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7-28-2009

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### Recommended Citation

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# *Icons, Miracles, and the Ecclesial Identity of Laity in Late Imperial Russian Orthodoxy*

VERA SHEVZOV

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, clergy and professional theologians in the Orthodox Church in Russia found themselves engrossed in debates over the theological nature and “proper” institutional fashioning of the sacred community called “church.” Insofar as this intensive reflection on communal life heatedly addressed issues of religious authority and the role of laypeople in that life, this period in Russian Orthodoxy in many ways lends itself to comparison with two critical points on the time line of the history of Christianity in the West: the Reformation and Vatican II. True, the “evolution” or brewing “revolution” (depending on one’s interpretation of those debates) in Russian Orthodoxy never had the chance to become a comparable definitive “event,” largely on account of the political aftermath of the 1917 revolutions.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the acute tensions in thinking about “church” that surfaced during that period suggest that had it not been for the sociopolitical events of 1917—events that propelled the Orthodox community into another level of concern—the landscape of Orthodox Christianity in Russia might well have undergone “modernizing” shifts comparable to those in the West.

Given these efforts by church intellectuals to reconceptualize their vision of “church” and especially the role of laity in the church, what, we might ask, were some of the ways that lay men and women

A version of this article was initially prepared for a conference on laity, East and West, held at the University of Leeds in 1998. The article is part of a larger, forthcoming study on the shaping of community in prerevolutionary Russian Orthodoxy. I thank the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Joint Committee of the Academic Council of Learned Societies, the Social Science Research Council, the International Research and Exchanges Board, and Smith College for supporting the research that made this article possible. I also thank Dennis Hudson, Albert J. Raboteau, and Jonathan Sutton for their suggestions and helpful comments.

1. Svetikov, “Evoliutsiia ili revoliutsiia,” *Tserkovno-obshchestvennyi vestnik* 39 (1913): 1–4; Paul Valliere, “The Idea of a Council in Russian Orthodoxy in 1905,” in Robert L. Nichols and Theofanis George Stavrou, eds., *Russian Orthodoxy Under the Old Regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978), 199.

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*Church History* 69:3 (September 2000)

themselves experienced the sense of “belonging” to the sacred community at that time? Addressing such lay issues during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, churchmen in Russia who advocated recentering the focal point of community in Orthodoxy from patriarch to parish and who attempted to augment the role of laity in the institutional life of the Orthodox Church, often recounted an 1848 encyclical issued by the Patriarchs of the Christian East to Pope Pius IX. In that statement, the Eastern Patriarchs voiced what has now become a classic statement regarding the part played by laity in the Orthodox Church. “Neither Patriarchs nor Councils could introduce novelty among us,” this statement read, “because the protector of religion is the very body of the Church, the people themselves.”<sup>2</sup>

While such an affirmation of lay “guardianship” has become virtually axiomatic in both Orthodox writings and Western accounts of modern Orthodox ecclesiology,<sup>3</sup> little attention has been paid to the *practical* means of lay identification with the church or to the sensibilities of common believers that might have made this role possible. In order to explore the issue of the ecclesial identity of laity, this essay turns to the religious landscape of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Russia, which had the largest Orthodox culture of modern times. At first glance, the nature of lay identification with the Orthodox Church during this historical period is not immediately evident. Common Orthodox believers, for instance, were not included on any wide scale in the institutional life of the church. Furthermore, common believers participated relatively infrequently in the central Christian sacrament—the Eucharist. “Proper” Orthodox piety, as defined by law at the time, called for believers to receive communion only annually. By and large believers partook of the Divine Mysteries no more than four times a year, during the four major lenten seasons.<sup>4</sup> Many believers, however, did not consider it unusual to miss a year, two, or even three.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the bishop—traditionally regarded as the guardian

2. *Encyclical Epistle of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church to the Faithful Everywhere* (New York, 1867), 25.

3. Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin, 1993), 251; Stephen Charles Neill and Hans-Ruedi Weber, eds., *The Layman in Christian History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 280–81; Edward Every, “Khomiakov and the Encyclical of the Eastern Patriarchs in 1848,” *Sobornost’*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ser. (1948): 102.

4. The four main periods of fasting include Great Lent, the Fast of the Apostles, which occurs prior to the feast of the Saints Peter and Paul, the Dormition Fast, and the Christmas Fast.

5. Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Vologodskoi oblasti (hereafter GAVO), fond (f). 496, opis (op.) 1, delo (d.) 16137, list (l.) 59 oborot (ob.). Also see comments in Russkii muzei etnografii (hereafter RME), f. 7, op. 1, d. 153, l. 8; Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv (hereafter RGIA), f. 796 op. 442, d. 1120, l. 18 ob.; d. 1608, l. 52. According to an 1858 directive of the Holy Synod, priests were to report those who failed to fulfill this

of Christian *koinonia* and the liturgical axis of the local church—was for all practical purposes absent from the lives of the majority of Christians who resided in remote rural areas. An Orthodox Christian could live his or her entire life without ever seeing a bishop. Finally, at least in Russia's rural areas, where villages were often located tens of miles from the nearest parish church, regular churchgoing could not always be assumed. Given this virtual absence of common laity from the institutional and sacramental life of the church, how could lay men and women conceive of themselves as guardians when they did not appear to be particularly "involved" in that life, other than by baptism and chrismation (both usually as infants)? By what means, we might ask, did laity as individuals and as local communities "tangibly" manifest their identity with the broader Orthodox community?

This article examines icon veneration as one means by which believers identified with and participated in the life of the church. In particular, it focuses on lay involvement in the veneration of a specific category of icons known as "specially revered" (*osobochtimye*) or "miracle-working" (*chudotvornye*), the majority of which were of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God.<sup>6</sup> My analysis of this phenomenon is based on two sets of related sources. First, I consider lay involvement with such sacred icons as reflected in more than 250 cases relating to specially revered icons that came before the Holy Synod between the years 1860 and 1917.<sup>7</sup> These cases offer detailed accounts, sometimes narrated by lay men and women themselves, of the manner in which the special veneration of such icons evolved and the meaning this veneration held for lay believers. Second, I also look at lay involvement with such icons as presented in scores of published descriptions of specially revered icons that appeared during this same period.<sup>8</sup>

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"Christian responsibility" three years in a row (P. Z., "O nepravil'nom vedenii isповednykh rospisei," *Rukovodstvo dlia sel'skikh pastyrei* 50 [1882]: 419). It should be noted, however, that priests rarely submitted names of parishioners who did not attend confessions for three years in a row to diocesan authorities.

6. "Specially revered" was a term that Russian Orthodox Christians used to distinguish a particular icon from the many other icons in their religious lives on account of its association with signs or miracles. Some hierarchs apparently believed that the term "miracle-working" should be applied only to those icons that had been so sanctioned by the Holy Synod. See the comments by Iuvenalii, bishop of Orlov, in RGIA, f. 796, op. 157, d. 225, l. 13. Nevertheless, diocesan bishops, parish priests, and laypeople regularly used that term in reference to icons that enjoyed special veneration locally without having received such sanction.
7. This is a sampling of the numerous cases concerning the special veneration of icons that came before the Holy Synod during this time.
8. Most noteworthy are the collections of descriptions of specially revered icons of the Mother of God, which appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century. See, for example, P. Kazanskii, *Velichie Presviatoi Bogoroditsy i Prisoodevy Marii* (Moscow, 1845); *Slava Presviatyia Vladychitsy nasheia Bogoroditsy i Prisoodevy Marii* (Moscow, 1853);

Believers from all social backgrounds paid special homage not only to nationally known icons of the Mother of God, such as those named “Kazan” and “Vladimir,” but also to particular icons in their local communities. Russia at this time had countless specially revered icons with some contemporaries attributing one to every parish or even village.<sup>9</sup> By the beginning of the twentieth century, close to eight hundred such icons, more than half of which were icons of the Mother of God, annually left their “homes” in monasteries, cathedrals, and rural churches to travel throughout Russia. Laypeople “invited” such icons to visit their towns and villages for corporate liturgical celebration as well as more private blessings in homes. The visitation schedules for many of these icons testify to the high esteem in which they were held. The “Iberian” icon of the Mother of God, for example, which was housed in a chapel not far from Moscow’s Kremlin, spent most of its time visiting the homes of Moscow’s faithful, returning to the chapel daily only after midnight.<sup>10</sup> In Russia’s rural areas, an icon might be absent from its “home” for more than nine months out of the year, traveling on request to dozens of towns and more than one hundred villages. On some days the better-known icons could frequent up to two hundred homes for private blessings in a twenty-four-hour period.<sup>11</sup> Certainly the bishop of Kherson and Odessa did not exaggerate when, in 1886, he observed that Orthodox laypeople displayed a “need to have and see in their midst” such a specially revered *sviatynia* or holy item.<sup>12</sup>

The meaning of such icons for believers stemmed not only from the visual image depicted, but also from the stories behind the image—from the narratives of those events that led to an icon’s special

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*Blagodeianiiia Bogomateri rodu khristianskomu chrez Eia sviatyia ikony* (Moscow, 1891); Sofia Snessoreva, *Zemnaia zhizn' Presviatoi Bogoroditsy i opisanie sviatykh chudotvornykh Eia ikon* (Moscow, 1897); *Slava Bogomateri: Svedeniia o chudotvornykh i mestno chtimykh ikonakh Bozhiei Materi* (Moscow, 1907); E. Poselianin, *Bogomater'* (St. Petersburg, 1914).

9. See the comment by the bishop of Tver in RGIA, f. 796, op. 187, chast' 2, d. 6987; P. Smirnov, *Chudesna v prezhnee i nash'e vremia* (Moscow, 1895), 15; Ieromonakh Vasilii, *Pouchenie pri poseshchenii ikony Belynichskoi Bozhiei Materi Orshanskago Bogoiavlenskago monastyria* (Mogilev, 1911), 2. The precise number of such icons, however, is difficult to establish because many remained known only locally.
10. Even at that hour, the chapel was not locked, and believers would come to venerate the icon throughout the night. E. Poselianin, *Bogomater'*, 160–61.
11. For examples of such extensive visitation schedules, see RGIA, f. 796, op. 187, d. 6929, ll. 68–70; l. 234 ob. Diocesan officials tried to discourage nighttime visitations, but often to no avail, given that visitations at any given location were limited by time and that the number of persons who wished to receive the icon into their homes grew as population increased.
12. RGIA, f. 796, op. 167, d. 1444, l. 3.

veneration and comprised that icon's "history" or "life."<sup>13</sup> An example of such a story is that of the icon of the Mother of God named "Fertile Mountain" (*Tuchnaia Gora*), which was housed in a cemetery church in the provincial capital of the Tver diocese.<sup>14</sup> Its "life" begins in the seventeenth century, when a resident of Tver, Kozma Volchaninov, received this icon as a gift from the abbot of a monastery where he had completed some renovation work. Volchaninov willed that this icon, which had become exceptionally revered in the family, be passed from generation to generation through the descendants of his eldest son. When the male lineage ended, the icon was to be donated to a church.

Having inherited the icon, Volchaninov's grandson disregarded the elder's wishes. Considering the icon as little more than clutter, he stored it in the attic. Meanwhile, according to the story, the grandson's new wife felt increasingly dejected from the emotional stress to which she was subjected in the household. Driven to despair, she decided to attempt suicide, but an unidentified monastic elder appeared and interrupted her efforts. Advising her to return to the house, he told her to pray to the icon of the Mother of God named "Fertile Mountain," assuring her that her life would then proceed in peace.

Shaken by this meeting, the woman ran into the house and related her experiences to those gathered there. Members of the family searched for the elder but could not find him. They then found the icon of the Mother of God in the attic and hung it in a place of honor. That evening, a service was held before the icon, and the woman finally attained peace and serenity.

During the mid-nineteenth century, the Volchaninov lineage ended. By the time the icon's final owner passed away, the icon was already well known in the Tver community and annually drew hundreds of people for veneration. In particular, it attracted women with ailing children. Priests came to the Volchaninov home twice annually to conduct Vigils in the presence of the icon: on 24 March, the anniversary of the unnamed woman's salvific encounter, and on 7 November, the day that Kozma Volchaninov had originally brought the icon home from the monastery. Believers from Tver also frequently requested that the icon be brought to their homes for special prayer services, especially during a serious illness. Finally, in 1866 the husband of the icon's

13. In published form these icon stories or narratives were frequently referred to as *skazaniia*. For a description of this genre for icons of the Mother of God, see Andreas Ebbinghaus, *Die altrussischen Marienikonen-Legenden* (Berlin: Osteuropa-Institut an der Freien Universität Berlin, 1990). Also see Ioann B. Sirota, *Die Ikonographie der Gottesmutter in der Russischen Orthodoxen Kirche* (Wurzburg: Augustinus-Verlag, 1992).

14. The typological name "fertile mountain" for Mary is based on Ps. 67:14; see *Ikona Bozhiei Materi "Tuchnaia Gora"* (Tver, 1888); *Slava Bogomateri*, 304–6.

final owner donated the icon to the cemetery church, where a special side altar was constructed in its honor.

Such stories, which were conveyed predominantly orally until they began being published much more frequently in the late nineteenth century, figured prominently in the complex process of lay identification with the Orthodox ecclesial community.<sup>15</sup> This process was propelled by two interrelated factors: the extensive involvement and zeal of laity in the shaping of the culture of icon veneration and the “official” Orthodox teaching on icons and miracles. This article begins by describing the nature of lay involvement with such icons and the ways in which laity honored them. Next it presents the Orthodox teaching on miracle-working icons as it was expressed in devotional literature and sermons at the time. Finally, drawing on both practice and beliefs, it considers the sense of ecclesial inclusion these icons helped to cultivate and draws attention to some ecclesiological implications of the lay veneration of such icons.

### I. PATTERNS IN ICON STORIES

Believers in late imperial Russia inherited countless specially revered icons from the past and perpetuated the “lives” of these icons by remembering and retelling the accounts that had led to their special veneration. In addition, their continued experiences with icons resulted in the appearance of new “specially revered” icons. Local diocesan archives and the archives of the Holy Synod are filled with numerous reported cases of miracle-working icons in the decades preceding Russia’s revolution. A close reading of these cases shows that most of the stories shared certain features that set the stage for the emergence of a kind of ecclesial identification involving these icons.

First, common laity figured prominently in the inception of an icon’s special veneration. Accounts like the one that stood behind the “Tolga” icon of the Mother of God in the fourteenth century would have been an anomaly in the nineteenth. In that story, the bishop of Iaroslavl, Prokhor, witnessed light radiating from an icon he discovered in a forest, and related his experience “to the people.”<sup>16</sup> But in the nineteenth century, the process of witnessing to perceived revelations generally moved from the “the bottom” up—from accounts by lay men and women to a corporately embraced ecclesial experience that

15. For a history of the publication of literature on icons of the Mother of God in the nineteenth century, see Archbishop Sergii (Spasskii), *Russkaia literatura ob ikonakh Presviatyiya Bogoroditsy v XIX v.* (St. Petersburg, 1900).

16. *Skazanie o iavlennii chudotvornoi ikony Presviatyiya Bogoroditsy imenuemoi Tolgskoiu, i chudesakh ot neia byvshikh* (Moscow, 1883).

only later (if ever) received episcopal sanction.<sup>17</sup> The events that led to the special veneration of the “Cyprus” icon of the Mother of God in the village of Stromynka in the Moscow diocese were typical. According to that account, in 1841 the condition of Mavra Alekseeva, an eighteen-year-old peasant girl who had suffered from scurvy and scrofula from childhood, worsened significantly. Soon after going to confession and taking communion, she informed her family that she had had a dream in which she had seen the “Cyprus” icon of the Mother of God hanging over the entry to their parish church. In that dream a voice from the icon beckoned her to take it to her home and to pray before it. Family members tried to locate the icon, but failed. They then brought the sick girl to the church where she herself found it. On 16 February, after her family had invited the priest with the icon to their home, the young woman was healed. People began flocking to the church to pray before this icon, and after several more reported healings, the parish priest reported the events to the eminent metropolitan of Moscow, Filaret Drozdov, who gave his blessing for the icon to be openly venerated in the parish church. February 16, the day of Mavra’s healing, became the icon’s local annual feast day.<sup>18</sup>

Second, the stories behind specially revered icons were related to the Eastern Christian theology of icons. According to this theology, icons are not merely depictions of persons or events in sacred history; they are also thought to convey the presence of that which they depict.<sup>19</sup> In this sense, icons can be considered a means by which the faithful can know God and participate in the sacred reality that the images manifest. The stories surrounding icons were intimately connected to this theology of presence, telling of an individual’s or community’s perceived encounter with “the holy” by means of a particular icon. An

17. A close reading of narratives behind icons of the Mother of God shows that common laypeople—peasants, merchants, and entire villages or urban communities—figured in the majority of the “lives” of those icons whose stories were rooted in the fifteenth century and later. Prior to that, the central characters of these stories tended to be monastics, clerics, and princes. In addition, whereas only a small percentage of narratives that took place in the fifteenth century related the experiences of women, in those stories whose plots took place in the nineteenth century women’s experiences reached virtual parity with that of men. Note that a similar trend characterized Marian apparitions in Europe. See David Blackburn, *Marpingen: Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Bismarckian Germany* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 17.

18. For the case as it was reported to the Holy Synod, see RGIA, f. 796, op. 122, d. 1338. For subsequent narrative accounts see *Slava Bogomateri*, 361–63; Poselianin, *Bogomater’*, 253.

19. For examples of some general overviews of the history and theology of icon veneration in Eastern Orthodox Christianity, see Moshe Barasch, *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1992); Sergei Bulgakov, *Ikona i ikonopochitanie: Dogmaticheskii ocherk* (Paris: YMCA, 1931); Leonide Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, 2 vols., trans. Anthony Gythiel and Elizabeth Meyendorff (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1992).



event would take place in which believers discerned a sign that informed them of a sacred presence and indicated to them the “workings of God.”<sup>20</sup> In 1906, for example, Irina Karateeva, a peasant woman from the Kherson diocese, claimed that her once darkened icon had lightened “from the Holy Spirit.”<sup>21</sup> Other believers spoke of such occurrences as the “unusual activity of God’s grace,” as the “graced” light of God, and as signs of God’s mercy.<sup>22</sup> Having encountered a sign, believers often felt that the only proper response was to bear witness to what they had seen, to give thanks, and to glorify God as well as the icon involved.

Notably, the accounts behind many of Russia’s most famous icons of the Mother of God relate episodes of persons ignoring or hesitating to proclaim such experiences. In 1637, for instance, Maria, a peasant widow from the village of Abalak in the Tobolsk diocese, beheld during a light sleep an icon of the Mother of God named “the Sign.” On each side of it stood icons of St. Mary of Egypt and St. Nicholas. A voice spoke to her through the icon of the Mother of God directing her to “proclaim this vision to all of the people” and to tell them to construct a church in its honor. Maria, however, failed to do so since she feared public ridicule. In a subsequent vision, she was informed that it was not her concern if others did not believe her: “If they do not listen, they will experience the wrath of God.” Nevertheless, it was only after several more visions and after St. Nicholas threatened her with physical paralysis for her noncompliance that Maria went to the local bishop and related what had occurred.<sup>23</sup>

Third, miracle-working icons had their roots in the world of private devotion. An icon’s “life” usually began with personal experiences, often with an icon that had been in a family for generations. It was also sustained through time primarily by persons who sought help in prayer before it. The life of the specially revered icon of the Mother of God located in the Gethsemane *skete* outside Moscow, for instance, began in the family of the Filippovs in the 1820s. After the death of her father, Alexandra Filippova lived with her two sisters in a priest’s home outside of Moscow, while her mother went to settle affairs in the

20. Typical “events” or “signs” associated with specially revered icons included the apparent self-lightening of an old, darkened image, the finding of an icon in an unexpected location, or a dream in which an icon figured prominently.

21. RGIA, f. 796, op. 187, chast’ 2, d. 7214, l. 1.

22. RGIA, f. 796, op. 169, d. 1513, l. 3 (Riazan 1888); RGIA, f. 796, op. 195, d. 1436 (Eniseisk 1912); RGIA, f. 796, op. 177, 3 ot., 2 st., d. 2423 (Kaluga 1896).

23. *Skazanie ob ikone Bozhiei Materi imenuemoi Abalatskoitu s opisaniem vazhneishikh kopii s neia i nachale pochitaniia onoi v Nizhnem Novgorode* (Nizhnii Novgorod, 1887). The actual writing of the icon of the Mother of God of “the Sign,” which came to be the patron icon of this church, involved yet another “act of God” in the healing of a paralyzed peasant.

city. A copy of the “Chernigov” icon of the Mother of God hung on the wall where the sisters stayed. When their mother did not return after several weeks as scheduled, Alexandra grew increasingly concerned and prayed fervently before this image. The priest finally left to search for their mother in Moscow; three days later the mother returned to her children explaining that she had taken ill. Attributing her mother’s eventual safe return to prayers before this icon, Alexandra asked whether she could have a copy of the icon made. The priest gave it to her as a gift instead. In 1842, desiring that the icon she personally so revered be properly honored, Alexandra donated it to the Gethsemane *skete*. In 1869 a peasant woman from the Tula diocese who had been paralyzed for more than six years was healed by praying before this icon. By 1899 more than one hundred persons had attributed the healing of physical and emotional ailments to prayer before this icon.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, accounts associated with specially revered icons often appeared to be only a series of episodes from the lives of seemingly unrelated individuals.

At the same time, however, these icons did not remain exclusively in the quiet realm of private piety. Typically, they began almost immediately to attract large numbers of believers, and thus became very much a part of the public domain. In 1863 a priest from the Tver diocese reported that more than one thousand believers had gathered to venerate the icon of the Mother of God that had been associated with miracles in their parish church.<sup>25</sup> In 1894 a peasant railroad conductor from the Kishinev diocese reported that an old family icon in his home had miraculously lightened. At seven the following morning, more than two hundred believers had already gathered to venerate the icon.<sup>26</sup>

Many believers attributed their spiritual well-being to such icons, saying that the icons “awakened them from their spiritual slumber and aroused religious fervor.”<sup>27</sup> They routinely noted that their first response to such news of signs or miracles was prayer. In 1874 local police in the Simbirsk diocese reported that believers from neighboring villages began gathering before an “epiphanic” icon in order “to read *akathistoi*, to sing *troparia*, and to pray.”<sup>28</sup> In 1912 two representa-

24. *Skazanie o chudotvornoj ikone Bogomateri, imenuemoi Chernigovskaia, nakhodiashcheisia v peshchernom khrame Gefsimanskago skita, chto bliz sviato-Troitskaia Sergievyy Lavry (Sviato-Troitskaia Sergieva Lavra, 1903).*

25. RGIA, f. 796, op. 144, d. 187.

26. RGIA, f. 796, op. 175, d. 1896.

27. RGIA, f. 796, op. 195, d. 1547, l. 1 (Vladimir 1912).

28. Believers considered *iavlennye* or so-called “epiphanic” icons to be extraordinary because they perceived a sign in the unusual manner in which such icons first appeared to them—in a field, on a bank of a river, in a tree, in a well. They understood the epiphany

tives from St. Nicholas parish in the Siberian diocese of Eniseisk wrote that “something irresistible pulled us to the icon; prayer before it comforted us, poured a courageous spirit into our sorrowful hearts . . . for we strongly sensed the presence of the grace of God in this small icon.”<sup>29</sup> In such gatherings, with their reverential affinity and kinship in prayer, a collective or shared veneration emerged from otherwise personal devotion. In 1895 parishioners from the Voronezh diocese stated that the presence of a newly perceived miracle-working icon of St. Nicholas in their church “led to a greater strengthening in them of their Orthodox faith.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, representatives of Kamennyi Brod (Kiev diocese) wrote in 1904 with respect to the specially revered icon in their village: “We have been linked together through prayer with this grace-filled (*blagodatnaia*) icon . . . [it] serves to strengthen Orthodoxy.”<sup>31</sup>

While they initiated the special veneration of an icon through such rudimentary prayer gatherings, laypeople also sought to “church” their experiences by asking the local parish priest to lead liturgical celebration before it. Such an ecclesial orientation was often present at the very beginning of a specially revered icon’s life. For example, in 1893, while ringing the church bell, a pious fourteen-year-old peasant boy from the Kazan diocese encountered “a maiden clothed in white” who directed him to notify the priest about a particular icon that had been carelessly abandoned in the church’s storage area. Although the boy had immediately proclaimed to others what had occurred, he neglected to tell the parish priest. That night he had a dream in which angels reminded him to notify the parish priest of the abandoned icon.<sup>32</sup>

Priests frequently (though not always) recognized and publicly acknowledged such experiences. In 1901, for instance, the peasant woman Pelagiiia Markelova from the Riazan diocese sought and received the help of her parish priest in finding a particular icon to which she had been alerted in a series of dreams. Prayer before this icon, a monastic elder had informed her in one such dream, would help those in need.<sup>33</sup> In 1894 a priest from the Novgorod diocese spoke publicly in church about an icon that had appeared to one of his parishioners in a dream and then invited everyone present to venerate

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of such an icon to be providential—God, as well as the saint depicted, intended for the icon to “appear” at that particular place and time. RGIA, f. 796, op. 160, d. 1764, ll. 1–2.

29. RGIA, f. 796, op. 195, d. 1436, l. 17.

30. RGIA, f. 796, op. 1895, d. 2084, l. 10.

31. RGIA, f. 796, op. 185, d. 2968.

32. RGIA, f. 796, op. 174, d. 1780.

33. RGIA, f. 796, op. 190, 6 ot., 3 st., d. 119.

it.<sup>34</sup> Involvement of the clergy marked a critical moment in the life of a specially revered icon and often precipitated the drama that characterized the stories behind some of these images.

Rarely associated with only one story, a specially revered icon often gained the patronage of an entire parish community relatively quickly. Believers typically displayed a sense of communal responsibility for the honoring of such an icon and anticipated that posterity would honor the icon as well. For example, in the 1860s, while temporarily residing in St. Petersburg, Vasilii Andrianov, from the Griazovets district in the Vologda diocese, repeatedly experienced a dream in which he was directed to adorn an icon of Christ "Not-Made-By-Hands." He paid no special attention to this experience. In August 1868 he received word from his home village in the Vologda diocese that on 15 August, the eve of the feast of the icon of Christ "Not-Made-By-Hands," a fire had destroyed all of his belongings. Contemplating what had transpired, Andrianov concluded that the calamity had been a divine sign in response to his ignoring the dreams that he felt had been divinely inspired. During a special prayer service that he requested in a St. Petersburg church, he vowed to seek out the icon he had seen in his dream. He subsequently notified the parish priest in his home parish who, together with several parishioners, found the icon in question in the church's storage area. They gave the icon away for renovation, and some thirty years later it continued to be specially revered among the parishioners of this parish.<sup>35</sup>

Laitly who associated their communal fates with such icons sometimes established annual liturgical celebrations or even entire feast days that included special prayer services and processions. In 1872 representatives from the town council in the provincial capital of Tambov requested that an icon of the Mother of God housed in a nearby monastic community "visit" their town annually. They had brought the icon to the city the year before during a cholera epidemic, and following the icon's visitation, the epidemic had ceased. Now they considered it their duty to preserve the memory of this saving event. If the icon was not brought, they wrote, "everyone will fall into terrible

34. RGIA, f. 796, op. 193, d. 1895. For other examples of cases where priests publicly acknowledged lay religious experiences with regard to icons, see op. 143, d. 2239 (Perm 1862); op. 133, d. 187 (Tver 1863); op. 153, d. 661 (Kostroma 1872); op. 153, d. 728 (Voronezh 1872); op. 154, d. 553 (Tavrida 1873); op. 157, d. 146 (Kostroma 1876); op. 160, d. 1753 (Tambov 1879); op. 166, d. 1468 (Kharkov 1886); op. 174, d. 1780 (Kazan 1893); op. 175, d. 1896, l. 8 (Kishinev 1894); op. 181, d. 2558 (Orlov 1900); op. 190, 3 ot., 6 st., d. 119 (Riazan 1909); op. 191, 6 ot., 3 st., (Ekaterinoslav 1910); op. 195, d. 1547 (Vladimir 1912).

35. "Opisanie tserkvi Voskreseniia Khristova," *Priboavleniia k Vologodskie eparkhial'nye vedomosti* (chast' neofitsial'naia), 1897, no. 7: 127–28.

despondency and will consider [the icon's absence] a punishment from God."<sup>36</sup>

At times, believers also understood such icons to be involved in the life of the Russian nation as a whole. The "lives" of Russia's best-known icons of the Mother of God contain episodes illustrating their key roles in securing God's aid to Russia in times of national distress.<sup>37</sup> Not surprisingly, during World War I Tsar Nicholas II requested to have the icon of the Mother of God named Vladimir, whose life was intimately tied to the history of the Russian nation, brought to the General Headquarters at the war front.<sup>38</sup> The common laity also associated specially revered icons with the nation's welfare. In 1903 a veteran of the Crimean War had a dream of the Mother of God standing on the banks of a sea holding a linen cloth with the image of Christ. She warned him that Russia would soon become involved in a difficult war on the shores of a distant sea and directed him to have an image of her painted as he saw her in the dream. Many believers subsequently tied this icon, which came to be known as "The Victory of the Blessed Mother of God," to Russia's fate in the Russo-Japanese war and sent it on a long odyssey that involved statesmen and church hierarchs by way of Vladivostok to Port Arthur; its failure to reach that city was seen as reason for the Russian defeat.<sup>39</sup> Notably, in 1916 the head chaplain serving Russia's military and naval forces declined a petition from a group of residents of the Perm diocese in which they asked to send their town's specially revered icon to the war front. The

36. RGIA, f. 796, op. 153, d. 697. For similar requests see op. 157, d. 136 (Moscow, 1876); op. 180, d. 2919 (Petersburg, 1894); op. 191, 6 ot., 3 st., d. 90 (Vladimir, 1910); op. 177, d. 2440 (Arkhangelsk, 1896); op. 199, 6 ot., 3 st., d. 129 (Tambov, 1914).

37. See, for example, the "lives" of the following icons of the Mother of God: the Bogoliubov icon in *Skazanie o chudotvornoi ikone Bogoliubskoi Bozhiei Materi* (Moscow, 1882); the Kazan icon in *Skazanie o iaolnennoi Kazanskoi ikone Bozhiei Materi, I byvshikh ot neia chudesakh* (Moscow, 1907); the Kursk icon in *Kratkoe opisanie o chudotvornoi ikone Znamenii Bozhiei Materi, prosiavoshei razlichnymi chudesami v gorode Kurske* (Moscow, 1838); the Smolensk icon in *Opisanie Smolenskoi chudotvornoi ikony Bozhiei Materi nakhodiashcheisia v Smolenskom Uspenskom sobore* (St. Petersburg, 1892); the Tikhvin icon in *Skazanie o chudotvornoi ikone Tikhvinskoi Bozhiei Materi* (St. Petersburg, 1889). In this sense, Russia's miracle-working icons of Mary paralleled the phenomenon of Marian apparitions among Roman Catholics in the West. Among numerous recent studies, see Blackburn, *Marpingen*; William A. Christian Jr., *Visionaries: The Spanish Republic and the Reign of Christ* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

38. RGIA, f. 796, op. 203, 6 ot., 3 st., d. 117.

39. On this icon, see A. M., "Prebyvanie ikony Torzhestvo Presviatyia Bogoroditsy v gorode Vladivostoke i otravlenie eia v Port Artur," *Vladivostokskie eparkhial'nye vedomosti* (chast' neofitsial'naia), 1905, no. 2:31–36; no. 3: 64–67; no. 4:88–92; no. 5:112–13; V. N. Mal'kovskii, *Skazanie ob ikone Torzhestvo Presviatyia Bogoroditsy izvestnoi pod imenem Port Arturskoi ikony Bozhiei Materi* (Tver, 1906); A. Andersin-Lebedeva, *Skazanie ob ikone Port Arturskoi Bogomateri* (Odessa, 1916); RGIA, f. 796, op. 201, 6 ot. 3 st., d. 298.

army, he stated, could not accommodate a long line of similar requests.<sup>40</sup>

The increased publication of icon narratives in the second half of the nineteenth century helped expand the geographic parameters in which an icon was known. The impact of devotional pamphlets can be seen when examining the spread of the story associated with the icon of the Mother of God named "Abalak" from the Tobolsk diocese. In the summer of 1877, a group of pilgrims or "wanderers" (*stranniki*) came from central Russia to Siberia in order to venerate its holy sites. During their stay at the monastery where this specially revered icon of the Mother of God was housed, they obtained published pamphlets of its life. On their way home, they stopped in the provincial capital of Nizhnii Novgorod and lodged at the home of Glafira Ivanova, the poor wife of a soldier. In return for her hospitality, they left as a gift a pamphlet describing the story of the icon of the Mother of God named "Abalak." When Glafira finally read the book, she "became consumed with some sort of special zeal" and began to tell everyone she met about the pamphlet she had read. Between 1878 and 1880 the Abalak monastery in the Tobolsk diocese received more than 150 orders from Nizhnii Novgorod for this same pamphlet.<sup>41</sup>

Knowledge of an icon's story, however, did not yet mean special devotion toward the icon. Such special devotion and fervor, facilitated by prayer before the image, was greatly fostered by the dissemination of painted copies of icons. Glafira Ivanovna in Nizhnii Novgorod, for instance, not only told people about the icon's story, but encouraged ailing people to have a copy of it made from the picture in the pamphlet and to pray before it. As a result, several recorded healings took place, including the "moral" healing of an alcoholic father, who had previously witnessed his own son's healing from prayer before a copy of this icon. Between 1878 and 1880 believers from Nizhnii Novgorod ordered more than six hundred painted copies of this icon from local iconographers. Such copies were soon found in the city's churches. By praying before such a copy, believers hoped that their lives would be graced by the same divine "presence" that manifested itself through the original. By making such copies, they sustained the life of the original and geographically expanded the boundaries of the community that specially revered it.<sup>42</sup>

40. RGIA, f. 796, op. 201, 3 ot., 6 st., d. 70.

41. *Skazanie ob ikone Bozhiei Materi imenuemoiu Abalatskoiu*, 50.

42. *Skazanie*, 40–50.

## II. THE THEOLOGY OF MIRACLE-WORKING ICONS

The phenomenon of specially revered icons and the stories behind them were not unique to Russia and were not merely a part of Orthodox religious folklore. They were very much embraced by the official Orthodox religious tradition as evidenced in the proceedings of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787), where they were adduced to establish the legitimacy of the practice of icon veneration in general.<sup>43</sup> The participants, for instance, listened to an account from the life of Mary of Egypt recalling the role that an icon of the Mother of God played in her conversion experience. According to that story, Mary of Egypt embarked on a journey with a group of pilgrims to Jerusalem for the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross. She was interested not in the pilgrimage but in the prospect of attracting new lovers. On the day of the feast, she followed the crowds to the church, but found she could not enter it. With each attempt to enter into the nave, she was held back by an unseen force. Looking up, she saw an icon of Mary, the Mother of God, hanging on the wall of the narthex. At this moment, Mary of Egypt re-evaluated her recent life and before this icon admitted to the Mother of God that she knew why she could not enter the sacred space. She vowed that should the Mother of God petition Christ to grant her entrance into the church, she never again would defile her body and would depart from "this world." Following this prayer, Mary felt a "fullness of faith" and with hope she entered the church with no obstacle. Having venerated the cross of Christ, she once again turned to the icon and prayed that the Mother of God would guide her in her new life. At that moment, Mary of Egypt heard a distant voice say, "if you go to the Jordan, there you will find peace."<sup>44</sup>

Following the telling of this account, one of the council's delegates noted, "we have seen this icon in the holy city of Christ our God and have frequently venerated it."<sup>45</sup> The council also recalled the words of Germanus, Patriarch of Constantinople (715–30): "through various icons, God created miracles about which many people desire to tell; for example he healed the sick, which we ourselves have experienced."<sup>46</sup> Orthodox writers and preachers in late imperial Russia were well aware of this tradition and drew upon it extensively in their treatises, devotional pamphlets, and sermons on icons.

43. *Deianiia Vselenskikh Soborov*, vol. 7 (Kazan, 1873). See especially this council's fourth and fifth sessions.

44. *Deianiia Vselenskikh Soborov*, 312–14; for a translation of the life of St. Mary of Egypt, see Benedicta Ward S.L.G., *Harlots of the Desert* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987), 35–56.

45. *Deianiia Vselenskikh Soborov*, 257.

46. *Deianiia Vselenskikh Soborov*, 350.

In this literature, miracle-working icons were linked to teachings concerning the Incarnation, revelation, and grace. According to these texts, after the perfect self-revelation of God in the person Jesus Christ, God's activity and revelation in the Christian community continued through the communication of his Holy Spirit. One way this "work" or "mercy" of God manifested itself to humans was in the form of miracles performed by the apostles. Such miracles were a sign of God's presence and disclosed truths regarding human salvation.<sup>47</sup>

Once Christ and the apostles departed, the grace that had acted in and through them was now made manifest in and through their images.<sup>48</sup> Icons, therefore, became a medium chosen by God to show forth the grace of his Spirit.<sup>49</sup> God, wrote one nineteenth century author, "opens and pours forth [through icons] miraculous gifts to his people."<sup>50</sup> While in theory every icon could become miracle-working, God found it pleasing to grant certain icons "the grace and the power of wonder-working for those who gathered before them in faith and hope."<sup>51</sup>

Russian Orthodox writers and preachers explained the revelatory nature of miracle-working icons by making use of the same biblical imagery that Orthodox Christians had drawn upon for centuries in defense of their icon veneration practices.<sup>52</sup> In particular, Russian Orthodox writers and preachers compared such icons to the Ark of the Covenant. That same presence of God once manifested through the Ark of the Covenant now made itself known through specially revered icons.<sup>53</sup> At the same time, treatises on miracle-working icons made it clear that the wonder-working power displayed by a particular icon did not belong to the icon in and of itself, but resulted from an encounter between God and the believer and from the strength of faith

47. See this discussion in Smirnov, *Chudesa v prezhnee i nashe vremia*.

48. D. Sosnin, *O sviatykh chudotvornykh ikonakh v tserkvi Khristianskoi* (St. Petersburg, 1833), 16.

49. Sosnin, *O sviatykh chudotvornykh ikonakh*, 4–5; Sviashchennik (Sv.) N. Romanskii, *O chudotvornykh ikonakh i sviatykh moshchakh* (Moscow, 1911) 4; A. Vysotskii, *Beseda o chudotvornykh ikonakh, kak ochevidnom dokazatel'stve istinnosti i bogougodnosti ikonopochitanii* (Simferopol', 1908), 2.

50. Sosnin, *O sviatykh chudotvornykh ikonakh*, 54.

51. Vysotskii, *Beseda o chudotvornykh ikonakh*, 2; Sv. P. Komarov, *Slovo v den' Preobrazheniia Gosпода 6 Avgusta, 1916: O pochitanii ikon* (Tomsk, 1916), 5–6. Romanskii, *O chudotvornykh ikonakh*, 5. For an explanation of why it would be detrimental to believers if all icons were miracle-working, see Sv. Aleksandr Vorontsov, *Pouchenie na 26-e iunია 1908-go goda: Vstrecha Smolenskoi ikony Presviatoi Bogoroditsy iz Sedmiozernoii pustyni* (Kazan, 1908), 4–5.

52. See, for example, Saint John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, trans. David Anderson (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994), 61, 96.

53. Sosnin, *O sviatykh chudotvornykh ikonakh*, 65, 73; N. Uspenskii, *O sviatykh ikonakh i o pochitanii sv. khristovykh tain* (St. Petersburg, 1894), 9; Vysotskii, *Beseda o chudotvornykh ikonakh*, 3.



and prayer of those who venerated it.<sup>54</sup> Miracles related to icons thus bore testimony to the “presence” of both divine energy (or grace) and human faith.

Devotional pamphlets also explained the manner by which a copy of a miracle-working icon could share the same healing power as the original. Copies of miracle-working icons were like mirrors. A mirror “receiving” the rays of the sun could reflect these rays to another mirror, and that mirror in turn to another, and so on to eternity. Each of these mirrors, however, shone with the light of the same sun. In a similar fashion, copies of miracle-working icons could also “reflect” the healing light of the original.<sup>55</sup> The early twentieth century Russian theologian and priest Pavel Florensky (1882–1939) supported this understanding when he wrote: “The spiritual content of these copies is not something new (when compared to the prototype) nor is it something similar; rather the spiritual content is *exactly the same*.”<sup>56</sup>

Religious experiences associated with specially revered icons were also liturgically confirmed. The Orthodox service for the blessing of icons called for the religious experiences associated with miracles and, hence, implicitly not only sanctioned the stories behind icons, but gave them a place in the liturgical life of the church. In the service for the blessing of icons of Christ, for instance, one of the prayers states: “Hearken O Lord my God . . . and mercifully send down your holy blessing upon this icon and . . . give it the power of healing every sickness and infirmity, the power of driving off every crafty design of the devil from those who in faith seek refuge with it.”<sup>57</sup> The service for the blessing of icons of the Mother of God even more directly anticipates religious experiences from prayer before the icon: “O Lord, our God . . . send down the grace of your most holy Spirit on this icon which your servants have designed in her honor and memory and

54. Sosnin, *O sviatykh chudotvornykh ikonakh*, 67, 71; Romanskii, *O chudotvornykh ikonakh*, 2. Lay believers also stressed the importance of faith and prayer when speaking about healings with respect to icons. See for example RGIA, f. 796, op. 190, 6 ot., 3 st., d. 145, l. 3 ob. This was an idea expressed by John of Damascus when he said, “Matter is filled with divine grace through prayer addressed to those portrayed in images” (*On the Divine Images*, 36).

55. Sv. Aleksandr Sidonskii, *Chudotvornaia ikona Bozhiei Materi Odigitrii, chto v sele Bogorodskom bliz goroda Tomsk* (Tomsk, 1892), 2.

56. Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis*, trans. Donald Sheehan and Olga Andrejev (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1996), 74.

57. “Chin blagosloveniiia i osviiashcheniiia ikony Khristovy, prazdnikov Gospodskikh, edinnyia ili mnogikh,” *Trebnik*, part 2 (Moscow, 1906). This translation of the text was taken from *The Blessing of Icons*, trans. Mother Mary (Toronto: Peregrina, 1993).

sanctify it with your heavenly blessing: *and grant to it power and strength of miraculous works.*"<sup>58</sup>

The incorporation of icon-related stories into the liturgical life of the church was most dramatically evident with respect to icons of the Mother of God and the rich liturgical and paraliturgical tradition that by the late nineteenth century had developed around them. Miracles and religious experiences associated with them entered the liturgical life of the Church through the so-called *akathistos* hymn, a genre of Eastern Christian hymnography that originally developed as a liturgical expression of the veneration of the Virgin Mary, but by the end of the Byzantine period developed into a broader genre of church hymnody.<sup>59</sup> Hymns of praise with their roots in psalmody, *akathistoi* were inspired by events and stories associated with a particular icon or saint. While found in the Eastern Christian tradition at large, this genre became particularly popular in Russia, especially during the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>60</sup> It is noteworthy that except for the icon of Christ "Not-Made-By-Hands," only icons of the Mother of God enjoyed *akathistoi* in their honor. *Akathistoi* to saints were as a rule composed in honor of the person of the saint and not of an image of that saint.

Furthermore, stories and experiences connected with icons of the Mother of God also entered the Russian Orthodox Church's liturgical calendar. Technically, there were approximately twenty-eight nationally recognized miracle-working icons of the Mother of God, some of which had full liturgical services composed in their honor.<sup>61</sup> In the late nineteenth century, locally revered icons of the Mother of God also

58. Emphasis added. "Chin blagosloveniiia i osviiashcheniia ikony Presvatoi Bogoroditsy," *Trebnik*, part 2 (Moscow, 1906). This translation taken from *The Blessing of Icons*, 13.

59. An *akathistos*—meaning literally "without sitting"—is a liturgical hymn or canticle during which people stand. For a historical description of this genre of hymnography, see the introductory article by M. Kozlov, "Akafist kak zhanr tserkovnykh pesnopenii," in *Akafistnik*, part 1 (Moscow, 1892). See also Vasiliki Limberis, *The Virgin Mary and the Creation of Christian Constantinople* (New York, 1994), 62–97. For the classic study of *akathistoi* in Russia, see Aleksei Popov, *Pravoslavnye russkie akafisty* (Kazan, 1903).

60. In addition to the more than 150 *akathistoi* that were officially accepted by the church in the nineteenth century, at least 300 more did not pass the synodal censor. Kozlov, "Akafist kak zhanr tserkovnykh pesnopenii," 10.

61. Archbishop Sergii, *Russkaia literatura*, vol. 40. For the liturgical services in honor of some of these icons, see *Minei*, 12 vols. (St. Petersburg: Sinodal'naia tipografiia, 1885); *Dopolnitel'naia Mineia* (St. Petersburg, 1909); *Minei*, 12 vols. (1893; reprint, Moscow: Pavilo Very, 1997). It is noteworthy that it was not uncommon for monastic communities on the local level to compose services or at least special hymns (*troparia* and *kontakia*) in honor of an icon of the Mother of God specially revered in their particular locale. The multivolume *Menaion* published by the Moscow Patriarchate in the twentieth century (Moscow, 1978–88) contains some of these locally composed services and hymns. It contains references to some seventy icons of the Mother of God.

gained more “official” prominence through their inclusion in published *Menologions*.<sup>62</sup> In 1907 a special commission under the aegis of the Moscow Synodal Press published an addition to the Russian language version of the *Menologion* compiled by Bishop Dimitrii of Rostov and known as the *Chetii Minei*, which included the “lives” of hundreds of specially revered icons of the Mother of God. Through such publications, the stories behind these icons entered into the body of devotional literature that served as material for preaching and teaching.<sup>63</sup>

### III. ICONS AND ECCLESIAL AUTHORITY

It was precisely the Orthodox theological understanding of icons and miracles, combined with extensive lay involvement with such icons on the local level, that made specially revered icons figure so prominently in the ecclesial experience of laypeople and in the formation of their ecclesial identity. While not sacred texts on the level of Scripture or even liturgical hymnody, the stories behind icons, especially those connected to icons of the Virgin Mary, were nevertheless very much part of the fabric of Orthodox religious life. Lay believers orally transmitted accounts of events that took place with such icons; priests recounted them during sermons or paraliturgical discussions. By the mid- to late nineteenth century, they began to be disseminated on a wide scale in the form of devotional pamphlets that believers could purchase and read.<sup>64</sup> They were also published in official diocesan publications. In this sense, they were part of the collection of texts and narratives that informed both personal and corporate Russian Orthodox identity.

Insofar as according to Russian devotional logic God chose icons as a medium by which to reveal the grace of his Spirit in postapostolic times, the accounts that set these icons apart might be seen as “appendices” to the biblical narrative that informs Christian identity. The symbolic “linking” of the biblical narrative with the narratives behind icons can be seen for example in the fact that many of these icons had churches built in their honor. According to its narrative, for instance, the icon of the Mother of God named “Hodigitriia of the Holy

62. Preosviashchennyi Dimitrii, *Mesiatseslov sviatykh, vseiu russkoiu tserkoviu ili mestno chtimyk i ukazatel' prazdnestv v chest' ikon Bozhiei Materi i sv. ugodnikov Bozhiikh v našem otechestve* (Moscow, 1893–99).

63. See *Slava Bogomateri*.

64. For an example of the influence such pamphlets had on common believers, see RGIA, f. 796, op. 178, 3 ot., 2 st., d. 2615, l. 1. Such devotional pamphlets were commonly found in the possession of peasants. See RME, f. 7, op. 1, d. 756, ll. 1–2 (Novgorod); d. 801 ll. 9 ob; 20–21 (Novgorod); d. 948, ll. 6–7 (Orlov).

Mountain" from the Pskov diocese was tied to the religious experiences of a pious fifteen-year-old shepherd boy who was considered a "fool for Christ" in his sixteenth-century community. Following this icon's glorification, a church was constructed in the icon's honor, with the altar table—a symbol of Christ's tomb, the throne of God, and the heavenly banquet table—constructed over the site of the boy's initial experiences with the icon.<sup>65</sup> In late imperial Russia, laity continued in this tradition by petitioning to construct churches or chapels on the site where they believed an icon's "life" had begun.<sup>66</sup>

The stories behind specially revered icons, therefore, actively connected the experiences of persons and communities living in the historical present with those episodes or persons from the history of salvation depicted on the icon. They spoke of believers' own involvement in a God-directed history. Specially revered icons held meaning not only because they *visually* testified to and "called forth" the paradigmatic events told in Scripture and Tradition, but also because they bore witness, through the stories of signs and miracles associated with them, to believers' own perceived participation in the same, ongoing sacred story. The glorification of such icons, consequently, was in a certain sense also the celebration of each and every layperson's experience of divine grace gathered up into the collective movement of salvation history.

Indeed, in a world where ecclesiastical matters were managed by priests, male monastics, and bishops, the laity at first glance appears to have counted little when it came to the ongoing life of the Russian Orthodox Church. A nameless woman such as Volchaninov's wife had virtually no voice in the institutional or theological matters of church life. And yet, on account of the icon of the Mother of God named "Fertile Mountain," her life experience was recognized and took on a sacred meaning that was incorporated into the history of the Orthodox community. Her experiences became part of the collective memory that, at least locally, was celebrated liturgically through communal doxology before the icon.

The flourishing of such stories behind specially revered icons was

65. For the symbolism of the altar table, see "O sviatom altare," *Rukovodstvo dlia sel'skikh pastyrei* 30 (1861): 327–28; St. Germanus of Constantinople, *On the Divine Liturgy*, trans. Paul Meyendorff (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 59. For the story of this icon, see *Slava Bogomateri*, 526–27.

66. RGIA, f. 796, op. 159, d. 1856 (Pskov, 1878); op. 175, d. 1279 (Viatka, 1894); op. 177, 2 ot., 2 st., d. 1629 (Chernigov, 1896); op. 187, d. 7006 (Smolensk, 1906); op. 190, 6 ot., 3 st., d. 426 (Viatka, 1909).

closely related to the mnemonic function of icons themselves.<sup>67</sup> If iconographic depictions served as visual narratives of divine activity in the unfolding of ecclesial life, then the stories behind the icons recalled God's presence and ongoing activity in the lives of the faithful. In this way, icon-related narratives became part of the "anamnesis" experience that icon veneration itself entailed. These narratives remembered God's remembrance of individual persons, local communities, and even an entire nation.<sup>68</sup>

The meaning of an icon's veneration, however, was not exhausted by the anamnesis of sacred history that it evoked. Laity also flocked to a specially revered icon as a locus of divine presence, as a possibility of immediate personal encounter with "the holy" that was in itself beyond history.<sup>69</sup> This relational aspect of icon veneration—which included magnification, identification, and a sense of deference and dependence—provided for a mode of bonding within the faith community that fostered ecclesial cohesion. In their posture of supplication before the image, believers not only tacitly affirmed their shared convictions, but also manifestly placed their hope in the same eternal power.

Accordingly, in their liturgical act of relating to the divine through the image, which was both the focus of prayer and the point of convergence of all the stories originating from it, believers united their disparate selves into a body of faithful. Thus, the reciprocity of image and narrative—the relational and the anamnestic—in the act of veneration synergistically enhanced personal and corporate Orthodox Christian experience and identity. This idea was eloquently expressed in 1908 by a priest from Kazan, Alexander Vorontsov, in a sermon he gave on the occasion of the greeting of a specially revered icon of the Mother

67. For an interesting discussion on the relationship between memory and visual imagery from the Protestant perspective, see David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 181–202.

68. For the Semitic roots of the notion of *anamnesis*, see, for example, Brevard S. Childs, *Memory and Tradition in Israel* (London: SCM, 1962). Christian use of this concept is the subject of numerous studies. For overviews, see F. Chenderlin, *Do This as My Memorial*, *Analecta Biblica* 99 (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1982); Richard J. Ginn, *The Present and the Past: A Study of Anamnesis*. Princeton Theological Monograph Series 20 (Allison Park, Pa.: Pickwick, 1989); Max Thurian, *The Eucharistic Memorial*, 2 vols. (Richmond: John Knox, 1960–61). In a certain sense, liturgical rituals connected with specially revered icons can be compared to those rituals involved in the eucharistic liturgy insofar as the former also "call to remembrance" key events in salvation history and play a major role in forming personal and corporate Orthodox Christian identity.

69. In Russia's culture of icon veneration, therefore, both the event of a perceived "hierophany" or "epiphany" and memory engendered the sense of sacred "presence." For these two aspects of the sacred, see Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), 11–12, 20–24; Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward a Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 1–23.

of God. Speaking of the benefits of such a visitation, he said: "In seeing it [the icon], our memories are awakened by the many thousands of persons who poured out their souls before it—who poured out comforting tears of joy, quiet tears of tenderness, or bitter tears of grief; the holy icon visibly and invisibly unites us with an entire assembly of our brethren—alive and deceased; our personal spiritual and bodily weakness is fortified by the universal, corporate strength of the church."<sup>70</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In her book *Other Peoples' Myths*, Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty has noted that the act of retelling stories does not simply communicate information but in certain circumstances also provides people with a means of communion. "People listen to stories," she writes, "not merely to learn something new (communication), but to relive, together, the stories that they already know, stories about themselves (communion)."<sup>71</sup> The stories behind specially revered and miracle-working icons contributed as much as the visual images themselves to making the veneration of such icons expressive acts of "communion" in late imperial Russian Orthodoxy.

Arising out of oral history that testified to perceived hierophanic or revelatory events, such stories verbally witnessed to the same "sacred reality" to which the image itself visually witnessed. For believers, the narrative qua witness overtly confirmed that which the icon symbolically manifested, setting apart the specially revered icon not as some sort of talisman, but rather as a corroborating "double witness" to the immediate presence and action of the holy in their midst and thus also to their inclusion in the ongoing flow of sacred history.

Believers responded to this perception of a local and direct manifestation of grace with a communal expansion and liturgical elaboration of their own verbal witness and veneration. In their actions, they drew on religious sentiments and patterns of thought and worship long established in Orthodox tradition and fostered a sense of Orthodox identity and unity. In their shared veneration of specially revered icons, however, believers experienced a liturgical structure and dynamic somewhat different from that of "regular" worship services in their parishes.

Clearly, the setting was less formal and the boundaries more fluid in such prayer gatherings, but of greater significance was that the laity in this context often assumed the position of conveyor and even guardian

70. Vorontsov, *Pouchenie na 26-e i iunia 1908-go goda*, 5.

71. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Other Peoples' Myths* (New York: MacMillan, 1988), 148.

of truths expressed through the remembrance and veneration of such icons. Moreover, access to specially revered icons was direct. Even when clergy led such gatherings, this type of icon veneration deemphasized the usual hierarchical distinction between clergy and laity. Standing in reverence and prayer before the face of such an icon, clergy and laity blended together in a fundamental way as they did not, for instance, in the receiving of the Eucharist, wherein clergy partook of the Divine Mysteries first, behind closed doors, out of sight of the congregation.

Indeed, the narratives behind Russia's specially revered icons introduce us to an ecclesial world where distinctions between laity and clergy played a secondary role. The lines of demarcation drawn by Metropolitan Makarii Bulgakov, author of a classic nineteenth-century Russian Orthodox dogmatic textbook, between a "subordinate" laity and a "divinely directed" clerical hierarchy, were repeatedly confounded in the world of icon veneration.<sup>72</sup> In their telling and retelling of experiences with specially revered icons, lay men and women acted as witnesses to God's actions in their midst and displayed an ecclesial consciousness that was not rigidly determined by such hierarchical divisions.

The veneration of specially revered icons reveals an arena within prerevolutionary Russian Orthodoxy where laity not merely "received," but also actively shaped the very Orthodox tradition with which they identified. On numerous occasions, lay men and women had to defend their integrity as witnesses in the face of clerical skepticism and an institutional bias at that time that usually recognized the "reality" of grace only if it was "validated" episcopally. Archival sources vividly testify to this internal ecclesial tension. Lay men and women in such cases usually had no qualms about questioning the judgment of ecclesiastical officials or insisting on the memorialization of God's action in their lives. Indeed, had it not been for lay perseverance and a sense of mission when it came to honoring these icons, many of these icons would have been forgotten, along with the personal and collective memories they symbolized, and their power to engender an ecclesial consciousness would have been lost.

72. Makarii Bulgakov, *Pravoslavno-dogmaticheskoe bogoslovie* (St. Petersburg, 1857), 166.