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Reconstructing the 'Sacred Canopy': Mother Serafima and Novodevichy Monastery

by WALLACE L. DANIEL

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Orthodox Church and the Russian government have sought to restore monasteries, viewing them as key institutions in the regeneration of religion. Novodevichy Monastery in Moscow has historically been one of Russia's most important religious centres and its most famous monastery for women. Returned to the Church in 1994, Novodevichy was administered by Mother Serafima, a remarkable woman whose life covered most of the twentieth century. In reconstructing monastic life, she placed charity at the centre of her endeavours. In her struggles and her efforts to rebuild the 'sacred canopy' at Novodevichy is depicted, in microcosmic form, Russia's own quest to recover its heritage and redefine its identity.

Monasteries have occupied a special place in the life of the Russian people. They have served as centres of refuge, offered renewal and provided comfort in times of war, revolution and personal suffering. Behind their stout walls individuals have found protection and, at other times, inspiration to continue and often to take a fresh look at life. Monasteries kept Christianity alive in Russia through some of the most difficult periods in its history. They preserved memory, nurtured the spirit, taught ethics and offered special ways of looking at the world. Monasteries attracted all segments of the population; 'it is therefore not surprising', art historian Evgeniia Petrova writes, 'that the image of the monk – and the

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monastery – runs through the entire history of Russian art'.[1] The internal world of the monastery spilled over into the life of society, connecting them to each other in numerous ways. Monasteries reached out to churches and parishes, 'welding and joining [them] together to form the mainstream of the Church'.[2]

Given their history and place of significance, it is not surprising that, after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, monasteries became special objects of attack. Aiming to build a new society in Russia, the Bolsheviks made war on the old order and its underlying supportive mechanisms. This assault especially involved peasant society and the Church, both of which, to the Bolsheviks, represented Russia's backwardness. Aspiring to overcome this, to construct an industrial, rational society, the new government also struck hard at Russia's national memory; monasteries represented key parts of that memory, preserving a great deal of the country's heritage, its ideals and its visions of the world. The cultural aims of the new order were expressed eloquently and enthusiastically by the novelist Boris Pilnyak:

> Our Revolution is a rebellion in the name of the conscious, rational, purposeful and dynamic principle of life, against the elemental, senseless, biological automism of life: that is, against the peasant roots of our old Russian history, against its aimlessness, its non-technological character, against the holy and idiotic philosophy of Tolstoy's Karataev in *War and Peace*.[3]

[1] Evgeniia Petrova (ed.), *Russian monasteries: art and traditions*, St Petersburg 1997, 29. This paragraph relies heavily on Petrova's introductory commentary.

[2] V. V. Rozanov, quoted ibid. 5. For the contributions of monasteries to the national life of Russia see Evgenii Evstigneevich Golubinskii, *Istoriia russkoi tserkvi*, Moscow 1901–17, which deals with early Russia into the sixteenth century; Vasilli Osipovich Kliuchevskii, *O nravstvennosti i russkoi kul'ture*, Moscow 1998, 104–8; Ernst Benz, *The Eastern Orthodox Church: its thought and life*, trans. Richard Winston and Clara Winston, Garden City, NY 1963, 85–102; and Vasilii Vasilevich Zverinskii, *Material dlia istoriko-topograficheskogo issledovaniia o pravoslavnykh monastyriakh v Rossiiskoi imperii*, St Petersburg 1890–7. For the Soviet government's treatment of monasteries see Charles Timberlake, *The fate of Russian Orthodox monasteries and convents since 1917*, Seattle 1995, and Jennifer Jean Wynot, *Keeping the faith: Russian Orthodox monasticism in the Soviet Union, 1917–1939*, College Station, Tx 2004. Since 1991 a large number of works have appeared dealing with church architecture, art and earlier monastic life. See especially S. B. Bakhmustov and others, *Russkie monastyri: Sredniaia i Nizhniaia Volga: Kazanskaia, Saranskaia, Simbirskaia, Samarskaia, Saratovskaia, Volgogradskaia, Astrakhanskaia eparkhii*, Moscow 2004; T. N. Manushina and S. V. Nikolaeva (comps), *Troitse-Sergieva lavra v istorii, kul'ture i dukhovnoi zhizni Rossii: materialy III Mezhdunarodnoi konferentsii, 25–7 September 2002*, Sergiev Posad 2004; A. A. Tenetkina (comp.), *Suzdal'skii Spaso-Evfimiev monastyr' v istorii i kul'ture Rossii (K 650-letiiu osnovaniia monastyria): materialy nauchno-prakticheskoi konferentsii*, Vladimir-Suzdal' 2003; and A. A. Antonov and others, *Russkie monastyri. Sever i Severo-Zapad Rossii: Pskovskaia, Novgorodskaia, Sankt-Peterburgskaia, Vologodskaia, Petrozavodskaia, Syktyvkarskaia, Arkhangel'skaia, Murmanskaia eparkhii*, Moscow 2001.

[3] Boris Pilnyak, quoted in Donald Nicholl, *Triumphs of the spirit in Russia*, London 1997, 213–14.

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Monasteries and churches personified Orthodoxy on earth. They symbolised individual connections to a single whole; in their architecture and in their activities these connections were made visible, preserved in memory and elaborated for the present and the future. Monasteries and churches served, in Peter L. Berger's terms, as a 'sacred canopy', an overarching structure that spanned a sacred cosmos, the institutions uniting the supernatural with the needs and claims of the world.[4] In such an order, religion provides legitimacy to social institutions, 'by *locating* them within a sacred and cosmic frame of reference'.[5]

Restoring the place of Orthodoxy in Russian society after the demise of the Soviet state in 1991 has been a preeminent goal of both Church and State. This restoration required reclaiming Russia's historical memory; it meant redefining the relationship of the Church to society; it necessitated acquiring the resources – human and material – to support the rebuilding of the Church; most important, it required developing a voice that could speak effectively to a population searching for meaning in a society in which the main guideposts had collapsed.

In this search for meaning, this attempt to rediscover and reclaim the national heritage, reconstructing the monastery would, by necessity, play a central part. Not only had the monastery played a key role in the past, but its religious and cultural relationship to the parish, to the community and to the individual had connected them, as Elena Petrova pointed out, 'welded them together'. Whether the monastery could serve these purposes again would be a large question, having a major impact on Russia's future development. In that quest Novodevichy Monastery in Moscow is one of Russia's leading monasteries, some would say it is the country's most famous monastery. While each religious centre has its own story and the circumstances leading to its recovery are unique, Novodevichy's quest to reconnect to its heritage and redefine its identity are of special interest. Moreover, the person charged with leading its reconstruction, Varvara Vasilevna Chichagova, Mother Serafima, is a person whose own story intersects both science and religion, the world and the monastery, in the twentieth century. One might find that her life, her struggles and her efforts to reclaim her heritage hold a mirror to Russia's own experiences.

While working earlier on a project concerned with the reconstruction of Russia's national memory following the collapse of the Soviet Union, I went many times to Novodevichy Monastery. In 1995 I was introduced to

[4] Peter L. Berger, *The social reality of religion*, London 1973, 13–25, 38–60 (first publ. as *The sacred canopy: elements of a sociological theory of religion*, Garden City, NY 1967). See also his 'Religion and the west', *The National Interest*, no. 80 (Summer 2005), 112–19; 'Globalization and religion', *Hedgehog Review* iv/2 (Summer 2002), 13–14; *A far glory: the quest for faith in an age of credulity*, New York 1993; and 'Epistemological modesty: an interview with Peter Berger', *Christian Century*, 29 Oct. 1997, 972–8.

[5] Idem, *Social reality of religion*, 33.

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Mother Serafima, who had only recently become the monastery's prioress (*nasteliatel'nitsa*), charged with reviving its operations. She gave me considerable time then, as well as in the summer of 1997, allowing me the privilege of seeing into her life, as well as viewing at first hand the struggle to rebuild of which she was so vital a part.[6]

She made a strong impression, this lively and joyful woman, whose whole being radiated energy. Standing less than five feet tall, her slight physical appearance belied her strength of personality. At eighty-one years of age in 1995, she had earned her retirement, but she had chosen another course, and her actions and demeanour spoke of youthful exuberance. She walked slightly bent over and with a measured pace when escorting a visitor around the grounds of Novodevichy. When she talked about her work, the reconstruction of the monastery, the large task she had set out to accomplish, her eyes sparkled, her voice rose and her hands appeared in constant motion. She was a person who, in spite of the contradictions such qualities imply, was simultaneously learned and humble, assertive and selfless, dynamic and peaceful. She had a quick laugh and a keen sense of humour. She did not take herself too seriously, but in her words, actions and vision for recapturing Novodevichy's monastic traditions and relating them to Russia's present condition, she had total devotion.

'*A cloister resplendent and divinely decorated*'

At Novodevichy, several of the larger themes of Russian history are evidenced: the role of women, the growth and power of Church and State, military triumph and suffering, invasion and endurance, patriotism and artistic creativity and imagination, passion and beauty, political intrigue, resistance and renewal, the monastery and the world. Thus, Novodevichy became a powerful, timeless symbol of much that is deeply embedded in Russia's national memory.

Founded by Prince Vasilii III (1505–33) in 1524–5 to commemorate the capture of Smolensk a decade earlier by the armies of Moscow and the union of Smolensk and the Smolensk territories with the principality of Moscow, Novodevichy rapidly became one of Moscow's principal monasteries and one of the most beautiful places in the city. Its tall, white and red-brick wall and its stately bell tower enclose a visual feast and a spiritual oasis to anyone who enters. Its churches and palaces have an architectural unity and artistic excellence that exhibit a very special quality, a sense of beauty and reverence that transports one beyond the self. 'We knew not whether we were in

[6] I owe a large debt of gratitude to Evgeniia Viktorovna Ivanova, who introduced me to Mother Serafima, and to Vladimir and Vera Salov, who participated with me in the first extensive interview with her.

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heaven or on earth', reported the emissaries who, in the famous ninth-century legend, recommended Orthodoxy to Russia. Novodevichy Monastery is the later physical embodiment of that famous statement.

The monastery had both political and cultural importance. Situated on the old land route to Smolensk, Novodevichy was at Moscow's front door, the main way into the city from the south-west. Shortly before he went to war with Smolensk, Grand Duke Vasilii III had vowed, should he succeed, 'to raise a nunnery in the environs of Moscow, and therein temples in the name of the Most Pure [Virgin], to the Procession of the Holy Cross and others'.[7] To fulfil his pledge, the grand duke gave 3,000 roubles in silver and several of his villages to endow the monastery and give it immediate prominence. It quickly drew the wives and ladies of the court, as well as others from some of Russia's wealthiest families, who entered the service of the Church – sometimes willingly, sometimes not. During the reign of Tsar Ivan IV (Ivan the Terrible, 1533–84), the tsar's daughter Anna was baptised and later interred there. Novodevichy was the home of Maria, 'queen of Livonia', daughter of Ivan's cousin Prince Vladimir of Staritsa, and the residence of women from many other prominent families.[8] But the monastery also served as a place to which Ivan IV dispatched the widows and daughters of several politically disgraced princes and boyars. Novodevichy became a kind of aristocratic church community, the focus of tales of both of triumph and despair, of service to both Church and State.

Events at Novodevichy in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries would dramatically shape the future history of Russia. Here came crowds from Moscow in February 1598 three times to supplicate Boris Godunov, who resided in the monastery, to accept the crown of Russia, and here, in the Smolensk Cathedral, the patriarch proclaimed him tsar. Aleksandr Pushkin in his drama *Boris Godunov* describes the scene:

> Look what a sight! All Moscow has thronged here.
> See! Fences, roofs, and every single storey
> Of the cathedral steeple, the church domes,
> The very crosses are studded thick with people.[9]

During the Time of Troubles (1598–1613), an era of civil war, internal chaos and mass destruction, much of Novodevichy was plundered and burned. Towards the end of this period, in August 1612, the walls of the monastery saw a major battle that contributed greatly to the restoration of civil order in the country. Rebuilt and restored as a place of wealth and power, Novodevichy

[7] Irina Gavrilovna Borisenko, *Novodevichii Monastyr'*, 2nd edn, Moscow 2005, 10.

[8] Ibid. 12–14.

[9] This is quoted in '*A cloister resplendent and divinely decorated*' (guidebook to exhibition in celebration of the 480th anniversary of the founding of Novodevichy Convent), Moscow 2004, 3.

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again became a place of unique beauty and splendour. 'This convent is much admired', said the Syrian archdeacon Paul of Aleppo, who travelled to Russia in the 1650s. 'Even in the Tsar's churches we have not found such adornments as here.'[10] Late in the seventeenth century, Tsarevna Sophia (1682–9), who ruled Russia in the name of her younger brothers, Tsar Ivan and Tsar Peter, awarded the monastery special favours and many lavish gifts. But it was here, too, that Sophia would later be forced to take the veil as Sr Susanna, after her failed *streltsy* insurrection in 1698, her bold attempt to regain power while Peter was abroad. In October 1698, 772 participants in the *streltsy* uprising were executed, 193 of them directly beneath the windows of Sophia's cell in the Nadprudnaia tower at Novodevichy.[11]

Ilya Repin's painting 'Tsarevna Sophia' (1879) captures this important moment in Russia's national memory. He depicts the tsarevna standing near the window of her small convent cell, contemplating the fate of the *streltsy*, whose bodies are hanging from the gallows below. The failed ambition, the unrealised hope and the sense of doom are etched within her face and eyes. She is unreconciled to her defeat, yet is helpless before powerful forces beyond her control. Repin brilliantly captures the execution and, through it, the violent assault on the representatives of traditional Russia.[12]

But if the monastery was closely connected to the glory, power, and intrigues of the court, it also served as an important cultural and religious centre. In the monastic realities of Novodevichy, religion and culture were closely related. Vasilii III laid their foundation in 1525 by transferring a copy of the original icon of the Mother of God, Our Lady of Smolensk, from the Kremlin's Annunciation Cathedral to Novodevichy's Smolensk Cathedral, thus consecrating the cathedral; the ancient miraculous image of the Mother of God became Novodevichy's greatest sacred relic. Other works of Russian artistic culture would soon follow, some depicting decisive moments in the history of Moscow, others representing the creativity of the women serving in the monastery. Tsar Ivan IV gave Novodevichy a silver cup as a sign of his repentance for his outburst of anger and the murder of his son Ivan, the heir to the throne.[13] In the last quarter of the seventeenth century, Karp Zolotarev, a master of the Moscow Armoury and a leading representative of the new universal masters in painting, was assigned to design the iconostasis of the Smolensk Cathedral. In addition he painted icons, ornaments in manuscript

[10] Ibid. 16, 18.

[11] Ibid. 20; Igor' Bychkov, 'Novodevichii monastyr' i predstaviteli tsarskikh semei v nem', in V. L. Egorov (ed.), *Novodevichii monastyr' v russkoi kul'ture: materialy nauchnoi konferentsii 1995 g.*, Moscow 2001, 53; Lev Vladimirovich Tsiurik, *Novodevichii monastyr': al'bom putevoditel'*, Moscow 1970, 4–6.

[12] Repin's painting, 'Tsarevna Sophia in the New Maiden Convent at the time of the execution of the Streltsy and the torture of all her servants in 1698', is displayed in the Tretiakov gallery.

[13] '*A cloister resplendent and divinely decorated*', 33.

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books, utensils and Easter eggs, endowing the cathedral with some of the finest master works of the entire period.[14]

In medieval Russia needlework offered women the sole means of artistic expression; amongst the work they produced are brilliant demonstrations of their creativity. Their figurative ornamental embroidery included shrouds, banners and vestments inlaid with precious stones and silver medallions.[15] Such examples suggest a creative spirit that flourished here and found expression in a variety of forms, which the atmosphere of the monastery cultivated. To this collection may also be added the paintings of Fedor Zubov, another master of the Armoury, whom Tsarevna Sophia ordered to the monastery in 1685. Working under Zubov, artists painted a new iconostasis in the south chapel of Smolensk Cathedral, portraying an 'unusual array of figures: holy women and Russian princesses, which, according to Zubov's design, stressed a woman's right to rule the country'.[16]

Novodevichy was never separated from the world and the rest of society; its nuns interacted with both in significant ways. The monastery's properties included almshouses, where the poor might be fed and destitute women and children might find solace. As befitting their social role, nuns cared for the sick and the elderly, and the monastery included a hospital, erected in the late seventeenth century, with an adjoining pharmaceutical garden. In 1724 Tsar Peter I established there a home for orphaned children, which by the middle of the eighteenth century cared for approximately 250 girls, who were taught to read and instructed by the nuns in spinning and needlework. The orphanage eventually closed, but another opened in 1871, financed by the Filat'ev brothers, prominent Moscow merchants, who built at Novodevichy a two-storey structure for girls that continued to operate until World War I. Extending its reach outward into the city, the monastery provided charitable assistance to people in desperate need.[17]

Novodevichy served as the burial site for certain persons closely connected with the city of Moscow. These included Count Aleksei Uvarov,

[14] Ibid. 14.

[15] Borisenko, *Novodevichii Monastyr'*, 89.

[16] Ibid. 68. The changes in artistic style that took place among master painters of the Armoury and the movement to other churches and buildings outside the court in the last third of the seventeenth century is well described by A. A. Pavlenko, 'Zhivopisnoe i ikonopisnoe delo v Oruzheinoi palate vo vtoroi polovine XVII v.', in Egorov, *Novodevichii monastyr' v russkoi kul'ture*, 188–205.

[17] Petr Grigorievich Palamarchuk, *Sorok sorokov: Al'bom-ukazatel' vsekh moskovskikh tserkov v chetyrekh tomakh*, ed. S. Zvonarev, Paris 1988–90, i. 205–8; Leonid Ivanovich Denisov, *Polnyi spisok vsiekh 1105 nynie sushchestvuishchikh v 75 guberniiakh i oblastiakh Rossii (i 2 inostrannykh gosudarstvakh) muzhskikh i zhenskikh monastyrei arkhiereiskikh domov i zhenskikh obshchin*, Moscow 1908, 499–503; Ivan Alekseevich Snegirev, *Moskva: Podrobnoe istoricheskoe i arkheologicheskoe opisanie goroda*, 2nd edn, Moscow 1875, i. 8; Karl Baedeker, *Russia, with Teheran, Port Arthur, and Peking: handbook for travelers*, Leipzig 1914, 307; Ivan Myachin and Vladimir Chernov, *Moscow*, Moscow 1967, 202–3; G. G. Antipin, *Khudozhestvennye nadgrobiia, 1914–1969*, Moscow 1970, 9–11.

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archaeologist and co-founder of the Moscow Historical Museum; Denis Davydov, poet and leader of the city's partisan resistance against Napoleon's armies in 1812; Fedor Buslaev, historian at Moscow University.[18] Beyond the south wall of the monastery are buried many of Russia's greatest cultural figures, including writers Nikolai Gogol, Anton Chekov and Mikhail Bulgakov, composers Aleksandr Scriabin and Sergei Taneev, actress Maria Ermolova, artists Issac Levitan and Valentin Serov, sculptress Vera Muktina, theatrical directors Konstantin Stanislavskii and Vladimir Danchenko, and the Tret'iakov brothers, Pavel and Sergei, founders of the famous art gallery in Moscow that bears their name. At the end of the nineteenth century, Novodevichy was the only female monastery (since 1764) of the five ranked in the first class.[19]

The 1917 Revolution, however, brought all this to an end and sent the monastery, like all other religious institutions in the country, into precipitous decline and near destitution. Its churches no longer functioned and its buildings came to be occupied by workers' families. Wooden shacks were hastily constructed inside the monastery, piles of firewood littered the grounds, while chickens ran loose through the entire property. Keeping the monastery in good repair was not possible. In 1922 the Soviet government made Novodevichy into a museum dedicated to the *streltsy* uprising, and in 1934 it became part of the State Historical Museum. For most of the Soviet era, it operated primarily as a museum, its white stone structures providing testimony only to pages in Russia's past, to certain moments in its national mythology. For a brief time at the end of World War II, Novodevichy was home to the Orthodox Theological Institute, before its move to Sergiev Posad. In 1945 the government allowed the Church to reopen the chapel of the Assumption in the monastery for worship and also to locate there the publishing arm of the Moscow patriarchate.[20]

[18] Inside the monastery are also buried members of the distinguished Solov'ev family: Sergei Mikhailovich Solov'ev (one of Russia's greatest historians and professor at Moscow University); his son, the philosopher Vladimir Sergeevich Solov'ev; his daughter, the poet Poliksena Sergeevna Solov'eva; and another son, the historical novelist Vsevolod Sergeevich Solov'ev. In the basement of the Smolensk Cathedral are buried seven female members of families of the tsars: three relatives of Ivan IV and four of Aleksei Mikhailovich. The latter include Aleksei's daughters Sophia (d. 1704), Evdokiia (d. 1712) and Ekaterina (d. 1718), and his daughter-in-law, Evdokiia Fedorovna Lopukhina (d. 1731), the first wife of Peter the Great. See A. I. Shlionskaia's study of these burial sites, 'Tsarskie grobnitsy v Novodevich'em monastyre', in Egorov, *Novodevichii monastyr' v russkoi kul'ture*, 94–113.

[19] Mashkov, *Arkhitektura*, 5–9; Vasilii Vasil'evich Zverinskii (comp.), *Statisticheskii vremennik rossiiskoi imperii*, III/18: *Monastyri v rossiiskoi imperii*, St Petersburg 1887, 42–3. Men's monasteries listed in the first class included Donskoi, Novospasskii, Simonov and Chudnov (in the Kremlin).

[20] Borisenko, *Novodevichii Monastyr'*, 26. The Lopukhin Palace was also the home of Iuvenali, Metropolitan of Krutitsy and Kolomna.

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It was only much later, in November 1994, that the State Historical Museum and the Orthodox Church reached an agreement to administer the monastery jointly and to reconstruct its religious practices. After nearly a century of neglect and the loss of memory, such reconstruction would be a daunting task. The person appointed to oversee this task was Varvara Vasilevna Chichagova, Mother Serafima, granddaughter of the martyred priest Leonid Mikhailovich Chichagov. On 13 October 1994 she had received holy orders from Metropolitan Iuvenali of Krutitsy and Kolomna at his Cathedral of the Assumption. On 27 November 1994 Metropolitan Iuvenali named her *hegumeniia* (Mother Superior), welcoming her as the monastery's new prioress, the first since 1922.[21] She was tonsured with the name of Serafima, after St Serafim of Sarov, one of Russia's most venerated saints.[22] Serafim is derived from the Hebrew, 'the flaming ones', suggesting fire, bringing warmth and light into a dark world.[23] As in the case of her famous predecessor, the name would be an appropriate one, well describing the person, and the course of action upon which she would soon embark.

Mother Serafima

When she assumed leadership of the monastery in 1994 Mother Serafima faced a difficult situation. Earlier, in the 1950s and 1960s, the government had not had the funds to support a full reconstruction of Novodevichy or even to keep its buildings in good condition. Residents in the monastery had divided the cells, guard houses and towers into apartments, where they lived with their families. In the 1960s, when the first plans for reconstruction were drawn up, these residents had to be moved out and relocated in the city. Despite such actions to regain some aspects of religious life, Novodevichy remained primarily a museum, physical testimony to key political events of an earlier period. Its operations came essentially under the control of the State Historical Museum, whose chief commitment was to the 'preservation of the priceless wealth of our [Russia's] national culture', a 'cloister

[21] The last such appointment had been in 1919 with the naming of Mother Superior Vera (Pobedimskaia), the daughter of government advisor Pavel Ivanovich Pobedimskii, who was an investigator of the Moscow circuit court. In 1922 the monastery was reorganised and became a museum; Mother Vera died in February 1949 and is buried in the Danilovkii monastery: N. F. Trutneva, 'Igumenii Moskovskovo Novodevich'ego monastyria [1525–1920 gg.]', in Egorov, *Novodevichii monastyr' v russkoi kul'ture*, 66–8.

[22] The biographical facts relating to her tonsure and appointment are taken from Archbishop Gregory of Mozhaisk, 'In memory of Hegumeniia Seraphima (Chernaia)', archived at http://www.russian-orthodox-church.org.ru/ne912233.htm, accessed on 28 August 2001, 2.

[23] Nicholl, *Triumphs of the spirit*, 18. Nicholl presents an extremely engaging picture of St Serafim (1758–1833), the daring, creative *starets* of the Sarov monastery, whose life and teachings centrally involved the resurrection.

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resplendent and divinely decorated'.[24] The reconstruction of Novodevichy's internal religious life was something else, a task much more formidable than the rebuilding of physical structures. It was this task that Mother Serafima attempted to accomplish, at the same time as the recovery of her own heritage, her own sense of personal identity.

Mother Serafima's life spanned the tumultuous events that Russia had witnessed in the twentieth century; her own experiences often corresponded and connected to the turning points in her country's recent history. Born in St Petersburg in 1914, on the eve of the First World War, she knew at first hand the disruption and chaos brought by war and revolution. Her family belonged to one of the most illustrious branches of the aristocracy. Her ancestor, Admiral Vasilii Iakovlevich Chichagov, played a key naval role in the reign of Catherine II (1762–96), leading an expedition that tried to find a sea route to North America via the Arctic Ocean. Her grandfather, Leonid Mikhailovich Chichagov, was an army commander and hero of the Balkan wars during the reigns of Tsar Aleksander II (1855–81) and Tsar Aleksander III (1881–94) and had later become a priest. Her father had served in the Russian-Finnish legation under prime minister Peter Stolypin (1907–11), and her whole family had known Tsar Nicholas II and the Tsarevna Aleksandra personally and, on occasion, been part of their entourage and social gatherings. The social and political chaos created by the First World War shattered that world. In 1914 Mother Serafima's father, serving as an officer in the Russian army, was killed at the front. She had no memory of him, nor of a relatively stable family life before the 1917 Russian Revolution. In February 1917, widowed, afraid of being left alone in Petrograd when the tsarist regime collapsed and German armies pressed near the city, Serafima's mother moved her children to Moscow. She sought the protection of her children's grandfather, Leonid Mikhailovich.[25] Mother Serafima vividly

[24] These facts about the monastery's existence since World War II are summarised by Aleksandr Shkurko, director of the State History Museum, in his forward to '*A cloister resplendent and divinely decorated*', 2.

[25] Leonid Mikhailovich Chichagov (1856–1937) was one of the leaders of the campaign to canonise Serafim of Sarov. In the late nineteenth century, his publication of the personal testimonies of Serafim's associates and friends told the story of Serafim's ministry and his contributions to the life of the Church. After taking monastic vows in 1898, Leonid Mikhailovich assumed the name of Serafim in honour of his illustrious predecessor. His collection of materials prepared for the synodial investigation into the sanctity of the elder of Sarov played a key role in the subsequent canonisation in 1903. Chichagov's efforts and their significance are recounted by Robert L. Nichols, 'The friends of God: Nicholas II and Alexandra at the canonisation of Serafim of Sarov, July 1903', in Charles E. Timberlake (ed.), *Religions and secular forces in late Tsarist Russia: essays in honor of Donald W. Treadgold*, Seattle–London 1992, 206–29. More than ninety years later Mother Serafima would play a similar role to that of her grandfather; her collection and publication of materials on his sanctity resulted in Leonid Mikhailovich's canonisation in February 1997: Maksim Shevchenko, 'Kanonizatsiia Nikolai Romanov ne sostoialas'', *Nezavisimaia gazeta*,

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recalled the desperation of this move, her mother's anxiety, the cutting of ties with everything familiar, their house and their lifestyle, now only memories: 'We left everything familiar, all that we had known and cherished and we travelled to Moscow, taking only what we could carry in our arms, practically naked.'[26]

The world in which the family now lived bore little resemblance to their previous existence. Facing a difficult winter, the family, like all other families, faced a constant struggle for survival: daily life took inexplicable turns and brought constant anxieties. As Pasternak described that winter, 'it was not as terrifying as the two winters that followed it, but it was already of the same sort, dark, hungry, and cold, entirely given to the breaking up of the familiar and the reconstruction of all the foundations of existence, and to inhuman efforts to cling to life as it slipped out of your grasp'.[27] Like other aristocratic families, the Chichagovs were suddenly poor. Beyond what their grandfather could provide they had few resources on which to rely, little protection against the bands of militia that roamed the streets or the cold that threatened their lives. To ensure their safety, Leonid Mikhailovich sent them away from Moscow, to a monastery not far away on the Volga River. There the family remained for the next eight years, from 1917 to 1925, attempting to survive and to adjust to their new circumstances. For former members of the nobility, accustomed to a privileged role in Russian society, adjustment was painful. Their mother, resourceful and determined to make a new life for her family, found work as a medical assistant in a nearby hospital.

Growing up in this new reality, Varvara Vasilevna had a difficult, challenging childhood and young adult life.[28] There were years marked by the formation of the Bolshevik state under V. I. Lenin and his successor Joseph Stalin, when proletarian values, not aristocratic heritage and upbringing, defined one's place in the world. The historian Sheila Fitzpatrick has written about the need to reimagine one's place in the world, to shape a new identity, and to remake oneself in a society on the move, in which previously established values and identities had been turned upside down:[29] 'Successful revolutions tear off masks: that is, they invalidate the conventions of self-presentation and social interaction that obtained in pre-revolutionary society.'[30] In Varvara Vasilevna's case the years of

20 Feb. 1997, and Varvara Vasilevna Chichagova, 'Premechaniia', in Leonid Mikhailovich Chichagov, *Dnevnik prebyvaniia Tsaria-Osvobitelia v Dunaiskoi armii v 1877 godu*, St Petersburg 1995, 32–3.

[26] Mother Serafima, interview with author, Moscow, 3 June 1995.

[27] Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*, trans. Max Hayward and Manya Harari, intro. John Bayley, New York 1958, 195.

[28] In describing her life before she became a nun, I use Mother Serafima's given name, Varvara Vasilevna Chichagova.

[29] Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Tear off the masks! Identity and imposture in twentieth-century Russia*, Princeton 2005.

[30] Ibid. 3.

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childhood and adolescence were times of hard work and study, of trying to adjust to changing circumstances. Her grandfather provided the one constant in her young life; he was an oak tree, firmly rooted in time and place, in the world of the Orthodox Church, in which he found meaning and purpose. At home, inside the family circle, Leonid Mikhailovich had a large presence. He gave to his family stability, a sense of place and a vision of the larger world. He did not appear critical of Soviet power; he simply tried to ignore it.

Looking back on those times and her grandfather, Mother Serafima found him to be pivotal in shaping her own values and sense of purpose. He did not force her to share his religious views: 'Perhaps he thought we lived in such a time that a person had to choose his own way', but he set an example for her, and the actions he took in serving other people presented to the young Varvara Vasilevna a powerful model of meaning and purpose, as well as of faith. Varvara Vasilevna's personal formation took place during a time when she had to operate between two worlds and two systems of belief: one presenting a rationalistic, materialistic, anti-religious picture of the world that emphasised class struggle, the other based on religion, redemption, the monastery and the conviction that reason should always be used in the service of others. In her own life she was able to blend together these two approaches, taking from each to fashion her commitments.

The integration of these two elements can be found throughout Varvara Vasilevna's later education and career. They provided opportunities, but they also created tensions that would always be difficult to resolve. During her school years she became very interested in chemistry, a subject given priority by the Soviet government because of its importance to the industrialisation campaigns of the 1930s and 1940s and to the military. Since Varvara Vasilevna's aristocratic background prevented her from being admitted to Moscow University, she enrolled instead in the Moscow Oil Chemistry Technical School, where she specialised in higher molecular chemistry. Demand for her specialisation, her skill and technical expertise opened career opportunities that she otherwise would not have had, while her former life and her family identity continued to define a significant aspect in her view of herself. During these years of study and at the beginning of her working life, she lived with her grandfather, remaining close to him and to his spiritual world.[31] In 1937 he was arrested, part of the great purge that engulfed many leaders of the Church that year. The night of his arrest would remain indelibly imprinted on Varvara Vasilevna's mind, and would haunt her for the next sixty years. Only much later would she learn of his fate. Her grandfather's life and service, as well as the religious values he embraced,

[31] In 1937 Varvara Vasilevna began work at the Military Technical Academy, which was under the supervision of the Academy of Sciences' Institute of Organic Chemistry.

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would remain sources of inspiration to his granddaughter, and they would not be forgotten.[32]

Such memories, however, receded into the background during the Second World War and under the exigencies of the Soviet Union. Preparation for the war changed dramatically the demand for specialists in Varvara Vasilevna's field and the importance of her specialty to the Soviet Union's national survival. This would lead to her rise, both during and after the war, in the scientific establishment.[33] Such opportunities did not destroy her inner being nor the memories that had earlier defined her world. 'During these years', she emphasised, 'I tried to keep my faith inside me – in my soul.'

The tension between her external self and her internal being, between outward demeanour and what some have called 'inner emigration', would characterise Varvara Vasilevna for most of her adult life. In her career she would become a prominent member of the scientific elite, charting an extremely successful career in Soviet science and technology. She did not join the Communist Party, despite pressure to do so and despite the opportunity membership would have provided to become director of the institute. 'I was a typical Soviet high-ranking female administrator of a scientific institute. I worked from very early in the morning until late at night', she said.[34] She devoted herself to her work, having been told repeatedly that her work served the glory of the Soviet state and its people. Her success is exemplified by the conferral upon her of the USSR's Honoured Researcher and, in 1979, the award of the USSR State Prize. She was also awarded the Order of the Red Banner of Labour, the Order of the October Revolution and eight medals for service.[35] Her concentrated work in the scientific establishment fulfilled her own needs and interests, her passion for science and her creative spirit: 'I thought that without my work I would not be able to live.'[36] In her outward behaviour, she had apparently moved from being a child of the old aristocracy and the Church to being a woman in the upper ranks of the Soviet scientific administrative establishment. While her background and past connections were known, her supervisors, faced with the pressures of industrialisation and war, mostly overlooked her earlier history. She remade herself, burying her childhood experiences within herself and channelling her energies into the only route that lay open.

[32] The story of her attempts to reconnect with her grandfather is recounted in detail in Daniel, *The Orthodox Church*.

[33] In 1939 Mother Serafima graduated from the Moscow Institute of Fine Chemical Technology, after which she began work with the Rubber Plant in Moscow. In 1942 she was named deputy chief engineer of the plant and would remain there until 1946, when she was transferred to the Rubber Industry Institute and given a research assignment: Archbishop Gregory of Mozhaisk, 'In memory of Hegumeniia Seraphima (Chernaia)', 1–2.

[34] Mother Serafima, interview with author, Moscow, 3 June 1995.

[35] Archbishop Gregory of Mozhaisk, 'In memory of Hegumeniia Seraphima (Chernaia)'.

[36] Mother Serafima, interview with author, Moscow, 3 June 1995.

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Yet Varvara Vasilevna continued to exist in two worlds, trying to balance both and to preserve her spiritual independence. In the cultivation of spiritual independence when confronted with state power she never forgot her grandfather and the example he had set for her. She had seen his suffering, but she had also witnessed his personal dignity and integrity, and these qualities remained with her. Varvara Vasilevna also recalled her mother's religious faith, commitments and struggles. At the end of the Second World War, when Stalin allowed certain churches on territories annexed from Germany to remain open, the Pyukhtitsa nunnery in Estonia was one of them.[37] While Varvara Vasilevna later offered few details of her mother's life, she recalled that she had entered this nunnery in 1953 and had lived there until her death in 1969.[38] Finally, Varvara Vasilevna emphasised the importance of Russian culture in nourishing her own religious faith. Russian art – its icons and frescoes, as well as the paintings of Vrubel, Kandinsky and others – had conveyed to her an inner meaning that sharply contrasted with the materialistic vision of reality promulgated by the state. She married Nikolai Valentinovich Chernyi, an art historian, a man of similar sensibilities, and together they quietly explored the religious themes of Russian art.[39] She and her husband created a private world, detached from the demands of their professional careers.

Varvara Vasilevna decided to enter the service of the Church after her husband's death in 1983 and the Chernobyl incident in 1986. At the age of seventy-two she made the decision to engage in this work and began in the simplest way, by working at the candle box in the Church of the Prophet Elijah in Moscow.[40] She said she needed to learn humility as her first act of theological training.[41] In deciding to leave her previous life, she pursued actively and openly the inner world she had cultivated for so many decades, and she also reconnected with earlier memories of her grandfather. In 1994, when the government returned Novodevichy to the Church, she was chosen to supervise the monastery's renewal. She combined the old and the new. She was a 'modern Russian', a working woman with a career in science, without children, yet with ties to the past, to national history, military successes, the pre-Soviet world, and the old Orthodox Church. She was a woman with great organisational skills, a person who, despite her age, had the energy and the talents to rebuild one of Russia's most historic monasteries. Yet in the reconstruction of this 'sacred canopy' much remained unknown; the identity she would give to the monastery, the direction in which she would take it, had still to be determined.

[37] Nathaniel Davis, *A long walk to church: a contemporary history of Russian Orthodoxy*, 2nd edn, Boulder, Col 2003, 168.

[38] Mother Serafima, interview with author, Moscow, 23 June 1997. [39] Ibid.

[40] Archbishop Gregory of Mozhaisk, 'In memory of Hegumeniia Seraphima (Chernaia)'.

[41] Mother Serafima, interview with author, Moscow, 3 June 1995.

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The 'sacred canopy'

In the autumn of 1994 the main religious structures of the monastery lay in disrepair, victims of a harsh climate, a paucity of funds and years of neglect when such buildings were seen as secondary in importance to the palaces and suchlike. The strong traditions attached to the monastery – its economic independence, charitable activities and social services – had to be totally reconstructed. This involved physical rebuilding, but most important – and most difficult – it required mental changes, especially in the way people thought about themselves and what they did. Mother Serafima was charged with rebuilding the monastery's religious functions, with reconstructing the parts of its operations that had long lain dormant. To accomplish this would be a daunting task, for the institutional framework and the *mentalités* to support the monastery's religious functions no longer existed.

The monastic community at Novodevichy could not be rebuilt without the necessary resources. With the exception of the museum, which the state controlled, the monastery had no regular source of revenue, no financial support for the monastic life and the charitable activities that Mother Serafima intended to develop. She confessed that acquiring financial support worried her a great deal: she knew that she would have to acquire it herself.[42] While she would not say so directly, she must have known that she would need to improvise, to create from nothing; she would need her connections, and her personal skills at negotiation.

When Mother Serafima assumed leadership of Novodevichy, the monastery had no working refectory, where meals could be served and the nuns could go to be restored. The old refectory was in extreme disrepair. Mother Serafima could afford to renovate only a small part of it, but this at least gave the nuns a central place to operate. During these first years most of the nuns went home to their own apartments in the city in the evening, to their extended families. There they washed and ironed their monastic garments. Their living conditions, by necessity, Mother Serafima said, 'detracted from the whole rhythm of monastic life'.[43] The focus, self-sacrifice and commitment that this life required could not easily be developed under such conditions, and the inner discipline that Mother Serafima expected of herself, as well as of the other nuns could only with great difficulty be nourished.

On 23 February 1997, the day before her grandfather Leonid Mikhailovich was canonised, she received a telephone call, which she referred to as a 'miraculous occurrence'. The call came in the morning, as she prepared for the ceremonies, from Aleksandr I. Muzykanskii, the Moscow city prefect and a man close to the mayor of Moscow, Iurii Luzhkov, and to the president of

[42] Mother Serafima, interview with author, Moscow, 23 June 1997. [43] Ibid.

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Russia, Boris Yeltsin.[44] 'The call came at Mr Muzykanskii's initiative', Mother Serafima recounted. 'I had earlier tried to speak with him, but had not succeeded.' This time, 'he sought me out, something, I am told, he never does. But he said to me, I have heard that you need help'. When she replied that she did, he said to her, 'Then I will come tomorrow to see you.' Since the canonisation ceremony was the next day, 'I told him that would be difficult for me'. He said, 'then I will come later'. Following his visit to Mother Serafima, Muzykanskii took a personal interest in restoring the exterior of the Smolensk Cathedral. He connected the cathedral's restoration to the imminent celebration of Moscow's 750-year anniversary and pledged a large sum of money to the project. But, according to Mother Serafima, in the summer of 1997 he also 'comes out to the monastery nearly every week, alone, without any fanfare, and he just stands there, observing the work as it is proceeding'. He had developed a personal relationship with the construction workers and he joked with them, Mother Serafima said: 'He tells them that he will pay the invoice, but only for the work whose results he can see, not for what has been promised.'[45] The patronage of a powerful Moscow official provided financial help, but also, one might suppose, valuable political support, especially during a period when both Church and State had an unusually large number of competing priorities.

Reconstructing the monastic community at Novodevichy, after nearly a century of neglect, created challenges on more levels than merely the physical. It involved ways of thinking, habits and rhythms of life that contrasted not only with Soviet practices but also with the contemporary social ethos. What service the monastery could provide also depended greatly on the quality of the people. Women came to Mother Serafima constantly, wanting to enter the Church, saying that 'they cannot live without service to the monastery'. They travelled from all over Russia, asking to be accepted and to undergo training. When this happened, she said, 'I sit them down in my office, and I talk to them at length, questioning their decision, trying to find out about their real motivations, exploring their backgrounds.' She explained that Russia had only recently emerged from a time when very few confessed to belief in God, and she 'asks a person, "Why now did you come to that decision?"' Then 'you get into such depth and you realise that most of these people are not prepared at all'.[46]

In 1997 the monastery had five nuns, all carefully selected, with life experience and self-sacrifice among the qualities sought by Mother Serafima. She also accepted an additional fifteen women as so-called 'servitors'. These were mostly 'young and middle-aged women who had come here to work, to pray

[44] A. I. Muzykanskii had served as the chairman of Boris Yeltsin's first electoral campaign in 1990–1, and he had remained close to the Russian president since then, later holding several high-ranking positions in the Moscow administration, including city prefect.

[45] Mother Serafima, interview with author, Moscow, 23 June 1997. [46] Ibid.

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and to live the monastic way of life and, if they are successful, at the end of three years they can move to the next level, and from there they can become nuns'. Typically, the nuns and servitors followed a rigorous, demanding daily schedule, arriving at the monastery at 6.15 a.m. for morning prayers and ending the day at around 10.00 in the evening.[47] In terms of providing a foundation, a framework for the monastic community, Mother Serafima reported, 'I think that in the last two years we have achieved a great deal of success … It is extremely difficult for a person to remake herself', she laughed, 'and especially challenging for a modern person to follow monastic rules.'[48]

Central to the activities of Novodevichy was the rediscovery and rebuilding of charity. In the past, charity had been one of the church concepts most heavily attacked by the Soviet government. It had long been a fundamental activity of the Church, connecting it to society, to the people most in need and to the world, and to fulfilling the notion of one's responsibility to others. While charity had obvious practical importance, it also had great conceptual significance, for it related directly to the sense of compassion, to *miloserdie*, which evokes a whole range of ideas deeply embodied in Christianity: mercy, kindness, trust and extension of the self to others. *Miloserdie* is literally translated as 'dear heartedness', signifying love for others, trust and a refusal to be judgmental – values embodied so strongly in many of Russia's most venerated saints and in Alyosha in Dostoevsky's novel *The brothers Karamazov*.[49]

President Gorbachev's meeting with Patriarch Pimen and other church leaders in April 1988 gave back to the Church the right to engage in charitable activities that the Soviet government had taken away in 1929. In 1994, and in subsequent years, Mother Serafima at Novodevichy Monastery endeavoured to recover this traditional practice of the Church. She understood that the earlier social atmosphere spawned by fear and by terror had promoted isolation and indifference toward one's neighbour. Fear had bred lifelessness, indifference and a loss of connectedness to others that had eventually replaced *miloserdie*.[50] Mother Serafima's vision for Novodevichy

[47] Ibid. Arriving at the monastery at 6.15 a.m., the women prayed without the presence of a priest until 8.00; they then went to the cathedral for the morning service. Following it, some of the women went to prepare food, others to engage in various duties; next they served lunch, and afterwards their service continued in diverse kinds of activities. At 5.00 they came again to the cathedral for the evening service, then around 8.00 they gathered outside the cathedral for a walk through the monastery. After this walk they returned to the cathedral, concluding the day with prayer, which lasted about two and a half hours.

[48] Ibid.

[49] For useful discussions of *miloserdie* and its central importance in Orthodox Christianity, as well as its treatment by the Soviet government, see Michael Bourdeaux, *Gorbachev, Glasnost and the Gospel*, London 1990, 189–93, and Mikhail Petrovich Mchedlov and others, *Miloserdie*, Moscow 1996, esp. pp. 42–69.

[50] These points are extremely well made by the writer Daniil Granin in his article, 'O miloserdii', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, no. 12, 18 Mar. 1987, 13.

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focused on several key traditional principles that distinguished women's monasteries from men's. They included nurturing *miloserdie*, bringing enlightenment and creating the foundation for the education of the young generation.[51] *Miloserdie* lay at the core of these principles, transcending the others and defining the special role of women's monasteries. This, in turn, to her expressed her vision for Novodevichy. She quoted Metropolitan Iuvenali, her spiritual mentor: 'Monasticism is letting the spirit of God flow through one's entire being and [from there] into all of life.'[52] *Miloserdie* strongly evoked the images forever imprinted on her mind – the memories of her grandfather, pictures of women's work in the world and images of Novodevichy's history and what it could again become.

In Leonid Mikhailovich's published work on parish life, there is a special section devoted to *miloserdie*, which he considered central to the parish's well-being. *Miloserdie* connoted the obligation to help the poor. In the Christian community, he explained, 'everyone is connected to one another'; each person must pray for all other people, and 'those who have nothing at all', must have in their prayers 'those who are wealthier than they'. *Miloserdie*, in Leonid Mikhailovich's thinking, had a broad meaning, more encompassing than 'good' (*dobro*), 'benefit' (*pol'za*), broader even than 'charity' (*blagotvoritel'nost'*), although it incorporated all of these terms and nourished them. When the legal expert asked Christ, 'Who is closest to you?' Christ replied with the parable of the good Samaritan, explaining that 'he considered his brothers and sisters those who expressed their love for others selflessly'. *Miloserdie* consisted of feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, consoling those who grieve, visiting the sick and those in prison, and reaching out to those who are lost. Such actions, Leonid Mikhailovich claimed, spoke to the heart of Christianity, and the extension of the self to others was fundamental to the work of the Orthodox parish.[53]

As first glance, to those strolling in its well-kept grounds and observing the brilliant blue and gold cupolas on its cathedrals, Novodevichy presents an

[51] Igumeniia Serafima, 'Istoriia i razvitie monasheskoi zhizni v zhenskikh monastyriakh', in Egorov, *Novodevichii monastyr' v russkoi kul'ture*, 19.

[52] Iuvenali, Metropolitan of Krutitsy and Kolomna, quoted ibid. 18. The term Metropolitan Iuvenali used for letting the sprit of God flow through one's entire being is *podvig*, a traditional Russian term meaning surrendering oneself to God. As a model of *miloserdie*, Mother Serafima cited the Marfo-Marinskaia cloister founded in Moscow in 1910 by Mother Superior Elizaveta Fedorovna. The nuns in the cloister took a vow of service to the sick and the poor. More than forty nuns served in the cloister, working in a hospital for poor women, setting up a field hospital for wounded soldiers, establishing an outpatients' department in the hospital that distributed free medicine, and creating two almshouses in Moscow, a training shelter for disadvantaged young women, and a library which gave free books to anyone who wanted them. Such acts of service Mother Serafima very much admired and wanted to develop (ibid. 19).

[53] Serafim, Arkhiepiskop Tverskoi eparkhii, *O vozrozhdenii prikhodskoi zhizni. Obrashchenie k dukhovenstvu Tverskoi eparkhii*, Petrograd 1916, 102–4.

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image of something removed from society, a refuge from worldly problems and concerns. The monastery's exterior suggests escape from the material conflicts of human existence. Such an image, however, seriously misrepresents the monastic life that Mother Serafima has sought to restore, the conversation with the past that she has tried to recreate and the precepts of *miloserdie* she aspired to regenerate. Under her leadership, Novodevichy has become a place of refuge for people in need but also a place that has 'actively reached out to people who were suffering, elderly, destitute, with nowhere else to turn.' A large number of women came to the monastery each day seeking help with the brokenness and social dislocation they had to live with nearly all the time. 'Many women come here asking for help and needing counsel', Mother Serafima said, 'because they don't have the means to live or because their husband or son gets drunk and treats them badly.'[54] Women often came to the monastery to ask her or the nuns 'to bless or pray for them – to give them the strength to deal with their hardships'. Most often, the problems such women came with are related to the family and the difficulties they faced inside their homes, the intense pressures they confronted. Sometimes they arrived needing food or because they had been evicted from their homes; a few came to learn about religion. Mother Serafima attempted, she said, to see each of these cases individually and to relate with compassion to the women who seek her out.[55] She saw the monastery as a place for help in the rebuilding of broken lives and broken spirits. Despite its extremely limited funds, Novodevichy is struggling to fill an important gap left by the crumbling of the government-sponsored network of social services in the last decade. Moreover, it is seeking in active ways to rebuild the sense of compassion that she and others see as lost or forgotten for many years.

Recreating the monastery's charities required a whole network of supporting operations essential to their success. Charities involve new ways of looking at the world, rebuilding the economy and relating to other people. Novodevichy's craft activities, once an important part of its monastic life, had to be almost totally recreated, since they had not been practised since the monastery's closure in 1926. By 1997 Mother Serafima had organised several craft shops and a sewing centre for making carpets, coverings for furniture and clerical garments. She planned to open a small bakery nearby, although these plans were only in the initial stage. The monastery had a large plot of land, eleven hectares in size, seventy kilometres from Moscow. She and the other nuns had begun to cultivate this land, where they had planted potatoes and other vegetables, and had built a cattle-yard, where they maintained the livestock of a small farm – a horse, three cows, several calves and some goats.[56] In these farming operations she aspired to connect the monastery to

[54] Mother Serafima, interview with author, Moscow, 23 June 1997.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.

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the rural agricultural cycle. That relationship was important to the rebuilding of charity, for it was a constant reminder of the connections between all things and of the responsibility for maintaining them and seeing them as sacred.

Novodevichy projects a collective responsibility for the sufferings that are everywhere visible in society. Several of the nuns have gone regularly to a local hospital to spend time with sick children and with elderly people, activities Mother Serafima saw as essential parts of the nuns' responsibilities. Despite its meagre resources, Novodevichy has tried to extend its services to others and, despite the divisions that existed everywhere, to view all of society, in the words of the Russian religious philosopher Nikolai Fedorovich Fedorov, as an 'ethical unit'.[57] 'The pinnacle of morality', Fedorov wrote, 'is the point where one does not separate oneself from others, does not separate "one's own" from what is common, where there is no contradiction between thought and action.'[58] To Mother Serafima, religious faith compelled one to put belief into action. On 10 August 1997, the feast day of the Smolensk Mother of God icon, Mother Serafima was setting a dining table for 220 people in the refectory of the cathedral. On religious holidays in the village where Novodevichy has a rural parish, she and her nuns often prepared food for all the villagers, approximately 250 people, many of them sick and elderly. These were efforts to rebuild the life of the parish, to reach out to people in need and to restore the Church and the sense of compassion within the whole society.

The story of Mother Serafima is of a woman whose life spanned the entirety of the Soviet era and beyond. Despite the many successes she enjoyed in the Soviet scientific establishment, and the awards she received, she considered the contributions made after she reached the age of seventy-seven to be the most significant. From 1994 until her death in 1999 she devoted herself entirely to restoring Novodevichy's physical structures but, even more important, to reconstructing its spiritual and mental being, its existence as a place of refuge directly connected to the world. At the core of these activities was the spirit of charity, this central Christian doctrine, which Mother Serafima embraced. She understood fully that the 'homeless mind' prevailed everywhere in Russian society and that individuals throughout Russia needed a home, an anchor that provided stability and hope; she endeavored to make Novodevichy such a place.

Focusing on the intrigues of the Moscow Patriarchy, commonly reported in the western popular press, gives a misleading picture of the role of

[57] Nikolai Feodorovich Fedorov (1828–1903), 'The restoration of kinship among mankind', in Alexander Schmemann (ed.), *Ultimate questions: an anthology of modern Russian religious thought*, Crestwood, NY 1977, 175–223.

[58] Ibid. 223.

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Orthodoxy in Russian society.[59] The intrigues of the patriarchy are one thing, but Orthodoxy is more than that institution, and is found in every Russian. Rather than being lethargic and disconnected from the primary problems of the larger society, Novodevichy sought energetically to speak to some of its central issues. While it represented only one example among many such institutions, the key element in its success appeared to lie in its leadership and the personality and drive of the individuals responsible for its operations. Mother Serafima connected memory, religion and social service. She was motivated by a vision originally implanted by her grandfather, whose example she carried with her all her life and on which she built. As Archbishop Gregory of Mozhaisk would write in her obituary in 1999, her sincerity and her ability to reach out to others, to the powerful and to the destitute, were among her special gifts.[60]

In Russian religious-philosophical thought, two view points on monasticism may be found. The first emphasises the monastery's strong ascetic qualities, its nearly complete focus on salvation, its stress on the inner life and its rejection of everything else, including the world outside. This perspective sees the Church's total obligation as lying in the domain of the spirit. Creativity and social service belong to the secular realm. The second view point is not indifferent to the secular realm, seeing service to the world as offering opportunity and responsibility. Such a perspective emphasises the incarnational theology of Orthodoxy, its belief that creativity, social justice and culture do not lie beyond the secular realm but are connected to it. For Nikolai Berdiaev, who wrote several articles on this topic, 'humility expressed a central principle' of the second perspective. Humility he interpreted as 'openness to everything, as the readiness to accept other points of view, as the readiness to listen and to hear the voice of other people and the voice of God'.[61] In reaching out to the world, in embracing and trying to connect the monastery to the problems of society, Mother Serafima exemplified the second view point. While ascetic principles were important to her, she related her religion to the world. 'I want to know what is happening to our people', she said in 1997, but 'what is happening does not depress me or cause me to turn my mind inward. I don't say this because I consider myself unique but because my faith helps me to look at the world through different eyes.'[62]

[59] See, for example, Robert Kaiser, *Russia: the people and the power*, New York 1976, 270–1, and Michael Radu, 'The burden of eastern Orthodoxy', *Orbis* xlii/2 (Spring 1998), 283–318.

[60] Archbishop Gregory of Mozhaisk, 'In memory of Hegumeniia Serafima (Chernaia)'.

[61] Quoted in Aleksandr Men', 'Dva ponimaniia khristianstva', in *Radostnaia vest'*, Moscow 1992, repr. and trans. into English as 'Two understandings of Christianity', in Elizabeth Roberts and Ann Shukman (eds), *Christianity for the twenty-first century: the life and work of Alexander Men*, London 1996, 158.

[62] Mother Serafima, interview with author, Moscow, 23 June 1997.

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Civil society is built on a complex web of institutions – voluntary associations, clubs, unions, educational institutions, Churches and charities.[63] These institutions are in turn built on the family, for it is there that the values supporting the broader culture are nourished and transmitted.[64] Such values depend on the relations between human beings, and it is these relations that Mother Serafima hoped to change and transform. She was involved in social reform, in trying to help women find a better way for themselves and for their children, in trying to restore their dignity and resolve. To her, Russian Orthodoxy held the key to rebuilding the family, and the values that are central to its theology – redemption, compassion, kindness, forgiveness and respect for every individual – were essential to this reconstruction.

It is commonly asserted that Russia's future strength will depend on the development of a capitalist economy and a consumer culture. As Mother Serafima's life suggests, however, the most important relationships are cultural and religious in nature, and they concern traditions and norms that transcend the market and will provide the ultimate context for its operation. To this end, Mother Serafima saw as essential the notion of 'charity'; the need to rediscover this notion had much larger importance than the simple act of helping other people. By placing charity at the heart of Novodevichy's existence, she believed it would cultivate other habits and forms of behaviour different from the aggressive consumer culture, which she saw everywhere emerging. Charity fostered social trust. By caring for the destitute, taking responsibility for the weakest and most fragile members of society and respecting the dignity of each individual in the community, trust would be expanded beyond the monastery to the larger society. The form of social trust that she had in mind differed greatly from the 'forced trust' that the former Soviet state had promoted to foster social solidarity.[65] The trust in which she believed was not based on coercion and fear, but on love and on mercy, qualities that spoke to some of the central principles of Russian Orthodoxy, principles which, if nurtured properly, would encourage the development of civil society. They are reminders, as Peter Berger has argued, that religious beliefs, hidden from view for many years have ways of reappearing and 'taking new institutional forms'.[66] In her work at Novodevichy, Mother Serafima provided personal witness to that statement.

[63] Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: the social virtues and the creation of prosperity*, New York 1995, 4.

[64] Ibid. 4–5.

[65] See the very interesting article by Alena Ledeneva, 'The genealogy of *Krugovaya Poruka*: forced trust as a feature of Russian political culture', *Proceedings of the British Academy* cxxiii (2004), 85–108.

[66] Peter L. Berger, 'The desecularization of the world: a global overview', in Peter L. Berger (ed.), *The desecularization of the world: resurgent religion and world politics*, Grand Rapids, MI 1999, 3.

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Returning to Moscow in the late autumn of 2005 to participate in an international conference at the Russian State University for the Humanities, I went several times to Novodevichy Monastery. On one of these occasions, a sunny, cold Sunday morning in November, I joined hundreds of people, many of whom were members of Fr Georgii Kochetkov's former parish, in the Church of the Assumption for a service. The worshippers, primarily young families with their children, packed the church, but they were also joined by older adults, mainly women, who felt a personal connection to the monastery. The monastery has continued to thrive, its physical beauty, its recovery of memory and its connection to the world providing testimony to its health and sense of purpose and bearing witness too to Mother Serafima's vision and dedication. As one of her last acts she succeeded in obtaining the Church's veneration of Elena Duvochkina, the first prioress of Novodevichy Monastery in 1525.[67] The grave of *Igumeniia* Elena, who died in 1547, may now be found near the Smolensk Cathedral, where she served. In addition, for her contributions to the Church and to the restoration of Russia's religious heritage, Patriarch Aleksi II presented Mother Serafima on her eighty-fifth birthday, on 12 August 1999, with one of the Church's most distinguished awards, the Order of St Princess Olga Equal-to-the Apostles.

Mother Serafima died in December 1999. On 18 December, 'the day of her funeral', Archbishop Gregory of Mozhaisk wrote that 'the spacious church of the Dormition (Assumption) at the Novodevichy convent could not accommodate all who came to see her off on "'the way of the earth"'.[68] She is buried immediately to the left of the main entrance to the Cathedral of the Assumption, the church she had served so effectively and where she had located her office. Her grave is marked by a black marble stone, simply inscribed with her name. Despite the simplicity of the setting, her burial site in the shadow of the cathedral and the red flowers laid carefully on her grave speak clearly to her ultimate commitments. 'She is Russia; her story, in multiple ways, is our story', a member of the Russian intelligentsia recently recounted.[69] Mother Serafima represents one of many people who preserved and sought to recover memories and connections with others. While the Russian government in the last five years has emphasised the close relationship between the Church, the State and Russia's national identity, the quiet surroundings of Novodevichy and the legacy of Mother Serafima speak not of power and division, but of what Turgenev called 'eternal reconciliation and life without end'.

[67] Archbishop Gregory of Mozhaisk, 'In memory of Hegumeniia Serafima (Chernaia)', 3. See also N. F. Trubetskoi, 'Igumenii Moskovskogo Novodevich'ego monastyria (1525–1920 gg.)', in Egorov, *Novodevichii monastyr' v russkoi kul'ture*, 57–8, 67.

[68] Archbishop Gregory of Mozhaisk, 'In memory of Hegumeniia Serafima (Chernaia)', 3.

[69] Dr Irina Glushkova, Institute of Oriental Studies, conversation with author, Moscow, 23 Oct. 2005.

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