



Protopriest Seraphim Slobodskoy  
Portrait by Nikolai A. Pankov

### Father Seraphim Slobodskoy (1912-1971)

In 2007, during the reconciliation of the Russian Church Abroad and the Moscow Patriarchate, an exposition dedicated to the Reunification of the Russian Orthodox Church was organized. This exhibition depicted father Seraphim Slobodskoy as one of the most outstanding figures of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad. How did it happen that father Seraphim, who had been born five years before the Bolshevik Revolution and who had received his education during Soviet times became a beloved priest here in America?

On September 11, 1912, Seraphim was born in Russia, in the village of Cherentsovka,

near Penza, into the family of father Alexei Slobodskoy and matushka Vera. His father was the priest of the church of Archangel Michael, and there little Sima attended services and learned to love the church. He

went to school when the Soviet government was already in power, and being the son of a priest had to endure all sorts of taunts and insults. The years of the 1920s and 30s were a time of great persecution of the church. His father's parish was closed, and later father Alexei was arrested. Seraphim never found out that his father had been executed by firing squad by the Bolsheviks in 1937.

Seraphim's wish was to become an artist, but the doors of all the fine art colleges were closed to the son of a priest. Nonetheless, he took night courses and was able to receive training in the arts. He then worked as an artist up until 1941, when he was mobilized into the army with Germany's attack. His battalion was comprised of the unwanted – the sons of priests, criminals, and others who had been blacklisted. They were thrown to the front with no preparation. He was constantly sent out by his superiors as a scout to see if there were Germans or landmines in the area. Once, a bomb fell right at Seraphim's feet. In the ensuing explosion many around him were killed, but he remained unscathed. Another time, during a scouting mission in the woods, he came face to face with a German soldier who fired at him point blank. Miraculously, he was unharmed; however, at the end of 1942, he was captured by the Germans and taken to a prisoner-of-war camp in Lithuania.

And so, began the harsh life of a war prisoner. The Germans treated their captives cruelly and many died from starvation and disease. Seraphim tried not to lose heart, and whenever he had the opportunity, he sketched everything his eyes could see on small scraps of paper. Once, Seraphim drew one of the prison guards. The sketch delighted the guard, and later he took Seraphim to see the commandant of the prison camp. This was an especially fortunate day, and from that day forward, the destiny of the prisoner-of-war, Seraphim Slobodskoy, took an entirely unique direction. The commandant of the camp was a highly cultured individual and he loved art. He selected the best artists from amongst the prisoners-of-war and included Seraphim. The small group of artists worked hard creating paintings, scenery, and portraits. At the camp, he met two other artists, Nikolai Aleksandrovich Papkov and Andrei Aleksandrovich Rostovtsov, who became life-long friends. Together, they made a vow that if they survived the camps, they would build a church for the glory of God.

Their prayers were answered, and after an arduous journey west, the artists found themselves in post-war Germany in Munich. There, Seraphim organized and led religious youth groups. In 1949, he married Elena Alekseevna Lopuchin. Seraphim was ordained a priest in 1951, and the following year the family emigrated to America, where shortly he was appointed pastor of the Holy Virgin Protection Church in Nyack, NY. Everyone called Matushka tetya Yolochka, and she was a true and tireless helper and colleague of father Seraphim during church services, in the school and in all aspects of parish life.

Inspired by their beloved pastor, the parishioners, who had recently immigrated to America with almost no resources, erected a beautiful church in honor of the Protection of the Holy Virgin. Batushka himself mixed cement, carted bricks on a wheelbarrow, and worked side by side with his congregation. And so, the former prisoner-of-war artists had fulfilled their promise, and each one contributed in the construction of this beautiful church: Papkov painted the frescoes, Rostovtsov designed the iconostasis, and Father Seraphim worked on the building of the church and painted many icons.

Father Seraphim left all of us his wonderful book, *The Law of God*, which he wrote with love and which he himself illustrated. He often worked into the night as he had so many responsibilities with the parish. With his artistic eye and perceptive understanding of pedagogy, he considered it important for each page to have an illustration. He carefully thought through and planned every section of the book. In addition to the many icons of saints and feast days, he drew all the church objects, the parts of the church, and the maps. He also drew all the decorative headings and embellishments. His book has continued to be printed in Russia in millions of copies and has been translated into many languages.

Continuing his tireless endeavors, he created an exemplary Russian school, to which many flocked from afar. During the summer, Father Seraphim was the spiritual father of a Russian children's camp, where he taught *Zakon Bozhiy* and participated in camp life. In his youth, Father Seraphim was an athlete; he was a goalie in soccer, excelled in volleyball and played the ancient Russian game of *gorodki*. All this helped him find a common language with young people, and they responded to him with love and respect.

Father Seraphim was a true Russian priest who was a prayerful person and who would lay down his life for his flock. He never cared about money. His whole being and his service were permeated with the love of God and people. Many times, he emphasized, that God is Love and that commandment is the firm foundation of our salvation. Once when having a discussion with a young lady, he asked her, "Which is more important, faith, hope or love?"

Knowing she was talking to a priest, the girl replied, "Faith!"

"No," Father Seraphim responded, "the most important is love, because without it there can be no faith."

During the last years of his life, Father Seraphim suffered from heart trouble. The difficult war years and his passionate and fiery (which is the meaning of his name, Seraphim) service to God and people undermined his health and strength. He passed away on November 5th, 1971, after returning home from evening services. His funeral was a great spiritual celebration. There were numerous clergy members in attendance, two choirs: a choir of seminarians and the parish choir, and there was a multitude of the faithful, more than had ever attended any feast day service. The church he had built was bursting at the seams with people who had come to bid farewell to their dear pastor, who for so many years had been their spiritual father, mentor, and friend. This funeral was an affirmation of the immense impact Father Seraphim had had on so many. Father Seraphim is buried at the cemetery at Novo Diveyoy Convent in Spring Valley, New York.

For Father Seraphim there was no greater joy than Pascha. Shortly before his death he wrote his Spiritual Testament. He ends it with the joyous words,

Christ Has Risen!  
For "Christ Lives, and my soul lives."  
"Christ is Risen and life reigns!"

Alexei Seraphimovich Slobodskoy