



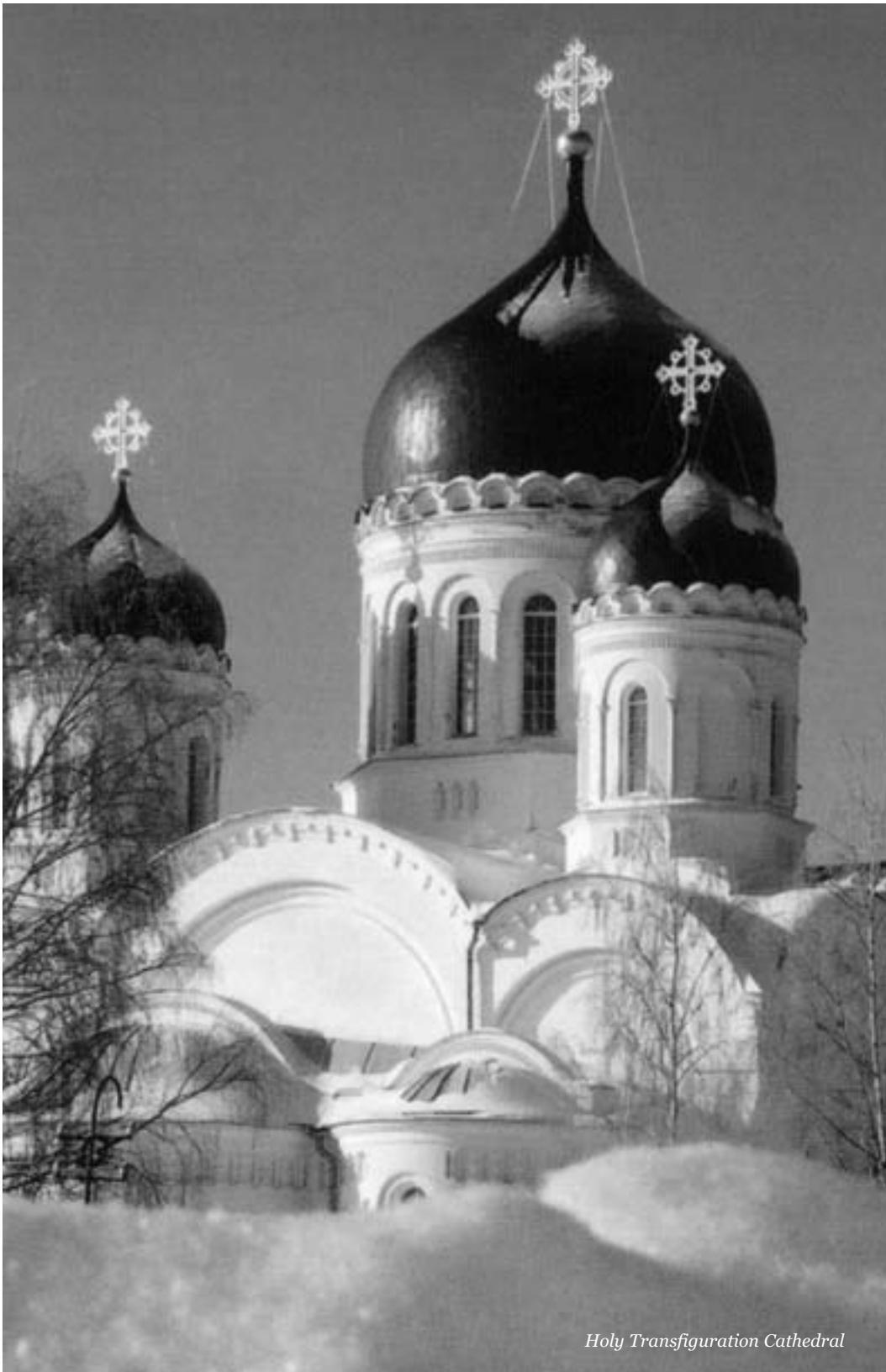
A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

ROAD TO EMMAUS

Help support
Road to Emmaus
Journal.

The *Road to Emmaus* staff hopes that you find our journal inspiring and useful. While we offer our past articles on-line free of charge, we would warmly appreciate your help in covering the costs of producing this non-profit journal, so that we may continue to bring you quality articles on Orthodox Christianity, past and present, around the world. Thank you for your support.

Please consider a donation to Road to Emmaus by visiting the Donate page on our website.



Holy Transfiguration Cathedral

DIVEYEVO: A PILGRIM'S CHRONICLE

1993-2003

by Mother Nectaria McLees

When I asked my Moscow parish priest how he had found his summer pilgrimage to the Holy Trinity-Diveyevo Women's Monastery, he replied, "Diveyevo is the center of the universe." Most Russian Christians would agree. Veneration of St. Seraphim has spread like wildfire over the past decade, not only among new Russian believers, but around the world, recalling the fervent piety of pre-revolutionary Russia. In 1991 the saint's relics were found in the basement of a former Soviet anti-religious museum in St. Petersburg and returned to the monastery, bringing tens of thousands of pilgrims in their wake and making Diveyevo the most revered pilgrimage site in Russia.

Reposing in 1833, St. Seraphim's monastic life had been spent behind the walls (and later in the forest) of the great Sarov Monastery, thirty kilometers from Diveyevo, two hours by bus from Arzamas. A hieromonk, elder, and hermit – in his own lifetime thousands of pilgrims made the trip to Sarov for spiritual counsel and solace. Living for two decades in hermitages deep in the Sarov forest, the elder was also the spiritual father of the Diveyevo nuns and a guide for monastics and lay-people.

St. Seraphim prepared himself to receive the spiritual gifts so abundantly given by God through a disciplined, constant struggle with the passions. During one period of forest asceticism he spent the better part of a thousand days and nights kneeling in prayer on a large rock. He was granted visions, both of the demonic world – which he would only describe as

“foul”– and of the heavenly realm. The Mother of God appeared to him no less than twelve times. During his earthly life, pilgrims said that even to look on him was a joy, and so it remains today. As one approaches the saint’s sepulcher, the almost tangible grace of his relics fills the soul with a sense of “present eternity” and the certainty of God’s love.

The most complete source of information about Diveyevo Monastery is *The Diveyevo Chronicles*, which describe the history of the convent and the life, sayings and miracles of St. Seraphim. Unfortunately, only portions of this work have been translated into English, a hardship for non-Russian speakers to the monastery, who can only guess at the treasure hidden between the covers. A much smaller but nonetheless valuable account of a 1926 visit to Sarov and Diveyevo is *We Were Guests at St. Seraphim’s* authored by Dr. F. A. Timofievich,¹ serialized in English in the 1991 - 1992 *Orthodox Word* magazine.

Sarov

Diveyevo Monastery has only recently acquired St. Seraphim’s relics. At his repose in 1833, he was laid to rest in his own monastery at Sarov. When Sarov was closed in 1927, the relics were exhibited in an anti-religious museum, attracting huge crowds of believers who surreptitiously came to venerate. Realizing that their attempt to discredit the saint had backfired, Soviet

authorities secretly moved the relics to St. Petersburg where they were stored for sixty years in a box in the basement of a second museum. After serving as a prison camp and then an orphanage for the children of prisoners, in 1946 Sarov was renamed Arzamas-16 and the monastery used to house the Soviet Union’s nuclear weapons research facilities. Today the village and the monastery buildings are still off-limits to non-villagers and



Lithograph of Sarov Monastery, 1784.

those without a security clearance. The monastery has not yet been returned to the church, and St. Seraphim’s relics are now enshrined at the convent in Diveyevo, as the elder himself predicted a century and a half earlier.

¹ Timofievich, F.A. *We Were Guests at St. Seraphim’s*, Orthodox Word, trans. R. Betts, 1991-1992



Church of the Dormition, Sarov, 1920.



Sarov Monastery, early 20th century.

Dr. Timofievich describes his approach to Sarov from Diveyevo in 1926, a year before the monastery's closing:

Leaving the village, we walked along the country road, through fields and small forests. A few miles further on we came to a large village called Balikovo. Behind this, on the horizon, one could barely see a dark patch of the Sarov forest. The road was mainly sand and our feet slipped on it, thereby slowing down our pace, but we briskly went forward, trying especially hard not to leave our fellow travelers behind ... A little more effort and we were in the forest which for tens of miles surrounded Sarov Monastery. Enormous spruces and pines, shaggy with moss, tightly wove their branches, forming a mysterious semi-darkness.

The road through the forest went on for about two miles and then a green wall suddenly appeared. Before us stood Sarov, all aglow with its numerous cupolas, surrounded by towers and walls and encircled below by a river. It appeared before us like the mysterious "city of Kitez",² rising out of the deep abyss and sparkling with the gold of the cupolas under the rays of the setting sun.

² Kitez – In Russian fables, an enchanted city lying at the bottom of a great lake.

We stood as if entranced, contemplating this magnificent picture, but a powerful ring of the bell – one, then another, then a third – flowed over the river and the forest, awaking and calling the human heart to prayer. We increased our pace.

Crossing a bridge and climbing a hill, we turned left past the inn. After passing through the holy gates with their tall bell tower pointing straight up to the sky, we found ourselves right inside the monastery itself.

Within the huge space enclosed by a wall and buildings towered the Summer Cathedral. In front of it and slightly off to the side was the Winter Cathedral of the Life-giving Spring. To the right was a wonderful new church in honor of St. Seraphim; to the left – the Church of Saints Zosima and Sabbatius, behind which could be seen the cupola of the Church of St. John the Baptist...

Of course the first thing I did was to go and venerate St. Seraphim's reliquary and with tears of joy to thank him for the innumerable blessings shown to me, a sinner... My life's dream was fulfilled. With great reverence we kissed the relics of the saint. Thanks to the fact that a small square opening was made at the head of the reliquary, it was possible to venerate his very head and this created a special feeling of being close to the saint.

Dr. Timofievich reports that by the time of his visit in 1926, the rock in the forest, which St. Seraphim had knelt on for one hundred days and nights, had been so diminished at the hands of pious pilgrims who wanted a remembrance of their pilgrimage that the abbot of Sarov blessed it to be hewn into pieces and taken to the monasteries of Sarov and Diveyevo for safekeeping. Another rock was put in its place to mark the spot, and even now Christians sometimes slip into the woods to venerate the places where St. Seraphim lived and labored.

A later inhabitant of Sarov Monastery, a concentration camp prisoner, recalls:

"Around our barracks, as a thick green wall, stood a forest of age-old pines. Amidst the columns of their red trunks was the bright emerald green of curving birches – the unforgettable Sarov forest – unique in the world. Involuntarily, we all felt the invisible power and the grace-filled closeness of the holy monastery."

After the monastery was closed by the Bolsheviks in 1927, the Sarov forest

was cut down and the lumber exported abroad. Although the birch forest has renewed itself, the immense, moss-laden pines, the growth of centuries, are gone. The desecrated monastery was first used as a prison camp for believers and civil criminals, and the prisoners were forced to cut the virgin woods. Camp authorities of succeeding decades suffered so often from extreme depression, mental illness and even suicide, that the camp was closed, later to reopen as a state home for the children of prisoners. The children themselves often spoke of seeing an elder in a white *podraznik* and black half-mantle, the saint's usual dress.

St. Seraphim's Spring

Deep in the Sarov forest was St. Seraphim's spring, which originated in the saint's own lifetime. Needing a source of fresh water near his hermitage, the elder prayed to the Mother of God, who appeared and struck the ground with her staff, causing the spring to flow. She told him that it would be a source of healing to all who approached it in faith, and so it was. Innumerable pilgrims immersed themselves in the spring, including Empress Alexandra Feodorovna, the wife of Tsar Nicholas II, who came as a suppliant, hoping to give birth to an heir to the throne. Within a year, Tsarevitch Alexis was born.

After the monastery was closed, the spring was deliberately mired by local Soviet authorities, who were only satisfied when it was finally cemented over in the 1950's. Less than a decade later, however, St. Seraphim began to

appear at night inside the forested military zone between Sarov and Diveyevo. He was seen by many of the soldiers who reported being approached by an old man in a white robe with a staff. Shouting at him to halt, they shot at close range but the bullets never touched him. This became such a common occurrence that when a shaken new recruit came to report his first sighting to his superiors, he was simply told to forget it.



Pilgrims at original spring of St. Seraphim in the Sarov woods, circa 1900.

St. Seraphim's Spring near village of Tsiganovka.

One night in the 1960's, the saint appeared in front of soldiers making their rounds and, like the Mother of God a century earlier, struck a large rock with his staff. Another powerful spring gushed forth, given by God as consolation to the faithful for the loss of the first. The guards were so shaken by the apparition and the very real water, that, when pilgrims began to visit (many having been summoned by visions of St. Seraphim), they were allowed to use the spring until the mid-70's, when a new commander decreed an end to the visits.

A bulldozer was brought in to mire the pond and block its source, but when it broke down on the way to the site, one of the workers was forced to walk back to the village for a spare part. The other, who stayed with the bulldozer, reported that after about an hour he saw a man in a white robe come from the forest, calling his name, "Vasili, why do you want to stop my spring?" Vasili, surprised and nervous, answered, "I have orders from the authorities." The saint replied, "You won't be able to carry them out." In fact, the spare part was not found in the village. Three days later, when the bulldozer was finally repaired and the workers ready to return, a sudden telegram from Moscow unaccountably announced that a large area of the forest, including the site of the spring, had been declared a national preserve and was no longer under military supervision.

Vasili, who was not a believer, went home and told his mother what he had seen. She, in turn, took him to Matushka Margarita, the last living nun of pre-revolutionary Diveyevo, who lived in the village dressed as a laywoman. Matushka Margarita showed him an icon of St. Seraphim, and Vasili replied, "Yes, he's the one!"

Pilgrims still come steadily to the spring, and even now, people driving near the area late at night often report hearing beautiful unearthly singing. The water is widely believed to have the same curative power as the first spring, and is especially helpful in relieving depression. St. Seraphim emphasized the need for faith and hope in God as a precursor of healing, and told one of the pilgrims to whom he appeared that water poured over rocks from the spring bed would carry the same blessing as if the petitioner had come to the spring himself.

About a half-hour's drive from Diveyevo is a dirt road leading to a narrow footpath that follows the stream bed to its source. The stream is bordered with birches and a variety of low bushes and shrubs. During the summer the forest is filled with wild mushrooms and berries, and the warm damp earth



Cross procession to St. Seraphim's Spring near the village of Tsiganovka.

and fragrant grass give off a rich, pungent smell. The morning we went to the spring the weather was fine and clear, the sun shone brightly and birds sang from the thickets. Along the way we stopped to pick sneet, the small green three-leafed plant, which St. Seraphim ate almost exclusively during his three-year forest reclusion. The plant is about 3-6 inches high and tastes much like carrot greens. In the summer it can be picked and eaten raw; in the winter the elder boiled the dried sneet he had collected for soup.

The two-kilometer footpath winds through the woods, bordered on one side by a large meadow and on the other by the stream itself. A final incline leads to the top of a hill overlooking the spring-fed pond. Water flows out the far end of the pond into the stream and down towards the road. The pond is in a small hollow and access to the far bank, where pilgrims swim, is by a log footbridge about thirty feet above the water. When pilgrims arrive

at the site, they gather to sing an akathist to St. Seraphim and then immerse themselves in the pond, first the men, and then the women. The feeling of the spot is one of joy and expectancy, a hope of healing for both physical and spiritual infirmity.

Diveyevo Women's Monastery

From Moscow, a pilgrimage to Diveyevo involves an overnight train ride to Arzamas, and from Arzamas, two hours by bus to the village. The monastery stands like an island in Diveyevo's midst. Although the convent was founded decades before St. Seraphim became its spiritual father, it flourished physically and spiritually under his guidance. Since the early twentieth century, the village has grown up around it, and many of the municipal buildings were once monastery property. Before the 1917 Russian revolution, the convent itself was a small village with 1,060 nuns, nine churches and fourteen altars. All were desecrated, and some completely razed. As of 1995 the convent restored two of its four major churches enough to use for services.

Diveyevo was closed in the autumn of 1927, a few months after the Bolsheviks seized Sarov. The last liturgy was served in the Church of the Mother of God, Joy of All Who Sorrow, on the feast of the Nativity of the Virgin. The convent was given back to the Orthodox Church in 1991, and by September of 1993 there were over 200 nuns officially enrolled as members of the sisterhood. One hundred and fifty of them live in the main monastery, three to five sisters to a room. The rest live in small sketes in the vicinity where they raise livestock, grow fruit and vegetables, and fish in the nearby lakes.

As much of the original monastery has not yet been returned to the church, Diveyevo does not yet have room for all who want to join; about eighty girls and women from all over Russia live in the village waiting to



*Matushka Sergeiya and sisters.
Cross procession, 1996.*



Diveyevo Monastery bell tower, where the keys were struck from Mat. Margarita's hand in 1927 as the Soviets closed the monastery.

be accepted. Those who have a little money, or whose families can help, rent a room which they share with ten to fifteen other hopeful novices. They come early to services, work at the monastery until late at night, and then go home to sleep.

Matushka Sergeiya, the abbess of the convent, is a remarkable woman who has taken on one of the most difficult tasks of post-Soviet Russia. Besides being responsible for the spiritual and physical welfare of what may eventually be over a thousand nuns, she is also in charge of the reconstruction of Diveyevo's churches and is a key figure in negotiations with local authorities for the return of monastery property. She not only oversees the monastery's spiritual life, but manages the outlying sketes and the reception of tens of thousands of pilgrims who arrive each year. Prior to becoming a nun, Matushka Sergeiya earned both medical and dental degrees. She is well-loved by her sisters, and as we found ourselves, takes time to extend her kindness and hospitality to visiting pilgrims.

As you approach the village, the monastery's bell tower rises in the distance, for seventy years a silent witness to the mysterious providence of God, Who allowed its closing. The old summer church, dedicated to the Holy Trinity, has been restored and it is here that St. Seraphim's relics are enshrined. Spring and summer, the square in front of the church is brilliant with flowers, criss-crossed by a myriad of little footpaths. Wide, birch-lined walkways lead to the main gate, the trapeza and the guest-house, and to the famous "*kanafka*," the canal of the Mother of God.

As one enters the church, the gilded main iconostasis is directly in view. To the left is an ornately carved wooden sepulcher enshrining St. Seraphim's relics, and behind, a small glass case containing his belongings: bark shoes, articles of clothing, a cross, and a cup. To the right is a large free-standing icon of the Umilienie (Tender Feeling) icon of the Mother of God. This is a replica of the original from St. Seraphim's cell, which is kept in the patriarch's residence in Moscow, where it was taken for safe-keeping during the Soviet years.

In the altar, the sisters keep an old iron cauldron, insignificant in appearance, but dear to every pilgrim who knows Diveyevo. During the last decades of St. Seraphim's life, after years of strict reclusion, he was ordered by the Mother of God to again receive visitors, and as the news spread, crowds of pilgrims thronged the monastery. In Russia there is a lovely, time-honored tradition of giving little gifts to guests, and even in his poverty, the saint was able to practice this hospitality. He also used his iron soup cauldron to bake

rye bread, and when guests arrived he gave them bits of this bread as a blessing. After his repose, St. Seraphim appeared to a Diveyevo nun and told her that bread kept in the cauldron would carry the same blessing as if he himself had given it. The Diveyevo sisters still keep the cauldron filled with small pieces of homemade rye bread and distribute it freely to the pilgrims.

The first encounter many pilgrims have with the Diveyevo nuns is their singing. The large choir, made up entirely of women's voices, has a light, unearthly quality. Their singing doesn't carry far in the large cathedral, but even this softness lends a fragile beauty to the otherworldliness permeating the church.

After Diveyevo's morning liturgy, the daily akathist is sung to St. Seraphim. Pilgrims are here from all over Russia (and the world) and it is difficult to imagine a more heartfelt and unified prayer. The slow, flowing Russian melody, fervent pilgrims kneeling on the stone floor, the rich smell of incense, and the presence of the saint himself, is an unforgettable experience.



Holy Trinity Church



Newly redug kanafka with Diveyevo in background.

Many of the pilgrims look as if they could have lived a century ago. Country women are in long skirts, blouses and scarves. I see several babushki – grandmothers – bent almost double with age, who nevertheless stand motionless through five or six hours of services, except in the intervals when they throw down their canes to make prostrations, helped to their feet after each *poklone* by their neighbors.

An old man with white hair and a matted beard sits on the floor, leaning against the little brass gate that surrounds the sepulcher. He has surely walked out of a Dostoyevsky novel: a high-necked shirt, large old-fashioned greatcoat, and leather boots with leggings – long strips of cloth that wind up his legs like bandages, instead of socks. He is missing one hand and the other has only two fingers. Next to him is a small cloth bundle with his possessions; he is here on his own business with the saint and is oblivious of the river of pilgrims parting to pass around him on their way to the relics.

A blind nun walks by, gently led by a kind-looking man who has been with her all week. She is only four feet tall and I think to myself that she is perhaps the oldest person I have ever seen – well over 100. Intent on the service, she hungrily strains to catch the words. She would have been born well before the revolution and I wonder to myself if this pilgrimage is a dream come true, after a lifetime of venerating St. Seraphim.

It is not only the elderly who come to Diveyevo. Many pious young Russians



Diveyevo Monastery from the village.

spend their summer vacations on pilgrimage and they flock to Diveyevo like birds. The church is crowded with eager young faces who are creating their own “post-soviet culture,” one that would surprise the economists planning Russia’s future. Some of these youngsters live in the monasteries from age sixteen or seventeen, and it’s not unheard of to have eight or nine year-olds living with parents who are monastery lay-workers or even novices.

The first time I visited Diveyevo, a sixteen year-old pilgrim, with long hair and a strikingly pure face, staggered into church. I learned later that he had walked an immense distance, perhaps hundreds of kilometers, and the fatigue lining his face witnessed to his determination to reach the monastery. He crossed himself as he entered, barely able to stay upright, and looked dazedly around. The first thing his eyes rested on was the life-size icon-cross of the crucifixion. He took a few final steps and fell with his arms around the cross, weeping with relief. He prayed for a long while and when he rose, left three small red apples at the foot of the cross.

Just behind Holy Trinity are the graves of the famous fools-for-Christ, Blessed Pasha of Sarov (+1915), Natalia Dimitrievna (+1899), and Pelagia Ivanovna (+1899). Covered with bright flowers and bordered with a wrought-iron fence, the graves have an air of sober joy and an impression of the mystery and unpredictability that surrounds the *podvig* of foolishness-for-Christ. Blessed Pasha, for example, predicted the martyrdom of the



Pilgrims at Diveyevo grave.

Russian royal family shortly before her death in 1915 by throwing down their portraits from her wall, telling her cell attendant to remove the shattered glass and torn pictures to the attic. Those present were shocked, but only a few years later her action was widely understood.

The life of the Diveyevo nuns is not easy. They sleep several to a room, work long hours, and are daily outnumbered twenty-five-to-one by pilgrims. It is impossible for them to walk even the short distance from their cells to the church without being stopped numerous times for questions or requests.

In the autumn of 1992, the convent began reconstructing a small church outside the gates across from the guest-house, the upper portion of which was previously dedicated to the Nativity of Christ. A second, below-ground church honors the Nativity of the Mother of God. I was there to see the beginning of the excavations of the lower church. The interior had been ravaged by decades of misuse and neglect, and was filled to the tops of the windows with trash and rubble. There were only two or three shovels and many of the young nuns used flattened tin cans, or even their hands, to scoop up the tons of plaster fragments, trash, and gravel onto pieces of cardboard to be carted away.

When the physical renovation of the lower church is complete, the sisters' real work will begin. As before the revolution, the Psalter is read continually in church, day and night in two-hour shifts. Each nun also reads the Psalter for herself an hour each day.

This small church stands next to a tiny fenced-in cemetery – the grave sites of Nun Alexandra, the first abbess of Diveyevo, Schemanun Martha, and Helen Manturov, one of St. Seraphim's spiritual daughters. Next to the church are the graves of the great defender and spiritual son of St. Seraphim, N.A. Motovilov. Farther along the wall are the remains of Michael Manturov, Helen's brother, another spiritual son of the elder and benefactor to the convent. Later, the coffins will be moved into the church.

The Church of the Nativity of the Mother of God has four large pillars upholding the ceiling, which have an otherworldly significance as well as a physical function. Before his death, St. Seraphim predicted that he would be sent by God before the end times to preach repentance to the world. He will appear in Diveyevo, and after preaching repentance, will uncover four relics (believed by the nuns to be four of his spiritual children buried near the church) and then will lie down in their midst and repose. Soon after, the end of everything will come. The saint himself instructed that the lower church be constructed with four pillars supporting it. "My joy," said the saint, "four pillars – four relics."

Since the monastery reopened, over five hundred Orthodox families have moved to the village of Diveyevo to be near the saint, many believing that the end times are already close.

Schema-Nun Margarita

One of the great joys of my 1993 visit was to speak with Schema-nun Margarita, the last living nun from old Diveyevo. I had come to the monastery with Yuri Balavlenko, a well-known Soviet dissident in the 1970's, and Father Veniamin, a monk of Valaam Monastery. On our third morning at Diveyevo we were given the abbess' permission to visit Matushka Margarita and we mounted the steps to her quarters expectant and grateful for the rare opportunity. In a few moments we were shown to Matushka's cell, a small room on the first floor which she shares with two other sisters. Although we were disrupting her morning routine, she greeted us warmly and asked us to sit. Ninety-three years old, Matushka's hair is soft and white, her eyes bright blue, and her mind and voice remarkably clear. Her cell-attendant told us that her knees bother her, making it difficult to walk and so she goes to the church only on Sundays and feast days. On the morning of our visit she wore a flowered pink and white *podraznik* and a white *apostolnik*. Over her bed hung a crucifix, an icon of the Mother of God of Tender Feeling (*Umilienie*) and many smaller icons in the 18th-century style. A little off to the side was a five-foot high icon of St. Seraphim.

Born Efrosinia Fominichna Laxtionova on Sept. 25/Oct. 8, 1899, Matushka told us that she was born in the Ukraine, and came to Diveyevo when she was sixteen years old. When we asked why she had chosen Diveyevo when there were many good convents in the Ukraine, she gave us

a well-deserved look of wonder, as if we were a little simple-minded and replied, "Because I loved St. Seraphim!"

Matushka's obedience was to help care for the church and to ring the monastery bells. Each day before services she climbed the hundreds of steps to the top of the bell tower and rang the complex melodies of the call to prayer. The immense Diveyevo bells required unusual strength, as well as dexterity and rhythm. Matushka Margarita still remembers the Vespers service for the feast of the Nativity of the Mother of God in 1927. She had just taken the key to the bell tower out of her pocket and was fitting it into the lock when someone reached over her shoulder and knocked the key ring out of her hand. The Soviets had come to close the monastery. The following morning they arrested the abbess, two visiting archbishops, and the convent's priests. The clergy were taken to prison; the 300 tonsured nuns and 800 novices were given a week to leave.

Matushka says, "...it was difficult, it was so difficult, but even so, we knew that the monastery's closing had been predicted decades before by St. Seraphim, who said, 'my sisters will scatter like peas through the gate.'" Matushka Margarita took a room in the village and watched as, one by one, her beloved churches were destroyed. In 1937, she was arrested as a former nun of the monastery and sentenced to prison, where she remained for four years. As Russia mobilized for World War II, Stalin needed the goodwill of the church to gain popular support for the war and ordered the release of many religious prisoners and reopened some of the churches. Matushka said, "After my release I spent six years on the road, walking from village to village looking for a place to stay. I would stay in each village for a few weeks or months, sleeping in barns and sheds, but as soon as local authorities discovered that I was a nun, they made me leave. No one was allowed to give me work and many people were even afraid to feed me."

Here, Matushka Margarita interrupted her story to tell us, with great relish, of Matushka Evdokia, a clairvoyant nun who had lived at Diveyevo before the eviction. She was well-known and respected in the village, and one day a local Bolshevik stopped her and asked what she would do if they closed the monastery. Matushka Evdokia looked him in the eye and said, "I'll walk about Russia with the White Tsar – I'm certainly not going to sit here with you pigs!"

Matushka Margarita continued, "Someone once asked me how those people who destroyed the convent should be punished. I said "Punish? Whom do we



Matushka Margarita with the icon of St. Seraphim from which she heard the voice.

punish? When the Lord was killed, He said, ‘...they know not what they do.’ God knows their hearts and He will judge them.” Then she added softly, “...but those years were so hard, it’s difficult to talk about them without crying.”

In 1947, Matushka Margarita settled in Diveyevo again, working in the fields at any manual labor she could find. Eventually she saved enough money to buy a small house where she lived with a few other secret nuns, who reposed one by one until she was alone once more. During this period she studied Church Slavonic with a priest who came secretly to the village twice a week. She lived in this manner for four decades, faithful to her vows and her cell rule, practicing her faith in silence and resigned to the belief that she would die exiled at the very gates of the monastery.

In the summer of 1988, however, when she was eighty-eight years old, Matushka Margarita had a remarkable revelation. She had laid down for a nap when she heard a man’s voice from the icon of St. Seraphim above her bed saying, “Listen, listen, the Mother of God is about to speak.” Matushka didn’t get up, but lay there quietly, and in a few seconds heard a “very beautiful” woman’s voice say, “From this cell, from this holy ground, the universe will be renewed.” A few months later *glasnost* and *perestroika* were in the headlines, and in 1991, churches began to be given back.

Matushka told us that before St. Seraphim reposed, he had given a candle to his spiritual son, N.A. Motovilov, and told him, “When my relics return to Diveyevo, meet me with this candle.” Motovilov said in astonishment, “Batiushka, the monks of Sarov will never give you to Diveyevo.” St. Seraphim simply repeated that it would be so. After Motovilov’s death the candle was passed from nun to nun until Matushka’s return to the village from prison, when it was passed on to her. When the relics arrived in 1991, having been carried for miles on the shoulders of eager pilgrims, Matushka Margarita met her beloved elder at the gate with the lighted candle.

St. Seraphim not only predicted the monastery’s closing, but its revival as well. Matushka Margarita says, “He said that the churches would be destroyed for seventy years and then given back, ‘without your asking.’ But I am still awaiting the arrival of the great Diveyevo bell that was taken away after the monastery closed. St. Seraphim said that after the reopening of the monastery the great bell will return overland, and at its ringing, he and the four others, whose relics he will uncover, will arise. Soon afterwards the end will come.”

While speaking with Matushka Margarita, I remembered an unfortunate article that had appeared a couple of years previously in an English-lan-

guage newspaper published by the Russian Church Abroad. The author disputed the relics’ authenticity and claimed that Matushka Margarita had said that these were not the true relics, which were still buried somewhere in the surrounding forest. As a result of this rumor, there were sad instances when Russians attached to the Church Abroad visited Diveyevo, but felt that they could not venerate or even acknowledge the relics.

I wanted to set the record straight, but not wishing to hurt her, I didn’t tell Matushka what the article had said about her, but mentioned that some American Orthodox were uncertain whether these were truly the saint’s relics. I asked her if she had ever had any doubts. She looked at me indignantly and replied in a loud, firm voice, “Never. I *knew* they were his.”

As we left, Matushka Margarita gave us each a little icon card as a remembrance. She told us that St. Seraphim had prophesied that America would play a part in rebuilding Diveyevo, and I asked if she had a word for the many new Orthodox converts in America and Europe. Her eyes twinkling, she replied, “Help Diveyevo!”

The Canal of the Mother of God

After the relics of St. Seraphim, the most widely visited site at Diveyevo is the “*kanafka*,” or canal of the Mother of God. As St. Seraphim was working in the convent one day, he saw the Mother of God walking around the boundaries of the monastery. He understood that this had been given not only as a sign of her protection, but that the very path she walked would be a blessing for those who followed in her steps. He and his nuns spent many months digging a deep canal along the Holy Virgin’s path, and St. Seraphim gave his sisters a prayer rule of 150 “O Theotokos and Virgin Rejoice...”³ to say as they walked around the edge of the canal. The elder also encouraged pilgrims to walk the canal, and that if they did so, the Mother of God would unfailingly answer their prayers.

Dr. Timofievich describes his canal walk in 1926:

It had already grown dark when we, having left the church, made our way to the canal, which was sanctified, according to the words of St. Seraphim, by the steps of the Mother of God Herself, and to which he attributed such special significance. Slowly the silent figures of the nuns were moving along the canal with prayer ropes in their hands, quietly

³ Theotokos and Virgin Rejoice! Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, for thou hast borne the Saviour of our souls.

whispering prayers. The canal was actually a rather large embankment with a ditch on the outside, and on top of it ran a well-trodden pathway planted with large trees.

The sides of the canal were overgrown with grass and field-flowers, which the believers pick and preserve as holy objects. We also walked along the canal with a prayer. Inexpressible was the feeling of contrition of heart when we also touched this mystery so full of grace and were, so to speak, engulfed in the stream of human souls which for over 100 years ceaselessly continued, according to the commandment of St. Seraphim, to follow in the steps of the Queen of Heaven ... Several times we walked around the canal with prayer and did not want to leave, so light and joyful were we in soul.

With the last breath of St. Seraphim this canal was finished, and it is destined in the future to be a defense against antichrist himself. The whole meaning, the whole completion of this sacred mystery, of course, was open to St. Seraphim alone, but to us sinners it is given only to touch it, like the hem of a garment, and to wholly believe the words of the Saint that not a single stone in Diveyevo was laid without the instruction of the Queen of Heaven.

Since Dr. Timofievich's time the canal has almost completely eroded and is no longer in its original form as an embankment. Although it has been both purposely and naturally filled in, its path was not forgotten and thousands of contemporary pilgrims still trod the well-worn boundary walked by the Mother of God. Since the convent's closure, the village has encroached on what was previously monastery property, and now the path winds past a school, near a power station and through the backyards and alleys of Diveyevo. Nevertheless, Dr. Timofievich's experience of the canal walk is as true for pilgrims today as it was for him in 1926, and the nuns themselves recount the tradition that each day, unseen, the Mother of God visits her canal.

Like many of the pilgrims, I walked around the canal path several times the first day I arrived. Every night after dinner, the Diveyevo nuns walk the canal in procession, carrying a cross and icons of the Mother of God and St. Seraphim, often with several hundred pilgrims in their wake. The day I arrived it had been raining for many weeks, and the well-worn clay earth was a slippery mire, especially where the canal path had worn smooth. There are many gullies, remnants of the old canal, where one has to clamber down small ravines. I did not have the compulsory rubber boots and as the soles of



Canal procession with sisters and pilgrims.



Canal restoration.

my shoes had worn smooth, the slippery clay presented a challenge to stay upright, even in broad daylight. That night after services I started out somewhere in the middle of the pilgrim crowd, but after a few hundred yards found that in the pitch darkness of the moonless night it was impossible for me to continue. Slipping to the ground several times, I found myself further and further behind. We had only gone a few hundred yards, but I knew I would not be able to manage the more rugged path further on. I watched the pilgrims move off into the darkness, and sighing aloud, “Unworthy!” turned back to the monastery, hoping to make my way without mishap.

I thought I was entirely alone, until suddenly a tall young nun stepped out of the darkness and said in Russian, “Matushka, I will help you.” As all the nuns were in the front of the procession, I couldn’t understand how she knew I had been left behind. She quietly took my arm in the darkness. We walked and prayed silently, the path every bit as bad as I had anticipated, and I slipped every few feet. My companion, however, was an unusually strong woman; every time I slipped, she would catch and steady my weight without a tremor, never once slipping herself. I tried to look at her, but her hooded cloak shielded her face. She neither spoke again nor looked at me, only patiently helped me up over and over. Although we were far behind the crowd of pilgrims, she made her way easily in the darkness. When we finished the walk she bowed in front of me and said, “*Prostite, Matushka*” – “Forgive me” and walked away before I could thank her.

Later, I asked Sister Natalia, one of my novice friends, what her name was so that I could find her and thank her. I described her as best I could and Natalia looked at me mischievously and asked, “Are you sure it was a nun?” I answered that at Diveyevo nothing would surprise me.

On my third visit, during the winter of 1993, the ground was frozen hard and the canal was much easier to walk, even in the dark. This time, I was in the front of the procession with the other nuns, Sister Natalia and I side-by-side. As we reached the final turn I realized that my woolen scarf had slipped off on one of our descents into the gullies. Wool scarves are a precious commodity against the cold Russian winter, and Sister Natalia ran to borrow a flashlight so we could return to find it. In the cell she shares with Matushka Cypriana,⁴ a schema-nun who was once the spiritual daughter of a well-known Kievan elder, Natalia explained why she wanted the light. The nun replied, “Tell Matushka that she doesn’t have to go look for it, someone will bring it to her from the church in a few minutes.” Meanwhile, as I waited in front of the guesthouse, a woman whom I didn’t know came out of the church. Running straight towards me across the dark



⁴ Matushka’s name has been changed.

square filled with returning pilgrims, she held up the scarf, asking if it was mine. Natalia returned to find me already in possession of the scarf and told me that Matushka Cypriana had neither left her room that evening, nor had anyone visited her.

Leave-Taking

Leaving Diveyevo is difficult – like abandoning a wonderful story just as hope appears to succor the suffering heroes. The still-ruined monastery, the services, St. Seraphim’s relics, the hope in the faces of the nuns as they begin their decades of restoration, all call the pilgrim to stay and be a part of this wonderful work. Even more difficult to leave is the tangible presence of God’s grace.

Nevertheless, as Dr. Timofievich says of Diveyevo:

In the very heart of the Russian people a hostile blow was dealt, which bled from its freshly inflicted wound. Violence could be done to St. Seraphim’s relics: they could burn his grave, break up the hermitages, chop down the forest, muddy his spring, yet no force on earth could tear him from the blood-stained heart of the people or destroy their love for St. Seraphim. And the God-pleaser answered them with a flood of such grace-filled help and miraculous healings that it could not help but raise our spirits; our belief was strengthened in the nearness of the final victory over evil.

A pilgrimage to Diveyevo adds sinews to one’s spiritual framework, a deep, abiding joy that knits will and grace. But even if one cannot visit the earthly Diveyevo, longing and a heartfelt prayer will carry any Christian to its heavenly counterpart, where one can hear from St. Seraphim himself, “My Joy! Christ is Risen!”

The End of a Decade

A decade later, Diveyevo Monastery has been impressively rebuilt. Sadly, much village land formerly belonging to the monastery still has not been given back, but the beautiful old trapeza-church of St. Alexander Nevsky, for many years a movie theater and disco, was returned and is now being restored. Behind the Church of the Holy Trinity, which enshrines St. Seraphim’s relics, stands the massive Church of the Transfiguration, unfinished even at the time of the monastery’s closing in 1927. Work has



*Canonization of St. Alexandra,
St. Martha and St. Elena of Diveyevo.*

slowly progressed, and although the interior is still unfinished, it is now open for services on Saturdays and Sundays.

The double Church of the Nativity, near the bell tower and front gate, has been restored as well. Enshrined in the lower church of the Nativity of the Mother of God are the relics of the newly canonized Abbess Alexandra, Schema-nun Martha, and Nun Elena Manturova, all St. Seraphim's spiritual daughters. Here, nuns take turns in the unceasing psalter-reading begun when the monastery was reestablished. Above is the small Chapel of the Nativity of the Lord.

With almost 400 nuns and novices, Diveyevo is today the largest women's convent in Russia. The sisters not only live in the monastery proper, but are scattered throughout twelve farming sketes in the region, which provide almost all of the monastery's food. Villages around Diveyevo have flourished with Orthodox families moving to the region to be close to the monastery.

Schema-nun Margarita reposed on January 27/Feb 9, 1997, three years after the above account was written. She died the same day as another, younger nun, and at their burial a cross of light appeared in the sky.

The miraculous spring of St. Seraphim draws more pilgrims every year. In 1998, a small wooden chapel was built at its edge, and a large bathhouse on the further side – pilgrims no longer immerse themselves in open view. Here at the spring is celebrated the monastery's blessing of the waters on Theophany, as the nuns come in procession each January 12. Miracles of healing are frequently recorded.

Since 2001, the canal of the Mother of God is being rebuilt along those portions of the canal that the monastery has gained access to. Much of the original *kanafka* walk is still inaccessible, unfortunately, as villagers who appropriated the property after the monastery closed left it to erode naturally and then built houses and outbuildings over the path. Almost twelve feet deep in places, the canal has been laboriously dug by hand, pails of earth then loaded onto wheelbarrows to be carried off and dumped. As the canal deepens, it is shored up by wooden scaffolding that will be removed when turf is planted over the steep banks of the canal to protect it from erosion. Laborers include visiting pilgrims, local villagers, priests and nuns. All eagerly volunteer to take a hand in reconstructing this holy site.

Daily, from a little kiosk built into the wall of the Church of the Transfiguration, a nun sits patiently giving out thousands of small bottles of

oil from the lamp over St. Seraphim's relics and the little packets of dried rye bread that have been blessed in his cauldron.

Each morning after early liturgy, as it has for a decade, Holy Trinity resounds with the akathist to St. Seraphim – in summer, thousands of pilgrims sing aloud on their knees, many lining the flowered walkways when the crowded church overflows – a thunderous roar that seems both an echo of the past and a reassurance that Holy Russia is not dead, nor has she forgotten how to glorify her saint. ✚



Aerial view of Diveyevo, 1960's.



19th-century pilgrim to Sarov



Pilgrim to Sarov. Note staff, bark shoes and water can.



Nuns near Abbess's residence, Diveyevo.



Diveyevo pilgrims



Pilgrims at the canonization, Sarov.



Divejevo orphanage, early 1900's.



Original Holy Spring at Sarov



"Kanafka" – Canal walk at Diveyevo



Внутренность трапезы въ Серфимовъ Дивеевѣ монастырѣ.

Diveevo nuns' trapeza.



St. Seraphim's far hermitage.



St. Seraphim's cave near his far cell.