

REPOSE OF VEN. SERAPHIM, WONDERWORKER OF SAROV

By Archpriest Peter Olsen

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Russian history is filled with much turmoil. Russia's enemies were many. In the early days there were constant wars with the Mongols in the East, as well as with European nations in the West. Internally, it seems, there was also always much conflict. For example, the tension between Tsar Ivan IV and the boyars and the severe oppression of the people by the "oprichniki," who were like a secret police who rooted out and arrested, tortured and executed anyone suspected of dissent or treason. Historically in the Byzantine State as well as in Russia there was tension between the Church and the state, such as between St. Mitrophan of Voronezh and Tsar Peter the Great. Tsar Peter eventually abolished the patriarchate and a civil servant, the "ober procurator", assumed civil authority over the administration of the Church. Later Russia suffered through terrorism, assassination and revolution. The Royal Family was brutally executed and the monarchy was abolished. Then began the most severe persecution in the history of the Christian Church. Conflicts continue today, for example, the controversial events in the Ukraine which have caused a great rift between Russia on one side and the United States and western nations on the other. It is amazing that in spite of and in the midst of all this, there were and are always countless holy saints who quietly go about the work of God, worshipping and struggling with sin, praying for their troubled homeland and the rest of the world, and acquiring the Holy Spirit.

One such saint is commemorated today, the great and venerable St. Seraphim of Sarov. St. John Maximovitch tells us that the power of St. Seraphim lies in the fact that he struggled so hard his entire life to follow the Gospel commandment, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). Having acquired many gifts of the Holy Spirit, we see the face of God when we see St. Seraphim, because in this amazing struggler we can see the restoration of the original image of man before the Fall, and therefore, when we look at St. Seraphim, we see the image and likeness of God Himself. St. Seraphim achieved the gifts of the Spirit, the great heights of virtue, which the Apostle Paul speaks about in the fifth chapter of his letter to the Galatians, namely "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance." St. Seraphim struggled for God in the eighteenth century, the so-called "age of enlightenment." This was a time of political and social upheaval as new ideas and great change permeated Europe and Russia. In Russia it was the precursor of the dark days of atheism and persecution which were on the horizon. At this time the humble monk Seraphim undertook his amazing spiritual struggles in the Monastery of Sarov. In his lifetime he received numerous divine visitations, by the Lord, the Mother of God, saints and angels. Rather than being an occasion of pride, according to Hieromonk Makarios of Simonos Petra, these divine favors were "an occasion for him to go down into deeper humility and self-reproach, and to seek solitude all the more." Near the end of his life he opened his doors to visitors who sought spiritual advice. He answered numerous letters that were sent to him without even opening and reading them, answering them with divine inspiration, always writing the advice which God would reveal to Seraphim and which was exactly what the recipient needed to hear. He always shone with divine radiance, joy and love. He would address everyone as "My joy," and throughout the year he always greeted everyone by saying "Christ is Risen!" This may sound odd, because we experience the joy of Pascha only once a year, whereas the joy of Pascha remained with St. Seraphim every day of his life. Fr. Makarios goes on to write: [St. Seraphim's] charity — namely the love of God within him — consoled everyone, forgave everything and won back everyone.

The glorification of St. Seraphim took place on July 19, 1903, in the presence of the Royal Family, many clergy, and several hundred thousand worshippers. The Royal Martyr Tsar Nicholas II and other members of the royal household helped to carry the sacred relics of St.

Seraphim during the procession. This was the last glorification of a saint to take place in Russia before the revolution and the persecution began. In 1926 the Bolsheviks confiscated the relics of St. Seraphim and all trace of them were lost until 1991, when they were providentially discovered in the reserve collection in the Museum of Atheism in St. Petersburg. The precious relics were authenticated, and preceded by a triumphant procession, were solemnly carried to the Monastery of Diveyevo, by way of passing through the great cities of Russia. In its own way, this great event symbolized the end of the persecution and the triumphant revival of the Orthodox Christian faith in Russia. Holy Father Seraphim pray unto God for us! Amen.



Glorification of Venerable Seraphim of Sarov, led by the Royal Martyr Tsar Nicholas II