

Mother Mariya (Skobtsova): A Model of Lay Service*

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In the early twentieth century Russia was a class-based society. Each class exhibited its own form of sainthood, and I would like to dwell on this fact before coming to my discussion of Mother Mariya. The sainthood of the highest, or grandducal, class is epitomised by Grand Duchess Yelizaveta Fedorovna. Her spiritual achievement (*podvig*) is famous. After the death of her husband she did not break away from the royal family; however, she left high society and, making use of her influence, dedicated herself to helping the poor; to works of charity.

Yelizaveta Fedorovna tried, albeit in vain, to revive the office of deaconess, built the Marfo-Mariininsky Convent and cared for the wounded during the First World War. When the Bolshevik Revolution began, however, she was martyred by the very people to whose service she had dedicated her life. Her path proved to be one of great humility, humility symbolised by her descent into the Alapayevsk Mine, the place of her martyrdom.

Next there were the clergy. Over the centuries the Church canonised scarcely one priest from among the secular clergy. In the twentieth century, however, the first victims of the communist terror were priests. Here one could mention Fr Ioann (Kochurov) of Tsarskoye Selo, the first of hosts of martyred clergy. Hitherto they had offered a bloodless sacrifice at the altar. Now priests themselves became participants in the Saviour's sufferings on the cross.

Thirdly came the peasantry. Here the great Saint Siluan the Athonite springs to mind. The peasantry was seen as personifying the Russian people: this is a favourite theme with Russian authors. And here, in the person of St Siluan, the people themselves finally found their voice. Siluan prayed to the Lord thus: 'May all the peoples of the Earth know you through your Holy Spirit'. He taught how to pray for the whole world, how to love one's enemies. Something of what Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky tried to see in the Russian people is revealed in a quite unexpected way in St Siluan's *podvig*, in his success in uniting the folk ideal with church tradition, with universal Orthodoxy.

The fourth and final class was that of the intelligentsia. Here we come to Mother Mariya (Skobtsova), a representative of the Russian intelligentsia in its classic sense. Today this class probably makes up the majority in the Russian Orthodox Church, so her path ought to be of particular interest to us. I will not relate her life here: it has

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been well documented in the book by Fr Sergei Hackel. However, I have studied the philosophical and theological legacy of Mother Mariya that has recently come to light. I would like to examine how Mother Mariya's ideas relate to her actions. After all, Mother Mariya, whom Nikolai Berdyayev and Georgi Fedotov, for example, considered it an honour to call their friend, was a person for whom reflection was an extremely important activity. She was, of course, a creative person. She brought all this to the Church in her monastic life. We are therefore justified in calling her a representative of the intelligentsia within the Church.

Mother Mariya was thus not simply a laywoman but also a member of the intelligentsia. The very concept of the laity has become quite a relative one in the twentieth century. Grand Duchess Yelizaveta Fedorovna left high society, but nevertheless she remained a laywoman: because her love was directed towards other people, towards the simple people, she remained in the world. Fr Ioann (Kochurov), who was martyred by deranged sailors, accepted death at the hands of the world and for the salvation of the world. Although St Siluan worked far away from the world on Mount Athos, his constant activity was praying for the whole world. In this sense he too was a 'layman'. Thus the distinction between 'World' and 'Church' in the twentieth century has been changing somewhat and has ceased to be formal, at any rate as far as saints are concerned.

In discussing Mother Mariya I would like to challenge some received ideas about her.

The first of these is derived from Nikolai Berdyayev, who writes of Mother Mariya that 'She strove for a new kind of monasticism, not contemplative but active, acting in the world and answering the tormenting questions of the world, the world's torment itself. This concurs with my ideas: we need to lay down a new religious path.'¹ All this is basically true: indeed, Berdyayev writes about 'monasticism in the world' in his book *Smysl tvorchestva (The Meaning of the Creative Act)*.² Mother Mariya's *podvig* did indeed take place in the world; but it did not involve a distinction between 'contemplative' and 'active' monasticism. Although in her writings one comes across a contrast between the two, the important thing is to understand what she meant by these ideas. As I noted earlier, in the twentieth century all types of piety, even the ascetic *podvig* of St Siluan, have involved interaction with the world, openness to its pain and torment. In this sense Mother Mariya is no exception in the Russian Orthodox Church.

Let us look more closely at this distinction between 'active' and 'contemplative' monasticism. The two are contrasted in the writings of Yelizaveta Fedorovna, who tried to revive active service of the Church in the World in the office of deaconess, and thus to respond to an issue of the day: namely, the socialist accusation that Christians do not wish to help the poor. (It is interesting to compare this motive with contemporary calls for the revival of the office of deaconess in order to enhance the role of women in the Church, as if in response to the challenge of feminist theology.)

Mother Mariya posed the question differently. The theology of the Holy Fathers recognises three levels in Christian spiritual life. The first is ascetic activity, meaning the practice of good works, helping one's neighbour and so on. The second is the practice of contemplation, including prayer and theology. The third and final level is mystical activity. Mother Mariya did not use this tripartite scheme – she probably did not even know of its existence – but in fact she continually discusses it. With reference to her *podvig* in the world, she speaks of 'the mystery of interaction with others' which complements the mystery of interaction with God. The two are for her inseparable, just like the two principal Gospel commandments. Her monastic life in

the world is therefore not just active monasticism, not just social work. It is not aimed at the world (which is in a fallen state) but at the individual, who is worth the whole world – indeed, is more precious than the world. There is a considerable difference here between Mother Mariya's approach and that of conventional social Christianity. This is how she herself describes it: 'All the types of social Christianity known to us are based on a certain rationalistic humanism; they simply apply the principles of Christian morality to "this world" and do not seek spiritual and mystical foundations for their efforts.'³

Mother Mariya herself finds such foundations in the mystery of human meeting with the world:

When we meet the world in the person of each individual, we know that we are meeting the image of God, and, in contemplating that image, we come into contact with the original image – we meet God. This is the authentic and truly Orthodox mystery not only of meeting God, but of human meeting. In this sense human meeting is simply another form of meeting God.⁴

These words are something more than a call to active service of our fellow men. This service should have a deeper foundation. As Mother Mariya says, 'Only the mystery of human meeting can become the true spiritual basis for outward Christian activism, for a kind of social Christianity that has not yet been born, for a Christianity that addresses the world.'⁵

A second received idea associated with Mother Mariya is the assumption that her Christianity is rooted in the philosophy of Vladimir Solov'yev. I have found this idea even in the perceptive work on Mother Mariya by the St Petersburg scholar A. N. Shustov.⁶ Of course the influence of Vladimir Solov'yev on the Russian intelligentsia, on the religious philosophers who were friends of Mother Mariya, can hardly be overestimated. Mother Mariya herself was undoubtedly greatly influenced by Solov'yev for a certain period. However, this is what I read in one of her works, written in 1937:

There has to be some kind of internal catastrophe, some kind of final and profound impoverishment, some kind of striving for the most relentless honesty, for a person to decide to place everything in doubt, to decide to give up repeating what Dostoyevsky or Khomyakov or Solov'yev has said and to start speaking only from his or her own conscience, from the extent of his or her love and knowledge of God.⁷

In 1929 Yelizaveta Kuz'mina-Karavayeva (i.e. Mother Mariya) published the book *Mirosozertsan'ye Vladimir Solov'yeva (Vladimir Solov'yev's Worldview)* (the title is the same as that of the book by Prince Yevgeni Trubetskoy). However, after the death of her elder daughter Gaiyana in 1936, Mother Mariya wrote 'one must not shut oneself away in philosophy (*mirosozertsan'ye*)'. This death, like the death in 1926 of her younger daughter Anastasiya, was for Mother Mariya just the kind of catastrophe she was to write about in her 1937 article. The idea that Mother Mariya was following Solov'yev in her monastic life in the world, then, seems to me untenable. I think that Mother Mariya related to the legacy of Russian religious philosophy in the same way that she related to the Russian émigrés whom she sheltered under her roof in Rue de Lourmel: that is, as a mother. She rescued the ideas of Solov'yev, Khomyakov and Dostoyevsky, as well as the ideas of her oldest friends, Nikolai Berdyayev and Fr Sergi Bulgakov: she rescued them and creatively

transformed them, but did not necessarily follow them.

I will try to show how this worked in the case of Solov'yev. The influence of Solov'yev on the circle of activists in the organisation 'Pravoslavnoye Delo' ('Orthodox Action') was indeed great. It was Berdyayev who came up with the name for the organisation, evidently taking it from Solov'yev's *Vtoraya rech' o Dostoyevskom* (*Second Speech on Dostoyevsky*) (1882): 'Dostoyevsky believed and preached Christianity, alive and active, a universal Church, a universal Orthodox action'.⁸ However, Mother Mariya's understanding of 'Orthodox action' is not the same as Solov'yev's, for whom (until his later period) it was principally connected with the concept of theocracy. In one way or another all nineteenth-century Russian philosophers thought in terms of worldly categories, such as 'the state' and 'the people'. Mother Mariya adopted a different perspective based on the Gospel. She even found it in the Russian philosophical tradition: 'I can safely say that the main theme of nineteenth-century Russian thought is the second commandment: its doctrinal, moral, philosophical, social and other aspects'.⁹ According to Mother Mariya, without this commandment it would be impossible to talk about Khomyakov's idea of *sobornost'*; without this love 'there would be no sense in the teachings of Solov'yev on Godmanhood (*bogochelovechestvo*), because the latter becomes the one, organic and true Body of Christ only when united and enlivened by the flow of brotherly love, which unites everyone through the one cup, sharing with everyone the one Divine Love.'¹⁰

It thus turns out that for Mother Mariya the liturgy is the source and peak of brotherly love. Moreover, 'Orthodox action' itself is perceived as the 'general task' (an expression coined by Nikolai Fedorov – GB), as 'a kind of liturgy projected from the Church into the World'.¹¹ We find similar ideas in Solov'yev, but there is a fundamental difference between Mother Mariya and Solov'yev as far as their attitudes to the liturgy are concerned. Solov'yev writes about three kinds of Christianity, of which the liturgy relates to the 'external Church' or 'church Christianity'. Alongside this there is, according to Solov'yev, 'domestic Christianity', personal devotion, and concern for the salvation of one's soul. Finally, there is also 'universal Christianity'; he evidently relates this to his theocratic idea, which he calls 'Orthodox action'. According to Solov'yev, universal Christianity of this kind does not yet exist: in his view not one of the existing Churches is universal (see his *Vtoraya rech' o Dostoyevskom*).

Mother Mariya, however, certainly does not consider the liturgy to be something 'external'. For her the liturgy is the source of Christian life: 'In the mystery of the Eucharist Christ gave himself, his divine-human body, to the world; or, to put it another way, he joined the world to his divine-human body through the act of communion.'¹² Nevertheless, this mystery of the Last Supper is for Mother Mariya inseparable from the Cross, from Christ's sacrifice for the world. This is what she says about the Eucharist: 'We believe that the eucharistic mystery is the sacrifice of the Lamb of God, the Body of Christ, for the sins of the world.'¹³ Here, however, Mother Mariya adds

and we who partake of this sacrificed Body are ourselves given up for sacrifice 'from all and for all'; in this sense the liturgy which takes place outside the church (the liturgy of service to the people – GB) is also a sacrificial service in the church of the world, decorated by the living icons of God, a common service, an all-human acceptance of the sacrifice of love, a great act of our divine-human unity, the one prayerful breath of our divine-human soul.¹⁴

Thus it is clear that for Mother Mariya the ‘church liturgy’ is certainly not the ‘external Church’ but the most authentic reality of the sacrificed Body of Christ. According to Mother Mariya Christians must make this eucharistic body their own. This is possible only when Christians become like Christ, when, in the liturgy that takes place outside the church, they themselves accept the sacrifice of love for ‘the living icons of God’, or their fellow men.

As far as the salvation of the ‘individual soul’ is concerned, this, according to Mother Mariya, begins with our coming to the Church, with participation in the sacraments, with the ascetic life. It is important to bear in mind, however, that true participation in the sacrificed Body of Christ is impossible without sacrificial love for one’s neighbour. The first commandment is inseparable from the second. Following Christ to his Father’s House (taking up one’s Cross) is inseparable from loving one’s neighbour as the image of God. Moreover, love for one’s neighbour is itself understood through the mystery of the Eucharist: ‘In the human interaction of the liturgy we also interact with God, we truly become one flock and one shepherd, one body, the inseparable head of which is Christ.’¹⁵ Through brotherly love the very opposition between the Church and the World is overcome.

We now come to Mother Mariya’s treatment of another interesting aspect of Christian life in the world. This concerns a particular feature of the Christian intelligentsia: its attitude towards creativity and art. In her article ‘Istoki tvorchestva’ (‘The sources of creativity’) (1934), where she sets out the New Testament theory of creativity, she takes issue with Berdyayev, who in *Smysl tvorchestva* maintains that creativity is a sphere of spiritual life about which nothing is said in the New Testament. I will not repeat her ideas here, but simply refer to what is in my view the most notable point she makes. Mother Mariya proves from the Scriptures that the source of all true creativity is in God, in Christ. However, a person is able to distort the impulse received from God. This distortion may be extreme, which results in a ‘demonic creation’ (she refers to examples of Renaissance art). However, here is the main point. In addition to artistic freedom – the freedom to distort or to convey precisely the divine creative impulse – there is also the freedom of the process of perceiving its results. As Mother Mariya remarks, icon painting is an example of undistorted creativity which does not require corrective creative effort. The icon does not demand anything of us except prayer. However, secular art frequently carries some kind of stamp of ‘demonism’ and demands a ‘corrective interpretation’ from the Christian. ‘In viewing evil creativity’, writes Mother Mariya, the Christian [or more precisely, I would say, the Christian member of the intelligentsia – GB] ‘so refracts it that the reunified ray of God’s intention enters his soul. For him evil creativity becomes positive and beautiful, does not corrupt but purifies.’¹⁶

In my view these ideas are very important. When members of the intelligentsia come into the Church it has now become common practice for them to reject all art and culture. This is in itself understandable, for Christ has no equal. But from within the Church, rooted in it, a Christian may return to the world and see in it the results of divine creativity – both in nature and in culture. As Mother Mariya remarks, ‘the whole world is defined, by its creative potential, as one with God’.¹⁷ In other words, there is no creative energy that is not rooted in God. When we are unable to see this our Christianity is often without talent as a result. Talent and genius remain outside the Church, while salvation remains lies outside the World.

Mother Mariya searched for a way to overcome this situation. Her theory of creativity and of the creative power which corrects the interpretation of the listener, viewer or reader seems to me a very important achievement in this respect. The

liturgy which takes place outside the church can and should be not just for the unfortunate, homeless and sick. Artists (past and present) stand in just as much need of this liturgy as do scholars and philosophers. Their work awaits our Christian 'corrective interpretation', or co-creation (Osip Mandel'shtam would invoke his 'reader, adviser, doctor'). In this context all activity undertaken by the intelligentsia is appropriate. It is possible to be both a Christian and a literary expert, philosopher or art critic. Today the intelligentsia is not alien to the Church, but something vital to it. I refer in particular to the extent to which the world has proceeded in the direction of 'demonisation'. A Christian cannot fully identify himself with this sick world; but to reject it would be a real betrayal. We need to leave the world, but those who have enough strength must return to it in order to enlighten it with the light of Christian love and corrective understanding.

The final thing that I would like to say about Mother Mariya as a model of lay service concerns love for one's own people and strangers – love for one another. This is a theme much discussed today by both philosophers and theologians. In the world we do not so often meet people who are like ourselves: in fact, there are very few such people. The people we meet are different, including people we find alien to us. What does Mother Mariya have to say on the subject of love for one's neighbour?

In emigration with her mother, husband and three children Yelizaveta Yur'yevna Skobtsova went through a spiritual crisis after the death of her daughter Anastasiya in 1926. She sensed all the constrictions of private family life, which did not allow for the realisation of true Christian love for all people. Yelizaveta Yur'yevna divorced her husband and became a nun, but although she thus rejected the world and its passions she did not abandon people. Together with likeminded companions, and with the blessing of the Church, she organised the movement 'Pravoslavnoye Delo' to help Russian émigrés in need. A Russian Orthodox community was formed with Mother Mariya at its heart. At this stage in her life she evidently replaced her family with this community. She had found her place among the Orthodox as a nun in the world, nurturing those in need with her motherly love. However, her memoirs show that her relationships with her son and former husband were far from ideal.

This was when the persecution of the Jews began. Mother Mariya and other members of her community actively came to their aid. She gave shelter to the persecuted and outcast and distributed certificates saying that they were members of the Christian community and baptismal certificates to those who received baptism. In this way many lives were saved. At this time Mother Mariya found renewed understanding and support in her husband, while her mother and her son Yuri joined in the whole community's activities to save the Jews and other people hounded by the Nazis.

Having opened herself up not only to the suffering of Russian Orthodox émigrés but also to the suffering of the whole world as epitomised by the persecuted Jews, Mother Mariya transformed through Christ her relationship with her family as well. Her son Yuri met a martyr's death along with his mother. In her *podvig* Mother Mariya thus turned out to imitate not only Christ, who died for the sake of the salvation of the world, but also the Mother of God, who accepted the sacrifice of her son for the world.

Jews who did not accept Christ did not of course become members of Mother Mariya's community, but their suffering, their very lives, were received and transformed by the voluntary *podvigi* of the Christians. In accepting death in a Nazi camp, Mother Mariya, her son and her companions were cast out and crucified by the world together with the persecuted Jews. In accepting the pain of the world, the Christians

were justified in calling themselves 'Israel'. In spilling his blood for all men, Christ, as Paul teaches us, restored peace between the 'far' and the 'near' (that is, non-Jews and Jews), as through him both have access to the Father in the one Spirit (Eph. 2:17–18). Pagans who accepted the Cross of Christ ceased to be foreigners, and became cocitizens with the saints and God's own (see Eph. 2:19). If the moral high point of Judaism is the commandment to love strangers, then Christianity aims to remove the very division between 'one's own' and 'stranger', which is fraught with envy and hostility.

Mother Mariya loved the Jews whom she saved as she did her own son, her family and those related to her by their Russian blood who lived with her and who also put their lives in danger by saving Jews. In Christ, the Jews became her 'kin'. It is this concept of 'kin' in which the division between 'one's own' and 'others' or 'strangers' is overcome, a division which belongs in the world and even among Christians who have not reached the full maturity of Christ.

Moreover, Mother Mariya's 'kin' included not only Russians and Jews. According to contemporary accounts, when the Nazi Gothmann, a Baltic German, arrested Mother Mariya and accused her of loving only Jews, she replied that if he were threatened with danger she would help him too. (Incidentally, these words were deliberately distorted in a Soviet film about Mother Mariya, where she says to Gothmann that she would never help him.) Thus for the saint every person is 'kin': we should not imagine that Christian love is only for the weak and unfortunate. When the weak and outcast are hounded (as the Jews were) the saints are crucified with them, freely accepting the fate of these outcasts. At the same time, however, they are crucified not only for the salvation of these outcasts, but also for the salvation of their enemies.

The sufferings forced upon the Jews by the Nazis became voluntary for the Christians. A Christian is not afraid of leaving the world, for he knows that he can obtain the fullness of resurrection only in God and that it is necessary to pass through death to reach this resurrection, into which he was baptised in the sacrament of baptism. On the faith of a Christian, Mother Mariya wrote that he is ready 'in torment, suffering and sorrow – in whatever way – to be born for eternity, to enter the Father's house and be there together with all those who have gone through these birth pangs before or who have yet to go through them'.¹⁸ However, the Christian cannot die as the result of his own will. His death, like his life, must be an act of love not only for God, but for other people (Phil. 1:23–24), as it was for the Saviour himself.

Thanks to love for God and desire for eternity, Mother Mariya was not burdened by or afraid of death. She neutralised the violence to which the Nazis subjected her in the power of the voluntary nature of her death. However, this was not suicide or death for death's sake, for the sake of deliverance from suffering or pain, or because of a desire to meet God. Primarily Mother Mariya saved the persecuted, and she accepted death as a result of this. But in a metaphysical, religious sense, in freely accepting death Mother Mariya actually neutralised the murder and violence perpetrated by the Nazis, and demonstrated how true freedom is possible. Relating to death in this way Mother Mariya showed that she was free from any hatred, even for the Nazis. Rejecting Nazism as a misanthropic ideology she (like other similar martyrs) was nevertheless free from hatred and contempt for her murderers. Thanks to her love of God she was able to separate people from the sins that they commit, while relating to the sin itself (the ideology of Nazism) with all the seriousness that the evil spirit that had seized hold of the German people deserved.

Mother Mariya's life shows us how the sphere of her love gradually widened. It began as the love of a mother for her family, and developed into a spiritual motherly love for her own people by faith and blood – the Russian Orthodox émigrés. Her heart then opened to the truth of 'all-embracing motherhood', to love for those completely alien – to Jews persecuted by the world. In this way Mother Mariya was not closed to anyone in need of her love. This path seems to me to be the path of true openness to the world, to crucifixion for it and with it, a true model of the life of a 'layman'.

In concluding my paper I would like to recall Mother Mariya's own words, which could not be more fitting to our theme: 'The more we go out into the world, the more we give ourselves up to the world, the less we are of the world, because that which is worldly does not give itself up to the world.'¹⁹ I would like to believe that among the host of twentieth-century saints the name of Mother Mariya will soon be shining.

Notes and References

- ¹ *Vestnik RSKhD* (Paris), no. 131, 1980.
- ² Nikolai Berdyayev, *Smysl tvorchestva* (YMCA Press, Paris, 1991), p. 33.
- ³ Mother Mariya, *Vospominaniya, stat'i, ocherki* (YMCA Press, Paris, 1932), vol. 1, p. 142 (hereafter *Vospominaniya ...*).
- ⁴ *ibid.*, p. 146.
- ⁵ *ibid.*, p. 149.
- ⁶ See the introduction by A. N. Shustov to Ye. Yu. Skobtsova, *Zhatva Dukha* (Vodolei, Tomsk, 1994), p. 6.
- ⁷ *Vospominaniya ...*, vol. 2, p. 257.
- ⁸ Vladimir Solov'yev, *Sobraniye sochinenii* (Moscow, 1990), vol. 2, p. 304.
- ⁹ *Vospominaniya ...*, vol. 1, p. 229.
- ¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 228.
- ¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 263.
- ¹² *ibid.*, p. 145.
- ¹³ *ibid.*, p. 148.
- ¹⁴ *loc. cit.*
- ¹⁵ *loc. cit.*
- ¹⁶ *Vospominaniya ...*, vol. 2, p. 153.
- ¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 147.
- ¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 166.
- ¹⁹ *ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 144.

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