

***Called to Be Saints:  
Our Common Calling to Holiness and Sanctity***

by

**William C. Mills, Ph.D.**

Michael Miller, Ph.D. (editor) *Doing More With Life: Connecting Christian Higher Education to a Call to Service* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), p. 91-106.

**Abstract**

This paper will explore a definition of vocation in terms of its primary meaning as a call to holiness and sanctity that is expressed through the language of the liturgy. Liturgy is the basic fabric from which Christians understand how they live out their baptismal calling to sanctity. This vocabulary of holiness will be explored through the writings of the late Orthodox liturgical theologian Father Alexander Schmemmann (1921-1983) who was one of the foremost liturgical theologians in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His writings emphasize that our vocation to holiness and sanctity is derived through the liturgy, specifically the Eucharistic liturgy. It is through the eucharist where we offer of prayer and praise to God and are sent back into the world to live out our vocation in the world. Likewise, I will look at the life and writings of the late Mother Maria Skobtsova (1891-1945) who devoted her life serving the hungry and poor and needy in Paris during World War II. Mother Maria is a specific example of a person who accepted her calling to holiness and lived it in a very radical way, focusing her life of the supreme commandment of both love for God and for neighbor. Mother Maria's life is a good example of how one person incarnated the prayers of the liturgy in her life, serving at the altar of the world. Both Alexander Schmemmann and Mother Maria provide us with a primary understanding of our vocation to holiness and sanctity no matter what our particular station in the world, whether clergy or lay, married or single.

**Introduction**

The term vocation generally calls to mind a person who is assigned an official service in the Church, such as ordained clergy, monastic, religious brother or sister, member of the parish vestry, or some other ecclesiastical service. People often cite St. Paul's exhortation to the Christian community in Ephesus as a specific example of vocation in terms of Church service: "And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry for the building up of the body of Christ." (Ephesians 4:11-12. See also 1 Cor. 12:27-30, 1 Timothy 3). The Christian tradition also knows of other official ministries in the Church such as reader, acolyte, catechist, as well as deacon, priest, and bishop. Throughout time these ecclesiastical roles were rather fluid and either were expanded or contracted depending on the particular needs of the Church.

Besides regular Church service, other people may think of vocation in terms of a career or job, people may have a vocation as a teacher, lawyer, banker, athlete, or stock-broker. However, can we reduce vocation to one's particular or specific job or career? Work is important, and according to the Christian tradition work can be both satisfying and uplifting, but also redemptive. The late Roman Catholic Dorothy Day often noted how one's work can be highly energizing and contribute to the overall work of God in the world.

Furthermore we might speak of vocation in terms of one's role in a family such as one's vocation as a parent, those with children and those without children. The vocation of an uncle, aunt, or grandparent. However, this understanding of vocation is also quite limiting and very specific, it only applies to a select number of persons. What about those people who really don't have a family of their own such as orphans or single people who live alone?

While many people may speak of vocation in a specific and particular way, such as ministry in the Church, careers in the workplace, or even one's marital or family status, there

must be a more expansive and even more inclusive meaning of vocation, one that is inclusive of all Christians, no matter what their particular role or function is in a Church, family, or society, yet at the same time which is limiting enough to remain faithful to both the scripture and tradition of the Church? I would like to explore a very primary understanding of vocation, one that is repeated throughout the scriptures and incarnated and experienced in the lives of Christians. Specifically, I would like to explore the notion of vocation as a common or calling towards holiness and sanctity as it is emphasized throughout the scriptures, especially St. Paul in 1 Cor. 1:2, “To the Church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, *called to be saints* together with all of those in every place call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.” Paul addresses the faithful in Corinth as saints, or holy ones which is also echoed in the Letter to the Hebrews 3:1, “Therefore, *holy brethren*, who share in a heavenly call, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession” and in 1 Peter 1:15, “As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, *be holy yourselves* in all your conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”<sup>1</sup> and finally, in 2 Timothy 1:9, “Do not be ashamed then of testifying to our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel in the power of God, who saved us and called us with a *holy calling*, not in virtue of our works but in virtue of his own purpose.”

This call to holiness is not something to be taken lightly. It is a command from God himself, that we are called to be holy because God himself is holy.<sup>2</sup> The entire scripture testifies to God’s holiness and sanctity.<sup>3</sup> Holiness and sanctity is the very foundation on which our life is

---

<sup>1</sup> Scripture quote is taken from Leviticus 11:44-45.

<sup>2</sup> See also Exodus 3:4, Exodus 19:6, 2 Timothy 1:9-10

<sup>3</sup> See also Romans 1:7, 1 Cor. 1:2, Matthew 5:48.

formed and shaped and it is through our baptism into Christ and our being raised for new life in which we live out our calling to sainthood. We are not called not just to be good, not just to be nice, but to be saints. We can fulfill our vocation to become saints because God has sent the Holy Spirit into the world who gives us the gift of grace to fulfill this high calling, as the Orthodox theologian Thomas Hopko remarks, “We are all made to fulfill ourselves as creatures made in God’s image and likeness for eternal life. And we can do so because God not only creates us with this possibility, and indeed, this command, but because He does everything in His power to guarantee its accomplishment by sending His son and His Spirit to the world.”<sup>4</sup> It is through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at the feast of Pentecost which vivifies us and sends us out into the world to accomplish God’s work which is no less than to bring the good news to the entire world.

Holiness, like the term vocation, is often misunderstood and generally refers to holy men and women who are officially recognized as saints, the spiritual giants to whom Christians look to for intercessory prayer and for their living witnesses of the gospel: St. Augustine of Hippo, St. Francis and Claire, St. Elizabeth Seton, as well as saints of the Eastern Church St. Sergius of Radonezh, St. Seraphim of Sarov, and St. Herman of Alaska.<sup>5</sup> As officially recognized persons of faith they have fully exemplified the life of Christ through their unique circumstances whether as apostles, preachers, martyrs, confessors, ascetics, teachers, soldiers, bakers, theologians, scholars, missionaries, as well as miracle workers, and intercessors. Very often the saints seem to

---

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Hopko, “Finding Ones’ s Calling in Life” (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2005), 4.

<sup>5</sup> See David Farmer *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1992).

be “unapproachable” or “larger than life.”<sup>6</sup> However, when reading the hagiographic and biographic stories of the saints we see that, with few exceptions, their lives were quite ordinary. Their holiness and sanctity was expressed through everyday routines of life whether through preaching and teaching in local parish churches, through working and praying in monasteries, serving the poor and needy in cities and towns, and others through their work with children, widows, or students. While the saints lived in different cultures, societies, countries, spoke different languages and experienced the Christian faith in different ways, they all share one common trait which is that they always allowed the Lord to work through them which eventually taught them what holiness truly was; living an authentic life in the precise place where you find yourself in life.

Furthermore, when we begin to dig into their lives, beyond the hagiographic material, we see that the saints were far from perfect, at least in the eyes of many of their followers. Hagiography tends to iron out the warts and the wrinkles and leaves people looking spotless. However, the saints themselves reveal otherwise. Most saints admit that they were all too human and suffered from great temptations and tribulations in life, their impatience with others, and lack of faith. One only has to peruse St. Augustine’s *Confessions* or the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* to see that the saints saw themselves as quite imperfect. Yet their memory has been kept alive by the Church to remind us about experiencing the kingdom of God in the present day, living authentic lives always striving to follow the supreme commandment of love. While we honor

---

<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to the work of my colleague Michael Plekon whose writing has shaped my own thinking on the subject of holiness and sanctity, see especially *Living Icons Persons of Faith in the Eastern Church* (South Bend, IN: The University of Notre Dame, 2002), *Tradition Alive* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), and co-translated with Alexis Vinogradov *In the World, Of the Church: A Paul Evdokimov Reader* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2001).

and remember these officially canonized saints as being examples of the Christian life, what about St. Paul's message to the church at Corinth, and to us, that we too are *called to be saints*?

Sanctity and holiness is a common vocation for the entire people of God. We all have a calling to live the life of the Kingdom of God in our own particular way of life whether as clergy or lay, married or celibate, with children and childless, and in our relationships with family, friends, and co-workers. I would like to explore this particular understanding of vocation through the writings of the late Orthodox liturgical theologian Alexander Schmemmann. Schmemmann offers us a nuanced understanding of vocation, one that is derived from the liturgy of the Church. Schmemmann's main thesis is that the liturgy forms the fabric of our understanding of the Christian faith and it is through the liturgy of the Church where we learn of our calling to holiness.

### ***Alexander Schmemmann: A Vocabulary of Vocation***

Alexander Schmemmann was born in 1921 in Tallin, Estonia. Soon thereafter his family immigrated to Paris where he lived until his departure to the United States in 1951. In Paris, the Schmemmann family joined the growing Russian émigré community, comprised of Russians with various intellectual and social backgrounds including; artists, writers, politicians, and theologians, many of whom left Russia on the eve of the 1917 Russian Revolution and expecting to return to their homeland after the upheaval had ended.<sup>7</sup> However, for most immigrants this dream would never be realized.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Schmemmann was younger than Mother Maria but it is unclear if their paths ever crossed. It is noteworthy that both Fr. Bulgakov and Metropolitan Evlogy were influential in both the lives of Mother Maria and Alexander Schmemmann. Fr. Bulgakov was Mother Maria's

Schmemann began his studies at the famous Lycee Carnot in Versailles, a military academy for boys. Later transferred to an upper level gimnaziia, the European equivalent of high school, the young Schmemann enjoyed a classical education of literature, music, art, and culture.<sup>9</sup> He later enrolled at the University of Paris and eventually entering the St. Sergius Theological Institute, where he received his theological training and education. While at St. Sergius, Schmemann received the equivalent of a Master of Divinity degree. He later became a lecturer in Church History following in the footsteps of his mentor, A.V Kartshev. John Meyendorff commented that Schmemann's first love was ecclesiastical history and notes that Schmemann had planned to write a doctoral dissertation on Byzantine theocracy, only later to put history aside in order to study liturgy.<sup>10</sup> However, Schmemann never abandoned his historical studies and rooted his liturgical writings in an historical context. Schmemann also reflected on the historical development of the Church in his many articles, books, sermons, and talks.

During this time at St. Sergius Schmemann met Juliana Ossorgine, who was studying classics at the Sorbonne. Later in 1943 Alexander and Juliana were married and relocated to l'Etang la Ville, a suburb of Paris, where they lived a very austere lifestyle. Schmemann was

---

spiritual advisor and also Schmemann's academic mentor at the Saint Sergius Theological Institute and Metropolitan Evlogy tonsured Mother Maria and was influential in Schmemann's early theological career.

<sup>8</sup> Sophie Koulumzine, *Many Worlds: A Russian Life* (Crestwood, NY, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 70.

<sup>10</sup> John Meyendorff, "A Life Worth Living" in Thomas Fisch (ed). *Liturgy and Tradition* (NY: SVS Press, 1990), 147.

ordained a priest in 1946 by Archbishop Tikhonistsky and subsequently assigned to help Fr. Kyprian Kern with Sts. Constantine and Helen parish in Clamart, a suburb of Paris.<sup>11</sup>

On June 8, 1951, Schmemmann and his family boarded the Queen Mary at Cherbourg, France and left his native Europe to travel to the United States, where he had accepted a teaching post at St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, then located in Uptown Manhattan. During his tenure as dean, Schmemmann flourished as a scholar, teacher, preacher, pastor, and theologian. Aside from his administrative position at the seminary, Schmemmann traveled throughout the United States and Canada giving speeches on college campuses and universities. He also served as an adjunct professor at both Union and General Theological Seminaries as well as at Columbia University.<sup>12</sup> During this period in his career, Schmemmann devoted his efforts to writing articles, books, and producing recorded weekly Russian language sermons for Radio Liberty which broadcasted his taped sermons to the Soviet Union during the Cold War period.

Schmemmann is primarily remembered for his writings on the liturgy, especially the eucharistic liturgy. The eucharist became the lens through which he envisioned theology and the Church, and most importantly, life. It is through the prayers, blessings, and hymns of the liturgical celebration where the Church reveals its true nature as the Kingdom of God. For centuries Christians have gathered together in order to offer their prayer and praise to God, which is a service of thanksgiving that is offered “for the life of the world and its salvation.”<sup>13</sup> When the Church gathers for worship it enters into an encounter with the one true living God

---

<sup>11</sup> Fr. Kern was also the chaplain at 77 rue de Lourmel for some time during the early 1940's.

<sup>12</sup> Meyendorff, 154.

<sup>13</sup> This phrase is included in the anaphora (offertory) prayer of the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom.



who reveals his holy will to the community of faith through the public reading of scripture and affirmed through the common prayers and affirmed in the breaking of bread. Thus, the community of faith is engaged in true living theology that is both redemptive and salvific.

For Schmemmann, liturgical worship is central to the Christian life; through worship that we enter into the reality of the Kingdom--the banquet of immortality. This intimate connection between liturgical worship and life is seen in the opening pages of *Liturgy and Life*: “It is my conviction that the Orthodox faith has its most adequate expression in worship and that truly Christian life is the fulfillment of the grace, vision, teaching, inspiration and power that we receive in worship.”<sup>14</sup>

Schmemmann’s critics have questioned his approach to liturgy and have pointed out that he emphasized liturgical worship over spirituality, outreach to the poor and needy, and evangelism. However, when reading Schmemmann’s theological corpus *in toto*, one actually sees an intimate connection between liturgy and life. According to Schmemmann, liturgy is meant to be missionary, in that liturgy always proclaims the gospel to the world around us. As mission, the liturgy is called to transform both the worshipping community and the culture and society in which we live. This missionary and transformative nature of the eucharistic liturgy was the topic for reflection in Schmemmann’s journal entry in early 1973:

The Eucharist reveals the Church as community-love for Christ, love in Christ-as a mission to turn each and all to Christ. The Church has no other purpose, no “religious life” separate from the world. Otherwise the Church would become an idol. The Church is the home each of us leaves to go to work and to which on returns with joy in order to find life, happiness and joy, to which everyone brings back the fruits of his labor and where everything is transformed into a feast, into freedom and fulfillment, the presence,

---

<sup>14</sup> *Liturgy and Life: Christian Development Through Liturgical Experience*. (Syosset, NY: Department of Religious Education, 1974), 5.

the experience of this “home”-already out of time, unchanging, filled with eternity, revealing eternity. Only this presence can give meaning and value to everything in life, can refer everything to that experience and make it full. “The image of this world is passing away.” But only by passing away does the world finally become the “World”: a gift of God, a happiness that comes from being in communion with the content, the form, the image of that “World.”<sup>15</sup>

The liturgy then becomes a mission to the world as the faithful are called to bring the love, joy, peace, and blessedness of the kingdom to the world, as the risen Lord commanded his disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20). Following our Lord’s injunction to continue his teaching ministry, the Church of God is called to continue this proclamation of the good news of salvation to whomever has ears to hear. Orthodox Christians are reminded of this command at every baptism service in which this particular pericope is always read.

Ultimately, the Eucharistic liturgy transforms the reality of daily existence, providing the transformation of our life to be the presence of God’s Kingdom as seen in the following commentary by the Orthodox theologian Michael Plekon:

The whole of the day, the night, the year, all of time is sanctified in the liturgy. All of human activity is to be transformed: work, play, eating, sleeping. Every point in human life is a moment of God’s saving and bringing us back: from our burial and resurrection in Baptism, to Chrismation, or confirmation, to Christian marriage, the anointing of the sick, and the burial of the Christian. Through the Church’s liturgy and ordained ministry all of human life, especially material things-bread, wine, oil, water, words, touch-are directed back to what they were created to be-good in God’s sight and, in the case of humankind, his very image and likeness. The consequence of this life of God and with God in liturgy

---

<sup>15</sup> Juliana Schmemmann (trans.) *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemmann* (NY: SVS Press, 2000), 25.

is made explicit. Time becomes the very “sacrament of the world to come,” the eschatological icon of God’s saving and reclaiming of his fallen creation...Father Schmemmann constantly emphasized the paschal or resurrectional nature of the Church, the liturgy, and Christian living, an intense realization within the Eastern Church’s experience, exemplified by numerous holy women and men even in our own era.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, the real liturgy begins when we leave Church on Sunday morning and go back into the world and share our life with our family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers. The liturgy challenges us to become missionaries of the good news to the entire world in order to see life as transformed in the eyes of God. In other words, we are to live the life of the kingdom in the “here and now” always seeking to incarnate the love, peace, and joy of the kingdom in our daily relationships with friends and family, co-workers and neighbors. We offer our prayer to God on the altar in the Church and serve our fellow neighbor in the altar of the world, a theme which Schmemmann often commented on in his writings and which is borrowed from the great orator and pastoral theologian John Chrysostom.

John Chrysostom said that there are two altars, one in the Church where we offer the sacrifice of bread and wine for the life of the world and for its salvation, but also the altar in the world, where we offer our dreams and fears, our pain and sufferings, and serve our neighbor. Both altars are required if we are truly following the Lord since we are not confined to the four walls of the Church but the priest sends us out to go forth in peace in order to accomplish God’s work, which is none other to bring his peace and love to the world to whomever we meet or serve. Chrysostom also referred to this as the liturgy after the liturgy.<sup>17</sup> While we all gather on

---

<sup>16</sup> Plekon, 190.

<sup>17</sup> The altar is made of Christ’s members, and the body of the Lord becomes your altar. Venerate it, you sacrifice the victim of the flesh of the Lord. The altar is more awesome than the one we use here, not just more than the one used in ancient times (in the Old Testament). No, do not object. The altar is awesome because of the sacrifice laid upon it, that, the one made of alms, is

Sunday morning for the eucharist, the real test of faith is how we incarnate or encapsulate the command of God to go and serve both him and the neighbor. Perhaps this is why Chrysostom devoted many of his sermons to the service of others.<sup>18</sup> It is through the service of the neighbor where we are transformed into pure love.

However, we learn about our vocation to holiness through worship. The Church provides us with this great command to serve the neighbor through the feast days and fasting periods of the Church, through the hymns, prayers, and petitions, and through the sermons and scripture readings. This transformative nature of worship was a theme for reflection in one of Schmemmann's writings:

One of Osip Mandelstam's poems, devoted to the eucharistic liturgy, the main service of Christian worship, includes this wonderful verse: "Take into your hands the whole world, as if it were a simple apple..." In an apple, and in everything within the world, faith sees, recognizes, and accepts God's gift, filled with love, beauty and wisdom. Faith hears the apple and the world speaking of that boundless love that created the world and life and gave them to us as our life. The world itself is the fruit of God's love for humanity, and only through the world can human beings recognize God and love him in return... And in truly loving his own life, can a person thereby accept the life of the world as God's gift. Our fall, our sin is that we take everything for granted-and therefore everything, including ourselves, becomes routine, depressing, empty. The apple becomes just an apple. Bread is just bread. A human being is just a human being. We know their weight, their appearance, their activities, we know everything about them, we no longer know them, because we do not see the light that shines through them. The eternal task of faith and of the Church is to overcome this sinful, monotonous habituation; to enable us to see

---

even more so, not just because of alms, but because it is the very sacrifice which makes others awesome. Again, this altar, only stone, becomes holy because Christ's body touches it, but that it is holy because it is itself Christ's body. So that altar is more awesome, sisters and brothers, than the one you are standing beside." *Homilies on 2 Corinthians 20* in J.M.R. Tillard *Flesh of The Church, Flesh of Christ: At the Source of the Ecclesiology of Communion* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> See Wendy Mayer and Pauline Allen *John Chrysostom* (New York, Routledge, 2000) and *St. John Chrysostom: On Wealth and Poverty* ed. Catherine Roth (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984).

once again what we have forgotten how to see, to feel what we no longer feel; to experience what we are no longer capable of experiencing. Thus, the priest blesses bread and wine, lifting them up to heaven, but faith sees the bread of life, it sees sacrifice and gift, it sees communion with life eternal.<sup>19</sup>

In the above passage Schmemmann outlines his thoughts on all of life as a service of liturgy, of the work of worship is to see everything already transformed and transfigured by the love of God. At its very core, liturgy reminds us that all of life is sacred, that spirituality is found in the everyday objects of bread, wine, oil, and is expressed through the life stages of birth, baptism, marriage, and death. Authentic spirituality is none other than communion with the God with all of creation who makes himself known in the breaking of the bread and in the sharing of fellowship with one another (Luke 14:13ff). Schmemmann railed against separating liturgy from life, the Church and the world, the world and the Kingdom, for Schmemmann there is only the life of God and this life is holy, sacred, and good. There cannot be any separation between the world and the kingdom, any separation is merely a reduction of what God had intended from the beginning. The entire Genesis story is about God's love and sharing that love with all of creation. Therefore, Schmemmann can say that all of life has been redeemed, sanctified, and offered up to God through Christ on the cross and celebrated and memorialized in the Eucharistic celebration, as the Book of Revelation says, "Behold, I make all things new." (Rev. 21:5).

We might think that Schmemmann was simply providing a theological excursus on the liturgy for other academics who are interested in worship as a theological subject worthy of exploration. However, his thoughts on worship are clearly exemplified in the life and writings of Mother Maria Skobtsova. While both Mother Maria and Alexander Schmemmann lived in Paris

---

<sup>19</sup> John Jillions (trans.) Alexander Schmemmann *Celebration of Faith* Volume 2 (NY: SVS Press, 1997), 160-1.

during World War II they lived in very different worlds. Schmemmann was teaching Church History part time at St. Sergius Orthodox Theological Seminary and assisting in a small parish community in nearby Clamart. Maria was serving the poorest of the poor in the center of Paris, among the homeless men and women, both Jews and Christians. She used her own money to open soup kitchens and flop-houses for widows, orphans, and homeless men. However, Mother Maria is a wonderful example of how we can live out our common calling to holiness through living the liturgy of the Church each and every day. Maria's life itself was a liturgy, a work for God but for her fellow man.

***Mother Maria Skobtsova: Following Ones Vocation: Living the Liturgy***

Elizaveta Pilenko was born in 1891 in the Latvian city of Riga. She was raised in a devout Orthodox home where both her parents attended Church. Her parents soon moved to the south of Russia near the Black Sea where her father was the mayor of Anapa for a short time, only later to relocated to Yalta where Elizaveta, or Liza, as she was called, was raised. Liza eventually relocated to St. Petersburg when her father died.<sup>20</sup>

Liza eventually married Dimitri Kuzmin-Karavivev who was a member of the Social Democrat Party which was known by its common name, the Bolsheviks. During this time Liza's interest in the Church waned as she was catapulted into political culture. The time was ripe for change and the young Liza found herself befriended by numerous young men and women her age who were idealistic and were seeking a new identity. However, Liza never became a total

---

<sup>20</sup> Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky *Mother Maria Skobtsova: Essential Writings* (NY: Orbis Book, 2003), 14.

unbeliever (atheist) since she still read the Gospels and the lives of the saints, especially after her father's death.<sup>21</sup>

Liza's marriage soon dissolved, but Liza was pregnant with her daughter Gaiana. Liza soon relocated to Anapa in the south of Russia where she raised her daughter. Her religious beliefs soon deepened as she turned to God for direction. It was in Anapa that Liza fell in love with Daniel Skobtsov. The two married and Liza quickly became pregnant with a son whom they named Yura. However the political situation soon worsened as the Bolsheviks started taking over the country. The Skobtsov's, together with Liza's mother Sophia, emigrated to the west, first through Georgia and then Istanbul, Yugoslavia, and finally to France. It was in Yugoslavia where her third child Anastasia was born. In 1923 the Skobtsova's arrived in Paris. Anastasia contracted influenza and died. Liza was traumatized by the event and grew even closer to God.<sup>22</sup>

It was immediately after Anastasia's death that Liza sought to live a consecrated life as a monastic. Her devotion to the poor and needy in Paris was already evident as she was actively assisting those in need on the streets, however, she felt compelled to do more. Her love for the poor, combined with the untimely death of her daughter Anastasia, opened a door for Liza as she discerned how to combine her devotion to the gospel and to the poor and needy of Paris. Liza did not find traditional Orthodox monasticism to be a viable since in the Orthodox spiritual tradition monastics live a cloistered life centered around the daily office, performing manual labor, devoting time to spiritual reading and meditation, and offering hospitality to pilgrims. Liza wanted to live a life consecrated life to God, but not in the seclusion of a monastery, but in the streets of Paris. She sought advice from Fr. Sergius Bulgakov her spiritual father, as well as the

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 19.

local bishop Metropolitan Evlogy (Georgievsky).<sup>23</sup> Metropolitan Evlogy supported Liza's vocation to the consecrated life and realized that the traditional monastic lifestyle was not flexible enough for her robust and lively personality. Evlogy agreed to tonsure her a nun and allow her to live a monastic life in the streets, what she called "monasticism of the world." In late March 1932 Liza was professed as a nun and was given the name Maria.<sup>24</sup>

Maria's decision to live a consecrated life as a monastic yet in the world may seem extraordinary. The Orthodox spiritual tradition has never had religious orders such as the Dominicans, Jesuits, or Franciscans as in the Roman Catholic Church. In the Orthodox Church monastics generally live a cloistered life centered around both work and prayer. However, Maria saw her life as quite ordinary. Maria felt compelled to serve the poor and needy in the world. For Maria, there was no other choice, the world was her Church and these people who came to her, the destitute, the orphan, the widow, the homeless found solace and peace. Maria would be known for her love of the poor which was expressed in quite ordinary and concrete ways.

Mother Maria as she was now called found her new home at 9 villa de Saxe in Paris where, with the help of Metropolitan Evlogy she purchased an unfurnished guest house. Mother Maria welcomed all of those in need, women, children, and homeless men. This was a house of hospitality as she herself wrote in her diary, "The house is roomy, but dusty, grubby, humble, unattractive; yet it is all redeemed by its warm sense of shelter, security, and gratifying huddling together in this salvatory Noah's ark, which has nothing to fear from the waves of life's threatening elements, from the horror of rent overdue, of the penury and despair of

---

<sup>23</sup> Both Fr. Bulgakov and Metropolitan Evlogy were prominent figures in the Russian religious renaissance in Paris during this period.

<sup>24</sup> Sergei Hackel *Pearl of Great Price* (NY: SVS Press, 1981), 21.



unemployment.”<sup>25</sup> However, this house soon became overcrowded and Mother Maria had to find a larger one. She eventually found a three-story house at 77 rue de Lourmel.<sup>26</sup> There she created a makeshift chapel and had enough room for over one hundred guests. Mother Maria was deeply devoted to her new ministry, usually rising early in order to go to the local market and purchase food for the day. She also sought financial donations to help pay for the rent as well as for the utilities since she herself did not work for money. She would then listen to people’s troubles, offering them a prayer or some spiritual direction. Her day lasted long into the night as numerous people sought her out for spiritual advice or a word of encouragement. Her quarters were a small closet underneath one of the staircases in the house. Mother Maria kept as her vision the gospel story of the last judgment based on Matthew 25:

The way to God lies through love of people. At the Last Judgment I shall not be asked whether I was successful in my ascetic exercises, nor how many bows and prostrations I made. Instead I will be asked, did I feed the hungry, cloth the naked, visit the sick and the prisoners. This is all I shall be asked. About every poor, hungry and imprisoned person the Savior says, “I”: “I” was hungry, and thirsty, I was sick and in prison.” To think that he puts an equal sign between himself and anyone in need...I always knew it, but now it had somehow penetrated to my sinews, it fills me with awe.”<sup>27</sup>

For Mother Maria holiness was not something contained within the walls of a monastery or even the Church, but lived and incarnated in the daily lives of real persons. Her love for the poor, almost obsession with helping those in need was exemplary. She often canvassed the area around her boarding house seeking out those in need, very much like a mother looking for her

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>26</sup> Mother Maria established houses of hospitality at 43 rue Francois Gerard, 74 rue de Felix Faure, and a large country house at Noisy-le-Grand.

<sup>27</sup> Pevera and Volokhonsky, 30.

children. Yet her own unconventional lifestyle drew attention from many persons who thought she was odd, especially since she was a professed nun. She wore a tattered and stained habit and was often found drinking red wine and smoking cigarettes with friends long into the night at nearby cafes. She was not enamored by long liturgical services, she often left early or arrived late to Church since she had much work to do, especially as the boarding house was soon overcrowded.<sup>28</sup> As the Orthodox theologian Michael Plekon describes her, Maria was not without her critics, “One could criticize the details of her personal life-her hats, the cast-off shoes and food-stained habit she wore, her continued love of Gauloises, smoking usually seen as incompatible with monastic asceticism, her unquenchable passion for debate and discussion with fellow intellectuals and artists. Some found her to have an extremely passionate personality, often given to outbursts of indignation, frustration, and compassion, disturbing to their sense of civility and monastic propriety.”<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, even with her unconventional lifestyle and despite what people thought of her, Mother Maria continued to labor for the poor and destitute, always seeking the love for the downcast and downtrodden.

During the Nazi occupation of Paris Mother Maria found herself burdened with hundreds of homeless Christians, Jews, and Gypsies, seeking food, shelter, and comfort. Paris was in shambles, there was little food and no work. Word soon spread that 77 rue de Lourmel was a safe haven. Mother Maria, together with the young priest Fr. Daniel Kleppinin, helped forge baptismal certificates in order to help Jews escape. Rather than looking the other way, Mother Maria went out of her way, even in the face of the enemy, trying to help those in need. It was in the poor and the needy and Mother Maria identified with showing love for the brethren:

---

<sup>28</sup> Hackel, 23.

<sup>29</sup> Plekon, 270. Gauloises was a type of French cigarette.

A person should have a more attentive attitude toward his brother's flesh than toward his own. Christian love teaches us to give our brother not only material but spiritual gifts. We must give him our last shirt and our last crust of bread. Here personal charity is as necessary and justified as the broadest social work. In this sense there is no doubt that the Christian is called to social work. He is called to organize a better life for the workers, to provide for the old, to build hospitals, care for children, fight against exploitation, injustice, want, lawlessness...The love of man demands one things from us in this area: ascetic ministry to his material needs, attentive and responsible work, a sober and unsentimental awareness of our own strength and of its true usefulness.<sup>30</sup>

Mother Maria's devotion to the neighbor is seen throughout her life, from tending to the sick and suffering, purchasing food from the local markets, to offering words of consolation to the unemployed and homeless. Yet Mother Maria was more than a social activist or political organizer trying to somehow bring a new world order. She was a devoted Christian who saw a great need and tried to do something about it. In other words, her vocation to holiness was concretely expressed through improving the life of others, even if it was done at the expense of her own personal interests. She always put her own needs and wants second to that of the other person, which was quite remarkable during a time of war when human nature tends to function in survival mode where people tend to look out for their own needs first. Yet, Mother Maria saw her entire life as contained between both the love for God and the neighbor, which she wrote about in her lengthy essay entitled, "Types of Religious Lives" where she identifies five different types of spiritual lives based on her experience in the Church. The last "type" in her collection of essays is called the "evangelical type" which refers to the evangelical nature of the gospel as proclaimed by Jesus and preached by St. Paul:

---

<sup>30</sup> Pevear and Volokhonsky, 54.

Christ gave us two commandments: to love God and to love our fellow man. Everything else, even the commandments contained in the Beatitudes, is merely an elaboration of these two commandments, which contain within themselves the totality of Christ's "Good News." Furthermore, Christ's earthly life is nothing other than the revelation of the mystery of the labor of love of God and the love of man. These are, in sum, not the true but the only measure of all things. And it is remarkable that their truth is found only in their conjunction. Love for man alone leads us to the blind alley of an anti-Christian humanism, out of which the only exit is, at times, the rejection of the individual human being and love for him in the name of all mankind. Love for God without love for human beings, however, is condemned: "You hypocrite, how can you love God whom you have not seen, if you hate your brother whom you have seen." (1 John 4:20). Their conjunction is not simply a conjunction of two great truths taken from two spiritual worlds. It is the conjunction of two parts of a single whole.<sup>31</sup>

For Maria, the love of God and for her fellow man was the summation of the entire gospel message. She felt that these two commands, or actually on single command was the heart of the Christian faith. Echoing the words of St. Paul, even if she had the gift of tongues or of prophecy, if she didn't have love, she was nothing (1 Cor. 13). Maria's entire life was a life of sacrificial love. She loved everyone who came to her, whether it was an orphan, widow, Christian or Jew, she did what she could to help other people since she thought that they were sent by God himself. How could she say that she loved God but not the poor who came to her for assistance every day? Maria's life was tied up with love of God and neighbor which for her was not an extraordinary feat but one which everyone is called to incarnate in their lives. While she lived the life of consecration as a monastic in the Orthodox Church she saw her larger vocation, her primary vocation, as one of living out the call to holiness through serving the poor and needy in Paris.

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 176.

In the heat of the summer in July 1942 thirteen thousand Jews, nearly two thirds of whom were children were arrested and detained at the Velodrome d'Hiver a sports stadium about a kilometer from her boarding house at rue de Lourmel. The Velodrome was a holding place for the Jews as they awaited transport to Auschwitz where many were put to work and then died of exhaustion or were gassed and then put into the crematorium. For three days Mother Maria was allowed access to the Velodrome where she ministered to the captives, bringing them food, water, and clothes. She even managed to smuggle out children in trash bins.<sup>32</sup>

As the war lingered on Mother Maria's fate was in the hand of the Nazi's. Her good fortune soon ran out as she, together with her co-worker Fr. Klepinin and her son Yura were arrested and deported to separate detention centers and eventually to different concentration camps, Yura and Fr. Klepinin to Buchenwald and Mother Maria to Ravensbruck. Both Yura and Fr. Klepinin died soon after due to the unsanitary conditions at the camp. However, Mother Maria survived almost two more years at Ravensbruck where she distracted herself from the harsh labor by knitting, writing poetry, leading prisoners in prayer and bible study, and offering hope and consolation to her fellow prisoners.<sup>33</sup> While the conditions at the camp were harsh and inhumane, Mother Maria remained joyful and hopeful, even until the final moments of her life.

The exact details of her final days are uncertain. On March 30, 1945 as the Red Army was quickly approaching the Germans were exterminating thousands of prisoners every day. Some eyewitnesses said that Mother Maria's number was called while others have said that she voluntarily took the place of another prisoner. As one camp survivor, Jaqueline Pery wrote, "It is very possible that Mother Maria took the place of a frantic companion. It would have been

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>33</sup> Hackel, 130.

entirely in keeping with her generous life. In any case she offered herself consciously to the holocaust...thus assisting each one of us to accept the cross...She radiated the peace of God and communicated it to us.”<sup>34</sup> Whether Mother Maria took the place of another prisoner or whether her number was called her life and memory will certainly be remembered for generations as a woman who lived a full Christian life, fully free and fully committed to the love of others even in her death.

Mother Maria saw her vocation as following God and seeing holiness in the details of daily life in war torn Paris. The limitless love for the poor and needy, her tireless work to assist Jews escape France was in response to her understanding of her vocation in life. She lived an authentic life intimating Christ in every way, being poor for those who were poor, being the outcast for those who were outcasts, even sacrificing her own life for the life of the neighbor. Maria didn't simply go through the motions of the Christian faith which many people do, but rather she was the very person who God called her to be. Some say that perhaps Mother Maria was all too real, she didn't adhere to the regular or normal practices of Orthodox monasticism, allowing herself to be free in this world. Free from the regiments of formal spirituality in order to live according to the one needful thing which was to live a life of complete love for the neighbor. She was free from obscure rules and regulations, free from what other people thought of her. Maria lived out her vocation the best way that she could, without false piety or self-righteousness but with humility and patience. Mother Maria was perfectly comfortable being herself and allowing the Lord to use her as an instrument in this world.

---

<sup>34</sup> Pevear and Volokhonsky, 42.

## ***Conclusion: Fulfilling Our Vocation***

In an essay entitled, “Holiness in the Orthodox Tradition” the late Orthodox lay theologian Paul Evdokimov wrote the following:

In our time when we speak of “holiness,” a kind of psychological barrier goes up. Immediately one thinks of the former giants, hermits and stylites, those hidden away in their cave-cells or perched upon their columns so that such “illuminated ones,” those “equal to the angels,” seem to be no longer be consecrated to this world. Holiness appears to be out of date, from an age that has long since passed and now seems alien to the discontinuous forms and syncopated rhythms of modern life. A stylite today would arouse curiosity but would provoke the question of the very purpose of such a great feat. Today a saint seems to be nothing more than a kind of you, or put more crassly, one who is sick, maladjusted, in any case no use to us. The same attitude would exile holiness from the cloister, far from human life, as a useless cumbersome object, good only for an historical museum. Even within institutionalized ecclesial religious life, the very thought of striving for sanctity is boring to sincere people. They are bored with archaic ceremonies and services, bored with empty sermons preached in verbally inflated style, bored with the blaring of hollow and meaningless childish songs, bored with community closed in upon itself, the key to its liberation hopelessly lost...Under careful scrutiny it is clear that these religious forms, by their metaphysical indigence and very limited perspective, only function to make religion appear irrelevant and outdated, an immanence inverted upon itself, empty of any real substance.<sup>35</sup>

Evdokimov’s commentary questions the very narrow way that we have chosen to view holiness and sanctity which typically been reserved for the few “larger than life” figures, namely the men and women who have officially been recognized as saints. Thus, the saints become historical superheroes who have little affinity towards how we live our life in our day and age. Their lives have somehow been frozen in history to a particular place and time, which very often, seems so different than our own. Yet, when we begin to look at their lives and the numerous temptations, trials, and tribulations that they endured, we begin to realize that their lives were not much different than our own. Holiness then isn’t merely for the few, but for all, echoing the

---

<sup>35</sup> Michael Plekon and Alexis Vinogradov, 149.

words of St. Paul, “To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints.” (I Cor. 1:2). While we honor and respect the saints as witnesses of the presence of the Kingdom of God, we also need to realize that we too are called to this same holiness and sanctity.

Mother Maria and Alexander Schmemmann reveal to us that one cannot simply reduce holiness to a simple formula, method, or type, to a few rules or regulations regarding prayer and fasting, but rather, holiness is expressed uniquely with each person, in our daily routines of work and family, we incarnate holiness through our daily actions wherever we find ourselves. We encounter our common vocation to sainthood through the liturgy, the worship of the Church. Worship gives us the language from which we understand our common calling to holiness. Christians are called to live the liturgy wherever we find ourselves. At the end of the eucharist service on Sunday we are sent out to do God’s work in the world, returning back to Church the following week to be consoled, comforted, encouraged, reprovved, and admonished to go back out again and serve both God and neighbor. We are fed and nourished on both God’s word and his body and blood which become our nourishment and source of strength. Through the regular participation of the liturgy we are formed and shaped into the body of Christ which is comprised of many parts, whose head is Christ (1 Cor. 12).

Mother Maria lived the liturgy in her daily life. Although she was not fond of long services which was the custom in the Russian Orthodox Church during this time, she knew that her vocation was not to remain in the small chapel in her house on rue Lourmel, but she had to find ways to serve the poor who came to her doorstep. The liturgy challenged her to leave the peace and quiet of her small chapel and serve, as John Chrysostom said, at the altar of the world. Mother Maria did not set out to eradicate poverty from the streets of Paris but saw her life as one



of service to the poor, just like Mother Teresa would do a few decades later in the streets of Calcutta. All saints both ancient and modern allowed God to work through them, living authentic lives wherever the Lord placed them, whether in cities, towns, villages, whether clergy or lay, married or celibate. They heard God's call to holiness and lived it as best as they could, in authentic and real ways. Mother Maria did not try to mimic someone else but lived out her calling to sanctity as one who served the poor. Other saints found their lives as teachers, scholars, pastors, bishops, as a path towards holiness as well. Thus, it is in our particular place and time, in our unique station in life, where we encounter the awesome face of God who comes to us through the face of the neighbor. Holiness is incarnated and expressed in the everyday things of life, including the good and the bad, the warts and the beauty. It is precisely in the various communities of Church, work, school, and neighborhood where we meet God face to face in the person of the neighbor as it is so eloquently expressed in the first epistle of John, "For he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen." (1 John 4:20).

