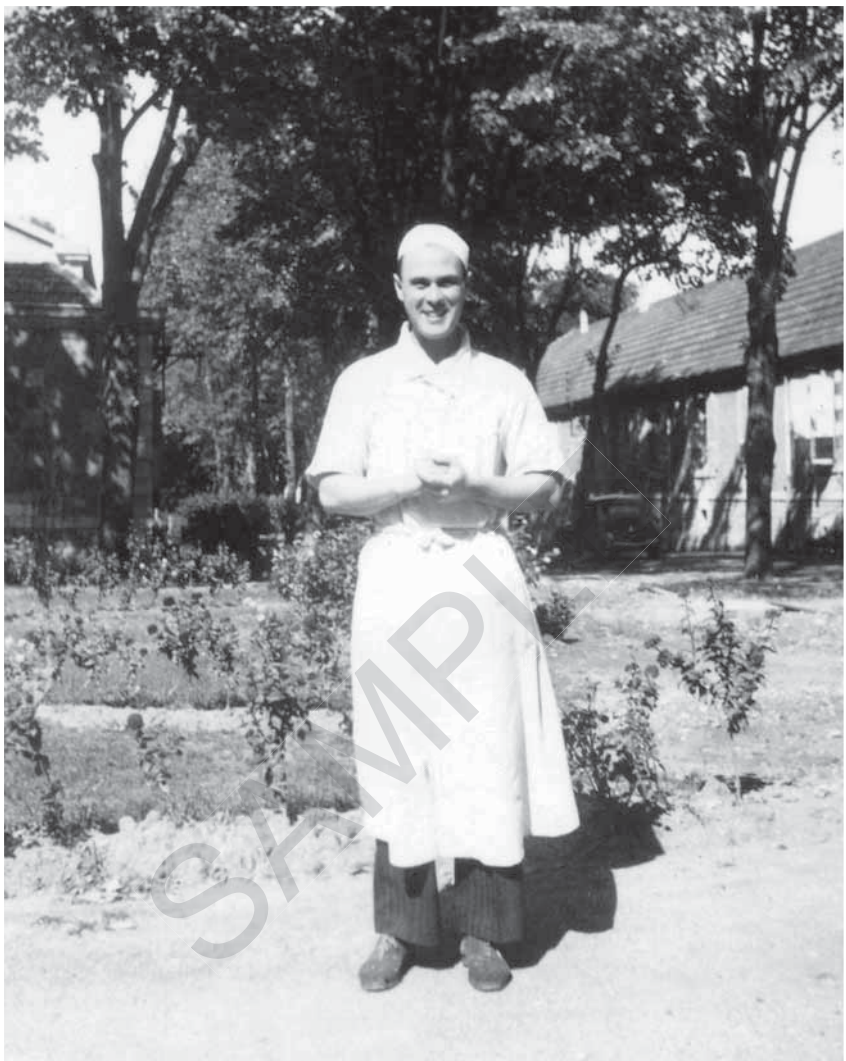
Indeed, it was amidst the dangers, the utter vulnerability of life under the occupation that he experienced an extraordinarily intense epiphany:

> I was walking across Paris without the permit to see a patient. I was crossing a bridge, the moon was full, I was in full view and the order for German patrols was to shoot to kill anyone who was to be seen in the streets after a certain time. And of a sudden I became aware of the divine presence in such overwhelming manner that right in the middle of this bridge I knelt down and bowed to the ground, and said to the Lord, "Lord, if for Your victory on earth and in Heaven You must claim my utter destruction let it be and glory be to You!" A phrase which is absurd perhaps in itself but which expresses what I felt of the greatness, the beauty of a God to whom one can give oneself unreservedly.[12]

Once, walking with Father Afanasii in a neglected Russian graveyard, he became quite carried away by the old priest's suggestion that he camp out in the grounds to care for the graves and pray for the souls of the departed, a kind of modern "desert" which immediately appealed to the newly consecrated monk Anthony's romantic heart. The two monastics "in the world" spent some time seriously discussing the practical possibilities of such a course of action, and it was Afanasii who first burst out laughing, clapped Anthony on the shoulder and exclaimed: "You know, all this is quite impossible! You have to work."[13]

Again, coming across Father Afanasii waiting at a bus stop, Anthony hurried up to him gladly: "Father Afanasii, now you've made a monk of me, but you never gave me any rule of prayer." "Whatever do you want a rule for?" Afanasii replied. "You're a monk now – pray all the time!"[14] He had not been taught to keep the rules. He had been taught boundless trust in God and love for his fellows – a more exacting, because never perfectly fulfillable, discipline.

One "rule", however, Anthony himself invented there and then, taking as his criterion of poverty the minimum diet recommended as compatible with keeping up health and strength to a wartime French population in the grip of austerity. He made an agreement with his mother that this was to be the touchstone of their housekeeping, even should they live on into a time of plenty. To give pleasure to guests this rule may well have been more honoured in the breach than in the observance. Ksenia Nikolaevna and her



Surgeon, 1943

son were no killjoys and, according to Nikolai Lossky, neither professional nor monastic conscience stood in the way of Dr Bloom's prescribing surgical spirit when his friends could not obtain vodka to celebrate Pancake Day![15] Nevertheless, there is ample evidence that Anthony, throughout his long life, lived at well below what is now considered "poverty-level" and ate very sparingly; also, however splendidly robed he may have appeared in church, the shabby black cassock, occasionally held together by a visible safety-pin, which he wore every day, became positively legendary in his London diocese. The St Petersburg lady, who made several films of the Russian

Church in London and of Anthony preaching, catching a glimpse of him as an old man out in the street carrying his weekly shopping and described his appearance as an old man coming home to the Cathedral from the nearby Knightsbridge shops as that of a *bomzh* – one of those displaced people *bez opredellenogo mesta zhitel'stva*[i] who lived in the underground heating systems of post-Soviet Russian cities and scavenged through other people's rubbish for scraps.

It was not until finally demobilised after the end of the war that Bloom, who had been reluctant to go through the formalities of registration under the occupation, set up his own practice as a doctor. When De Gaulle led the Free French into Paris, indeed, the remobilised Dr Bloom was in some way, as medic and bodyguard, attached to his suite. He always remembered with admiration the immensely tall General stalking on up the aisle of Notre-Dame after a sudden burst of gunfire from the shadows had sent his escort diving for the shelter of the pews! The liberation also left less uplifting memories. Anthony was sickened by the public humiliation of collaborators. One revenge attack he witnessed at first hand was a man he knew to have betrayed fellow Resistance workers, a very bad man, being marched shaven-headed, beaten, bloodied and pelted with filth to execution. As the procession passed him by, he realised Christ must have looked like that, staggering under His cross. In the hospitals, he would use all his authority to protect threatened patients, whatever their nationality or past record.

Ksenia Nikolaevna, Ol'ga Il'inichna and Anthony had, by the time he opened his first surgery, been living some ten years in the heart of the capital, at 3 Rue St Louis on the Île de la Cité. He acquired a bicycle, on which he hurtled around the comparatively empty, post-war streets to visit his patients. Some paid, but it was said that the surgery was always full of elderly émigrés who could not. When not with his patients, Anthony would encourage young people, many of them his ex-pupils from the Russian school, to foregather at his house in an informal Bible study group. Veronica Lossky remembers how eagerly they would assemble at the family flat in the early evening. Anthony would ask each adolescent member of the group to prepare their own commentary on a passage or on two apparently contradictory passages of scripture. She recalls being allotted "not peace but a sword" and "love one another", still deeply gratified by the commendation that her presentation was "très bien réflechi" (very well thought-through). Sometimes, he would expand on passages himself, which was "even more interesting".[16]

It was still under the name of André Bloom that he attended the Fifth International Conference on Religious Psychology which took place at the Maison d'Avon in Fontainbleau on 19 September 1948 and gave a paper on

i. Hence the acronym "bomzh": of no fixed abode.

"Contemplation and Ascesis", published in the resultant proceedings. This begins, in his elegant native speaker's French:

> Contemplation is neither something people do nor yet a transitory state.
>
> It should be the whole of one's being, for it is the one and only foundation: "and this is life eternal, that they should know Thee the only true God." (John 17:3).
>
> It is the one and only vocation. The way, the reason for being.[17]

In the parlance of the Eastern Church, he explains, the individual is the human being accessible to our senses and knowledge, Adam, who has become "as one of us". As such, the individual is opposed to the community. The *person*, on the other hand, is as non-confrontational as the touch of a pianist, the tone of a voice. The "person" is defined by that name written on a stone and prepared for each one of the saved according to the Book of Revelations. The "person" does not oppose others but is *with* (the French is in fact *towards*) them and *with* God (John 1:1). Moving from the contemplative to the active life, Dr Bloom continues:

> Action, for a contemplative, that is to say for all Christians inclusively, has no value in itself: it either bears witness to or teaches the spiritual life, which is not to say pious thoughts and emotions, but the putting into practice of the life desired by God, which forges – through tragedy – the human soul.[18]

The brief bibliography at the end of this paper refers the reader to Vladimir Lossky's *Essai sur la Théologie mystique de l'Eglise d'Orient* (Aubier, 1943) and Lev Gillet's *Orthodox Spirituality: An Outline of the Orthodox Ascetical and Mystical Tradition by a Monk of the Eastern Church* (London, SPCK, 1945).

The emphasis on "tragedy" suggests, beyond the influence of these two older friends, the whole intellectual and spiritual climate engendered by the journal *Put'* ("The Way") founded in 1925 by Nikolai Berdiaev and Lev Shestov (the author of *The Philosophy of Tragedy* based on the works of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche). *Put'* had come out regularly as *La Voie: organe de la pensée religieuse russe* until 1940 and served to unite and express the free interaction of divergent currents of Russian twentieth-century religious thought. Its authors included, among others and besides the founders, Georgii Florovsky; Vasilii Zenkovsky, author of a history of Russian philosophy; Boris Vysheslavtsev; Semen Frank; Vladimir Il'in; Sergii Bulgakov; Georgii Fedotov; Nikolai Onufrievich Lossky, father of Anthony's "older friend" the theologian Vladimir, and grandfather of his "younger friend" Nikolai Lossky; and Nicholas Zernov. Antoine Arjakovsky, in his monumental study of the journal and its contributors, describes *Put'* as "a space circumscribed in time and place in whose womb matured the

consciousness of an intellectual generation united by the common trauma of revolution and exile as well as by the cultural memory of Russia's past".[19]

The monk Anthony matured too late and was too busy with his medical studies to be a contributor to *Put'*, but he was certainly a reader, inspired among other things by Berdiaev's dictum "that we are not in exile but on a mission" ("*ne v izgnanii a v poslanii*") and by the broad tolerance of an editorial policy that allowed readers to acknowledge the true and the beautiful beyond the borders of the Judeo-Greek tradition of Christian culture and to argue out their own inter-Orthodox differences on its pages. Anthony, indeed, always had respect for other revelations of the Divine Nature, albeit partial, not yet containing the "Fullness of Truth". He teased his mentor Vladimir Lossky, who tended to discount other creeds wholesale as "paganism", by presenting him with a bouquet of quotations from the Upanishads and asking his help to trace their patristic provenance. The good theologian came back to him with all the required attributions to sayings of various Fathers of the Church and, when shown the actual source, admitted good-naturedly that he must indeed rethink his attitude.

It is clear from the evening classes, from the active role he played at the YMCA Conference of 1947 and from this first venture into print that Dr Bloom's medical practice did not divert him altogether from the "angelic way". Indeed, he was inclining more and more towards the priesthood, constantly anxious about the amount of time and energy he nevertheless had to devote to medicine.

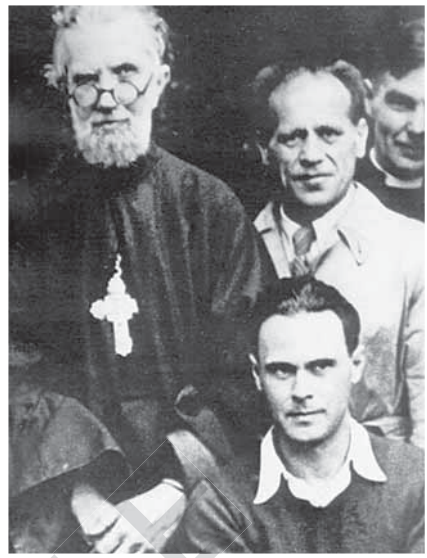
One day, as he sat in his surgery waiting for a patient, he opened his Bible at random and found himself reading in the twenty-eighth chapter of Isaiah:

> "And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry and the afflicted soul; then shall the light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noonday." (v.10) I baulked; because all my life I had been very reticent, and my spiritual father brought me up never to tell anybody about my inner life. At that time I was being pressurised to become a priest: "We need priests," but that would mean opening out. You can never supress every spark of your own inner life if you are trying to help someone else. I thought: Surely God isn't telling me: yes, go on and lay your inner life out like a stall at market, open up, let people take what they want? . . . I read the same verse three times, three times the meaning came through quite clearly. . . . What it says is: feed the souls of the hungry. And in the context that boils down to: feed the one who has no food. And as I understood it, it decided my fate. I decided: yes, I'll become a priest. Possibly it was a temptation and I ought not to have succumbed to it, but that's another question.[20]

It is not surprising, at this stage, that Lev Gillet and Sergii Bulgakov,

who had become deeply involved with the Orthodox-Anglican Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius, should have invited Dr Bloom to join them in explaining the Orthodox approach at a conference in London in 1948.

The still youthful-looking 34-year-old doctor of medicine, clean-shaven and with a distinct spring in his step, was not what the Fellowship really expected of an Orthodox theologian, but they found his presence among them inspiring and, when it became clear that the Russian Orthodox Church in Paris had ordained him priest, invited him to come to London as their chaplain.



At the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius (FSASS) conference, 1948, with Father Georgii Florovsky and Vladimir Lossky

This next step in Bloom's career was, however, no easier than his switch from philosophy to medicine or his renunciation of the world before becoming a monk. Ksenia Nikolaevna was so overcome that she retreated alone to the country before writing to their Bishop the Exarch Metropolitan Seraphim (Lukianov), from whom she believed she had obtained a promise that the Church would not dissuade her son from the medical practice at which he was proving such a success unless she as well as he were reconciled to the prospect: "Yet it is enough for me to think of the possibility of Andrei's being ordained for everything to go dark before my eyes, my heart to hurt and my mind to mist over." Quite apart from her own personal reactions, she went on, "there is another reason, and that is my sincere conviction that Andrei does much more moral and spiritual good in his calling as a doctor than he would as a priest, to whom those of no or little faith, or simply the French, will involuntarily react with some degree of suspicion or prejudice."[21]

In the face of the Metropolitan's persuasions, his insistence on the need for educated younger priests, and her son's need to serve with undivided heart and mind, she eventually capitulated gracefully, merely extracting a promise from Anthony that he would refrain from further estranging his fellow human beings by growing a beard – at least during her lifetime. This promise he kept.

On 22 October 1948, he was ordained deacon by Metropolitan Seraphim, then priest on 14 November. After brief service in Paris and Geneva, he was appointed, as requested, Chaplain to the Fellowship of St Alban and

St Sergius in London. The Metropolitan reported to His Holiness Aleksii Patriarch of all Russia: "Doctor Bloom is a remarkable personality. He is 34 years old. For the last six years he has been a monk in secret, professed by the Vicar of the Church of the Three Holy Hierarchs in Paris Archimandrite Afanasii under the name of Anthony. He is a sober and devout monk, a sound self-taught theologian, without specific academic education in this field, a good doctor, very kind-hearted, much loved and respected in Paris, Russian by nationality, a French citizen. He will conduct a fine Orthodox mission among the English without it being in any way an overt official mission, discretely, calmly, but correctly and conscientiously. In the future, I believe, priestmonk Anthony will be a luminary of our Church."[22]