

ICON OF THE MOTHER OF GOD

‘SEEKER OF THE PERISHING’

AN ICON IS A WINDOW INTO ANOTHER WORLD THROUGH WHICH WE UNITE WITH THE SPIRITUAL WORLD AND THOSE WHO DWELL THERE. AN ICON IS NOT A PICTURE BECAUSE A PICTURE EXISTS FOR THE PURPOSE OF BEING VIEWED, BUT THE ICON ITSELF LOOKS AT US.

—FR. PAVLO FLORENSKY



EACH MIRACLE-WORKING ICON OF THE MOTHER OF GOD HAS ITS OWN HISTORY AND PURPOSE. SOME ICONS ARE CALLED ICONS OF PROTECTION. FOR EXAMPLE, THE VOLODYMYSKA ICON HAS REPEATEDLY RESCUED THE LANDS OF KYIVAN-RUS’ FROM INVASIONS OF TARTARS AND POLES, WHILE THE SIGN ICON HAD SAVED THE CITY OF NOVGOROD. OTHER ICONS ARE KNOWN AS THOSE WHICH COMFORT AND CURE DISEASE: COMFORT MY SORROWS, JOY OF ALL WHO SORROW AND THE HEALER. EACH ICON ORIGINATED IN A DIFFERENT WAY: THE TIKHVIN AND VOLODYMYSKA ICONS WERE WRITTEN BY THE HOLY EVANGELIST ST. LUKE. THE KAZAN ICON WAS FOUND BY A GIRL CALLED MATRONA AT THE LOCATION OF A CHURCH THAT HAD BURNT DOWN. THE DUBYNSKA ICON APPEARED ON THE BARK OF AN OLD TREE.

IN THE NAME OF THE ICONS THEMSELVES, SUCH AS SEEKER OF THE PERISHING, ONE CAN CLEARLY HEAR THE CRY OF A DESPERATE SOUL. IT REFLECTS THE PRAYERS OF ONE WHO PLACES THEIR LAST HOPE IN THE BLESSED THEOTOKOS, WHO THROUGH HER COMPASSION, CAN FIND LOST SOULS AND THROUGH REPENTANCE, CAN LEAD THESE SOULS TO THE HARBOR OF SALVATION. THIS KIND OF NAME FOR AN ICON COULD ONLY ARISE FROM THE DEPTHS OF A HEART TOUCHED BY A MIRACLE.

THE STORY OF THE SEEKER OF THE PERISHING ICON BEGINS IN THE 4TH CENTURY. A MONK NAMED THEOPHILUS ONCE LIVED IN THE CITY OF ADAN. HIS OBEDIENCE WAS AS THE CHURCH STEWARD AT THE BISHOP’S RESIDENCE. THOSE WHO ENVIED HIM FOR THIS PLUM POSITION BEGAN TO GOSSIP AND TOLD LIES ABOUT HIM, WHICH LED THE BISHOP TO GET RID OF THE MONK. THEOPHILUS WAS VERY HURT AT THE INJUSTICE AND BLAMED GOD—NOT SINFUL HUMAN NATURE. THE DEVIL HEARD THE MONK COMPLAINING AND OFFERED HIS HELP, AND THE TEMPTED MONK MADE A DEAL. SUBSEQUENTLY, THEOPHILUS RECOGNIZED AND BECAME AWARE OF HIS FALL INTO THE ABYSS. REPENTING FOR HIS SIN IN FALLING AWAY FROM GOD, THE MONK BEGAN TO PRAY INCESSANTLY TO THE MOTHER OF GOD BEFORE HER ICON. HE BELIEVED THAT NO ONE COULD FORGIVE

HIM, EXCEPT FOR THE BLESSED HOLY MOTHER. IN HIS PRAYERS THE MONK CALLED THE ALL-PURE VIRGIN THE SEEKER OF THE PERISHING. THE MOTHER OF GOD HEARD THE MONK'S PRAYER AND TOLD HIM HE WAS FORGIVEN, ABSOLVING HIM OF HIS AGREEMENT.

THE SEEKER OF THE PERISHING ICON OF THE MOTHER OF GOD IS CONNECTED TO NUMEROUS MIRACLES AND MANY WONDERFUL STORIES HAVE BEEN TOLD ABOUT THE ICON. ONE OF THESE ACCOUNTS COMES FROM RIVNE IN UKRAINE. DURING THE CRIMEAN WAR OF 1854-1856, A VILLAGER FROM THE SMALL VILLAGE OF BILEVSKA IN THE RIVNE REGION WAS CALLED TO ARMY SERVICE. HE MANAGED TO GET THROUGH THE ENTIRE WAR UNSCATHED. THE MAN BELIEVED THAT HE WAS PROTECTED FROM DEATH AND INJURY BY THE ICON OF THE THEOTOKOS THAT HE RESCUED FROM A RUINED ORTHODOX CHURCH. YEARS PASSED. HIS DAUGHTER STEPANYDA GREW UP AND MARRIED. THE NEWLYWEDS WERE BLESSED WITH THIS ICON. BEFORE LONG THE YOUNG WOMAN WAS WIDOWED AND WITHIN A FEW YEARS SHE WAS ALMOST COMPLETELY BLIND. HOWEVER, AS ALWAYS, SHE PRAYED DAILY TO THE THEOTOKOS BEFORE THE ICON. FROM APRIL 11 TO 12, 1927 HER CHILDREN NOTICED THAT THE ICON BEGAN TO RENEW ITSELF. THE NEXT MORNING THIS MIRACLE WAS THE TALK OF THE WHOLE VILLAGE. IT SOON BECAME CLEAR THAT THE ICON IS NOT ONLY BLESSED, BUT ALSO MIRACLE-WORKING. PEOPLE FROM SURROUNDING VILLAGES AS WELL AS CLERGY ALWAYS CAME TO STEPANIDA'S HOUSE ON THE FEAST DAY OF THE COMMEMORATION OF THE ICON ON FEBRUARY 18. THE ICON WAS USUALLY CARRIED INTO THE COURTYARD AND A DIVINE LITURGY WAS SERVED IN THE PRESENCE OF THE FAITHFUL GATHERED. ONE TIME, STEPANIDA, AT THE REQUEST OF THE CLERGY, CARRIED THE ICON INTO THE COURTYARD TO PROCEED WITH A MOLEBEN. SUDDENLY, STOPPING ON THE PORCH, SHE HAPPILY EXCLAIMED, "I CAN SEE ALL OF YOU!"

MANY MIRACLES FOLLOWED. LOCALS RECALL THAT AFTER THE REVOLUTION, THE AUTHORITIES DECIDED TO CLOSE THE CHURCH AND OPEN UP A CLUB IN IT. ONE DAY, THE PROJECTIONIST BROUGHT IN A FILM TO SHOW. ALL THE VILLAGE YOUTH, INCLUDING THE DISTRICT POLICEMAN, GATHERED AT THE CLUB. THE PROJECTIONIST HAD TROUBLE GETTING THE EQUIPMENT TO OPERATE. SUDDENLY, THE SCREEN LIT UP—NOT WITH THE FILM, BUT WITH THE ICON OF THE THEOTOKOS. THE DISTRICT POLICEMAN SUBMITTED HIS RESIGNATION FROM THE POLICE AND LATER HAD HIS CHILDREN BAPTIZED. THE ICON DID NOT GIVE THE LOCAL AUTHORITIES ANY PEACE. THE HEAD OF THE VILLAGE COUNCIL DECIDED TO PERSONALLY REMOVE THE ICON FROM THE VILLAGE. WHEN HE DROVE UP IN A WAGON TO THE HOUSE WHERE THE MIRACLE-WORKING ICON WAS KEPT, HE HEARD SOMEONE CALL OUT TO HIM. HE TURNED TOWARDS THE VOICE, BUT THEN COULD NOT TURN HIS HEAD BACK AND WAS TAKEN TO THE HOSPITAL IN THIS CONDITION. AFTER THIS

INCIDENT, THE ICON WAS NO LONGER DISTURBED.

COUNTLESS MIRACLES HAVE OCCURRED AS A RESULT OF PRAYER BEFORE THIS ICON OF THE THEOTOKOS AND IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO DESCRIBE THEM ALL. ONE OF THE MOST FASCINATING ACCOUNTS TELLS OF HOW ONE OF THE VILLAGERS OF THE BOR KALUGA PROVINCE IN RUSSIA WAS SAVED AFTER HE WAS LOST DURING A SEVERE BLIZZARD. ONE DAY, ON THE EVE OF EPIPHANY, A VILLAGER WAS CAUGHT IN A SEVERE SNOWSTORM AND LOST HIS WAY ON THE ROAD ALONG WITH ANY HOPE OF BEING SAVED. HE BESEECHED THE MOTHER OF GOD FOR HELP, VOWING THAT, IF HE WAS SAVED, THEN HE WOULD HAVE A COPY MADE OF THE SEEKER OF THE PERISHING ICON AND DONATE IT TO HIS VILLAGE CHURCH. THEN A MIRACLE OCCURRED. HIS SLED UNEXPECTEDLY CAME TO BE BY THE GATE OF A HOUSE IN A NEARBY VILLAGE, DESPITE THE FACT THAT THE FARMER EARLIER HAD UNHARNESSED HIS HORSE IN DESPAIR. THE HEAD OF THE HOUSE AT THAT MOMENT HEARD A FEMALE VOICE AT THE WINDOW, SAYING, "TAKE HIM IN." GOING OUTSIDE, HE SAW THE HORSE AND THE MAN IN A SLEIGH. THE MAN FULFILLED THE PROMISE HE MADE TO THE HOLY VIRGIN, GIVING AN ICON TO THE VILLAGE CHURCH. TO COMMEMORATE THIS WONDERFUL RESCUE ON THE EVE OF THE THEOPHANY, THE VILLAGER ASKED THE ICONOGRAPHER TO WRITE IN THE UPPER CORNER OF THE ICON THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD IN THE JORDAN. LATER, THE MIRACLE-WORKING ICON DISAPPEARED WITHOUT A TRACE AFTER THE CHURCH WAS CLOSED IN THE VILLAGE.

AS YOU KNOW, THE AKATHIST TO THE MOTHER OF GOD IS THE SAME FOR THE SEEKER OF THE PERISHING ICON AND FOR THE JOY OF ALL WHO SORROW ICON. THIS SHOWS THE DEEP SPIRITUAL UNITY OF THESE TWO ICONS. RECENTLY, AN AKATHIST WAS DISCOVERED THAT EXISTED IN MANUSCRIPT FORM IN GODLESS TIMES AND WHICH WAS READ IN SECRET. IT WAS DISCOVERED IN THE ARCHIVES OF ARCHPRIEST GREGORY PONOMAREV (1914-1997), WHO SERVED GOD AND THE FAITHFUL OVER 60 YEARS, INCLUDING 16 YEARS IN THE STALINIST PRISON CAMPS. THERE IS SPECULATION THAT HE COMPOSED THIS AKATHIST SINCE IT IS CLOSELY RELATED TO THIS PRIEST'S LIFE EVENTS, ACCORDING TO HIS SPIRITUAL FLOCK.

WITH THIS ICON, THE MOTHER OF GOD GIVES US ALL THE FINAL HOPE NOT TO FALL INTO DESPAIR AND GLOOM. HOPE COMES FROM THE FACT THAT THE MOTHER OF GOD CAN REACH A SINNER WHO REPENTS—EVEN FROM HELL. THIS IDEA IS EXPRESSED IN THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE IMAGE. THE MOTHER OF GOD IS HOLDING THE JESUS-CHILD IN HER FIRM EMBRACE, ALONG WITH THE SOUL OF EVERY SINNER WHO REPENTS. THE MOST HOLY MOTHER IS DEPICTED WITHOUT ANY HEAD COVERING. THE FAITHFUL EXPLAIN THIS FEATURE AS FOLLOWS: THE MOTHER OF GOD ALWAYS SPEEDS TO OUR RESCUE, NOT EVEN STOPPING TO COVER HER HEAD.