

Ekaterina Sienskaya Abrikosova (1892—1936) : A Dominican Uniate Foundress in the Old Russia

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Vladimir Vladimirovič Abrikosov, the future husband and cousin of the central personality of this article, was born on 22 October 1880.¹ When his schooling was finished, he entered the faculty of History and Philology of Moscow University, where he wrote a dissertation on the causes of the Western Reformation. In years to come he would deplore the manner of his historical studies as formalistic, lacking in attentiveness to history's significance. A constellation of attitudes by no means uncommon among educated Russians liberal families of the period. In 1904 Abrikosov married a cousin two years his junior. Anna Ivanovna Abrikosova was born on 23 January 1882. She attended the first *gimnaziya* (high school) to be opened in Moscow for the education of girls, and in 1899 won a scholarship to Girton College Cambridge. There she read history, assiduously, earning from her contemporaries the nickname 'Deadly Earnest'. She was a gifted linguist with an excellent grasp of English, French, German and Italian, as well as considerable knowledge of Greek and Latin.

The household of the newly-weds was free-thinking. God was neither affirmed nor denied. Politically they supported the current which would lead to the constitutional Revolution of 1905. Their inherited wealth enabled them to live a carefree life, devoted principally to European travel and the arts. Thus, with the exception of a single month in 1905, they spent the entire period from 1904 to 1910 in France, Italy and Switzerland. Their encounters with Western Catholicism in its artistic and historic monuments precipitated in Anna Ivanovna a personal crisis of a religious kind. Probably at the suggestion of her friend Princess Maria Mikhailovna Volkonskaya, whose family, unable to maintain their Russian domicile after their conversion to Catholicism, now lived in Rome, she discovered the mystical *Dialogue* of the fourteenth century Dominican tertiary Catherine of Siena. She was especially struck by a phrase in its prologue: *virilmente cognoscere e sequitare la verità*, virilely to know and follow the truth'.²

In December 1908, Anna Ivanovna was received into the Catholic communion in Paris by the abbé Maurice Rivière. Though she wished to join the Latin rite, Rivière pointed out, correctly, that Canon Law

allowed her to worship in that rite but she would belong to that of the Byzantine-Slavs. After a year in Rome studying theology with her husband, he too was received into the Catholic communion at the Madeleine in Paris in November 1909. In the fervour of their new-found faith, Anna proposed that she become a Dominican sister and her husband be ordained in some monastic or religious Order. As this plan could only be carried out, as things stood, in the Latin Church they appealed to Pope Pius X for permission to withdraw from the Byzantine rite, which in any case, as Catholics they had never experienced. The pope, faithful to the spirit of the canons, turned down their request. Shortly afterwards they returned to Russia, making their home in their apartment in the newly-constructed 'Jerusalem Court', accommodation which, later on, was to prove large enough to house a religious community of twenty. There in the winter of 1910 they entertained a certain Leonid Fedorov, still a seminarian but the future Exarch of a Russian-rite Catholic Church. Fedorov was born in St Petersburg on 4 November 1879, his widowed mother ran a restaurant much frequented by Vladimir Solov'ev, the religious philosopher. It was through conversations with Solov'ev that Fedorov began to take his faith more seriously and, after high school, he entered the St Petersburg Ecclesiastical Academy. Solov'ev's apocalyptic ecclesiological speculations included dreams of co-operation between the Tsar, as Christ's representative in his kingly office, and the Pope, his representative in the priestly office. Association with him unsettled Fedorov's Orthodoxy. By 1902 he had resolved to become a Catholic, something it was only politic to do abroad since such an action was technically (before 1905) a civil offence. However, the Polish pastor of the Latin parish of SS Peter and Paul was ready to accompany the twenty-two year old Fedorov across the frontier, with a view to locating, in Austria-Hungary, some kind of ecclesiastical bourse which might enable him to continue his studies for the priesthood in a Catholic context.

They approached the controversial Uniate Archbishop of Lvov in Austrian-ruled Galicia, Andrey Szeptycky (1865—1944).³ Szeptycky's own aristocratic family, like many others in the Hapsburg Ukraine, had become Latin-rite, but Szeptycky was intent on reviving for his people the full patrimony of the Byzantine church. His wide-ranging activities as bishop extended to the re-invigoration of the Liturgy and Church music, the rescue of historic objects, the founding of monasteries, and a pastoral outreach whose political implications soon gained him the displeasure of the governments in Petersburg and Vienna. In Petersburg they feared an autonomous movement in southern Russia, in Vienna the siren voices of pan-Slavism. Fedorov was warmly welcomed by Archbishop Szeptycky who provided him with a recommendation to take to Rome, where he became a Catholic. Leo XIII sent him to the newly-founded seminary of Anagni, although later Fedorov moved into Rome. Threatened eventually with the

withholding of his re-entry permit to Russia should he take Orders. Fedorov repaired in 1907 to the Swiss university city of Fribourg, where he passed himself off as an Italo-American.

Meanwhile, in Petersburg the liberalisation of the religious legislation of the empire which followed on the constitutional settlement of 1905 was having its effect. A disciple of Princess Volkonsky's mother, Natalya Sergeivna Utčakova, a high-society *grande dame*, conceived the idea of founding a Russian-rite Catholic parish in the capital. Although Uniate Catholicism remained illegal, the Minister of the Interior and President of the Council of Ministers, Pyotr Stoŷpin, promised to turn a blind eye to her schemes. A chapel was constructed and a chaplain found, Alexis Zertčaninov, a convert Orthodox priest. By 1909 all was ready. Canonically, the parish required an episcopal overseer, and Andrey Szepticky considered himself well qualified to be that person. It soon became clear that strong leadership was needed if the Petersburg experiment was to survive and extend itself.

In 1912, Fedorov, now an ordained monk, arrived back in Petersburg to find an uncertain situation. He had come directly from one of Szepticky's monastic foundations, Kameniza, in Bosnia. There he had acquired the conviction that whereas, to Western Catholics, an Oriental rite was simply a matter of worshipping in another language, saying different prayers and using different gestures, for the East, dogma and liturgy were one. Faith and rite made up together a seamless garment. Fedorov was, therefore, much relieved, when the Holy See finally directed that the new parish's worship should not differ from that of the Synodal Church of Russia itself: *nec plus, nec minus, nec aliter*, as the Roman letter briskly put it. Not that the parish simply identified the Christian life with Christian worship; by 1913 it was animating an ambitious movement of assistance to the poor of the capital, and had also started a theological magazine, *Slovo Istiny* (The Word of Truth). By this date it claimed in the vicinity of Petersburg some seven hundred souls.

Meanwhile, during the course of 1911, the Abrikosovs had developed what might be termed an apostolate of the *soirée*. Seated round the samovar, the couple provided for their interested acquaintances an entire theological formation in miniature. Their materials were mostly Western, but, little by little, they gravitated towards the idea of opening a chapel of the Russian rite. Not that this implied any diminution of respect for the Dominican Order. On the contrary, in the years 1911–1912 they sought profession as lay Dominicans in the tertiary chapter based at the Muscovite church of St Louis des Français. On aggregation to the chapter, Anna Ivanovna took the additional name Ekaterina Sienskaya, 'Catherine the Sienese'. At the same time they made a private vow of permanent continence within marriage, and drastically simplified their living arrangements. In the University milieu to which most visitors to the house belonged, a number of women students sought reception into the Catholic Church. Their families rarely approved. Anna Ivanovna took them under

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her roof. With bedrooms in 'Jerusalem Court', and inducted as Dominican tertiaries, it was among this group, that, over the years 1913 to 1917, the making of a full conventual sisterhood was gradually prepared.

The outbreak of the War in August 1914 did not, however, leave everyone's life quite so unchanged. Father Leonid was promptly deported to Tobolsk in Siberia. However, with the liberal Revolution of March 1917, all restrictions on religious liberty were finally lifted, and Fedorov was unconditionally set free. Anna Ivanovna now put her plan into full operation. She would have a fully-fledged conventual priory of Dominican women, devoted to the intellectual apostolate, in the setting of a Byzantine liturgical life in the Russian tradition; the identity of the prioress was not in doubt. On the feast of St Dominic, 1917, the lady of the house became *Mother* Ekaterina Sienskaya, with her erstwhile fellow-tertiaries now her religious subjects. The question of a Russian-rite chaplain had so far proved intractable, but with the announcement by Szepticky of a forthcoming visit to Petrograd, she saw her opportunity. She bundled her husband onto the train, and on the Sunday of All Saints metropolitan Szepticky raised him to the priesthood. Szepticky then proceeded to name Leonid Fedorov 'Exarch of the Greek-Catholic Church of Russia'. Summoned from exile in Tobolsk, Fedorov arrived in Petrograd on Holy Saturday 1917, being received with full honours by A.V. Kartashev, the last Procurator of the Holy Synod. The provisional government undertook to provide stipends for the exarchate's seven clergy. More important to the Abrikosovs was the fact that their activity was now public and officially recognised both by Church and State law. In this context it was vital for the future that their aims and ideals should coincide as completely as possible with those of the new Exarch.

Fedorov's overall objective was the corporate reconciliation of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches via that of their respective hierarchies. The mission of his little community was to be one of witness. Using a term from Scholastic philosophy he called it the 'exemplary cause' of reunion.⁴ Canon 52 of the Exarchate's constitution explicitly forbade priests in their preaching to enter upon controversial matter. They were simply to set forth Catholic doctrine in a positive frame of mind. This reflected the spirit of the Abrikosovs who had embraced Catholicism as agnostics engaged on a spiritual search, and not out of any dogmatic disagreement with Orthodoxy. In retrospect a little more awareness about certain deficiencies in the pre-Revolutionary Russian church might have better prepared them for the approaching débâcle.⁵ In his 1974 'Letter to the Third Sobor of the Russian Orthodox Church outside Russia', Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote: '... the condition of the Russian Church *was one of the chief reasons why the revolutionary events were irreversible*'.⁶ (The emphasis is in Solzhenitsyn's original.)

During the first years of Bolshevik rule the unique experiment which Mother Ekaterina had created endured more or less unscathed. The day-to-day context of the sisters' work consisted of an intense liturgical and

studious existence. Their worship was almost entirely Byzantine. They did, however, use the Rosary and sang the Marian antiphon, *Salve Regina*, to the Dominican tone as well as celebrating the memory of a number of, mainly Dominican, western saints. Their music was of the somewhat operatic kind favoured in the Russian Church from the nineteenth century onwards; a musician from the Moscow Opera House took their choir practices. Their library was meant to serve not only the nuns but also the needs of the parish. They added to it bound typescripts of their own, translations of Western spiritual books considered by them closest in ethos to Russian piety. With assistance from selected layfolk, they provided for young people an entire third-level education, ranging from mathematics, through the study of Russian history, to that of Eastern monasticism, intending thereby to counteract the influence of the now Communist University system. They taught catechism classes, clandestinely after the official banning of religious education for those under eighteen. They also worked in kindergartens until this too was terminated by the State in 1922.

Mother Ekaterina herself was an imposing figure with whom other strong personalities found co-operation less than easy. In relations with others she avoided sentiment and familiarity. She expressed herself briefly and always to the point. For the sake of recollection and study she insisted on the meticulous observance of silence. In a word she was glacial. This, however, was not entirely a matter of personal temperament. Her two main concerns in governing her community were: first, a striving through *asceticism* and prayer for perfect discipleship, and secondly, a concentration on the community's goal so thorough that it would shut out everything irrelevant to that purpose. With Mother Ekaterina the decks were always stripped.

An impression of a certain putitan authoritarianism might account for the adverse criticism she and her sisters endured. The neighbouring Polish clergy referred to her as 'the Russian pope-ess'; to a number of the Moscow orthodox her community was known as the 'Abrikosovian sectarianettes'. The reservations of the Polish clergy require further comment. With the creation of the Exarchate, Mother Ekaterina had committed herself wholeheartedly to the restoration of communion between the Orthodox church of Russia and the see of Rome. In this new context she turned abruptly against the Latin rite which she had once petitioned a pope to let her enter. Her opposition to the Polish clergy was intensified by the outbreak of war between Russia and Poland in 1920. Where Polish churchmen in Russia were concerned, she did not mince her words:

Hostility, narrow, provincialism, together with an inborn hatred of the Eastern rite and an absurd desire to maintain a leading role in the Catholic Church of Russia, as well as the alien fantasy of latinising the Russian people.⁷

Mother Ekaterina would tolerate in Russia no Latin missionaries or Orders, unless they went over to the Eastern rite. She would accept no

Latin bishops, but only the Exarch. She would let no Latin churchman administer the funds of the Pontifical Aid programme launched by Pius XI in the wake of the Civil War.⁸ The Polish presence in Russia she stigmatised as a 'colonial Church'. And as to the idea of a Russian-speaking Latin rite she wrote it off in a single English word: 'nonsense'. A painful contrast is presented by her rather productive early relations with the Communists. 'What an interesting and enchanting personality your little mother is', exclaimed an ideological re-education officer to one of the sisters. 'It is just a shame that she isn't a Communist!'⁹ She also enjoyed excellent relations with many of the Orthodox clergy, as indeed did the Exarch himself.¹⁰ In 1919, the Orthodox metropolitan Benjamin of Petrograd, together with the Exarch, made a joint protest against Bolshevik attacks on the Church, and they further projected a common course of apologetics to counter atheistic propaganda. When in June 1922, after the house-arrest of the patriarch Tikhon, a presentation was arranged for him on his name-day as a demonstration of solidarity. Father Vladimir was also invited to take part, not least to compensate for the absence of the many Orthodox clergy who had gone over to the collaborationist body known as the 'living Church'. In her correspondence, which mentions scores of Orthodox ecclesiastics, never once does she speak of any of them with acerbity.

At the end of the summer of 1922, Father Vladimir was expelled from the Soviet Union along with a distinguished company of Orthodox philosophers and theologians—Berdyayev, Frank, Bulgakov, Lossky. He lived on in France well into his eighties, dying at Meudon, outside Paris in 1966. In his absence, and in the face of the growing persecution inflicted on Orthodoxy, Mother Ekaterina's sympathy for the Russian church became noticeably stronger. She viewed with mounting concern the development of an anti-hierarchical current, the progress of protestant sectarianism, and above all, the speedy advance of unbelief, even among her children. Her nights were haunted by the spectre of a new generation formed solely on Communist teaching. Called on to comfort her sisters and the parishioners, she herself felt the acute loneliness of separation from her husband. Financially the community depended on assistance from the Pontifical Mission. To begin with, she had deplored the entrusting of this programme to, of all people, an American Jesuit. 'Do they realise (she wrote) the fear and revulsion here for Jesuits? ... This ... Order cannot enter Russia. Its arrival will be the ruination of all our work.'¹¹ However, she soon came to appreciate the worth of the young Bostonian, Edmund Walsh, and he hers. But, her initial reaction was thus far correct: the peremptory expulsion of the Mission by the Soviet authorities as a bourgeois-clerical ploy signalled the coming storm which would indeed carry her work away.¹²

In February 1923 the Exarch was arrested and condemned to ten years' imprisonment, at first in the relatively mild setting of the Sokolniki prison, and then in the much more severe Lefort prison outside Moscow.

In November of the same year, Mother Ekaterina was arrested with eight other sisters, and placed in the dreaded Lubjanka prison, deprived of all human contact, in a windowless cell, with a permanently burning electric light. After four months the sisters were transferred to the Butyrskii prison, where they could enjoy a degree of mutual contact. There they partially re-created their religious life, singing the Offices from memory, in low voices. On 30 April, St Catherine's day, three sisters made profession into her hands. In May they heard of their trial, conducted *in absentia*, and also of their sentencing under articles 61 and 62 of the Soviet penal code. These articles covered any relations of advantage with the international bourgeoisie, together with the organisation of sedition, armed uprising and espionage. Mother Ekaterina was convicted on four heads: —illegal diplomatic correspondence with foreigners; —relations with the Pontifical Aid Mission and the receiving of its monies; —maintaining an illegal school, and membership of a religious community whose existence was contrary to the statutes of the Soviet State. The sentence was deportation to Siberia.

The prison regime was harsh enough to take its toll on her physical health, and her activities were hampered by months of illness at a time. Despite her difficulties, she managed to gather information about the whereabouts of the other sisters, and resumed her spiritual motherhood by correspondence. She taught reading and writing to those of her fellow prisoners who were illiterate, taking them through Pushkin, Gogol and Tolstoy. They repaid her by sending in fruit to improve her diet and flowers for her cell from their work in the fields. The prison authorities commented on the dignity of her bearing and the condition of her cell: more like a court lady than a prisoner.

In this prison life, her spiritual personality seems to have attained its full flowering. At the end of 1929 she was transferred to Yaroslavl, where she would remain until shortly before her death. Her correspondence ceased, probably from fear of drawing down suspicion on the addresses. Ironically, she was thrown together with a Polish prelate, Teofil Skalski, apostolic administrator of the Latin diocese of Žitomir, but all anti-Polonism had drained out of her. He wrote later of her 'neat, aesthetic and even festal appearance', and her 'complete simplicity and dignity'.¹³ She taught the other inmates the Psalms, and the use of the English language, and copied out newspaper articles she thought important.

Late in 1931 she developed cancer of the breast. She was operated on in the prison hospital of the Butyrskii, but without much hope of success. On account of her serious condition she was now released, though under a prohibition order on residence in the six largest Russian cities, together with the seaports. She was, however, permitted visits of ten days' length to Moscow, and the final testimonies to her come from these excursions. She remained under surveillance, and, at a meeting with women students in a friend's house, was once again arrested in August 1932. Charged with the dissemination of religious propaganda, she was sent back to Yaroslavl, but

to an isolation cell. Her health deteriorated. In the course of 1935 the cancer reached her face. In the spring of 1936 she was brought back to the Butyrskii hospital, where she died on 23 July. Four days later her body was cremated and her ashes interred at a place unknown. No priest prayed; no friend was present. The Exarch was already dead. Having served eight years of his sentence, mostly in the Solovki islands in the White Sea, he had been released on condition that he remained in northern Siberia where he died in March 1935. The fate of only one other member of Mother Ekaterina's community is certainly known.

Although Anna Ivanovna's career was marked by human frailty, it is not entirely unworthy of a mention in the Church's history. Though she was in high degree a self-willed, headstrong and even impulsive woman, she was also deeply religious. Her courage, which existed finally in the mode of sacrifice, her love for the Church, and her concern for her fellow human beings were palpable. Her boundless energy and somewhat domineering temperament were pitfalls—yet they were also presuppositions for the success of the enterprise she undertook. Whereas there were many sisterhoods devoted to social and charitable works in the Russian Orthodoxy of the nineteenth century, it would appear there was none consecrated to the intellectual apostolate which she made her own. At the same time, she was attempting an experiment in ecumenism, the living out of the way of life of an Order of the Latin middle ages within the context of an Eastern church, preserving that Order's own ethos and elements of its devotional life, while transplanting these to the setting of the Byzantine-Slav Liturgy and its spiritual world. That, as the child of a liberal and even secularised milieu who had found her way to Christianity through Western Catholicism this required of her a further education in Eastern Orthodoxy itself only added to the magnitude of her self-set task.

We know that many Orthodox view with profound suspicion all attempts at Uniatism no matter the circumstances. Yet not all of Mother Ekaterina's Orthodox contemporaries saw matters in this light. Indeed, the Patriarch of Moscow saw fit to bless her work. No doubt the menace of the Bolshevik persecution of the churches drew them together. It is a Christian truth of wide application that out of suffering, borne in an evangelical spirit, does the desert bloom. The suffering which both purified and warmed Mother Ekaterina's heart may also provide a valuable education of feeling for those involved in the ecumenical task today.

1 Most of the biographical information about the Abrikosovs found in this article derives from A.K. Eszer, O.P., 'Ekaterina Sienskaja (Anna I.) Abrikosova und die Gemeinschaft der Schwestern des III. Ordens vom heiligen Dominikus zu Moskau', *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum XL* (1970), pp. 277—373. Cited below as ESA

2 K. Foster, O.P., and M.J. Roynane, O.P. (eds.), *I, Catherine. Selected Writings of St Catherine of Siena* (London 1980), p. 281.

3 For his life up to 1920, see C. Korolevsky, *Le métropolitain André Szeptickij*

- (Grottaferrata 1921); a perceptive overview is D. Attwater. 'Andrew Szepticky, Father Metropolitan', *Blackfriars* (February 1948), pp. 53–59.
- 4 P. Mailloux, S.J., *Entre Rome et Moscou: L'Exarque Léonidé Féodoroff*, Brussels, 1966) p. 84.
- 5 T.G. Stavrou and R.L. Nichols (eds.), *Russian Orthodoxy under the Old Régime* (Minneapolis 1978); and more specifically on the attempts at reform, A.A. Bogolepov, 'Church Reform in Russia 1905–1918', *Saint Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly* 10 (1966), pp. 12–66; J.W. Cunningham, *A Vanquished Hope. The Movement for Church Renewal in Russia 1905–1906* (Crestwood, New York 1981).
- 6 The complete text in *Eastern Churches Review* VII. 1 (1975), pp. 40–65.
- 7 Cited ESA, p. 310.
- 8 On this see H.J. Stehle, *Die Ostpolitik des Vatikans 1917–1975* (Munich 1975), ch. 1.
- 9 Cited ESA, p. 313.
- 10 For a fuller account of the couple's ecumenical activities, on the Catholic side definitely pioneering for their period, see *ibid.*, pp. 336–338.
- 11 Cited P. Mailloux, S.J., *Entre Rome et Moscou: l'Exarque Léonide Féodoroff*, *op. cit.*, pp. 101–102.
- 12 For the wider process, see J. Zatko, *Descent into Darkness. The Destruction of the Roman Catholic Church in Russia, 1917–1922* (Notre Dame, Indiana 1965).
- 13 ESA, p. 359.

Death and the Christian

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Attitudes to Death

Someone once said that death is a tragedy only when we know nothing about it. If this is true, then just how much do we know of death that to die would not be a tragedy? If we had some idea what it is like to die, would there be less fear in us? Would we be less scared at the prospect of it since it would not be a plunge into the unknown or a leap into the dark?

What is troubling about the moment of death, thereby causing much distress and anxiety, is that we all know that one day each of us will die; yet there is much uncertainty about death. Consequently, the thought of it grips our whole being, leaving us bewildered. Or could it be the parting with loved ones or perhaps leaving behind an unfinished task which makes death a sad and unwelcome moment? John Keat's poem 'Terror of Death' certainly expresses the tragedy of being separated from loved ones or an uncompleted work. Maybe it is the fact that there is no turning back after—to use Alfred Tennyson's words—one has 'crossed