

## 6.

# Blessed Matrona – the eighth pillar of Russia

*"Before I formed thee in the belly, I knew thee; and before thou camest forth from the womb, I sanctified thee.." (1 Jeremiah 5).*

The Cathedral of St Andrew in Kronstadt is filled with literally thousands of worshippers who have come to the Liturgy served by the great pastor and ascetic, Archpriest John Sergiev. The service has ended and St John leaves the altar to bless the people. Suddenly he stops and orders the throng of people to make way for a young fourteen-year-old blind girl, who has arrived in Kronstadt on a pilgrimage with a friend. The pastor calls her by name.

*-Matronushka, come here!*

Matrona is led towards St John who announces that this young blind girl is his replacement. He proclaims to all those gathered in the cathedral that Matrona is the eighth pillar of Russia. The year is 1895.

How could a blind girl of fourteen be St John's replacement? What did the saint mean when he called Matrona the eighth pillar of Russia? The meaning of these prophetic words would never be revealed. However those who were close to Matrona believed that she had been chosen by God for a special service to the people and to Russia, especially during the time of the persecution of the Church by the Soviet authorities. Matrona proved in this regard to be a pillar of faith (1 Tim 3: 15) and a pastoral mother – like St John, to all who came in contact with her. We, who live in the comfort zone of western society will surely baulk at Matrona's life in the village of Sebino and later her homeless life in Moscow. Although she did not live as a street-person, she nonetheless was forced to find shelter where and when it was available. Matrona, living according to spiritual laws did not have life insurance, medical cover or any other security that we enjoy in our affluent society.

*"the foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."* (Matt: 8, 20).

But trusting in the Providence of God, she willingly accepted all that was sent to her and by so doing, was able to transmit the divine grace of the Holy Spirit to others.

### **Early years in Sebino**

Matrona was born in 1881 to Dmitri and Natalia Nikonov in the village of Sebino in the district of Epifansky. She was the youngest of four children. The family was very poor, as were many in the village at that time. Due to poverty, many of the mothers placed their children in the orphanages belonging to Prince Golytsin. Abortions, so prevalent today, were unthinkable. Natalia too, considered placing her blind baby in the orphanage, but one night she had a dream in which she saw a white dove with a human face, perched on her hand. The eyes of the dove were closed. On waking the next day she realized that this was her own Matrona and that God had indicated that she should rear her at home with the other children. Indeed this was a sign from God, as the life of Matrona was to demonstrate in the years to come. But even as a young child she began to display her divine gifts and at a very early age, people began to come to the Nikonov household with their problems and infirmities.

The word quickly spread that little blind Matrona was no ordinary child. The Lord had chosen Matrona for a special service to Russia and had placed a heavy cross on her from the beginning,

which she accepted with meekness and patience. The first sign of her being chosen by God, occurred at her baptism.

As the priest plunged her into the baptismal water, a column of sweet-smelling smoke appeared above the font.

The priest Father Basil and her uncle Pavel Prokhorov witnessed this. As a baby she abstained from breast-feeding on Wednesdays and Fridays. On these days she slept so soundly that her mother could not wake her up.

### **A blind visionary**

Matrona as a child began to reveal her extraordinary gift of prophecy. She announced the repose of Father Basil and began to heal people through her prayers. She prayed unceasingly and when missing from the home, she was always found in the village church. She did not play with other children. Being blind they would tease her so that she preferred to stay indoors.

Once when her mother went to church, her father and Matrona stayed behind. On returning, Matrona told her mother that she had only been in church in body, but not in spirit. Her mother's thoughts had been wandering during the divine service.

At the age of seventeen she lost the use of her legs. From that time on she was carried from place to place. She told others that there was a spiritual reason for her infirmity and that she accepted this as the will of God. She was blind, crippled and yet full of love for God and her neighbor. Matrona realized that a specific cross accompanied every gift that God bestowed upon her and that each cross transfigured her life and the lives of those around her. Her blindness gives rise to spiritual vision and foresight. Her sedentary affliction immobilizes her physically, but makes her available spiritually to the whole of Russia. Like the Holy Prophet Job she can say: *"The Lord has given and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord!"* (Job 1: 21). Thus Matrona "sat" for fifty years in various homes where she was given refuge. She was a holy vessel, *"the place where Thy honour dwelleth"*. (Ps 26: 8). She never complained about her infirmities but humbly bore her heavy cross, given her by God.

## **Matrona predicts the Revolution**

Matrona predicted the Bolshevik Revolution with its persecution of believers and the destruction of churches.

When asked why the people did not resist such evil, Matrona replied that the people had become stupefied. They had become mesmerized by evil, which had pervaded the life of the populace.

In former times the demons had inhabited the swamps and marshes and were kept at bay by the piety of the people. But now almost everyone had fallen away from God. They no longer kept the fasts. Some even did not have icons in their homes.

God had allowed the destruction of churches for the people rarely attended them.

Like many great ascetics and spiritual elders in former times, Matrona was illiterate and had no schooling. Yet she possessed spiritual vision which enabled her to converse with highly educated people, not in general terms, but in the language of their particular discipline. For example, one of her spiritual children, a student of architecture came to her with the following problem. For some reason or other, the student's supervisor took a disliking to her and made life difficult in the daily encounters at the Naval Institute. One day the supervisor told the girl that she would have to present a draft of her architectural thesis the very next day to a board of examiners. The student was crestfallen since she had not been able to complete her work. In tears she went to Matrona for advice. Matrona told her to return that evening for tea, when she would help her with her thesis. That evening Matrona demonstrated her spiritual knowledge, beginning by taking the student on a 'tour of Florence'. Matrona named the streets, the buildings and the piazzas and finally drew her attention to the architecture of a particular palace. She told the girl to use the design of the arches from that palace in her thesis.

The next morning, the student dashed to the institute and set to work on her drawings. She had hardly completed her work, when the board of examiners came into the room. The chief examiner took one look at her work and exclaimed that it was excellent! He told the astonished girl to prepare her thesis for formal presentation the following day.

## Synergy between God and man

In the Gospels we see how Christ works with the people who ask for healing. There is always a synergy between the divine and the human. For example the Lord says to the centurion: "*and as thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee. And his servant was healed in the same hour*". (Matt 8: 13). And again the Lord asks the blind men that came to Him for healing:

"*Believe ye this that I am able to do this?*" and adds: "*According to your faith be it unto you*". (Matt 9:28, 29).

Even with the man who half believes, a miracle occurs. We read in the Gospel of St Mark: "*Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth*". (Mk 9: 23, 24). The man in desperation and tears answers: "*Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief*." It seems that despite the fact that we may have doubts or possess very little faith, God in His love for mankind is always ready to heal others through our prayers.

Matrona tells a man who has lost the use of his legs to crawl to her for healing. The journey is four kilometers. He does this and is healed. Another man is healed through the faith of his sister. The cooperation or synergy between God and man is always at the human level. As individuals we do not exist spiritually. Contrary to the individualistic world view of man, the Christian is a corporate being, a person who exists and thrives within the community of love which is Christ's mystical body. As the fathers of the Church tell us, a single Christian is no Christian. Only within God's community are we truly Christians. If we do not pray for each other we become spiritually inert and isolated from Christ. Before we proclaim the statement of our belief, the Creed, the deacon intones: "*Let us love one another that we may confess*" (from the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom).

Matrona's power of healing had nothing to do with folk healing or magic. She rigorously sent away sorcerers, fortune-tellers and anyone occupied in occult healing. She would pray for them, but not talk with them. She emphasized how harmful it was to be subject to what she called occult or demonic healing. By such means the demons were able to possess people. Many in fact came to her after having been to faith healers and channellers. These unfortunate people often cursed and insulted Matrona when they saw her.

On one occasion, the daughter of a Soviet general was brought by her mother to Matrona.

The father refused to acknowledge that his daughter could find any help in 'religion', but had nevertheless given in to the pleas of the girl's mother. On seeing Matrona, the girl began to spit and foam at the mouth. She tried to break away from Matrona and suddenly fell down, writhing on the floor. Blood flowed from her mouth. She lost consciousness and slept for three days. However when she awoke she was completely healed and asked where she was. During the exorcism, Matrona said not a word but prayed silently against the demon that possessed her.

Sometime later a lady, who was a Soviet official came to Matrona as if to a fortune-teller, asking her whether she could do anything about her son who was incarcerated in a lunatic asylum.

Matrona gave the mother a bottle of blessed water with the instructions that she should splash the contents into her son's face, making sure that some went into his mouth. In disbelief the desperate mother took the bottle and set out to visit her son in the asylum.

Her son was led into a reception room, which was divided by a barrier, so that inmates could not escape. When the boy saw his mother he began to plead with her to throw away what she had in her pocket. The bottle of holy water, although hidden from view, was obviously tormenting him. The surprised mother disregarding his pleas, took out the bottle and quickly splashed his face. Some of the water went into his mouth. Within seconds, the boy's countenance changed. He smiled and said: "*That was fine!*" Within a few days he was discharged from the lunatic asylum.

Matrona's method of healing was to read prayers over water and give it to the sick. Drinking this water or sprinkling it over people delivered them from various sicknesses and calamities. In some cases she simply prayed for them.

We do not know what prayers Matrona read over the water that she gave to those who came for help. They were certainly not the prayers used by the clergy. But it is known that the grace of healing is associated not only with holy water blessed by priests, but also is associated with streams, wells, springs, especially in those places where holy people dwelt or where there were holy icons. For example in the courtyard of the Russian monastery of St Panteleimon on Mountain Athos, there is a spring, which has miraculous properties.

## **Podvig in Moscow**

In 1925 Matrona's two older brothers joined the Communist Party and became very active members and of their local soviet or committee. The situation for Matrona became impossible and she was forced to leave Sebino and move to Moscow. This she saw as God's plan, for she loved Moscow, calling it the holy city, the heart of Russia. A new podvig was to begin. Matrona would become the mother of this city, protecting it with her prayers and providing spiritual nourishment to the citizens of this great metropolis.

## **War prophecies**

In 1939, Matrona predicted that people would begin to fight each other, to create divisions, which would end in a world war. She told one of her spiritual daughters to take a holiday at once, since war was coming and she would not be able to do this later. Again in 1942, she prophesied that Moscow would not fall into the hands of the Germans and that Russia would finally be victorious against the enemy. To certain people she spoke in parables but to her friends she spoke plainly. However she often did things, which even those close to her could not explain. For example, when the war started, Matrona asked everyone who came to her to bring willow branches. These she broke into equal lengths, cut off the roots and prayed over them.

It is said that Matrona was able to be in various places in spirit. There was no distance that could not be covered nor place and events that escaped Matrona's spiritual vision. For St John of Kronstadt, Elder Serafim of Vyritsa, St John of Shanghai and Blessed Matrona, and other holy people, physical distances were no obstacle to their powers of spiritual perception. Nor were their souls, and in some cases their bodies, limited to a fixed physical location. One cannot evaluate or measure such amazing phenomena according to the laws of this physical universe. Such phenomena belong to the realm of the spiritual where the transfigured nature of a holy person behaves according to the law of Heaven. Those who live in Christ, become like Him. Their bodies and souls become transfigured and they begin to experience the future resurrection in this life. They are possessed by the Spirit *"Who art everywhere present and fillest all things"*. (From the prayer to the Holy Spirit).

Blessed Matrona often said that she was invisibly at the Front, helping the Russian troops. She predicted that the Germans

would not take Tula. Accordingly the Germans, after fierce fighting failed in their objective to take this town.

In 1952, Matrona reposed. It is said that she knew the date of her departure from this world three days before the actual event. She began to make preparations. She asked if the funeral could be held in the Church of the Deposition on Donskoy Street. She daily received the Holy Mysteries (Holy Communion) from visiting priests, especially Fr Nikolai Golubtsov. On the 2nd May, the holy woman of God, blind Matrona passed into the eternal mansions. At the news of her repose, the monks at the St Sergius Lavra in Moscow served the memorial service (panikhida). On the 4th May, the remains of the saint were laid to rest in the Danilovsky cemetery.

### **Blessed Matrona is glorified**

In 1998, the remains were transferred to the Pokrov convent in Moscow, where the service of glorification was held. Her bones were placed in a reliquary. Today many pilgrims come to pay homage and pray before the relics of the saint.

### **Spiritual counsels**

Matrona taught that one should not judge one's neighbor. *"Why do you judge other people? Think about your own condition more often. Each little sheep shall be hoisted up by its own tail. What are other sheep's tails to do with you?"*

Matrona also taught that one should give oneself to the will of God, living by prayer. You should cross yourself and make the sign of the cross over your surroundings as often as possible, thus protecting yourself and those around you from evil forces.

She also recommended frequent Holy Communion. *"Protect yourself with the sign of the cross, with prayer, holy water, frequent communion...always have a lamp burning before your icons at home."*

Matrona taught her spiritual children to love and forgive the elderly and the infirm:

*"If someone is unkind to you or offends you and they are old or sick or mentally disturbed, do not listen, but simply help them. One should help the sick with love, always forgiving what*



*they say or do."* She also advised against paying attention to dreams: *"Do not pay them any attention. Dreams are often from the Evil One and they can disturb a person and throw his mind into confusion."* She forbade her spiritual children to consult "elders" or false prophets. She also advised against running to and from different fathers (spiritual directors). Such behaviour can cause loss of spiritual strength and as a result one can easily lose direction in the spiritual life altogether.

Matrona often said: *"The world lies in evil and delusion, and delusion is the seduction of souls – and it will be obvious, so take heed!"* *"If you go to a priest or an elder for advice, pray to God first so that your spiritual advisor will set you on the right path".*

Matrona taught that one should not be interested in priests and their lives. Those who are interested in obtaining Christian perfection should ignore the externals, i.e. the way people dress. They should rather be patient in adversity. She taught in accordance with St Serafim of Sarov and other church fathers, that when you go to church, you should not look around but pray quietly. You should close your eyes so as not to be distracted or you may look at a particular icon. Looking at a particular icon is a means to focusing on the words and ritual of the service, not a means for revelry or meditation.

Matrona said: *"The enemy approaches – we must pray without fail. Sudden death occurs if we live without prayer. The enemy sits on our left shoulder. On the right sits our angel. Both keep books in which one records our sins and the other our good deeds.*

*Cross yourself often! The Cross is like a lock on the door. By the power of the honourable and life-giving Cross save yourself and protect yourself!"*



**Icon of Blessed Matrona**



# LIVING THEOLOGY

RUSSIAN SPIRITUALITY IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY



FATHER SERAFIM GASCOIGNE

*Pokrov Press*