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Photo Courtesy Frej Schmedes

# THE MONASTERY: MR. VIG AND THE NUN

Still relatively unknown in the Orthodox world, this slow-moving, spirit-filled documentary about an 82-year-old Danish recluse who donates his castle to become an Orthodox monastery and the Russian nun who arrives to help it happen, may well be the most authentic Orthodox note ever struck on film. “In its choice of subject,” one reviewer says, “the project is as far off the beaten track of documentary filmmaking as you could imagine,” yet, this Scandinavian gem so captivated film-goers that it has racked up awards and nominations at every major festival. Here, Mother Amvrosija, Hesbjerg’s nun, fills in the background of this remarkable work (although if you want the ending left a surprise, see the film first).

RTE: Pernille Rose Grønkjær’s 2006 documentary is a small gem of faith, vulnerability and humor. She works with a delicacy that allows the characters to reveal themselves in small daily honesties, without letting us forget the eternal values that bind them together. Filmmakers dealing with religious subjects often gloss over the home truths of daily life or romanticize the spiritual, but in *Mr. Vig and the Nun*, Pernille has risen above both of these temptations.

MAT. AMVROSIIJA: Yes, Pernille is very talented. She is also industrious, and she had a very good editor and producer. After six years of filming, she had over 100 hours of usable scenes for them to choose from, an immense amount of film.

RTE: How did you manage to be so unselfconscious in front of the camera?

MAT. AMVROSIIJA: Pernille is a good friend to all of us and we knew that we could trust her. We were used to her being there day after day, and just stopped noticing the camera. She was also very careful with the editing and came to show us what she had done before it was released. At the beginning

*Opposite: Mr. Vig and Mother Amvrosija.*

of the movie, for example, you see Abbess Nikona, our Matushka Igumenya from Shamordino, coming into the building, very tired and worn – we had just driven from Russia to Denmark, and Pernille began filming as we drove up. She was afraid that Matushka wouldn't like how she appeared in the film, but she just laughed and said, "It's alright. That's how I really looked."

RTE: Fiction such as *Ostrov* (The Island) has its own value, but it can't begin to touch God's real presence in real events, and *Mr. Vig and the Nun* manages to reflect your relationship with Mr. Vig and Hesbjerg, both the struggle and the grace. What was Mr. Vig's background, and what brought him to such an extraordinary place at the end of his life?

MAT. AMVROSIJA: As you know from the film, Mr. Vig was born in Denmark, of Danish parents, and was an ordained Lutheran pastor and a university librarian. He studied many subjects deeply throughout his life, and always referred to himself as a student. He was interested in both western and eastern philosophy and spoke fifteen languages, many fluently and the others well enough to read freely, including several Indian and oriental languages. He bought the castle after the Second World War, and for decades, he was interested in combining Christianity with eastern religions, but then he began turning more and more towards Orthodoxy...

RTE: And you, Matushka, are from Shamordino, the Russian convent founded near Optina Monastery by St. Ambrose of Optina. How did you become a nun there, and how did you end up at Hesbjerg Castle?

MAT. AMVROSIJA: When I entered the Church as an adult in the 1980's, the first book I read was about Optina Monastery. I was very touched by the whole Optina tradition, but I thought, "Well, Optina is gone...", but God had other plans. I became a nun in Riga, Latvia, and when another sister was sent to reopen Shamordino Convent in 1990 as the abbess, I was blessed to go with her. Shamordino was in ruins, so we first went to newly reopened Optina on a cold, rainy day in March. Coming from Latvia, we were very tired, and had fallen asleep on the long drive to Kozelsk. When the car stopped, it was completely dark, and I opened my eyes to see a brilliant white arch with the words "Optina Pustyn" in golden letters. It was like a vision, but it wasn't a vision. It was real.

So, we began rebuilding Shamordino. The abbess was busy with organizing the services and the sisters, while I was the treasurer and in charge of the re-

construction and the day-to-day physical ordering of the monastery. We were so happy to be back in Russia and to have the monastery back, and we felt that we were not alone – Elder Ambrose, Matushka Sophia (the first abbess), and all of the sisters who had ever lived in Shamordino were somehow with us. Everything seemed easy, even in the winter. There were five sisters when we first came in 1990. When I left for Hesbjerg ten years later, we were already 130.



Mr. Vig.

RTE: And how did you meet Mr. Vig?

MAT. AMVROSIJA: A common acquaintance of Mr. Vig and me first came to Shamordino in 1996 and said, "There is a castle in Denmark. Don't you want it for the monastery?" (laughter) I asked, "But what would Shamordino do with a castle?" "Make a monastery there." I thought it was a bit of a joke, but a few years later, he came again and said, "The owner is ready now to make a monastery."

As I said, Mr. Vig had wanted to make a monastery at the castle for almost fifty years; he had bought the castle in 1957, the year I was born. (One of my friends said, "You were born, and Mr. Vig felt that it was time to buy the castle.") In 2000, he asked the Moscow Patriarchate to help him establish the monastery. Of course, when Mr. Vig first offered the castle, no one in Moscow took the offer very seriously... they were wise enough to see that it would probably come to nothing; but when our Matushka Igumenya asked the Patriarch, he said, "Well, you may go and see."

RTE: How did you feel about the condition of the castle?

MAT. AMVROSIJA: When the sisters in Shamordino saw the part of the film where I go from room to room, seeing the castle for the first time, they said, "Oh, Matushka Amvrosija was frightened." (laughing) But I wasn't, I was just investigating. I had already met Mr. Vig, and he was very picturesque. Judging by his appearance, it was somehow possible to imagine the state of the castle, so it was not a great surprise. Shamordino was much worse when we came in 1990 – we had no roofs, no windows, no doors, no heat, no electricity, nothing...



But on our first visit, we also found many coincidences between Hesbjerg Castle and our monastery. Matushka Igumenya's first impression was, "It reminds me of Shamordino!" Although the architecture is quite different – Shamordino has a Byzantine-Russian style, while this is absolutely Neo-Renaissance – but still, Matushka felt something. As we walked around that first morning, we saw the date the castle was built inscribed on the wall – 1884, the same year as Shamordino! A little further on, we saw an iron monogram on the side of the castle – the letters A and M – which stood for Andreas Milo, Hesbjerg's first owner. For us, this is also the Russian abbreviation for Ambrose – Elder Ambrose of Optina, the founder of our monastery.

When I first came to Hesbjerg, I thought, "Alright, here is the building, and once we prepare the plans and documents, we can begin the restoration. I'll start things and then the Moscow Patriarchate can send whatever monks or nuns they want, and I will go back to Shamordino. Mr. Vig's original plan was to have a mixed monastery of all different religions.

RTE: His interest in the East is apparent in the scene where you are cleaning out the castle and he comes downstairs with a Buddha in his arms.

MAT. AMVROSIJA: Yes. During the Soviet period in Russia, there was a well-known film comedy in which the authorities of a region change very often, and each time, someone says, "Another power is coming." Mr. Vig was sitting on the bench with this Buddha, when my godson, Ilia, smiled and said, "Now another power is coming."

Of course, Mr. Vig and I had very serious talks about belief, because belief is not a joke, it is a matter of our future, eternal life. He had gone deeply into Buddhism as a Lutheran priest, but when I asked him, "Are you Christian or Buddhist?" he answered, "I am Christian. I'm Orthodox, but I study Buddhism." This was his position. He always insisted on the idea that Buddha was a prophet of Christ and that in some way Buddhism should blend with Christianity. As he says in the film, "It is difficult to change the ideas of an old man." He was very fixed in his ideas. His "Yes" was a "Yes" forever.

RTE: Did he formally become Orthodox?

MAT. AMVROSIJA: Yes, in 2002, at a Russian monastery in Alatyr in Chuvashia. Mr. Vig was very conscientious and serious about becoming Orthodox. He had studied Orthodoxy from the time he was a student at the Sorbonne, and

*Opposite: Garden at Hesbjerg.*

had met Russian émigrés in France. In 1996 he spent a year in St. Petersburg attending an ecclesiastical academy. When he was chrismated, the priest enumerated all of the points of Orthodox doctrine that differ from Lutheranism, and asked Mr. Vig if he agreed to them. Mr. Vig said yes, and then he added a final point of his own that was not on the list.

RTE: In the film, it wasn't obvious that he spoke much Russian.

MAT. AMVROSIJA: (*laughing*) No, he did speak Russian, but he didn't like to, because he was afraid of making mistakes. He preferred to correct my English instead. If you remember Ilia from the film, who helped us – Mr. Vig would always ask Ilia to correct his Russian, but never me. He was a bit jealous of the fact that I was a nun and he was a layman. I think he would have liked to become a monk, but he died before that could happen.

RTE: How did he die?

MAT. AMVROSIJA: Mr. Vig died in India in 2005. He was a pacifist and had gone to a world peace conference there. His death was a great shock. Of course, we will all have to die, now or later, but because he was very strong, we never expected it would be so soon. Before his departure for India, he'd caught a cold, and I told him, "You shouldn't go anywhere, you should stay here and take care of your health," but he said, "It's very cold in the castle, it will be much warmer in India." I thought that perhaps it really would be better for him to go to a warmer climate because the castle never goes above 12° C. [about 50° F.]. As it turned out, the nights in India were very cold and Mr. Vig caught pneumonia. Two days before his planned arrival back in Denmark we received a call from him. He was very angry as he had been forced to go into the hospital, which he would never have done on his own. He said, "The doctors won't let me go home without someone to accompany me." We immediately began trying to obtain visas for India, but six hours later, we received a call from the doctor saying that he had died.

The worst thing for me was that he died in India without the sacraments, but I had some peace when I saw that the fortieth day after his repose coincided with the feast day of the New Martyrs of Russia, which includes the Tsar's family. Our church at Hesbjerg Castle is dedicated to Tsar Nicholas II and his family, the Holy Royal Martyrs. This was also Mr. Vig's choice because Tsar Nicholas was half-Danish through his mother, and his children were one-quarter Danish.

RTE: It must have been a consolation to have the fortieth day fall on that feast. How did you come to feel so close to the Royal family? Since you didn't grow up as a believer, you must have only had the standard Soviet account of them in school.

MAT. AMVROSIJA: While I was at the university, I was given the English book, *Nicholas and Alexandra*. To tell the truth, I don't like the book very much, but there were photos there. This was the first time in my life that I saw photos of the family. I was not a believer, in fact, I was far from the church – I was

an active Komsomol member and believed deeply in Komsomol's values – but when I saw their faces, something happened in my heart. I understood that they were so very dear to me, so close – as close as my nearest and most beloved relatives. From that time, I couldn't help thinking about them.

RTE: After Mr. Vig's repose, did you receive legal title to the castle? The outcome was unclear in the film.

MAT. AMVROSIJA: Mr. Vig didn't want to divide his property, so he left everything to a foundation for peace research, with the condition that the foundation allow us to use the castle and the surrounding grounds.



*Clearing the boiler room.*

Mr. Vig died three years ago, and we are still working through the legalities: first of all, to change the status of the castle and its grounds, which are listed as agricultural. In Denmark, agricultural land can only be owned by a person who is a documented farmer, not an organization such as a monastery or a foundation. The foundation's only choice was to sell the 40 hectares [almost 100 acres] of agricultural fields to a farmer, and then they were able to change the status of the castle and grounds. Now, we are finalizing the agreement between the foundation and the Moscow Patriarchate, which states that the castle will be given to the Moscow Patriarchate to use for 99 years. After ten years, the Moscow Patriarchate can prolong this use for a second 99 years. If the foundation ceases to exist, then the castle and its grounds will belong to the Moscow Patriarchate.



We have a very good relationship with the foundation, and we are being helped by Mr. Vig's former Danish lawyer – a wonderful man, who has continued to assist us since Mr. Vig's death. I asked him once, "You are a Protestant of Protestant missionary parents, and we are making an Orthodox monastery here. To be honest, if a Protestant came to Russia to build a church, I would not like it at all. Why are you helping us?" He answered, "I think that an Orthodox monastery here will be a kind of challenge for our Danish church and make it more active."

At first, I hesitated over the foundation retaining ownership of the castle, because if you are going to put all of your efforts and resources into a place, you must be sure that it will be yours to use, but our lawyer said, "If you think that the Moscow Patriarchate will come to an end before the foundation, then you should hesitate, but, for myself, I don't doubt that the Moscow Patriarchate will go on forever." So, legally, all is well.

### The Castle

RTE: How do you live year-round in a castle whose highest temperature is 12° C.?

MAT. AMVROSLJA: It's difficult, but I've gotten used to it. I've been here for seven years now; there are services and liturgies here, and I have deep feelings for Hesbjerg Castle.

RTE: The castle's dilapidated roof and ancient boiler were the *bête noir* of the film. Are they fixed now?

MAT. AMVROSLJA: Pernille was not filming when this happened, but one day, Mr. Vig came with a lot of brochures and said that he was going to buy a new boiler, and asked Ilia and me which one he should choose. The price of the boilers were from 20,000 to 50,000 Danish kroner (about \$4,000 to \$10,000). Mr. Vig, of course, wanted to buy the cheapest. Ilia investigated them all and said, "Mr. Vig, for our castle, we need the one for 24,000 kroner (\$ 4,700). The difference in cost is small, but it will give twice the amount of energy." Mr. Vig said, "No, it's too expensive." I suggested that if it was too expensive we could wait until the money was available to get what we really needed, but three days later he brought the 20,000 kroner boiler, which simply can't heat such a large area. But it was always like that with Mr. Vig.

*Opposite: Hesbjerg Castle.*

In Russian we say, “When you economize unwisely, you pay twice.”

It was the same with the roof repair. There was a tile roof, but the roof beams had begun to decay and the tiles were too heavy for the wood. It was obvious to all of us that the roof had to be completely changed as the holes were very large, but Mr. Vig decided to only patch the holes, not to replace the entire roof. He paid a lot of money to Danish workers for this – \$10,000 for two days of work because they brought a special truck with a ladder. For this money my pilgrims could have changed the entire roof. But this was Mr. Vig’s “economy”. The roof is still only patched. Last year, Ilia repaired it without any special trucks. He just climbed up and did the work.

After Mr. Vig died, we also had to repair the chimneys. We had been forbidden to use them by the authorities because it was too dangerous. The foundation was going to take care of this, and with Danish workers it turned out to be about the same price as the roof – \$10,000. So, instead, the foundation bought the materials and Ilia and his friend rebuilt the chimneys.

RTE: I’m sure you miss Mr. Vig, but in some ways it’s probably easier now.

MAT. AMVROSIJA: In practical ways, of course it is much easier, because the members of the foundation are much more reasonable, but I miss him very much.

### Denmark’s Russian Connections

RTE: It may be interesting for our readers to know that relations between Denmark and Russia, including royal marriages, have a long history. St. Ansgar, the Apostle to the North, who was responsible for the conversion of the Danes, died in the same year that Sts. Cyril and Methodius began their translation of the Bible into Slavonic, which led to the conversion of the Slavs. The first king of the Danish “Golden Age”, Valdemar I (1157-1182), had a Russian mother and was given the name of his great-grandfather, the famous Vladimir Monomakh, Grand Prince of Kiev 1113-1125. Most recently the hereditary name Valdemar was given to the first-born child of Danish Crown Prince Frederik in 2006, who was baptized Christian Valdemar, and is a descendant of the 12th-century Russian prince. Finally, as you mentioned earlier, in the late 19th century, Dagmar, the daughter of King Christian IX of Denmark, married the future Russian Tsar Alexander III. In Russia, she was known as Empress Maria Feodorovna and their four children included Tsar Nicholas II, to whose family Hesbjerg’s church is dedicated as Orthodox new martyrs and passion-bearers.

MAT. AMVROSIJA: Another small but very interesting Danish-Slavic connection is that practically all Danish girls are given an Orthodox cross when they are baptized. The history of this practice goes back to the 13th century, when Valdemar II (the Victorious), the King of Denmark, was looking for a bride. He was given a portrait of a beautiful Slovakian Orthodox princess, whose name was Dragomira; he asked her father for her hand and she came from Slovakia (now Bohemia) as his bride. In Denmark, she was known as Dagmar. She was very loved by the Danish people, and stories of her kindness and generosity are still told. On her deathbed, the young queen asked her husband, the king, to free all prisoners and to lower the taxes of the peasants. She was



*Woodcutting for winter.*

buried in the king’s chapel. After some centuries, when another royal grave needed to be prepared, they opened Dagmar’s remains and found her Byzantine cross, which became a relic for the whole country. A copy of this cross is the traditional christening gift for girls, and as almost every Dane is baptized, so every home in Denmark has such an Orthodox cross. As you mentioned, it is also very interesting that Tsar Nicholas II’s mother was Dagmar, after Dragomira.

We also have some interesting personal links to this Russian-Danish connection as one of the founders of our monastery in Hesbjerg is Tatiana Ladyzhenskaya, who was close to Grand Duchess Olga Alexandrovna, Empress Marie Feodorovna’s daughter and Tsar Nicholas’ youngest sister. Also, about 30 kilometers from us lives a couple – a Danish woman who is Orthodox, and her Russian husband, Andrei, who is not a strong believer, but is interested. Andrei’s parents died when he was young, and he was adopted by General Dieterichs, the Russian White Army commander who investigated the murder of the Royal Family. It was a great surprise for him to find a church dedicated to the Tsar not far from his home, and we were equally surprised to find such a person living so close to us. It is a great gift. He and his wife gave us a very interesting present – an Orthodox catechism printed in Danish, which was published at the time that Princess Dagmar was preparing to marry the future Tsar Alexander III.

## Danish Neighbors and Parishioners

RTE: Are your Danish neighbors and visitors interested in the monastery?

MAT. AMVROSIJA: Since the film came out, I have had many Danish visitors. They mostly come out of curiosity, but a few are seriously interested. This spring I was visited by two young Danish men who had joined the Coptic Church, but found that the cultural differences were just too great for them. It is easier for them to connect with Russian Orthodoxy. We do have a few Danish Orthodox parishioners, and several émigrés who belonged to other Orthodox parishes, but now come to us because we are closer or because they like the full, traditional services.

We have one Danish parishioner who, two months before she visited Hesbjerg for the first time, had a kind of vision. She was lying down one day, but wasn't asleep, when suddenly she saw an old man with a beard in her room, dressed in a dark robe and wearing a large cross. She wasn't frightened, but she thought, "Who is this?" The answer was two letters, "A" and "M", and then he disappeared. She had an acquaintance from Belarus, who asked this woman to bring her to Hesbjerg. I don't know if they saw the letters "A and M" on the castle – I always forget to ask – but when they saw some of the icons we have for sale, this woman chose one. Her Belarusian friend asked, "Why this icon, this other one is much more beautiful." The woman said, "I don't know why, but I need this one." They began to look at it closely to see who it was, and they saw, "AM...", Ambrose of Optina. Later, she came with us to Shamordino, and was baptized there.

RTE: What is the religious climate in Denmark, and how do people view you?

MAT. AMVROSIJA: Although the state church is Lutheran, and there are many parishes, Danish people are not churchgoers in general, but they have been very friendly towards our project, and always want to help. For me, Danish people are very generous and open-hearted, and even if they aren't attending church, I think that our Lord will find a way to their souls. Perhaps I have been fortunate in that I have only met such people, but to me the most apparent feature in the Danish character is their kindness. Although they may not be conscious of it, they truly serve Christ in this way.

This is similar to when we returned to Shamordino in 1990. Although many Russians were not practicing believers, they still felt that the Church

*Opposite: Raising the Cross; Ilia, Mat. Ambrosija and Russian volunteers.*



is “mother.” There is a respect for the Church deep in their souls, and I feel something similar in Danish people. I was only able to study Danish for a month, but I found many common features in the structure of our languages, and in the way we express our thoughts, so it would not be surprising if we also have common spiritual traits.

Speaking of Danish-Russian connections, Mr. Vig was very proud of the fact that his family goes back to St. Vladimir. Once, we had a disagreement about a large and beautiful cross that we had brought from Russia (the one you see in the film). We had planned to put it on the highest tower of the castle, but Mr. Vig said, “We don’t need it. There is already a decoration there, why should we change it?” In the middle of our discussion, Mr. Vig left and returned with a large wood-covered book in which he showed me that, according to his family tree, he was descended from St. Vladimir. I said, “And so, Vladimir baptized Russia and you don’t want to put up the cross.” He thought for a moment and said, “We’ll put it up!”

Ilia, as I mentioned, was often a buffer between Mr. Vig and me, and at this point he suggested that we put a smaller cross over the church, leaving the highest tower for Mr. Vig’s decoration (which also incorporates a small cross). Everyone was satisfied.

RTE: Ilia was invaluable.

MAT. AMVROSIJA: Yes, and particularly so in that Mr. Vig always used to complain to him about me. It was good that he had someone to complain to, and that this person was Ilia, who managed things so that we were both satisfied.

RTE: How many other sisters do you have now?

MAT. AMVROSIJA: I am alone now, although a priest comes from Copenhagen twice a month to serve liturgy. I first came with the other sister you see in the film. I would like to have her all of the time, but she can’t be spared from Shamordino. However, I believe that if there is going to be a real monastery here, we should have Danish monastics. What is the use of transporting nuns back and forth from Russia?

Generally, though, I find that it is often difficult for people from a Protestant culture to accept Orthodoxy with the heart. It was this way for Mr. Vig, he accepted it in mind, but to open his heart was difficult. This will only come slowly. One of the biggest problems for our Danish parishioners is the length of our services. (I remember this feeling very well from when I began

going to church myself. It takes time to learn to stand through the services.) Sometimes they ask me, “Your services are too long, perhaps you will make them shorter? I can only answer, “If it is difficult for you, this is not a problem – you are welcome to sit in a chair, or even go to my room and sleep for part of the service. You can leave early – no one will judge you – but we need to have the full services, as they should be. This is the Orthodox tradition and to shorten it would be unfair to those who want the whole tradition.

When we began in Shamordino, there were no other churches in the surrounding area, and people only went to church on Pascha and Christmas. In



*Building the chapel.*

the first years, it was really a problem because people didn’t know how to behave. Instead of praying, I was completely occupied in running around the church, taking care of people and keeping order. Finally, one Christmas, when I was prepared as usual to run around and to keep order, I looked around and suddenly realized, “No, I don’t have to fix anything. Everything is alright. People are alright. No one is causing a disturbance – they are praying!” After some years, they had begun to pray.

Some Danish people ask me, “Why are you not active in missions? You should be more active.” But this is not my gift. We are very thankful to have gifted speakers and missionaries in the Church, but I think that for most of us, our missionary work is just to be Orthodox, which is even more difficult.” The main thing is not to speak, but to be.

RTE: After the Russian Revolution, when Grand Duchess Olga Alexandrovna, Tsar Nicholas II’s youngest sister, lived in Denmark, her motto for her life was “To be, and not to seem.”

MAT. AMVROSIJA: Yes, it is the same thought... though Mr. Vig was unhappy that I didn’t want to do active missionary work in the world.

RTE: You were already working sixteen or eighteen hours a day, doing all of the services, cooking, cleaning, taking care of Mr. Vig and your guests, restoring the monastery – and he wanted you to be a full-time missionary as well?

## Mr. Vig's Legacy

MAT. AMVROSIJA: Mr. Vig felt that our main purpose was to enlighten people but, as I said, we all have different characters and I am not at all talented in this. I am not yet good enough at being Orthodox myself, so how can I teach someone else? It is more important to become truly Orthodox.

RTE: But in the end, that's a mission as well, isn't it? – St. Seraphim's, "Acquire the Holy Spirit and thousands around you will be saved." Regardless of your differences over the renovation or philosophy, you and Mr. Vig were brought together at an important time: the end of his life and the beginning of the monastery.

MAT. AMVROSIJA: Yes, of course, and when people complain, "He wasn't fair to you, he should have settled the legal status of the castle before his death; he left you with all of these problems, he was not a good person," I always say, "Perhaps he was not an extremely nice person, but anyhow, he was a much better person than you or me because he is the founder of this church. Are you the founder of a church? Neither am I. Mr. Vig founded the church and it is not every person who can do this."

RTE: Towards the end of the film, when Mr. Vig becomes upset over your e-mail, there seems to be some very dry humor behind his comments. Pernille, the director, said in an interview that she felt his humor acutely. She was Danish herself, of course, and would have a keener sense of him, but did you see that as well?

MAT. AMVROSIJA: Yes, he was not a merry person, but he was very humorous inside. Some of my friends dislike him for his words in the movie when Pernille asks, "When is Mother Amvrosija going to come?" and he answers, "I don't know. You know that Russians have no conscience." But to understand our relationship, you have to look to the next scene where he runs after me around the castle during our Cross procession. He was always grumbling, but he knew what was important. And of course, we were very close. His grumbling was just family relations, nothing else. I am so thankful that Pernille didn't show me when I was grumbling. *(laughter)*

RTE: There are several moments such as the "Russians have no conscience" scene, in which it is very obvious that he misses you.

*Opposite: Ilia and Russian volunteers replacing the roof of Hesbjerg Castle.*



MAT. AMVROSIJA: Yes, he grumbled because he missed us, and that was how he expressed his feelings. He was also very attached to the church, but I only realized this one day after we'd had a great disagreement, and I said, "If you don't want us to stay, I can take the church out and go." He looked as if he was about to cry, and I really regretted that I had said so. I didn't know that it would hurt him so much. On the one hand, it was his idea to found a monastery; on the other, we were always struggling, as if we were against one another rather than doing the same work.

RTE: Pernille has managed to capture on film, what Dostoyevsky and Alexandros Papadiamandis portrayed in Russian and Greek literature: people struggling with faith, often disappointed and disillusioned, as was Mr. Vig, but beyond the disillusionment is the power of God, waiting to amend the failings and lead them to a resolution. What was it that made you stay through all of the difficulties?

MAT. AMVROSIJA: I stayed first of all because I am a nun, and secondly, because my character is to be very active, but this kind of constant activity is not good for a nun, and this is why I am so thankful to Mr. Vig.

RTE: Because he stood in the way?

MAT. AMVROSIJA: Yes, Mr. Vig made it impossible for me to do anything. I started out by struggling for the restoration and then I realized, "No, we are just to follow God's will, and see what the Lord is going to do about all of this." I stopped my struggles, became calm, and decided that, "What will be, will be." This is how our Lord showed me that restoring buildings is not the main thing. Of course, I already knew this in my mind, and I was always sorry about my unending activity, but I couldn't stop. I am so thankful to Mr. Vig that he stopped me.

RTE: And what did Mr. Vig receive? The day-to-day reality of building the monastery often seemed to catch him off-guard.

MAT. AMVROSIJA: I think that was the main idea of the film, that he only slowly realized what he was getting into. Although in the film he said that he wasn't a person who could love people, I don't think that this was true; he was very much attached to us.

Mr. Vig was looking for truth; he was a seeker. Because of his upbringing, it was difficult for him to accept Orthodoxy with his heart, but the Lord found a way to reach him. God gave the castle into Mr. Vig's hands, and then accepted it back as a gift from him. Each person has his own measure, but we are all equally dear to our Lord, and because Mr. Vig was looking for the way to come to God, I believe this is how the Lord helped him. ✦

Monastery address:  
Orthodox Monastery of the Holy Royal Martyrs/Hesbjergvej  
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*Matushka Amvrosija at Mr. Vig's grave.*