

The Confessor's Tongue for January 24, A. D. 2016

34th Sunday after Pentecost; St. Xenia of St. Petersburg, St. Xenia of Rome

In honor of St. Maximus the Confessor, whose tongue and right hand were cut off in an attempt by compromising authorities to silence his uncompromising confession of Christ's full humanity & divinity.

24 January: St. Xenia of St. Petersburg

St. Xenia lived during the eighteenth century, but little is known of her life or of her family. She passed most of her life in Petersburg during the reigns of the empresses Elizabeth and Catherine II.

Xenia Grigorievna Petrova was the wife of an army officer, Major Andrew Petrov. After the wedding, the couple lived in St Petersburg. St Xenia became a widow at the age of twenty-six when her husband suddenly died at a party. She grieved for the loss of her husband, and especially because he died without Confession or Holy Communion.

Once her earthly happiness ended, she did not look for it again. From that time forward, Xenia lost interest in the things of this world, and followed the difficult path of foolishness for the sake of Christ. The basis for this strange way of life is to be found in the first Epistle to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 1:18-24, 1 Cor. 2:14, 1 Cor. 3:18-19). The Lord strengthened her and helped her to bear sorrow and misfortune patiently for the next forty-five years.

She started wearing her husband's clothing, and insisted that she be addressed as "Andrew Feodorovich." She told people that it was she, and not her husband, who had died. In a certain sense, this was perfectly true. She abandoned her former way of life and experienced a spiritual rebirth. When she gave away her house and possessions to the poor, her relatives complained to the authorities. After speaking to Xenia, the officials were convinced that she was in her right mind and was entitled to dispose of her property as she saw fit. Soon she had nothing left for herself, so she wandered through the poor section of Petersburg with no place to lay her head. She refused all assistance from her relatives, happy to be free of worldly attachments.

When her late husband's red and green uniform wore out, she clothed herself in rags of those colors. After a while, Xenia left Petersburg for eight years. It is believed that she visited holy Elders and ascetics throughout Russia seeking instruction in the spiritual life. She may have visited St Theodore of Sanaxar (February 19), who had been a military man himself. His life changed dramatically when a young officer died at a drinking party. Perhaps this officer was St Xenia's husband. In any case, she knew St Theodore and profited from his instructions.

St Xenia eventually returned to the poor section of Petersburg, where she was mocked and insulted because of her strange behavior. When she did accept money from people it was only small amounts, which she used to help the poor. She spent her nights praying without sleep in a field outside the city. Prayer strengthened her, and in her heart's conversation with the Lord she found the support she needed on her difficult path.

When a new church was being built in the Smolensk cemetery, St Xenia brought bricks to the site. She did this in secret, during the night, so that no one would know.

Soon her great virtue and spiritual gifts began to be noticed. She prophesied future events affecting the citizens of Petersburg, and even the royal family. Against her will, she became known as someone pleasing to God, and nearly everyone loved her. They said, "Xenia does not belong to this world, she belongs to God." People regarded her visits to their homes or shops as a great blessing. St Xenia loved children, and mothers rejoiced when the childless widow would stand and pray over a baby's crib, or kiss a child. They believed that the blessed one's kiss would bring that child good fortune.

St Xenia lived about forty-five years after the death of her husband, and departed to the Lord at the age of seventy-one. The exact date and circumstances of her death are not known, but it probably took place at the end of the eighteenth century. She was buried in the Smolensk cemetery.

By the 1820s, people flocked to her grave to pray for her soul, and to ask her to intercede with God for them. So many visitors took earth from her grave that it had to be replaced every year. Later, a chapel was built over her grave.

Those who turn to St Xenia in prayer receive healing from illness, and deliverance from their afflictions. She is also known for helping people who seek jobs.

On Holy Fools

Svitlana Kobets

Iurodstvo (or holy foolishness for Christ's sake) is a peculiar form of Eastern Orthodox asceticism. This ascetic exploit is marked by the subversive behavior of its practitioners who feign madness in order to provide public with spiritual guidance and yet not be praised for their saintliness. Phenomenology of *iurodstvo* and its endorsement in hagiography reached their full development in the fifth-century Byzantium and then in the fourteenth-century Russia. A Medieval Russian *iurodivy* to a great degree resembles his Byzantine ancestor and displays all the attributes of the holy foolish paradigm: he feigns madness, goes around naked or half-naked, is homeless, talks in riddles, is eccentric, gives away whatever is given to him, is socially disruptive. On the other hand, he is a clairvoyant and a prophet, he performs miracles and, in most cases, only upon his death he is recognized as a saint.

The holy fool's exploit is that of secret sanctity, which above all promotes the non-ontological understanding that all of God's created world is a sacred place. By his feigned madness the holy fool opts to say that the lowliest of the lowliest can be not

the poor wretch that he appears to be, but a holy man and God's prophet. He shares his power and authority with all the weak, mocked, and despised thus symbolically destroying clear-cut distinctions between the irreconcilable for the profane mind opposites.

The Greek term descriptive of the ascetic exploit of foolishness in Christ is *salos* (pl. *saloi*), which means "mentally deranged." While many languages simply added the Greek *salos* to their vocabularies (e.g. Georgian, Latin), Russian term is its own. The term *iurodivy* or *urodivy*, derives from Russian *urod*, which means ugly, crippled, an individual with congenital defects. Other words that initially designated the fool in Christ are *bui*, *blazhennyi*, and *pokhab*. These three words used to reflect such different facets of the holy fool's phenomenology as aggression (*bui*), state of beatitude (*blazhennyi*), and explicit indecency (*pokhab*). Unlike *bui* and *pokhab*, *blazennyi* continues to be synonymous to *iurodivyi*. In modern Russian language *iurodivyi* has a meaning of an eccentric, a simpleton, someone who pretends to be a fool with a purpose to make his point, someone who displays unorthodox behavior and trespasses against social conventions.

In Russian Orthodoxy foolishness in Christ has long been a mode of popular religiosity. At the same time it is a theological category denoting one of the non-orthodox forms of Christian asceticism. The exploit of foolishness for Christ's sake belongs to *opera superagotoria* or is an optional ascetic exploit. It is regarded as the most difficult and controversial of all ascetic practices. Russian Church canonized about thirty-six of its holy fools and many more have been venerated locally. Unlike other ascetics the fool in Christ does not renounce the profane world. He feigns madness and instead of going into hermetic or monastic seclusion becomes a part of secular life.

The figure of a paradigmatic *iurodivy* belongs to the fourteenth-sixteenth centuries, the heyday of Russian foolishness in Christ. Then *iurodivy* amounts to one of Russia's most popular spectacles and saints. He is to be encountered on the street, market place, and church steps where he is invariably surrounded by the crowd of onlookers. He goes around naked and barefoot even in the depth of winter. He wears chains and other iron objects. This extravagant attire and wild look allow the public to identify him as both an ascetic and a madman. His behavior is offensive and bizarre. By renouncing all communal norms and by continuously displaying offensive, controversial behaviors, the *iurodivy* makes himself a spectacle. The holy fool would disrupt church services and conspicuously break Lent. He would confront the highest authorities, including the Tsar, insult his audience, and continuously trespass against social regulations and norms of decency. At the same time he would utter prophecies, perform miracles and feats feasible uniquely for saints. While he makes his offensive and eccentric behaviors conspicuous, he keeps his saintly deeds secret from the public. According to holy foolish hagiographies, whenever

someone finds out about holy fool's saintliness and hidden ascetic feat, the holy fool makes this person keep his secret. Only after the holy fool's demise his saintliness can be revealed to the public. The holy fool's uninterrupted performance is designed to provoke people's meditation on issues that ultimately lead to an understanding of the divine. Yet only the righteous ones see the *iurodivy* as God's messenger. For the sinners he is just a madman and therefore a source of amusement and an underdog. They violently react to the *iurodivy's* harsh criticism, invariably beating and chasing him away. The permanency of this public reaction testifies to the fact that profane minds are not capable of grasping the divine truth.

The origins of the phenomenon of saintly madness can be traced back to Jewish prophets and later to the desert-dwellers of Syria and Egypt. While delivering the divine message Jewish prophets displayed outrageous and bizarre actions. The prophet's audience was aware of his status as the God's herald and attempted to discern the meaning of his message. Yet because of the abundance of false prophets and madmen, the prophet's message would be repeatedly neglected and the messenger himself would be chased away.

In the Christian context the phenomenology of saintly madness received a new span of life as well as new semantics. In the first century AD Apostle Paul proclaimed that "the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God" (1 Cor. 1:19), and defined Christ's apostles as fools for Christ's sake. The Apostle Paul not only coined the term 'fool for Christ's sake', but also identified Jesus Christ as the initiator of the holy foolish paradigm. As the Pauline texts formed a part of Apostle, one of the most popular and widely circulated books in Russia, they exercised a continuous influence on Russian Orthodox believers.

The theme of God's folly and foolishness for Christ's sake is prominent in the New Testament. Gospels present Passion as the sum-composite of humiliation, mockery, derision and powerlessness (Matt. 27:29, 39, Mark 15:29-32, Luke 23:35-39). The holy fool's behavioral complex testifies to his imitation of Christ as he constantly seeks and inevitably finds humiliation, scorn, and physical suffering. The holy fool accepts this situation with unconditional humility. Furthermore, according to the Christian commandment to love one's enemies "and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44), the holy fool spends his nights praying for those who abused him during the day. Because of his non-allegiance to the profane values the holy fool, like Christ himself, is a carrier of the apocalyptic message. Similarly to Christ he reconciles in himself the divine and the profane. The holy fool's saintly status, just like that of Christ, is recognized only after his death. And, like Christ's, the holy fool's divine wisdom is always taken for folly.

In the first centuries of Christianity the notion of foolishness in Christ received close attention of

Church Fathers who championed the importance for a Christian of not polluting his mind by profane notions and values. The wisdom of the world was viewed as alienating one from God and therefore was deemed sinful and erroneous. The real wisdom was regarded only the one coming from God. Notwithstanding the fact that the Church Fathers constantly referred to apostles as 'idiots and simpletons,' they drew a clear distinction between pathological madness and God-inspired folly. Only the latter was viewed as exhibiting reason unpolluted by a priori notions, which alone could be susceptible to the teachings of Christ. One of the Byzantine theologians who were most influential in Russia, Simeon the New Theologian (d. 1032, commemorated March 12, October 12) maintained that an ideal Christian is a simple in heart and mind "uneducated man."

If the Jewish prophet exhibits a behavioral paradigm similar to that of the fool in Christ, holy men of Syria and Egypt are among his direct predecessors. Inspired by Christian teachings, these ascetics engaged in exploits that were aiming at self-effacement and elimination of their own will. They practiced traditional Christian virtues of chastity, humility, and obedience in an untraditional way. By often behaving in an ostensibly grotesque and ludicrous manner they meant to hide their ascetic achievements. Thereby they attempted to eliminate the possibility of pride. Early Christian hagiographies, extensively exploited the theme of subversive sanctity. These stories question the value of Christian obedience and, by extension, dogma. Moreover, they endorse such features of early Christian asceticism as secret sanctity, paradoxes of unconditional devotion, simulation of madness and sinfulness, challenge to the conventional notions of sin and virtue, and others. These features of unconventional subversive holiness came to constitute an integral part of the holy fool's behavioral paradigm.

The first paradigmatic adumbration of saintly folly found expression in the Life of Simeon of Emesa, which was written in the seventh century by Leontius of Napolis (d. 668). Simeon becomes a *salos* after many years of practicing other forms of asceticism. He relocates from the desert to the city where he gains for himself a reputation of a madman and a fool. He runs around naked, relieves himself in public, lives in the streets, washes in a women's bathhouse, and keeps the company of prostitutes. On the other hand, he performs miracles, acts as an exorcist, and exhibits the gift of prophesy and clairvoyance. He continues being an ascetic, but he does not let people know about his vocation. He prays and weeps only at night so that no one can see him. People learn about his saintliness only after his death. Simeon's Life served as a model to the hagiographer of St. Andrew of Constantinople, Nikephoros (10th c.). The Life of St. Andrew the Fool was translated into Old Russian as early as the twelfth century. It consequently became one of the most popular and widely emulated hagiographies. It supplied Russian Orthodox

tradition with one of its most popular holidays, Pokrov (Transfiguration) (October 1).

Byzantine hagiographic texts presenting Lives of holy fools were among the first samples of canonical literature transplanted to Russian soil. The Lives of such *saloi* as Isidora the Fool in Christ (4th c.), Serapion the Sindonite (d. 350), Simeon of Emesa (6th c.), and Andrew of Constantinople (6th c.) were available in Slavonic translations as early as thirteenth century. Subsequently these holy fools were included in Russian pantheon of saints.

Russian holy fools were not long in coming. Already in the eleventh century Kievan Rus had its first holy fool, St. Isaac the Recluse (or the Cave-Dweller) of Kiev Cave Monastery (d. 1090). St. Avraamii of Smolensk (d.ca. 1220) was the next. The first paradigmatic holy foolish Life was devoted to Procopius of Ustiug (d. 1302) It says that he was "of the Western countries, of the Latin language, of the German land." He arrived to Novgorod as a foreign merchant but loved Orthodox Christianity so much that he decided not only to convert but also to embark on the ascetic exploit of saintly folly, becoming a fool in Christ. Procopius's Life was modeled after that of St. Andrew from where the Russian hagiographer borrowed not only paradigmatic elements of holy foolish asceticism but also many scenes and events. The Life of Procopius is one among many Lives that offer Russian Christians the example of holy foolish piety by copying their Byzantine models. There were many more holy fools to come: Theodore of Novgorod (d. 1392), Nicholai "Kochanov" (Cabbage-Head) of Novgorod (d. 1392), Maxim of Moscow (d. 1433), Michail of Klop Monastery (d. 1453), Yury of Shenkursk (d. 1465), Isidor "Tverdislov" (Firm-Word) of Rostov (d. 1474), Ioann of Ustiug (d. 1494), Galaction of Therapont Monastery (d. 1506), Lawrence of Kaluga (d. 1515), Jacob of Borovichi (d. 1540), Basil the Blessed of Moscow (d. 1552), Arseny of Novgorod (d. 1572), Nicholai "Salos" of Pskov (d. 1576), Ioann "Vlasatyi" (The Hairy One) of Rostov (d. 1581), Simon of Iurevets (d. 1584), Ioann "Bol'shoi Kolpak" (Big-Cap) of Moscow (d. 1589), Kiprian of Suzdal' (d. 1622), Procopy of Viatka (d. 1627), Maxim of Tot'ma (d. 1650), Andrew of Tot'ma (d. 1673). These holy fools received conventional holy foolish Lives that were included in numerous hagiographic collections and were recited and sung during the church services. Subsequently these fools in Christ were canonized by the Russian Church Cathedrals.

The Muscovite period, especially fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, yielded the biggest number of holy fools. During the canonization processes of 1547-1549 holy fools were definitely favored for canonization. By the end of the seventeenth century there were twenty-three canonized fools for Christ's sake. Yet the canonized holy fools constitute just an insignificant part of the total number of Russian fools in Christ. The list of holy fools who were locally

revered without being canonized and of those who were canonized only locally is endless.

The status of fools for Christ's sake within Russian Orthodox Church has changed throughout history. The sixteenth century amounts to the Golden Age of *iurodstvo*. At that time foolishness in Christ was promoted and sponsored by the Church. The manifest veneration and support of the holy fool by the Church comes to an end when the Byzantine structure of the Russian state is displaced in favor of the European pattern. This historical change started with the Church reforms of Patriarch Nikon (1605-1681) and was finalized by the reforms of Peter the Great (1668-1725), who subdued the Church to the State.

The modernization of Russia went parallel with the severe persecution of fools for Christ's sake, whose paradoxical figure came to be singled out as subversive, and whose saintliness had been declared false. Regulations of 1646 and 1731 proscribed holy fools from entering places of worship. In the seventeenth century holy fools took the side of the schismatics fiercely opposing Nikon's reforms. Many of them became martyrs. Peter the Great and his successors initiated legislation that outlawed holy foolishness and other forms of non-orthodox piety declaring them a threat to public order. After 1762, madmen were no longer banished to the monasteries. Starting with 1766 according to Ukaz No. 12754 by Catherine the Great (1729-1796), the lunatics became the domain of police. In the eighteenth century there appeared the first lunatic asylums where holy fools could be detained along with conventional madmen.

Notwithstanding severe repression foolishness in Christ survived. The eighteenth century produced one of the most popular miracle workers, Xenia of St. Petersburg, the Holy Fool in Christ who was canonized in 1978 by the Russian Church in exile and later on by the all-Russian Cathedral of 1988. In the nineteenth century the abundance of holy fools was compared to an epidemic. This time witnessed appearance of first Russian theological works either discussing or exclusively devoted to holy foolishness. Many Medieval holy foolish vitae were rewritten so as to meet the classical Byzantine pattern; many a vitae were composed anew. Influence of holy fools on the society was such that they would become real celebrities and seers. For example, the mental institution to which was committed Ivan Iakovlevich Koreisha (1780-1861), became the genuine place of pilgrimages. Other important nineteenth-century fools in Christ are Pelagia Ivanovna Serebrenikova (1809-1884) and Kievan monastic fool in Christ Feofil (1788-1853). None of these holy fools were canonized, yet their graves continue to be places of attraction for the pious.

If compared to the classical Byzantine paradigm, phenomenology of the nineteenth century *iurodivyi* exhibits not only continuity but also numerous modifications. Thus, in the nineteenth century the holy fool is considered a saint even as he lives,

therefore mocking of his figure comes to be considered a sin. Many of *iurodivye's* extrinsic attributes also change considerably. They are no longer naked. Though they could be half-naked and barefoot, could wear usual paraphernalia of the type (chains and other metal objects), they could also be dressed as ordinary people. Not all of them were aggressive and some were even meek. Nor were the nineteenth century holy fools necessarily perpetual wanderers. Many of them had homes, some lived in rooms supplied by their benefactors, some lived in monasteries or were committed to mental institutions. A major confusion and most of the ambiguities in the assessment of the nineteenth-century holy foolish phenomenology result from the fact that the holy fool was venerated concurrently with genuinely mad. Indeed, veneration of cripples and lunatics was common. The "poor in spirit," because of being dissociated from mundane concerns, had in popular understanding a connection with the sacred realm. Madness was regarded the source of their power. The twentieth century brought forward many holy fools who perished in the Gulag and who were persecuted by the Soviet authorities. Their Lives are documented in numerous hagiographic and historical accounts.

The distinguishing characteristic of Russian *iurodstvo* is its global character. When compared to its Byzantine model Russian *iurodstvo* is clearly greater in scope. If in Byzantium holy foolishness is a vocation of the chosen few, in Russia we find an overwhelming number of holy fools, who, canonized or not, were venerated not only after their death but even as they lived. Later in history foolishness in Christ was no longer confined to religious domain but became thoroughly secularized. If Byzantine holy fools were mostly monks and ascetics, then Russian holy fools were predominantly lay people and urban dwellers. As holy foolishness developed and changed it became a part of Russian religious consciousness, and even influenced behavioral pattern of both secular and ecclesiastical individuals among whom such figures as Ivan the Terrible, Archpriest Avvakum, Rozanov and Leo Tolstoy are just a few. Phenomenology of foolishness in Christ has continuously provided material for the country's aesthetic self-expression. <http://www.slavdom.com/index.php?id=35>

Upcoming Events 2015-16

- 2 February: Meeting of the Lord in the Temple
- 13 March: Forgiveness Vespers, 6:00 p.m.
- 14-19 March: Clean Week: Plan now to set aside as much of this week as possible for prayer.
- 1 May Pascha

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!