



SAINT SERAPHIM OF SAROV

— *by an Orthodox Monk*

In 1759, in the small Russian provincial town of Kursk, a baby boy, the future St. Seraphim of Sarov, was born to a local merchant and builder and his wife, Isidore Ivanovich Moshnin and Agathia Photievna. A few

days later, when the child was baptized, he was given the name Prochor.

Isidore died at the young age of 43. Prochor's mother Agathia, now a widow, continued a life of generous charity, especially towards orphans and poor children. She sometimes even arranged marriages for them. After Isidore's death, she also took over direction of a church that he had started building in 1752. We tend to think of the Saints as people who lived in ancient times, but St. Seraphim is a relatively modern saint. To put the life and times of St. Seraphim somewhat into Californian perspective, California was Spanish territory from 1769 to 1821. St. Seraphim was born in 1759 and died in 1833.

His life span overlapped that of Fr. Junipero Serra, who lived from 1713 to 1784.

When Prochor was seven, he climbed the bell tower of the new church with his mother, and from the very top, he accidentally fell headlong to the ground. In horror his mother rushed down expecting to find him dead, but he was standing on his feet, and not hurt! At nine Prochor fell ill and seemed to be close to death, but he told his mother that he had had a dream in which the Theotokos told him she would heal him. Shortly after the dream, the icon known as “The Kursk Root Icon” was carried through the town, and passed by the Moshnin home. Prochor’s mother took him outside for the procession: he was laid on the ground, and they carried the icon over him. Soon he was completely recovered. (It was before this very same icon that St. John Maximovitch of San Francisco died.)

In 1776 (the year that the Declaration of Independence was signed), when young Prochor Moshnin was 17, he went with a group of friends on pilgrimage to Kiev. Near Kiev there lived a well-known clairvoyant ascetic named Dositheus. Prochor asked him what he should do in life. The ascetic told him to enter the Monastery of Sarov. Two years later Prochor went to Sarov to become a monk, and was later tonsured with the name of Seraphim.

Two years after entering the monastery Father Seraphim the monk fell seriously ill again, and for three years spent most of his time lying motionless in his cell. Towards the end of that time he managed to totally surrender himself to the care and will of God. He requested that the Holy Gifts be brought to him. Later he reported that after receiving Holy Communion on that occasion, the Mother of God had appeared to him in ineffable light, in the company of the Apostles Peter and St. John the Theologian. The Theotokos said to St. John, “This is one of our kind.” Very quickly, Fr. Seraphim found himself healed of his illness.

In 1793 the Monk Seraphim was ordained to the diaconate, and later was advanced to the presbyterate, or priesthood. Once, while still a Deacon, he was granted another vision of extraordinary dimensions. Here is how he describes it in his own words: “Once I happened to be serving as Deacon on Holy and Great Thursday. The Divine Liturgy began at two in the afternoon and, as usual, was preceded by Vespers. After the little entrance and the readings I, poor sinner that I am, exclaimed before the royal doors, ‘O Lord, save the pious, and hear us.’ Entering the royal doors and holding up my stole to the people I finished: ‘And unto ages of ages,’ when suddenly I was struck by a ray as of sunlight. Glancing at this radiance, I saw our Lord and God Jesus Christ, in the

image of the Son of Man, shining with glory and unutterable light, surrounded by heavenly Powers, Angels and Archangels, Cherubim and Seraphim, as if by a swarm of bees, and proceeding through the air from the west doors of the Church. On reaching the Ambon, the Lord raised His most pure hands and blessed the clergy and the congregation. And then stepping into His holy Icon, which is to the right of the royal doors, He was transfigured, surrounded by choirs of Angels who shone with unutterable light all through the Church. And I, who am ‘dust and ashes’, by meeting the Lord Jesus then in the air, was granted a special blessing from Him; my heart felt pure, enlightened by joy in the sweetness of love for the Lord.”

It is reported that on that occasion Fr. Deacon Seraphim’s appearance changed and he could not even move from his place by the royal doors. Two other deacons were sent to take him under the arms and lead him into the altar. The Deacon Seraphim continued to stand there motionless in ecstasy for about three hours.

In 1794 St. Seraphim moved to a log cabin on high ground on the banks of the Sarovka River, in a deep pine and fir forest about three miles from the monastery. There he cultivated a small kitchen garden, and devoted himself to

studying the Scriptures and the Fathers of the Church, engaging in continual prayer.

It was while he was living in this hermitage that there occurred one of the most famous episodes in his life. Saint Seraphim toyed with the idea of accepting a great honor, which was offered to him, to become the Abbot of the Alateer Monastery. He was immediately so repentant for yielding in the least to the temptation to abandon his vocation as a hermit, that he spent the next three years standing and kneeling night after night on a huge granite boulder praying continually, “God be merciful to me a sinner.” Imagine what that means, kneeling and standing, night after night, scantily clothed, in snow and rain, in penitence for what most of us, I’m sure, would not find to be major fault, much less a grave sin!

Ten years later, St. Seraphim was still living in his hermitage. One day three peasants arrived at the cabin demanding money. “Old man, we know people bring you money all the time.” He told them that simply was not true, and enraged by the reply they hit him on the head with his axe, left him unconscious, and searched his dwelling, finding nothing. St. Seraphim was crippled the rest of his life, but never held this sin against his assailants. He made his painful way back to the monastery, and was put to bed, and before long, had

another vision of the Theotokos. That evening, to the amazement of all, St. Seraphim got up, and his recovery began.

St. Seraphim is famous for his close relationship with wild bears. On one occasion the Abbess Alexandra and a nun named Anna went to visit the Elder. “Without stopping at the Monastery we went straight to the hermitage, and on approaching it, we saw Father sitting on a log. Suddenly an enormous bear walked out of the wood on its hind legs.

“Our hands became clammy, our eyes grew dim. Then Father said, ‘Misha, why do you frighten my orphans? Better go back and bring us some kind of consolation, as I have nothing to offer them.’ The bear turned around and went off into the forest. About two hours had passed with the nuns having a wonderful conversation with Father Seraphim in his cabin, when the same bear suddenly appeared again, and scrambled clumsily into the cell and growled. Father Seraphim went up to him and said, ‘Well, well, Misha, show me what you have brought us?’ The bear rose on its hind legs and gave Father something wrapped in leaves. The contents of the parcel turned out to be a fresh honeycomb. The Elder took the honey and silently pointed to the door. The beast seemed to make a bow and the Elder, taking a bit of bread out of his bag, gave it to him, and the bear wandered off into the forest.”

On the 8th of May in the year 1810, St. Seraphim moved back to the Monastery, and lived as a recluse for the next 15 years, a hermit living in a cell of the monastery. But in 1825 he opened the door of his cell to visitors, and from that moment on spent the rest of his life in spiritual direction. Thousands of pious Christians had personal contact with him during the last years of his life. In 1831 he began to feel unusual exhaustion, and couldn't always receive visitors. On the first of January of 1833, St. Seraphim went out of his cell three times in the course of the day to the spot which he had chose for his burial plot. In the evening the monks heard him singing in his cell hymns from Paschal Matins, "Shine, shine, O New Jerusalem," and "O great and most holy Pascha, Christ our God."

About 6 am the next morning, they knocked at his door, but there was no answer. They found St. Seraphim inside kneeling upright before his favorite icon, with his arms crossed on his chest. He was dead. St. Seraphim had been a monk for 54 years.

St. Seraphim was already known throughout Russia as a great saint, so it is not surprising that he was glorified by the Russian Church only 70 years after his death. His canonization took place, not of the day of his death in the darkness of the Russian winter, but rather on 19 July 1903.

Many thousands came, led by Tsar Nicholas II and his wife Alexandra, who themselves were to die a martyr's death with their children only 15 years later.

St. Seraphim is noted for his pastoral moderation and constant joy, expressed in the fact that he gave people the Paschal greeting, "Christ is risen!" all through the year, and not just during the Paschal season. Some have interpreted this to mean that we don't need to struggle in our spiritual lives, but just to bask, so to speak, in the light of the Resurrection. But nothing could be farther from St. Seraphim's teaching. For even though he counseled moderation in spiritual disciplines, he taught, to use the words of an old American folk hymn, "If you don't bear the Cross, you can't wear the crown." In the fullness of the Orthodox Tradition, St. Seraphim never separated the Resurrection from the Cross—nor the Cross from the Resurrection. For he believed that through the Cross "joy hath come into all the world."