



CHAPTER 9

St. Xenia as a Patron of Female Social Suffering

An Essay on Anthropological Hagiology

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The first post-Soviet canonization took place during perestroika, a period of very fast and dramatic transition in the Soviet political and ideological system. This was the very beginning of religious revivalism in Russia, which coincided with the 1988 celebration of the 1,000th anniversary of the baptism of Russia.¹ At that time the Moscow Patriarchate realized that Russian Orthodoxy was transforming quickly and drastically from the ideological enemy of Communism into the main guardian of Russian national cultural heritage. The canonization conducted at the 1988 Church Council reflected this transformation very clearly: the Council's list of new saints started with the names of well-known figures who are associated with Russian cultural and historical greatness.²

Among the nine saints canonized on that day only one was a woman, St. Xenia of St. Petersburg (also known as Xenia the Blessed), glorified as a "Holy Fool" (or a "Fool for Christ," *yurodivaya*) (Kanonizatsia 1988: 109–17).³ She differed from the other canonized saints not only in her gender, but also in her social status. Other canonized persons were either monks (including three bishops) or famous rulers like Prince Dimitri Donskoi. Xenia was a lay woman of (allegedly) non-noble origins. She also was the only one who had already been an object of popular veneration amongst the common people. Xenia's sepulcher in a shrine at the Smolensk Cemetery in St. Petersburg/Leningrad had been revered since at least the middle of the nineteenth century (Toporov 1995; Filicheva 2006; Kizenko 2003). Active pilgrimage to the shrine continued during the Soviet period.⁴ Her canonization sent a message to Soviet authorities about the continuity of religious tradition represented by this pilgrimage. It stressed that despite all the antireligious campaigns of the Soviet state, there were many Orthodox believers in the country who still needed church shrines, and were waiting for the reestablishment of the Church. But if we examine the message sent by Xenia's canonization to the Russian public, we see that its primary purpose was to institutionalize Xenia's veneration, as well as to create and

popularize a female image that would be understandable and attractive to the majority of actual and potential believers—lay women.

Indeed, Xenia the Blessed has become a very popular saint in post-Soviet Russia. Many churches and chapels dedicated to St. Xenia have been built throughout Russia; her icon can be bought in most church shops in the country. Every time we went to her shrine in the Smolensk Cemetery in St. Petersburg to do our field observations, we saw both men and women (mostly women) praying to St. Xenia.

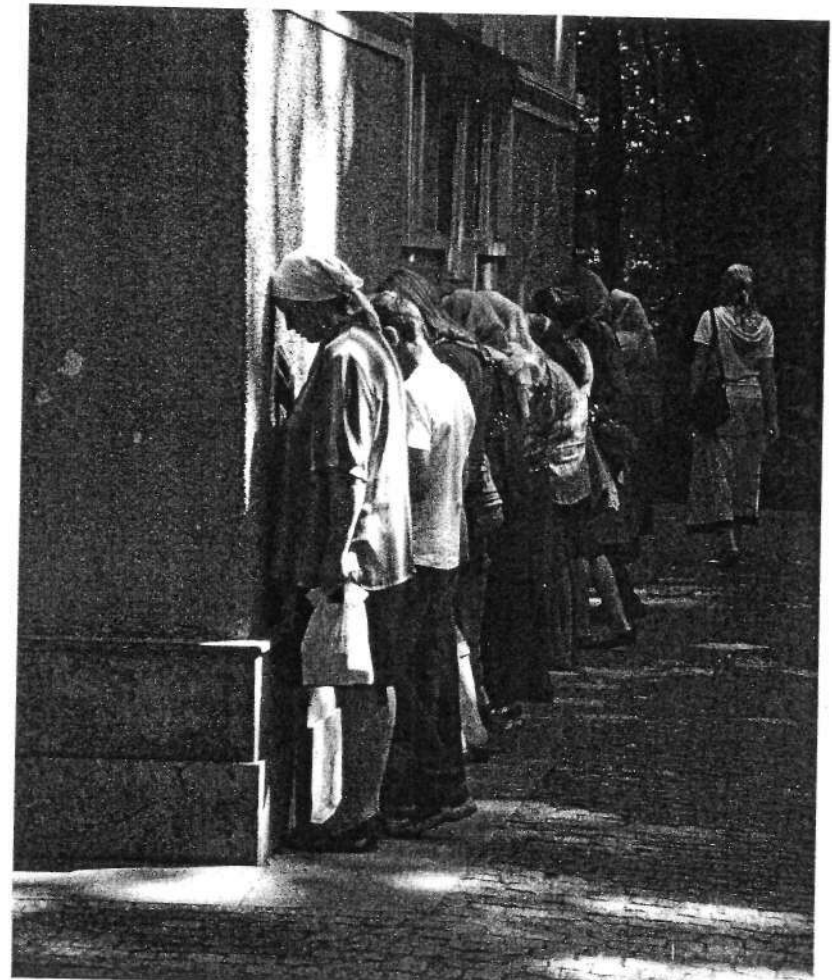


Illustration 9.1. Pilgrims at St. Xenia shrine. Photo by Sergey Shtyrkov (2009).

We observed people writing notes or even long letters to the saint, which were put into the walls of the chapel—a custom that has survived all attempts of the local parish priests to stop it (Filicheva 2006). Many read a special akathist⁵ to St. Xenia or prayed to her in their own words, circling around her chapel three times or standing for several minutes by the wall of the chapel with their palms and forehead touching the chapel wall. When the chapel was open, there were also people queuing at the chapel door to buy church oil from the shrine or to participate in the service conducted by a local priest.

Participant observation was conducted at the shrine in different seasons, both on weekdays and church feasts, and including the day annually dedicated to her memory on 6 February, which is usually incredibly cold and windy. We interviewed religious activists and average believers, and studied letters to the shrine of St. Xenia printed in different publications, from the local parish newspaper to special books, usually edited by lay women.⁶ One more important and revealing source for our research has been the Internet, which contains official information provided and controlled by the Church (including variants of the life of Xenia and akathists) and, at the same time, provides space for believers to express their religious feelings and ideas freely while remaining anonymous and outside of church authority. Usually, those believers (or religious “seekers”) who are active in Orthodox internet chat rooms are not churchgoers. Finally, we examined popular images of Xenia the Blessed in contemporary Russian literature and mass media, which provide many examples of what we call the “lay life” of Xenia. In 2007 the play *St. Xenia of St. Petersburg in her Life*, by Vadim Levanov, won a prestigious prize in Russia; in 2009 under the title *Xenia: The Love Story*, this play is being performed in St. Petersburg’s Alexandrinski Theatre.

In our research we were especially interested in popular perceptions of the saint, reflected in oral and written narratives about the life of Xenia, her apparitions, and the miraculous help she provided. However, we were faced with a rich variety of images of the saint, not only in the sphere of “popular” religion, but in “official” religion as well. The very fact that someone is canonized means that there must be official (or canonical) texts of her or his life and akathists approved by the Church (either by the Church authorities or by certain institutions, such as the Synodal Canonization Commission). But in fact there are at least three variants of akathists for Xenia. All of them appear in church publications (including Internet materials), and it is hard to say which one is canonical.⁷ As for the life of St. Xenia, one can find a dozen versions that claim to be canonical. In other words some church authors and most readers of those texts take it for granted that this is the official version of the life although the texts have important differences, and

one could say that some canonical life with unified ideological meaning just does not exist.

In this chapter we consider why Xenia the Blessed has become so popular among contemporary Orthodox believers. To answer this question we first seek to understand the “target audience” of this saint, and the specific features of these contemporary believers. Second, we analyze the image of Xenia, how she is depicted in various narratives and visual representations, and how she is depicted by the Church and perceived by believers in their written and oral reflections.

An Over-age Contemporary Believer: The Genesis

There is a clear tendency in public discourse about the Russian Orthodox Church to compare contemporary religious life with the pre-revolutionary situation and to draw conclusions about continuities between them. The Soviet period in these speculations is either silently skipped or represented as a hard time for the Church and faith, which were both preserved uncorrupted by the zealots of faith. On the basis of our field research, we tend to stress the discontinuities, and to insist upon the “invention” of the religious tradition, especially in the realm of lay religiosity. A religious tradition can be transmitted via personal participation in routine (church services, icon veneration, etc.) and through a special system of education. As is well known, in the USSR both of these means of transmitting religion were closed to the average Soviet citizen. Soviet atheistic propaganda, which mocked religion as an old-fashioned, rural phenomena, and simple superstition, was rather effective in the age of rapid Soviet modernization. Village immigrants to the cities and their children, some of whom received a good professional education, became teachers, engineers or physicians, and eventually composed the so-called Soviet intelligentsia,⁸ who tried their best to distance themselves from their rural low-status heritage, including religion.

In contemporary Russia there is a widespread belief that religious tradition was preserved in the Soviet period by village grandmothers: those women who did not migrate from the countryside to the city. These women allegedly transmitted religious faith and practices to their urban grandchildren. The idea is inspired by little more than today’s conception of the continuity of national traditions which were able to survive the Soviet period. The fact that a significant number of Soviet children were baptized, sometimes secretly by their grandmothers or other older female relatives (often parents pretended that they did not know about these baptisms because they could lose their jobs), does not automatically mean that those children were raised as religious persons. Some of them did not even know about

their baptism until they became adults; for others their religious education was restricted to some knowledge about special foods their elder relatives prepared for Easter (painted eggs) and for burial ceremonies (*kutia*, a sweet meal made of rice or wheat with honey or raisins). In some senses, atheism has won.

The image of a pious grandmother as a keeper of religious tradition is willingly used by the converted. Martha,⁹ born in 1930, and the daughter of an eminent Soviet civil engineer and official who was a committed atheist, converted to Russian Orthodoxy at the beginning of the 1990s at the age of 60. She did not know whether she had been baptized in her childhood, and she addressed this question to a priest whom she respected very much and whose church she started visiting in St. Petersburg. According to Martha, "The priest looked at me and said: 'You have been baptized already; you don't need to be baptized again.'" From that expert's words she concluded that her grandmother, with whom Martha lived in a village in her childhood, did baptize her. As with many other converts who did not have even elementary religious knowledge, Martha started her self-education by reading books from church shops and communicating with other people who had converted during outdoor religious activities such as pilgrimages. In the mid 1990s she organized her own pilgrimage service which she continues to lead to this day.¹⁰ The method of conversion and the religious career of Martha proves our assumption of discontinuity between traditional and new religiosity. The post-Soviet urbanized believers live in a different social and economical environment than their (mostly village-based) grandparents. In creating suitable new forms of religious life, these children of the Soviet system reuse their Soviet social habits. Thus, the genealogy of Russian organized pilgrimages shows that post-Soviet religious travelers draw directly on their Soviet experience of domestic heritage tourism (see Kormina 2010).

It is not just the contemporary believers who have Soviet roots; many traits of contemporary Russian religious culture originate in the USSR and have evident traces of Soviet heritage. One of the characteristic features of a certain segment of Orthodox believers is their suspicion of the public demonstration of someone's religiosity. Some people contend that they avoid going to church because in their mind, religious life must be a private matter. This prejudice against the display of private matters in public space is perhaps related to Alexey Yurchak's observation that the "last Soviet generation" learned to live in two separated worlds simultaneously—the false world of communication with the state, full of simulacra of different sorts, as opposed to the intimate world of sincere friendship and true feelings (2006). It is very possible that the representatives of the last Soviet generation reject the prospect of becoming regular churchgoers because of their

antipathy towards the institutional control of their lives. Although they feel that it is necessary to be affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church, they are not enthusiastic about participation either in parish community life or in the liturgical life of the Church. They prefer to consider themselves Orthodox believers (or even just Orthodox people, meaning belonging to Russian culture). They are sure that their inner faith and infrequent visits to the church, or a little pilgrimage to a local shrine like St. Xenia's chapel for an individual prayer, is a perfectly adequate form of Orthodox worship. Thus, they remain believers outside the Church, who use the concept of Orthodoxy or, rather, the concept of Orthodox identity, for their own purposes. The Church is increasingly trying to control such irregular Orthodox believers, although not always successfully and consistently.

It might seem to be a paradox, but the Church, which must encourage regular institutional practices, has good reason to represent irregular religiosity as legitimate and Orthodox (with some reservations, and by certain rhetorical methods, such as assuming the sincere but childlike and unsophisticated faith of common believers). We suggest that in doing so, the Church pursues two goals. First, if one counts irregular believers as observant, then most citizens of Russia will fall within the purview of the Russian Orthodox Church, and it would have a right to represent itself as a majority institution. This political outcome could be described as the inclusive strategy of Orthodox identity. Second, the Church considers irregular believers to be Orthodox by their nature, and just one step from entering the Church. Thus, these two goals can be seen as important aspects of an "inner" missionary program. Consequently, the church must sometimes create and promote lay figures to be saints in order to have an avenue of contact with people who try to escape from the control of religious institutions. In this sense, the "promotion" of St. Xenia seems to be a very successful missionary project.

St. Xenia and Irregular Religiosity

The image of St. Xenia must look very sympathetic to the irregular believer. An important feature of the image presented in official accounts of her life is her alienation from the regular life of the official church. We do not know whether she was raised by pious parents or was herself a pious person (a typical motif in such official accounts). In the earlier official account of her life, one cannot find any mention of clerics, or even her confessor. As a saint, Xenia did not need them. Some versions of the lay accounts of her life even tell us about Xenia's anticlerical actions. For example, Vadim Levanov, in his play *St. Xenia of St. Petersburg in her Life*, portrays a scene in which

Xenia exposes the local ecclesiastics' secret sins. The reader of the official biographical accounts of her life does not encounter Xenia praying in a church or monastery.¹¹ Both official and lay variants of her biography say that the religious life of Xenia, after she had become a *yurodivaya*, or "Fool for Christ," occurred secretly and outside the church walls.

There are two stories replicated in almost every life narrative of the saint. The first story says that in the daytime, Xenia roamed the neighborhood where she used to live before her husband's death, visiting her acquaintances and having tea with her fellow women. But every night, in all seasons, she used to go to a field outside the city and pray, alone, the whole night through. As one Orthodox writer puts it in an article published in the weekly tabloid *My Family*, "She never prayed in public. At night she went out of the city. There, in the fields, barefoot, she prayed kneeling before daybreak, bowed down to all four sides of the horizon" (Basha 2001). The second well-known story about Xenia that celebrates her hidden religious deeds—what we call her "night religiosity"—tells of the saint's secretive help to the builders of the church at the Smolensk Cemetery. At night Xenia lifted bricks up onto the scaffolding around the church to speed up the construction work. The workers did not know who helped them. "Finally," as another writer put it in her book about Xenia for children, "they decided to find out who the invisible helper was. Everyone learned that this onerous work had been done by Xenia, the Fool for Christ, who was known all over the neighborhood" (Kundysheva 1995: 9).¹²

The idea that proper spiritual and devotional work can and must be done secretively is well-known among all Christian traditions. This conception is based on Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount about secret alms (Matt. 6:1–4), fasting (Matt. 6:16–18), and prayer (Matt. 6:5–6). However, in the post-Soviet variant of Orthodoxy, such a practice of secret religious deeds has an additional implication: Those secret deeds of faith cannot be under the control of any institution. One who does not attend church services and cannot remember when and where her last confession was can still pray in her heart, and from time to time she can light a candle at an icon in a church she has never visited before and to which she will not return. This "light" variant of religious activity is usually accepted by the Church. As Metropolitan (now Patriarch) Kirill said in an interview on the Internet portal "Interfax-Religia" in January 2009, "Every day, let each of us—either those who visit church regularly or those who go to church infrequently, or even those who do not remember the last time they crossed the threshold of the church—begin with a prayer to God."¹³ In an earlier interview, Kirill explains that "us"—the Orthodox people—includes all his baptized Orthodox compatriots who are not convinced atheists (Metropolitan Kirill 2002). According to this tolerant discourse, irregular believers are given legitimate

rights to be considered truly Orthodox. This corresponds with the previously discussed inclusive strategy for defining believers that is promoted by the Russian Orthodox Church.

As we have written elsewhere (Kormina and Shtyrkov 2008), in the situation of a post-Soviet and post-atheist country, the Russian Orthodox Church cannot enjoy total domination in the ideological sphere. In many social contexts the Church cannot simply provide direct instructions to believers without any explanations (and wait for their obedience) just because of its institutional authority. In new circumstances the Church needs to represent publicly the source of the legitimacy of its power, such as the support of common believers. To achieve this legitimacy, the Church has to create new grounds and a new language for communicating with its actual, and especially, with its potential followers. It also has to elaborate and promote a new image of the ideal Orthodox person suitable for this particular social and historic situation. This ideal, translated through the cults of saints in particular, is embodied in an image of the saint herself and in the images of ordinary believers who became the recipients of miracles. In the case of St. Xenia, these two images—of the saint and of her followers—obviously overlap. Her alienation from the church and her hidden private religiosity might look very attractive for people used to an irregular religious life.

Female Saint Needed

In his well-known work, *The Saints of Old Russia*, George Fedotov considered the phenomena of female sanctity in pre-revolutionary Russia and wrote, not without some sadness, "The number of women saints in the Russian Church is not large; the Church seems to have canonized only 12 of them" (2000: 176). One can find slightly different numbers,¹⁴ but nevertheless, some things are quite clear. First, the number of canonized female saints was and still is much lower than the number of males: Trofimov asserts that the total number of Russian saints is about 400, so only three percent are women.¹⁵ Second, most of the female saints are princesses and often simultaneously nuns. Third, all of them lived several centuries ago. The "newest" female saint, Yuliania Lasarevskaya of Murom, was accepted for all-Church veneration in 1903, almost 300 years after her death.¹⁶

It should be mentioned that according to Orthodox Christianity, many female saints lived in the first centuries of Christianity. So one can suppose that there would be no shortage of female saints in the Russian Orthodox tradition. Indeed, some holy women of the Ancient Church were well-known in Russia. And perhaps the most venerated female saint in the Russian religious tradition has been St. Paraskeva (Piatnitsa), whose cult

spread to Russia from the Balkans in the process of Christianization. In Russian popular religion, St. Paraskeva has been a protector of women, especially married women, and a patron of women's activities, such as spinning. Some ritual restrictions were connected with her, and there were also associated folk legends about the punishment of those who transgressed them (Afanas'ev 1990: 84–85; Levkievskaya 2001: 414). In her study of the veneration of St. Paraskeva, Eve Levin points out that her popularity declined in Russia after the revolution and has almost disappeared today (2006: 126).¹⁷ Was this cult, rooted in traditional peasant society, wiped out because of modernization and the mass migration of village dwellers to the cities? Or was the decline in the veneration of St. Paraskeva caused by the emancipation of women, whose sphere of competence changed so radically? In the twentieth century, women became involved in Soviet industrialization as workers and professionals, instead of (or rather, in addition to) the activities that St. Paraskeva was patron to, such as housekeeping, child rearing, and spinning.

The decline of the old objects of devotion should not be explained solely in reference to the Soviet social transformation, for one can see changes in social processes taking place in pre-revolution mass religiosity. From the second half of the nineteenth century, the presence of women in Church public life became more and more visible.¹⁸ Some Orthodox authorities began to think that women's religious activism (both lay and monastic) was a real foundation and support for the Church in times of rapid social change (Wagner 2007: 130). In the 1900s, some activists, inspired by the canonization of a popular saint—Serafim of Sarov in 1903—started looking for an ideal female saint. Yuliania Lasarevskaya, mentioned earlier, could have been such a person, as she was not a nun or a princess. But her image was too special and, in some respects, outmoded. According to official accounts of her life, Yuliania was a noblewoman famous for her self-sacrificing philanthropy and who had a special concern for her serfs. That role was attractive to some women from the intelligentsia who wanted to devote themselves to social service; but it was not attractive for the common urban or rural female believer (Fedotov 2000: 182). There was no Orthodox saint whose life would resonate with the average female believer. To put it another way, female sainthood was located outside of real contemporary religious life.

A twelve-volume collection of biographies of unglorified Russian Orthodox devotees was compiled and published between 1906 and 1912 (Zhizneopisaniya 1906–1912). It was a sort of program for future canonizations. The volumes include several biographies of pious Imperial Russian women who could become saints (including Xenia the Blessed) and who came from a variety of backgrounds. If this collection is correlated with the Church's internal discussion on the religious role of women,¹⁹ one can conclude that

there was a good chance that a prominent Abbess would become a saint—one whose convent was well-known because of its prominent social welfare program. But as we know, the new official female saint didn't appear until 1988, when most potential or actual Orthodox people had no idea what nuns looked like. Then the Church needed a person of another type—St. Xenia.

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, Xenia was venerated as a saint for common city-dwellers. According to the official account of her life, she lived in the capital of the Russian Empire and was involved in the everyday routine of the big city. Characters in the official and lay narratives of her life (and the recipients of her miracle help) are people with small businesses, such as shopkeepers or carriers, or average urban dwellers (such as the widow of a noncommissioned officer who rents a room in her house, or builders erecting a church). Xenia herself is a typical city-dweller of her time. The *Life of St. Xenia* tells a story of an ordinary lay urban woman. As a young girl she was married to Andrei Fedorovich Petrov and lived in her husband's house in the neighborhood of Peterburgskaya storona, St. Petersburg. At the age of 26 she lost her husband, who died suddenly. After his death the young widow gave her house to her former tenant and her possessions to the needy, and started living on the street in the same part of the city where she had previously lived, begging for food. Local city-dwellers supported the "Holy Fool" by giving her food and clothes. She lived a long life and was buried in the Smolensk Cemetery in St. Petersburg, where her much venerated chapel is now located.

Xenia's life story sounds as if it happened very recently, not in the eighteenth century. An abundance of geographical details put the narrative in the context of contemporary St. Petersburg. For example, the reader is informed about the current name of the street where Xenia's house was once located. On her icons, Xenia is put into the actual, not the imagined, landscape. Painters create icons with the recognizable landscapes of the Smolensk Cemetery, with crosses on the graves, and the chapel of Xenia and the Church of Smolensk Icon of the Mother of God. Not surprisingly, in their narratives about "meetings" with Xenia, visionaries see her at the bus stop, in the market, in the church, or by the chapel of Xenia at the Smolensk cemetery. Here is a typical story about meeting with Xenia, published on the web site for Russian amateur poets (stikhi.ru) in response to the poem "To Matushka Xenia," which was posted by a female poet:

I met Xenia the Blessed in the underground two years ago. She came into the carriage at Lesnaya station and alighted at Finland rail station. In the carriage she blessed people loudly, asking only for one ruble.²⁰ She wore a faded pink coat and green skirt. I had

the luck to talk to her! She said to me, "Don't rely upon mind, but the God's will only. Say always: God is up and down, on your right and on your left, in front of you and behind you." This was like in the dream. I asked her, "Are you Xenia?" And she laughed with a thin little voice. People in the carriage got excited. "This is Xenia! This is Xenia!" and started opening their wallets. And she said something to everybody, very distinctly and loudly!²¹

The holy icons of Xenia quickly inform us of her age. She is pictured grey-haired; on some images we can see wrinkles on her forehead. Interestingly, those visionaries who saw the Mother of God usually describe her appearance as bright but uncertain, as a woman shining in the divine light. In contrast, descriptions of Xenia are precise and realistic. In their narratives about miraculous Xenia meetings, dreams and visions, Xenia believers also often describe her appearance as an aged woman (*starushechka* or *pozhilaya zhenshchina*) dressed in an outmoded long skirt and jacket, with a headscarf on her head, as the following two examples illustrate. The first is from a popular collection of apparitions and miracles of the saints: "Her garment was common—a skirt, a cardigan, a warm plain handkerchief of deep purple color put on her head and wrapped around her neck. She held a stick and leaned on it. I remember very well her tired, reddened eyes" (Svidetel'stva 2006). A second example is from the book for children mentioned earlier: "They say that she wanders about St. Petersburg's streets today. She looks like an older, threadbare woman, like a typical pensioner" (Kundysheva 1995: 21). So St. Xenia resembles an archetypal representative of the majority of the contemporary Russian Orthodox flock—an aged lay woman.

"The Holy Fool" Versus "A Typical Pensioner"

The images of the female saint as they are offered in the official accounts of Xenia's life and in holy icons are altogether contradictory and uncertain. As a Fool for Christ, she appears strange and dangerous, whereas as a typical compatriot and neighbor, she appears as normal as common urban people. As we shall see later in this article, the images of St. Xenia are evolving in two separate directions that were silently proposed in earlier Church accounts of her life. In fact at least two different versions of Xenia's life and religious deeds existed, each with its own moral message.²²

The Xenia as "Holy Fool" variant has been developing in the lay narratives written by professional or semi-professional writers in literature, movies, and drama. According to the official narratives, after her husband's

death, Xenia took his name (Andrei Feodorovich) and wore his uniform (he had a rank of colonel). At her husband's funeral ceremony, she claimed that Andrei Feodorovich was alive and that it was his spouse, Xenia, who had died. The story about changing her name and changing her clothes expresses the quite traditional idea that a woman who is widowed changes gender. She symbolically dies as a woman, at least for the period of mourning. Xenia had no children and did not perform the traditional female role of mother. Hence, her female gender was weak and, consequently, a radical gender change was possible. However this fascinating story of gender change as a sign of becoming a *yurodivaya* is not stressed or even used by contemporary believers. This part of the story perhaps seems too exotic and extravagant for them; it makes their saint a strange and odd person. Although the holy icon with the transvestite image of Xenia does exist, it has not become popular. On the icons of Xenia which can be found literally in every church shop in Russia, one sees an elderly woman, clothed modestly and neatly in the female Orthodox style.

Among more than 70 holy images of St. Xenia collected by worshippers of the saint on the web site www.xenia-spb.narod.ru,²³ only one icon depicts Xenia in her husband's military uniform.²⁴ The Church (if one can



Illustration 9.2. Icons in a church shop at the Smolensk Cemetery. Photo by Jeanne Kormina.

talk about it as a unified actor) is not active in promoting this strange image of Xenia. It seems that the believers prefer to see their popular saint as a pensioner in a headscarf and long skirt rather than as a transvestite wearing a male military uniform.

In the lay narratives of Xenia, however, the very fact of her husband's death has become one of the key aspects of creating her image. Much attention has been paid to the fact that it is because of his death she has become a saint. The official narratives of the life of St. Xenia leave the figure of her husband vague and unclear. They mention that he was a chorister and a high-ranking officer, which must be very confusing for the contemporary reader.²⁵ Those readers who have some general knowledge about Russian history of the eighteenth century can draw a parallel with the famous favorite of Empress Elisabeth, Count Andrei Razumovskii, who started as a chorister in the court choir and then had a meteoric career.²⁶ This line of associations leads to an image of an unfaithful, empty-headed husband, as Xenia's husband is indeed depicted in the play by Levanov mentioned earlier. Included in the play is a scene of an accidental meeting between Xenia and her husband's former lover. Similarly, in folk narratives about Xenia recorded by Victor Toporov in Leningrad in the 1980s, Andrei Petrov is represented as a thoughtless officer: "Xenia was of princely birth and fell in love with an officer. But he was unfaithful to her. Then she gave away all her wealth and started to wander" (Toporov 1995). Other lay accounts of her life turn Xenia's spouse into "a dashing cavalry officer" (McLees 2000) and even "an army colonel who drank himself to death and who may have been an abusive, violent husband" (Forest 1997: 140). This narrative is one way to make St. Xenia seem unhappy and thus able to understand the suffering of other women. In contrast, other lay accounts of her life stress that Xenia and her husband loved each other very much. In these versions, when her husband died, she lost the closest person to her, and was forced to live alone in poverty. It is a critical point of transformation of the official image of the saint when her freely chosen asceticism turns into a forced disaster. Her suffering becomes her virtue. Here we see an easily recognizable portrait of a woman who can become a saint because of her pain and patience.

The circumstances of the death of Xenia's husband have also been subject to creative interpretation in latter accounts of the life of Xenia. According to pre-revolutionary narratives of her life, he died unexpectedly, and Xenia's religious life began after and because of his death.²⁷ The Church councilor document on Xenia's canonization and almost every lay version of the life of Xenia gives an explanation of how these two facts are connected. Generally, it is stated that in her grief Xenia took a vow to become a Fool for Christ to expiate the sins of her husband, who passed away with-

out confessing (Kanonizatsia 1988: 107). In one of the recent versions of Xenia's life (an Orthodox educational project which appeared as a book, a 4-part DVD, and on a special Internet site approved by Patriarch Alexy titled *Scripture Lessons for Family and School*), the relationship is explained as follows: "Understanding that her husband's death was far from the ideal of the Christian decease, Saint Xenia decided to please God on behalf of her spouse who had passed away."²⁸ Some texts go so far as to blame her husband's drunkenness and even suicide as causes for his "less-than-ideal Christian death."²⁹ Traditionally, those who died of drunkenness (*opoitsy*) or committed suicide were buried out of a cemetery, and thus were symbolically excluded from the local community of Christians (Zelenin 1995). People were prohibited from praying for these deceased in the Church. However, in contemporary Russia there is a practice of petitions to dioceses from relatives of suicide victims asking to allow a church funeral and church prayer. These requests are often granted.³⁰

The councilor versions of the official life of Xenia and some lay biographies of this saint tried to articulate an important and, in some respects, novel moral message addressed to female believers. They said that Xenia was a religious virtuoso who felt responsible for her husband's salvation and spent all her life trying to achieve it: "[T]o save her husband's soul Xenia repudiated herself (*otkazalas' ot sebia samoi*), she rejected her own name and took the name of her husband to live with it the rest of her life" (Kanonizatsia 1988: 107). The message is that contemporary female believers have to take care of the souls of their spouses. Indeed, in contemporary Russia, there are wives and mothers who represent their families in the church and who, in particular, have to organize a proper church burial ceremony for their deceased husbands, usually non-believers who perhaps were not even baptized. In these cases, a woman appears as the head of her family in the face of God. Her responsibility for the religious well-being of the family perhaps originates in her duty, during the Soviet period of shortages, to supply the household with food, clothes, and everything needed for its welfare. However, the majority of those who venerate Xenia the Blessed do not accept this message of responsibility for the salvation of a husband or the idea of a personal religious life composed of altruistic deeds of devotion. Most believers see the death of St. Xenia's husband as causing personal distress that led her to faith, as happens to many other people (since one who has lost everything becomes closer to God as a result ("*vsio poteriali—blizhe k Bogu stali*")).³¹ They do not see her husband's death as the reason she became a "Holy Fool." Later Church versions of her life also omit the idea that she became *yurodivaya* as a voluntary penance for her husband's sins, leaving the story to lay artists who are very enthusiastic about that unusual idea (see, for example, the play by Levanov; the documentary by Plugaty-

reva; and others).³² In the eyes of common believers, Xenia appears not as a religious virtuoso but as a lonely elderly woman whose faith helps her to get through the suffering of everyday earthly life. This popular image of her has become a model of religious life for the contemporary believer.

The Saint of Female Suffering

As we have already seen, St. Xenia is perceived by believers as a compatriot, a contemporary, and a neighbor. She is also a wise, experienced, female friend who can give good advice and support in complicated circumstances. The sphere of her competence includes experiences of suffering:

Oh, Xenia Blazhennaya, you had so much patience!
You suffered privations, and misfortune, you suffered for us.
Mother [*Matushka*] Xenia, strengthen me in my patience,
Help me to withstand my terrible grief.

Oh, Xenia Blazhennaya, you are so tired!
You are tired of suffering and crying for everyone.
Mother [*Matushka*] Xenia, I am absolutely exhausted,
And I won't withstand without your prayerful help.³³

These are strophes from a song about *matushka Xenia* that is quite popular among female believers. We heard it many times near Xenia's shrine: women pilgrims singing this song together with the akathist, or instead of it. Anthropologist Detelina Tocheva (see chapter 5, this volume) told us that her church-going female informants in the village of Maloe Zamostie, located about 40 kilometers from St. Petersburg, performed this song in chorus at somebody's birthday party together with secular lyrical songs of Soviet origin. Both the melody and poetry of the song are similar to pseudo-folk Soviet lyric songs that focused a great deal on feelings. In this particular song, the singer addresses Xenia Blazhennaya, comparing their life experiences and asking for moral support. The singer believes that Xenia can give her help because she suffered herself and, as a result of this personal experience, she can understand and support another woman, a believer.

In the song, as well as in their letters to Xenia, people call her *matushka*, which is a typical address to a church-going female believer from other members of the believing group. This word is one of the linguistic markers of belonging to a particular social group—in this case to the community of believers. In other words, the saint is a member of this community. She is not the sort of saint who supervises and punishes (like Paraskeva Piatnitsa); she is the sort of saint who feels compassion and helps.

In their letters to St. Xenia, believers constantly represent themselves as poor people who experience the deprivation of something indispensable for normal human existence, such as family relationships, money to survive, or health. They deserve the attention of Xenia not because of their extraordinary piety, but just because of their desperate need for her assistance. In a letter to St. Xenia one can find such words: "As far as I have nothing to give you in return [for your help], help me just because [*prosto tak*]. ... There are zealous slaves of God who apply to you. But there are also the ordinary and weak [like us]" (Iakovleva 2006: 26). The humility of a person is a special quality that increases her chances to be heard by the saint who, according to popular conception, reached sanctity through suffering.

Who are the women who come to the church and why? There are at least three social features typical of the women who participate in religious activities. The first one is their professional position. Many of these women do not have a prestigious profession or have not achieved success in their job (examples include a woman from an account office in the ship factory, a physician working in an outpatients' clinic, a school teacher, a cleaner). Sometimes they have lost their jobs and failed to find a good new job, or have accepted early retirement. In the Church, these women have a chance to start a new life. Some of them find a new job there, working as cleaners or vendors in church shops, or singing in the choir, or as sextons. These positions give them some money, but what is even more important, these new jobs place them in the center of church life. These church workers often pretend to have expert knowledge on different religious questions. Alongside this, many female religious activists use their church activities to interpret dreams and to give necessary information to people looking for some special icon or prayer, or to lead pilgrimages as a kind of social service that is highly respected in their society.

Age, with its challenges, is another rather evident feature of this group. While in the secular world the personal social capital of a woman is often her fertility and sexual attractiveness, which decrease as she becomes older, her status in the religious community depends on her religious knowledge and experience and increases with her age. In the religious context, old age has very positive connotations; only elders can become living saints, or *startsy*.

The third social characteristic shared by many of these women is their loneliness, caused by changes in their family status. Now in their fifties, the family project they participated in as wives and mother has often run its course. The structure of their family has changed radically. Children grow up and build their own separate families; their mother's expertise is not needed anymore. The husband (if he was in the family) has sometimes already died, although more often, he has just left. Sometimes when there is

an official relationship with a spouse, in reality the couple is separated. Men escape by drinking and watching TV. They join the virtual community of the TV-addicted or a "male club" focusing on a specific male activity, like car repair or playing chess. It is significant that these husbands often do not share their wives' religiousness. At most, the non-religious husband tolerates his wife's religiosity, considering her to be a freak or worse, mocking her religiosity, hurting her feelings and reducing her self-respect; sometimes he even tries to ban her religious activities. Stories of this sort can be found in the books written by Orthodox writers and recounted by women as part of their life stories (see, for example, a story titled "The Victory over Death" by Father Nikolay Agafonov (1997: 6–23)). The best gift that a husband can give to his wife is his consent to a church wedding ceremony. Martha, whom we encountered early on in this article, proudly explained that her husband (baptized in his childhood but not a religious person) agreed to their church wedding as a present to her for their 50th wedding anniversary.

The majority of women who participate more or less actively in church life take their religious involvement as a sort of cultural activity. For them, the church plays the role of a sort of female club where women find a new social context in which to function. This resocialization gives them an opportunity to enjoy a new social status and a role that is respected in contemporary society.

Conclusion

What does the Church need saints for? The theological answer to this question was given by St. Augustine the Blessed. He argued with a Manichean who contended that Christians had "turned the idols into martyrs" and worshiped them instead of idols. St. Augustine responded, "It is true that Christians pay religious honor to the memory of the martyrs, both to excite us to imitate them and to obtain a share in their merits, and the assistance of their prayers."³⁴ In other words, for a Christian believer saints are role models and helpers. And it is obvious enough that certain saints are perceived more as helpers than as role models, and vice versa.

Why does the Church need new saints? We suppose that in these saints, images and ideas of sanctity are reconstituted, and the continuing gracefulness of the church and actuality of ancient dogmatic and moral truths are proven. To fulfill this function the profile of a new saint should be up-to-date, and it must be possible to understand the main idea of his or her Christian mission and to imitate the saint's religious deeds in the current social circumstances, or there must be maximal recognizability of his or her

social position and life experience. The former meaning creates a perfect role model, and the latter one represents the portrait of an ideal helper—a saint patron for every venerator who hopes that the saint will understand the nature of his or her problem. Ideally those two aspects of the saint's role coincide, but this is often impossible. Moreover, the prospects for the imitation of a saint's life are sometimes very problematic. June Macklin, who considered a similar problem in Latin American Catholicism, noted that according to church teachings, saints "were to be perceived both as model of and models for behavior, which introduced yet another tension into the system: these spiritual overachievers were both imitable, and inherently inimitable" (1988: 70). Indeed, almost any endeavor to imitate a saint's behavior appears to be too conceited for a Christian. One can find a clear example of this idea in the story "Father Serafim" by popular contemporary writer Maja Kucherskaya. She tells us about a woman who decided to imitate St. Xenia and intentionally lost her husband and home. Although the protagonist of the story thought that she acted like her favorite saint, in actuality, her behavior was selfish and irresponsible. By imitating St. Xenia, she turned into the antipode of the saint (Kucherskaya 2004: 220–24). This point leads us to reflect upon the reasons for and receptions of the canonization process.

When canonizing Xenia the Blessed, the initiators of the glorification tried to reconcile the functions of role models and protectors by including the moral message on the religious predestination of wives and widows into the veneration of the popular saint. But St. Xenia's life misfortunes turned out to be closer than the greatness of her Christian devotion to the majority of believers.

Does this mean that the Church did not achieve its aim? We think it does not. Xenia became much more popular. It is the early versions of her life that give to believers a wide potential for interpretation. She is a saint for the urban people; for St. Petersburg citizens in particular; for the aged and the poor; for the single and the separated; for people from lower classes; for women. She is the saint of irregular believers, and a dynamic channel for Church newcomers.

Notes

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1. Technically, 1988 was not yet post-Soviet, as the dissolution of the Soviet Union officially occurred in 1991.
2. The first two saints on the list are the Great Prince of Moscow Dimitry Donskoi, whose name is closely associated with a famous victory over Khan Mamai of the

- Tatar Golden Horde at the Kulikovo battlefield (1380) and with the political independence of Rus', and the greatest Old Russian icon painter Andrei Rublev. In the Soviet era, Rublev was considered a symbol of ancient Russian spirituality. It should be added that by Church tradition the sequence of the list of new saints formally depends on dates of their death.
3. Xenia is the first woman "holy fool" (or a fool for Christ) glorified by the Russian Orthodox Church. Fools for Christ with their peculiar ways of behavior constitute a special type of saints in Orthodoxy. They pretend to be insane to conceal their piety and divine abilities. As secret ascetics, holy fools can practice speaking in riddles and unconventional behavior to challenge accepted norms. For more about this type of saint, see Ivanov (2006). It also should be noted that Xenia was initially canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCA) in 1978. That canonically semi-autonomous Church was founded by Russian post-revolution immigrants as an alternative to the Russian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate in Soviet Russia. As an independent institution, ROCA canonized some persons and established their veneration. We will discuss St. Xenia's image in ROCA publications later in this chapter. In 2007, the Act of Canonical Unity between the Moscow Patriarchate and ROCA was signed in Moscow as a symbol of the reunion of both branches of the Russian Orthodox Church.
 4. In the Soviet period, secular modern people such as students of the Leningrad State University located in the same part of St. Petersburg as Xenia's chapel used to visit her grave before taking their exams.
 5. In Orthodox Christianity a hymn, dedicated to God, the Mother of God, a saint, or a holy event.
 6. For more details about publishing letters to Xenia in church publications as an advertising strategy by the Church, see Kormina and Shtyrkov (2008).
 7. On the history and functioning of Orthodox akathists, see Shevzov (2007).
 8. For a discussion of the self-identification of Soviet intelligentsia, see, for example, White (2000).
 9. The woman's name has been changed to protect her anonymity.
 10. The functioning of independent pilgrimage "agencies" and "services" are analyzed in more detail in Kormina 2010.
 11. For some authors, Xenia seems to be too independent. This can be a challenge for the regular Orthodox believer, who has said many times that obedience to a spiritual father is the main Christian virtue and an indispensable condition for salvation. From the early "traditional" variants of the account of her life, it could be concluded that it was Xenia's own decision to become a "holy fool." But, as Gippius argues, "No one can become a Holy Fool of one's own free will and wish. It is absolutely necessary to get a special blessing" (2008: 32). And Xenia's confessor and spiritual tutor, who allegedly gave her the blessing to become a Holy Fool, was found in the remote monastery in the Upper-Volga region: "There is an opinion that Xenia spent several years at the Alekseevskaya female cloister that had been founded by Theodor of Sanaxar" (Svyataya 2003; Kozlovskaya 2002: 31). St. Theodor was the spiritual tutor of that cloister and might have been a preceptor for Xenia, if one accepts that idea about Xenia's absence from St. Petersburg for several years to visit remote monasteries and receive spiritual instructions from monks.
 12. It should be said that the secrecy of the "holy fools" piety is commonly described in the relevant hagiography. See Ivanov (2006: 170–71) and Saward (1980: 16–20).

13. See <http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=interview&div=206> (accessed 2 November 2009).
14. Trofimov says about thirteen women were canonized for All-Church veneration (1993). In some works, the short list has been enlarged to include locally-venerated saints (Slovar 1862).
15. The information reflects the situation before mass canonization of "new martyrs" in the 2000s when the Church glorified more than 1,500 new saints.
16. Actually it was not a canonization in the proper sense. Yulianiya was a local saint for Murom town. In 1903 her name was included in a Church calendar of Orthodox saints (*Mesyatsslov Vostoka*) (Evgeni 1910).
17. See also Uspenskii (1982: 134–38).
18. On women and icon veneration, see Shevzov (2000: 616, n. 17); on female monastic communities see works by Brenda Meehan-Waters (1986, 1991); see also Belyakova and Belyakova (2001).
19. See Belyakova and Belyakova (2001); Posternak (2004); and Wagner (2007).
20. This motif is borrowed from the official account of the life of Xenia. Although she begged, she accepted only kopeck coins.
21. The response is dated 6 April 2007. See <http://www.stihi.ru/comments.html?2007/05/04-68> (accessed 13 March 2009). The author of the response, Valeria, who is also an amateur poet, changed gender from male to female some fifteen years ago (she is now in her mid 40s). Her narrative about meeting with Xenia looks like a natural expression of her femininity. She has her special reasons to venerate this saint of loneliness and social suffering because she knows very well what it means to be abandoned by society.
22. It should be mentioned here that the followers of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad who canonized Xenia in 1978 tend to stress her homelessness. The text of the church service which canonized her also reflects this ("Service to St. Xenia" 1978: 155).
23. Accessed 15 December 2008.
24. The attention to what is depicted on holy icons is a rather new phenomenon in Orthodox religious culture. As Sergey Shtyrkov's study about the veneration of icons by modern Russian peasants demonstrates, this type of believer often perceived the holy images as just sacred objects, and simply was not interested in who was painted on the old icons they called *bozhen'ka* ("a little God") and situated in the Red corners of their houses. The name, not the image, of this sacred object revealed its nature and function (e.g., the icon of the Mother of God, "The [Inflam-mable Bush," helped to extinguish or localize fire (Shtyrkov 2006). It should be said that contemporary urban believers definitely look at the icons they buy in church shops. It seems that the message about speciality of a particular saint now can be read from his or her image rather than from a biography or name.
25. The statement that Xenia's husband was a colonel occurs in every version of her life. We know just one author—Orthodox writer Nikolai Koniaev—who questions this fact. He hypothesizes that the figure of Andrei Petrov unites the traits of several historical personages (Konjaev 2003).
26. See the documentary *In the Name of Love: Xenia the Blessed of St. Petersburg*, made in 2007 (director Elena Plugatyreva) for the Russian TV channel Kultura ("Culture"). The text in the movie is recited by one of the most popular actors of St. Petersburg, Andrey Tolubeev (1945–2008).

27. This motif is repeated in the life story of a non-canonized venerated *staritsa* Matronushka-bosonozhka (barefooted) (1840s–1911), who also lived in St. Petersburg. According to one version of her biography, she became a “holy fool for Christ” after her husband’s death in the Russian–Turkish war (1877–78), in which she had served as a nurse. Possibly, this motif was borrowed from the accounts of the life of Xenia.
28. See http://zakonbozhii.ru/Zakon_Bozhii/Chast_1_O_vere_i_zhizni_hristianskoj/Zhitie_sv_Ksenii_Peterburgskoi/ (accessed 13 March 2009). The author of the project is Father Serafim Slobodsky.
29. See the documentary *In the Name of Love: Xenia the Blessed of St. Petersburg*.
30. The suicide rate in Russia has almost doubled since 1990 and is now one of the highest in the world; more than 80 percent of those who have committed suicide are men (Gilinsky and Rumiantseva 2004).
31. This is the title of one of the chapters in the book of letters sent by believers to Xenia the Blessed (Iakovleva 2006).
32. In a poem by Natalia Piskunova, Xenia exclaims, “And then I will put on his [Andrei’s] shroud and consequently his sins” (see <http://www.tropinka.orthodoxy.ru/zal/poezija/piskunov.htm> (accessed 20 June 2009)); Dmitri Bobyshev writes that “Blessed Xenia’s love ravished him from the somber shadow of Hell” (1981).
33. Translated, this passage reads: *Ksenia Blazhennaya, kak zhe ty terpela! / Ty za vsekh terpela gore i nuzhdu. / Ukrepi v terpenii, Matushka Xenia, / Pomogi mne vynesti tiazhkuyu bedu. Ksenia Blazhennaya, kak zhe ty ustala / Ty za vsekh ustala plakat’ i stradat’ / Ya v iznemozhenii, Matushka Xenia, / Bez tvoei molitvy mne ne ustojat’*.
34. Contra Faustum Manichæum XX, 21

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CHAPTER 10

Built with Gold or Tears?

Moral Discourses on Church Construction
and the Role of Entrepreneurial Donations

Tobias Köllner

Introduction

During the socialist period, many of Vladimir's¹ churches were destroyed, fell into decline, or were used for other purposes, such as radio stations or museums. Today, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is the most trusted institution in Russia (Dubin 2006: 84), and there exists a general tendency to restore former church buildings and to erect new ones in places where churches had been before the 1917 Russian Revolution. Although most people favor returning the former church buildings to the ROC, some voice reservations due to the fact that good museums will vanish, and that the newly established churches will be used by only a few parishioners.

The most serious problem the Church faces in the context of its reconstruction is the financing of building activities. According to the Russian Constitution, the state and the ROC are separated and no money can easily be directed to the Church. But since the presidency of Vladimir Putin, the official separation has become blurred, and the ROC is supported by the state in many ways. One way of supporting the ROC is to declare its church buildings as instances of architectural heritage, which enables the ROC to receive state funding for their reconstruction. Nevertheless, the ROC is still highly dependent on donations from private entrepreneurs. In particular, the erection of new church buildings requires substantial donations. In only a few instances have parishioners managed to carry out the restoration of a church building on their own without help from the diocese or from rich businesspeople. In such cases, contributions are made in the form of labor rather than money. The parishioners form a close group of people and many of them spend every free minute on the construction site helping to restore the church.

Charitable giving, labor contributions and donations to the ROC are often morally charged and carry moral meanings. For this reason I connect donations by businesspeople to the sphere of morality. Morality, as Jarrett