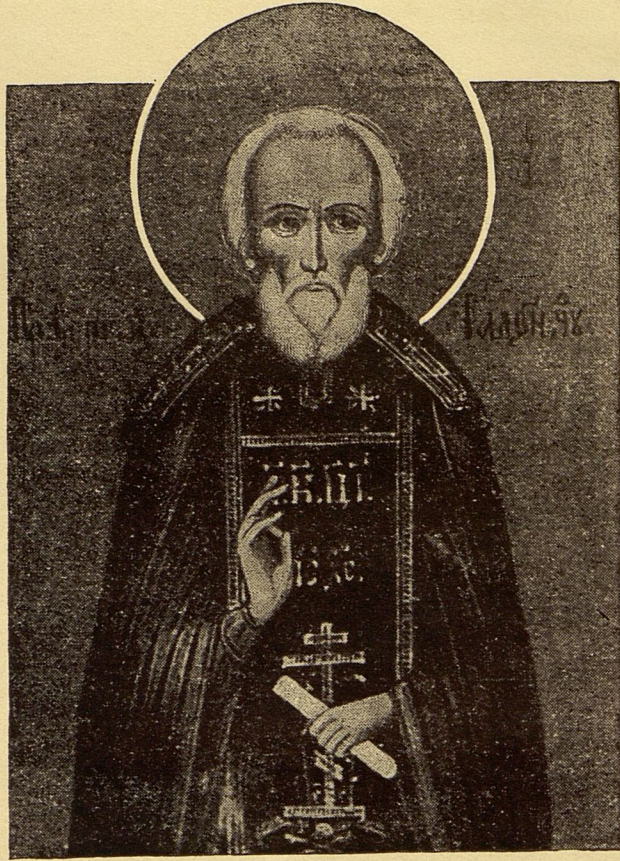


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The Life of Saint Sergius.

BY V. SHIBAYEV

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СВ. СЕРГІЙ РАДОНЕЖСЬКІЙ

FROM AN OLD ICON OF ST. SERGIUS

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The Life of Saint Sergius.

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Truly, the lives of the great Rishis of India and the life of the Patron Saint of the Slavonic nation—Saint Sergius—have much in common, and no doubt the noble spiritual achievements of the latter will appeal to the hearts of the Indian readers. The sacred fundamental conception of Guruship is common to both people and there exists in India that deep religious tolerance, which permits to see the Greatest, Noblest and Highest in other truly great beings without prejudice of race, creed and sex. Besides, the acceptance of another great fundamental Law—that of a continuous rebirth of the spirit on its way of unfoldment—brings nearer the realization that Great Souls—Mahatmas—of one nation may have helped at different times their own people under a different Image and thus to venerate the Great Ones in Their various aspects means but to venerate the One Great Origin of all Life.

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HERE are names of historical personages, which lived at a definitely known time, and which created a vital historical achievement, but names, which have already lost their chronological meaning, for they have stepped out of the boundaries of time into the glory of eternity. The reason for this is that their deeds in their significance by far transpassed the limits of their age and by their beneficial influence so deeply imbued the life of the following generations that the person who created these deeds, in the consciousness of the generations, gradually lost all attributes of time and place and became transfigured from a historical personage into a national hero, and his very deeds changed from a historical fact into a practical ordainment—into what we are accustomed to call an ideal. Such people became for the following generations not mere great dead ones of the past, but became eternal companions, even Leaders, and entire centuries reverently repeated their names not only for the sake of rendering gratitude to their memory, but in order not to forget the Commands which they ordained. Such is the name of Saint Sergius ! ”

Thus stated the famous historian, Professor V. Klutchevsky, for indeed the name of Saint Sergius, despite the six hundred years that have passed, has become more close to the hearts of all true spiritual Russia, than ever it was before. What great heroic achievement had consecrated this name of the Patron Saint of this vast country ?

In order to understand this, it is necessary to remember at least in outline, the history of his time. Russia then was not one united country, but consisted of many separate princedoms, which had been conquered for over 160 years by the Tartars, who had subjugated them completely, extorting colossal taxes, and who had left the princes in power, compelling them to collect and pay these contributions. The princes consequently were in continuous quarrels amongst themselves for the privilege to remain in ruling power and this, together with the hopelessness of the position for over one and a half centuries, had demoralised the population, made them frightened, timid and subject to panic and horror at the least news of the approach of Tartar hordes. The vast country at the time was only thinly populated, there being no means of communication between the distant villages, except narrow forest paths, and even Moscow itself was at the time but a large village.

Professor V. Klutchevsky continues: "But the distinguishing sign of a great nation is its ability to rise again after a downfall. However great its humiliation, but the ordained hour will strike, when it will gather all its scattered moral power and will incarnate it into one great person, or perhaps several great men, who will lead the people again on to the temporarily abandoned great straight historical path!"

This moment had just dawned, when at the time of the reigning of the national calamity, in 1314, in the family of the distinguished Rostov boyars (nobles) Cyrill and Marria a son was born, who was given the name of Bartholomey, which later, when he joined the monastery and was ordained, was changed for Sergius. The records of his remarkable life were transmitted in history by Epiphany and have been beautifully rendered lately in the book of N. Yarovskaya "Saint Sergius of Radonega" from which many passages are quoted in the following pages.

According to tradition, Bartholomey as a boy was behind his brothers in studying the alphabet and once being severely reprimanded by his teacher and parents for what they considered to be laziness, he went in full despair into the fields. There he met unexpectedly, at the edge of the forest, an old Sage, to whom he confessed his great grief. The old Hermit knelt down with him in deep prayer and blessed him, and ever since Bartholomey became very successful in his studies. He reverently asked the Sage to come to his home and here the old wise man, whom no one had ever seen before nor met afterwards, predicted to the parents that their son would become "a great spiritual Teacher in the name of the Holy Trinity and that he will bring many, many followers to the understanding of Divine Wisdom".

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Ever since this Visit, Bartholomey progressed in his studies; he longed to join one of the monasteries, which in those days were the only true places of learning, where man could learn to "reveal the kingdom of God within himself". But his brother was already in a monastery, so he had to stay at home with his parents, until he was 23 years old. When his parents died, he gave away all that they had and went himself to join his brother in the monastery. But the fiery heart of the young seeker of Truth was not satisfied with this life and he decided to go into the forest wilderness, into hermitage. He persuaded his brother to join him and they built a small chapel some 20 miles from Radonega, in the Makovetz forest. This chapel, so beautifully visualized by Prof. Nicholas Roerich in his famous painting "St. Sergius, The Builder", became the foundation of the long series of centers of spiritual education, founded, by and by, all over Russia. The hardships of the terrible forest life were however too much for his brother, and the latter soon left him. Now began the years of absolute solitude, for he was only very rarely visited by an old priest Mitrofan, who later ordained him to monkhood and gave him the name Sergius. During these hard years, Sergius crystallized through patience, fortitude and the rejection of all fear, that pure mighty active Spirit, which later brought him to the consummation of his great heroic achievements. Here in the wilderness he had to fight hunger, depression of spirit, fear from wild animals and the invisible forces of darkness. According to the Nikonov Annals, Sergius lost even all fear of bears—the king of the wild Russian forests, and once, seeing a huge bear, who had come up in hunger to his chapel, he fed him with remnants of his own meagre meal and this bear became a friend and visited him peacefully ever afterwards.

Here in utter solitude, the first miracles took place, for it is recorded, that when once reading the life of the Great Mother of Christ, his oil lamp went out, but Sergius became so imbued with the fire of his Spirit, that the book radiated in a heavenly light, and he was thus able to read it.

News about the great hermit spread over the country and soon the first pilgrims arrived, who wanted to imitate his life and asked him to be accepted as disciples. "Sergius self-sacrificingly accepted them and gave them instruction in labour and prayer, filled their hearts with divine joy and taught them the greatness of heroic achievement. This spiritual joy, which Sergius laid at the foundation of all actions, attracted to him many hearts and thus made the growing community the centre of spiritual culture a stronghold and refuge in the difficult hours of the country". (N. Yarovskaya).

"There soon gathered around Sergius twelve disciples; for everyone of them a monastic cell in form of a log-hut was built and for protection a wooden fence was erected around the place. Sergius himself felled trees for the huts, dragged logs through the forest, cut wood, carried water with two disciples for the whole community, made boots, etc. etc. labouring, according to Epiphany 'like a purchased slave'. In summer and winter he wore the same clothing, neither cold nor heat affected him; despite the meagre meals, he was tall in stature and 'possessed the strength of two men'. He was always first at the morning service. Sergius did not change the original type of Russian monastic life and retained the same as founded in Kiev in the XI century, but he introduced spirituality and refinement into it. Benignness, spiritual clearness and utmost simplicity were his basic characteristics. Being occupied in incessant labour, we never find him encouraging harsh asceticism; there is no indication of torturing the body and carrying heavy chains (called 'verigi', as was customary with certain other religious sects), for Sergius urged but to joyful ceaseless work, both spiritual and physical." (N. Yarovaskaya).

The community grew rapidly. In the beginning there was shortage of everything. "They live like poor orphans" reported a peasant, who had visited the community. And amidst this difficult life, Sergius was himself the true incarnation of the ordainment of Christ, Who had commanded: "Let him who desires to be first, be a servant of all others!" (Mark X, 44 et al.) He was ever vigilant, an observant teacher, who watched and continuously helped all his brethren, especially the neophytes and who despite his tenderness, never permitted any deviation from the established rules. The severe discipline, which he had introduced, demanded from the disciples a constant alertness and watching over their words, deeds and thoughts and this discipline made of the community an educational organisation, which produced valiant, fearless men, educated in self-denial, refusal of selfish wishes, thus making true co-workers for the General Good and creators of the new consciousness of the nation.

One of these rules prohibited members of the community from calling on adjacent villages begging for alms, even when food became very scarce, for Sergius demanded that everyone should live by his own creative labours or from voluntary donation, uncalled for by begging. Here again Sergius was himself a stern example for everyone. Once, having remained for three days without food, and having heard that a monk who had a stock of old bread, wanted a small portico to be built to his hut,

Sergius went to him and asked him whether he cared to have this work done. "Very much indeed," was the reply "but that may be very expensive?"—"It will not cost you much," replied Sergius, "I only wish to have some of the old bread, of which I have heard you have some stock reserved". Whereupon the monk brought two handfuls of worm-eaten bread and said: "If this is enough, you can take it."—"It is more than sufficient", replied Sergius, "but take it away for the present till the evening, for I never take remuneration before my work is completed". And he laboured the whole day until by sunset the portico was completed, and only then did he take the bread. And all the others were surprized to see, how clouds of dust came from his mouth as he ate the dry rotten bread.

Another incident happened a little later, when the community after a severe winter had exhausted all the stock of food, and the disciples began to grumble and showed signs of faintheartedness, when Sergius spoke unto them: "The Bliss of God is not without trials, but according to these, is the measure of rejoicing. It has been said: 'In the evening there may be wailing, but the following morning brings joy'". And hardly had he finished these words, when there was a loud knock at the heavy gates, and the brethren found that cartloads with bread had just arrived from the nearest town. This prophecy they never forgot afterwards. But Sergius found a way to the hearts of men not through miracles and prophecies, which he always prohibited his community from mentioning it to outsiders,—he touched their hearts by being himself a living example of the high precepts of life, which he taught them.

The community, becoming greatly esteemed and beloved by all neighbours, soon received donations and even large bequeathals and consequently expanded greatly. But although the community was no longer suffering from deprivation, Sergius still continued to live the simplest life, fasting often and wearing the most ordinary clothing. His sermons were never long, but short, forceful and convincing. In his Teachings he attached most importance to active labour. He himself knew the inner value of it and therefore regarded work as the condition and means of spiritual achievement. He knew from experience that by perfecting the quality of work, the Highest may be achieved, whereas laziness, idleness and rest cannot lead anywhere, whatever be the spiritual aspirations; for in the latter case they merely remain intentions and do not become reality. Thus in the person of Sergius the whole community had the real example of a true Leader, who laid firm the foundation of actual co-operation.

Yet, as everywhere, there was a class of disciples, who wanted comfort and ease, who revolted against having to carry water from the spring, and although this group was very small, Sergius once happened to hear his own brother, who had returned to the monastery since it flourished, say to someone: "But why should he be the abbot; am I not his elder? Didn't I found this place together with him?" Sergius, on hearing this, finished the service and then quietly left his community the same night. It is difficult to say, what made him take this step, for from the very beginning he considered that to be the abbot was the greatest burden and he had carried it out but as a sacrifice. No doubt, he had very profound reasons for taking such a serious step, and we see indeed that it had a most regenerating effect upon the whole community. Sergius's pilgrimage was a very long and tiring one and he visited most remote places. He settled far away and built there another chapel. In the meantime, his old disciples had searched for him everywhere and finally implored the assistance of the Mitropolite and upon the request of the latter, Sergius returned again to his former community and was henceforth beloved and esteemed still more, by all without exception. And the "Community of the Holy Trinity" (as it was called) grew and prospered. At that time Sergius commenced the great task of spreading this form of constructive spiritual education through active monasteries all over the country; he sent his disciples to inaugurate new centres and this brought new life and strength to the harassed, frightened people, who dreaded the very name of "Tartars". It is known that Sergius and his closest disciples founded over forty such monasteries and this number was augmented to over a hundred by the disciples that followed them later.

In 1377, the Mitropolite Alexis, who was of great age, wished to bestow the highest church rank of the country—that of Mitropolite—upon Sergius, but the latter would not accept it, saying: "Please forgive me, My Lord, but from childhood I have never been in favour of gold and glory, and it befits me to remain now in the same poverty",—"I know that," replied the Mitropolite Alexis, "but it also befits thee to manifest obedience and therefore accept this post with my benediction"—and he placed the holy cross upon Sergius. But Sergius remained adamant and decided to continue the work of sacrifice which he had commenced before. There is a most beautiful passage about this episode of his life in "The Book of Sacrifice", which forms part of the "Leaves of Morya's Garden":

"By what shall you be affirmed?
How shall you attain the fulfillment of Our Work?
By the Power given by Us.

Shall I speak of power, when all folly, all ignorance
all vanity strives for power?

But I Say and Attest : Our power is different,
Our Power is Sacrifice.

.....
When Sergius of Radonega declined the throne
of the Mitropolite

When he was learning how to commune with wild beasts
He still remained to build monasteries
And kept around him his pupils.

.....
Knowing wherein is achievement,
Knowing that power is sacrifice,
While affirming the victory, you will say :

' Lord, let this cup pass away from me '

Then you have attained the power to create and
Thy spirit is already unconquerable."

Truly, this greatest of all human virtues—Sacrifice—was the fundamental trait of Sergius's character. He lived and worked but for the spiritual well-being of those who were striving to improve and perfect their actions and verily can the whole of St. Sergius's life be regarded as a continuous Service to the General Good.

Around this time, the invasion of the Tartar hordes became more and more frequent and it became evident to the Grand-Duke Dmitri, who was ruler of the central principdom around Moscow, that unless some heroic extraordinary achievement was undertaken, the Slavonic nation as such would cease to exist for ever under the pressure of the foreign invasion. He therefore went to consult Sergius, the greatest spiritual leader of the country, and to ask his assistance. Sergius asked the Duke whether he had really done everything possible to avert the horrible battle, which would cost so many lives? And when Dmitri replied that there was no hope whatsoever left for a peaceful dignified existence of the people, Sergius said: "If that is so, then the enemy has to be destroyed, and you shall receive the help of God to achieve this." And he gave to Dmitri his blessings for the battle, which became the turning point in the history of the country. On the large plains—the Kulikov Field—on September 8th, 1380 for the first time after a century of continuous conquest, the large Tartar hordes were defeated by Dmitri's comparatively small army of daring heroes. This naturally was only the first battle, and a long series of others followed with varying success, but the glorious battle won at Kulikov, gave the people that fiery hope in their hearts, which later brought them complete liberation from the invaders. During this famous battle, Sergius was all the time praying in his forest chapel and two of his best young disciples, Peresvet and Oслиaba, were sent by him on the eve of the battle to join Dmitri's army as symbols of spiritual fearlessness and

valiancy. The winning of this battle against the obvious superiority of the enemy is considered throughout the country as the first great miracle of Saint Sergius.

Though Sergius died on September 25th, 1392, at the age of 78, held in highest veneration by all the people, miracles continue to be attributed to his great Spirit even up to now, for there have been innumerable cases of visions in which He appeared to advise and guide his people. The second great miracle attributed to Saint Sergius dates to the time of the great Russian mutiny, in the beginning of the XVII century, when rebels joined forces with the army of adjacent foreign enemies and took possession of even Moscow itself. Again the very existence of the nation was endangered, when St. Sergius appeared in a vision to an ordinary butcher, Kuzma Minin, ordering him to gather an army. Minin, trembling, did not know how to begin and the vision was repeated altogether three times. After the third imperative command, Minin appealed to Prince Pojarsky, who heeded to his transmitted Indication of Saint Sergius, collected an army,—Minin was appointed treasurer—and with enormous self-sacrifice and super-human efforts, the army re-took Moscow on Nov. 27th 1612, reconstructing and saving the empire. On many other occasions Saint Sergius appeared, saving wonderfully the Monastery of the Holy Trinity, his original abode, which had grown into an entire city and centre of spirituality, warning the abbot of the monastery of planned attacks by robbers and invasion.

There are many beautiful episodes recorded in the old chronicles about incidents in the life of Saint Sergius, of which the following are but a few.

Once, when the whole community was assembled at a religious occasion, Saint Sergius suddenly turned into another direction, and bowing lowly, said : “ And may the Blessings of God be with you also ”. As it appeared afterwards, the abbot of a near by monastery, passing the road some ten miles distance, but being unable to call on Saint Sergius at the time, sent him his greetings with a deep bow and blessings, and it was to these that Sergius had knowingly responded.

On another occasion, having for a long time prayed to the image of the Holy Mother, Saint Sergius suddenly turned to the attendant Mikhei and said : “ Be ready, there is presently to come a miraculous Visit ! ” And hardly had he uttered this, when a colossal light, “ brighter even than the Sun ”, appeared and Saint Sergius saw with his own eyes the Great Mother of Heaven, Who vouched for the welfare and success of his work for the community. After this visit, St. Sergius was in highest exaltation all

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