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ST. SERAPHIM'S CANONIZATION AND THE RUSSIAN ROYAL FAMILY AT SAROV


“As concerns the sanctity and miraculousness of Saint Seraphim, of this I am already so convinced that no one will ever shake my conviction. I have unconquerable proof for it.”

Tsar Nicholas II, ca. 1900

St. Seraphim of Sarov and Tsar Nicholas II stand out as the two most illumined figures in the landscape of modern Russian ecclesiastical and political history. Their earthly lives were separated by three decades, but overlapped in eternity, bound together by the mysterious providence of God with the fate of Orthodox Russia – its seventy years of oppression and its resurrection from the ashes of humiliation.

According to Nicholas Motovilov, St. Seraphim's spiritual son and chronicler, St. Seraphim prophesied his spiritual links with the future tsar before his repose in 1833:

The great Elder Batiushka Seraphim, speaking with me about his flesh (he never called his flesh “relics”) mentioned the name of the Most Pious Sovereign Nicholas, his Most Devout Consort Alexandra Feodorovna, and



Empress Alexandra Romanov after immersing herself in the holy spring.



Royal Family at Sarov.

his mother, the Dowager Empress Maria Feodorovna. Recalling the Sovereign Nicholas, he said, "He is in soul a Christian."

From a variety of miscellaneous sources, Motovilov's own journals, letters and hastily scribbled notes on small bits of paper, it is evident that he expected and searched for ways to bring about the canonization of St. Seraphim during the reign of Nicholas I; his wife, Alexandra Feodorovna; and his mother, Marie Feodorovna. His efforts were unsuccessful and he was bitterly disappointed because the results were seemingly so contrary to the prediction of the starets who had linked his glorification with that precise combination of royal names.

Motovilov died in 1879. Could he or anyone else have guessed that fifty years after the death of Nicholas I, the very same names would reappear upon the throne of Russia: Nicholas II, his wife Alexandra Feodorovna, and his mother, Marie Feodorovna? The canonization of St. Seraphim would be solemnized during the reign of the last autocratic monarchs of Russia.

St. Seraphim had not only predicted the canonization, but the arrival of the tsar and his family for the celebration:

The Tsar will come to us with his entire family. What joy there will be and Pascha will be sung in the summer.

In the *Diveyevo Chronicles*, the history of Diveyevo Convent, it is recorded that before his repose, St. Seraphim handed a letter to N.A. Motovilov, with instructions to deliver it to the tsar who would visit Sarov. After Motovilov's death, the letter was preserved by his wife, Elena Ivanovna. When Tsar Nicholas II came from Sarov in 1903 to visit Diveyevo, he was

met by the nuns, lining both sides of the road leading to Diveyevo with Elena Ivanovna Motovilov at their head, who presented the tsar with the letter from St. Seraphim.

In Russian church circles, this letter has long been rumored to be a prophecy of the family's death. Tsar Nicholas and Tsaritsa Alexandra never revealed the contents of the letter, but their obvious hopes for the future (recorded in their letters from captivity and the recollection of those who shared their imprisonment and survived) make this supposition doubtful. Without revealing their personal end, however, the letter could well have outlined the future of Russia.

On that same visit to Diveyevo, the tsar visited Blessed Parasceva (Pasha of Sarov), a clairvoyant fool-for-Christ. They spoke alone, and when the tsar emerged from the blessed one's cell, those awaiting him reported that he was pale and shaken. Later, as the Revolution drew near, Pasha one day took her portraits of the Emperor and Empress from the wall and dashed them to the ground before her horrified visitors, instructing her cell attendant to take them to the attic – a prophecy of the overthrow of the monarchy and the family's imprisonment and death.

At the turn of the century, however, the political horizon was not yet so dark and Tsar Nicholas actively encouraged the Russian synod of bishops to canonize St. Seraphim. Initially he met with resistance. A few years earlier he had championed the glorification of St. John Maximovitch of Tobolsk, but according to one contemporary source, the bishops, nervous about a general increase in the number of petitions for canonization, were reluctant

over St. Seraphim's. They did not want to move quickly in an area that had traditionally taken decades and sometimes centuries to settle. A fear of imperial authority encroaching on church affairs may have contributed to their reluctance to finalize the official canonization, although the whole of Russia had been venerating the saint for decades.

In a Christian monarchy, however, imperial and ecclesiastical authority were never as sharply divided and delineated as in Western representative governments. The modern brief, secular, political ceremony of the "oath of office" is an echo of the installation of a monarch, a solemn rite in the Orthodox Church. The anointing of the monarch was far more than an ecclesiastical seal on the "divine right of kings," for it was essentially an oath by the emperor that he would not only rule Russia, but that he would answer to God for Russia; his defense of its people and their Christianity would be the uppermost concern of his entire life. To a Christian prince, absolute power bore the crossbar of absolute responsibility.

As emperor, Nicholas was united to his subjects, not through the vote of an electoral college, but precisely through the religious rite of coronation. During the anointing service, he was admonished by Metropolitan Seraphim of Moscow in the Kremlin's Dormition Cathedral:

Your ancestral crown belongs to you alone, as Absolute Tsar, but all Orthodox Christians are worthy of the anointing, which to them is given but once [at Chrismation]. If you should be blessed through this sacrament to perceive a new life, the reason is this - that as there is no power higher, so there is no power on earth more arduous than the power of the Tsar, no burden so wearisome as the duty of the Tsar. Through this visible anointing, may the invisible might of heaven descend upon you to augment your powers as Tsar and light the way for your pursuit of the welfare and happiness of your devoted subjects.

Thus, the tsar's rights as autocratic emperor were inextricably bound up with his duty before God. As "Defender of the Faith," he was obliged to safeguard the earthly processes of the Church, as well as the political sphere. From his own words it is apparent that Nicholas II perceived his efforts to encourage the canonization of these two saints (already popularly venerated for decades) as part of his duty as a king and as a Christian.

Another element of reluctance on the part of the synod may have been their discomfort with the prophetic sayings attributed to St. Seraphim that foretold the destruction of Orthodox Russia and the fall of the monarchy,

prophecies which in the first years of Nicholas' reign seemed highly improbable. Nevertheless, the tsar repeatedly requested the synod to turn its attention towards the proposed canonization, and finally, in 1902, the petition for the elder's glorification was approved.

The love and veneration of the royal family for St. Seraphim was recorded time and again in conversations, personal letters and notes. Tsar Nicholas had a large portrait-icon of the saint mounted in his office, and publicly proclaimed his belief in the elder's sanctity long before the canonization was approved.

Although Empress Alexandra initially had great difficulty in converting to Orthodoxy from her native German Lutheranism, by 1903 her Orthodox faith and her veneration for St. Seraphim was deeply personal. Having given birth to four daughters, Alexandra's lack of a male heir to the throne was giving rise to what one author called, "a private guilt with public consequences." During her visit to the monastery for the glorification festivities, the empress went to St. Seraphim's healing spring deep in Sarov forest and immersed herself in the water, praying for a son. In twelve months Tsarevitch Alexis was born. Thirteen years later, the empress' life-long gratitude shines through her letters from captivity. Writing to a friend, she remarks, "Oh, how I long to go to Sarov!"

While it is still uncertain whether St. Seraphim's letter, delivered by Elena Motovilov, had foretold their personal fate, Nicholas and Alexandra were doubtless acquainted with the elder's prophecies concerning Russia as a whole. The morning after the first of the 1905 series of strikes and massive political unrest that led to the establishment of the Duma, Empress Alexandra requested material from the state historical archives relating to St. Seraphim's prophecies of the future of Russia. His canonization in 1903 had been a triumphant moment in the emperor's reign; the will of the tsar and his subjects uniting in an outpouring of veneration for the monk who, seventy years earlier, had accurately taken the pulse of twentieth-century Russia. In the ensuing unrest, the empress turned in prayer to the saint they had glorified.

1903: The Canonization

July 19/August 1, 1903. When the royal entourage arrived at Arzamas, nearly half a million pilgrims had reached the monastery. The road was choked with multitudes of believers, both peasants and well-to-do pilgrims who had chosen to walk the last miles out of reverence. Many had been on

the road for months, some from as far away as Siberia. The immense crowd pulsed with anticipation and wave after wave of expectant souls flowed through the gates of Sarov Monastery, the “Russian Jerusalem.” From every corner of the empire people came, dressed in bright regional costumes, in rags, in genteel finery, but all with one purpose: to venerate one of the most beloved figures of Russian history.

The physical rigor of a pilgrimage, often involving great sacrifices and discomfort, is itself an act of veneration, a physical expression of the soul’s willingness to bow before God and his saint. Emperor Nicholas II and Empress Alexandra walked the last stretch of road with the pilgrims and on the day of the canonization received Holy Communion in the midst of their subjects, the apogee of their reign as earthly guardians of the Church.

Contemporary sources compiled rich descriptions of the proceedings. The canonization began with the previous evening’s vesper service; the booming of the monastery bells could be heard twenty kilometers away. One hundred thousand pilgrims filled the monastery churches and square, and thousands more stood astride the walls and lined the road leading through the ancient Sarov forest, all awaiting the moment when the relics would be opened for veneration.

Metropolitan Anthony of St. Petersburg led the family and clergy in procession to the Cathedral of the Dormition. Inside the church, Sarov monks and Diveyevo nuns waited, candles in hand, with the multitude of worshippers. A cathedral choir from St. Petersburg sang stichera for the saint while the clergy served the final pannikhida. Holding the cross on high, the metropolitan led the procession through the cathedral’s west gate into the Church of Saints Zosima and Sabbatius, where the elder’s relics lay. As the metropolitan censed the coffin, the crowd prostrated to the ground. The tsar and five grand dukes stepped forward, and lifting the coffin to their shoulders, carried it from the church. As the procession made its way through the open square, a deep silence fell over the crowd, broken only by sounds of weeping and stifled cries of joy. Peasants scattered linen towels, scarves or skeins of thread along the path, which they afterwards gathered as treasured mementos of grace from the moment of the coffin’s passing.

Halting at the west door of Dormition Cathedral, the clergy sang the litya that accompanies every vigil service, a prayer originating in fourth-century Jerusalem. Carried up the steps and into the cathedral, the relics were then placed in an ornate newly-carved sepulcher. Bishop Innocent of Tambov

stepped forward to give the sermon:

*“What message does this sepulcher hold for us? By the grace of God it is a heavenly revelation, a witness to the Lord’s majestic power, a clear sign of heavenly reward for earthly righteousness, and the source of the most profound Christian feelings. We know that this coffin conceals the holy relics of a righteous one, a God-pleaser, a man of prayer and ascetic podvig, great in his simplicity, crowned with modesty and humility, burning with the love of Christ for everyone he met. In St. Seraphim’s relics we come face to face with the profound truth of Holy Orthodoxy. In the relics of this man of prayer we sense the quickening life in our Russian Church. Our church is not dead, it has not grown cold or turned to stone; rather, adorned with new and righteous saints it grows even younger and blossoms forth new shoots... These holy relics are a sign of the mercy and grace of God towards the Russian people and the Holy Orthodox Church. The heavens have opened to reveal a new man of prayer, a new intermediary and intercessor for us unworthy ones, who stands before the Lord for us ... and in the tender joy of our faith, in the presence of the saint in his wondrous icon, we sing to him: “We glorify thee, righteous Father Seraphim.” Amen.**

At the close of his sermon, Metropolitan Anthony lifted the embroidered cover from the coffin, and the immense crowd fell to its knees. Thousands of gleaming candles flickered at the vibration of the great cathedral bells booming out the glorification, and the entire church joined in the thunderous roar of praise: *“We magnify, we magnify thee, our Blessed Father Seraphim, and we honour thy holy memory, instructor of monks, and converser with angels ... For thou dost pray for us to Christ our God.”* It took days for the immense crowd to file past the relics of the saint to pay him homage, and many stayed in makeshift shelters near the monastery for weeks and months after the canonization.

The canonization echoed around the world as Russians throughout the empire and abroad joined in venerating the saint who, along with “the tsar who glorified him,” continues to play a uniquely prophetic role in the resurrection of Holy Russia. †

* Grateful acknowledgment to *Religious and Secular Forces in Late Tsarist Russia*, ed. C. Timberlake, U. of Washington Press, Seattle, 1982, for its partial translation of the canonization service sermon.