

# Matushka Olga Michael: A Helper in Restoring the Work of God's Hands

By Fr. John Shimchick

Spring/Summer 1997



While all of the canonized Saints of North America have so far been men, over the past few years an Orthodox woman, native of North America, has slowly become known to more and more people, particularly other Orthodox women.

Matushka Olga Michael, wife of the departed Archpriest Nikolai O. Michael from the village of Kwethluk on the Kuskokwim River in Alaska, as described in Fr. Michael Oleksa's book, *Orthodox Alaska*, was neither a "physically impressive or imposing figure." She raised eight children to maturity, giving birth to several of them without a midwife. While her husband was away taking care of many other parishes, she kept busy raising her family and doing many things for other people. One is reminded of the story of Tabitha in the book of Acts (9:36-ff) when hearing that "[i]n addition to sewing Father Nikolai's vestments in the early years and crafting beautiful parkas, boots and mittens for her children, she was constantly sewing or knitting socks or fur outerwear for others. Hardly a friend or neighbor was without something Matushka had made for them.

Parishes hundreds of miles away received unsolicited gifts, traditional Eskimo winter boots ('mukluks') to sell or raffle for their building fund. All the clergy of the deanery wore gloves or woolen socks ...[which

she] had made for them" (p. 203). While fulfilling many of the other tasks (like preparing the eucharistic bread) that are often assumed by other priests' wives, she also knew the hymns of many feast days, including Palm Sunday, Holy Week and Pascha in Yup'ik (her Eskimo language) by heart. After, miraculously surviving an initial bout with cancer when it seemed that nothing could be done, she eventually succumbed to a return of the disease, preparing herself for death which took place on November 8, 1979 with great courage and faith.

It appeared that the normal snow and river ice of that time of the year would prevent many people from attending her funeral. But, the weather uncharacteristically changed and a southerly wind helped to melt the ice and snow allowing parishioners from the neighboring villages to make the journey to Kwethluk. "Hundreds of friends...filled the newly-consecrated church on the extraordinary spring-like day of the funeral. Upon exiting the church, the procession was joined by a flock of birds, although by that time of year, all birds have long since flown south. The birds circled overhead, and accompanied the coffin to the grave site. The usually frozen soil had been easy to dig because of the unprecedented thaw. That night, after the memorial meal, the wind began to blow again, the ground refroze, ice covered the river, winter returned. It was as if the earth itself had opened to receive this woman. The cosmos still cooperates and participates in the worship the Real People [i.e. the name native people give to themselves] offer to God" (p. 205) .

However, it is not just her story, that has been so special and life changing to others, but the actual encounter with her presence that has taken place in remarkable ways. One woman, originally from Kwethluk but now living in Arizona, had a dream in which Matushka Olga appeared, assuring her that her mother would be alright because she was coming to join her in a bright and joyful place. This woman did not know her mother was sick at the time, that she had been rushed to Anchorage, and that she would soon die. But the next day she received news of her mother's emergency evacuation and rushed from Arizona to Alaska, comforting her mother with the news Matushka Olga had brought her about her eternal destiny. The woman died in peace and with her daughter without the shock and grief that would have certainly ensued if the dream had not reassured her.

Another woman, after viewing a picture of Matushka Olga, experienced a "compassionate, loving, gentle, and very real - very accessible presence."

The most detailed account comes from an Orthodox woman who, as in the previous example, had suffered for many years from the consequences of severe sexual abuse experienced as a child. This is her testimony of meeting Matushka Olga:

One day I was deeply at prayer and awake. I had remembered an event that was very scary. My prayer began with my asking the Holy Theotokos for help and mercy. Gradually I was aware of standing in the woods feeling still a little scared. Soon a gentle wave of tenderness began to sweep through the woods followed by a fresh garden scent. I saw the Virgin Mary, dressed as she is in an icon, but more natural looking and brighter, walking toward me. As she came closer I was aware of someone walking behind her. She stepped aside and gestured to a short, wise looking woman. I asked her, "Who are you?" And the Virgin Mary answered, "St. Olga."

St. Olga gestured for me to follow her. We walked a long way until there weren't many trees. We came to a little hill that had a door cut into the side. She gestured for me to sit and she went inside. After a little while some smoke came out of the top of the hill. St. Olga came out with some herbal tea. We both sat in silence drinking our tea and feeling the warmth of the sun on our faces. I began to get a pain in my belly and she led me inside. The door was so low I had to duck like bowing in prayer.

Inside the hill was dry and warm and very quiet. The light was very soft coming from a shallow bowl and from the open hole on the top of the hill. Everything around me felt gentle, especially Mother Olga. The little hill house smelled like wild thyme and white pine in the sun with roses and violets mixed in. Mother Olga helped me up on a kind of platform bed like a driftwood box filled with moss and grasses. It was soft and smelled like the earth and the sea. I was exhausted and lay back. St. Olga went over to the lamp and warmed up something which she rubbed on my belly. I looked five months pregnant. (I was not pregnant

for real at that time.) I started to labor. I was a little scared. Mother Olga climbed up beside me and gently holding by arm, she pretended to labor with me, showing me what to do and how to breath. She still hadn't said anything. She helped me push out some stuff like afterbirth which kind of soaked into dried moss on the box bed. I was very tired and crying a little from relief when it was over.

Up until this she hadn't spoken, but her eyes spoke with great tenderness and understanding. We both got up and had some tea. As we were drinking it, Holy Mother Olga gradually became the light in the room. Her face looked like there was a strong light bulb or the sun shining under her skin. But I think the whole of her glowed. I was just so connected to her loving gaze that I didn't pay much attention to anything else. It was the kind of loving gaze from a mother to an infant that connects and welcomes a baby to life. She seemed to pour tenderness into me through her eyes. This wasn't scary even though, at that time, I didn't know about people who literally shone with the love of God. (It made more sense after I read about St. Seraphim). I know now that some very deep wounds were being healed at that time. She gave me back by own life which had been stolen, a life that is now defined by the beauty and love of God for me, the restored work of His Hands.

After some time I felt like I was filled with wellness and a sense of quiet entered my soul, as if my soul had been crying like a grief-stricken abandoned infant and now had finally been comforted. Even now as I write... the miracle of the peacefulness, and also the zest for life which wellness has brought, causes me to cry with joy and awe.

Only after this did Holy Mother Olga speak. She spoke about God and people who choose to do evil things. She said the people who hurt me thought they could make me carry their evil inside of me by rape. She was very firm when she said, "That's a lie. Only God can carry evil away. The only thing they could put inside you was the seed of life which is a creation of God and cannot pollute anyone." I was never polluted. It just felt that way because of the evil intentions of the people near me. What I had held inside me was the pain, terror, shame, and helplessness I felt. We had labored together and that was all out of me now. She burned some grass over the little flame and the smoke went straight up to God who is both the judge and the forgiver. I understood by the "incense" that it wasn't my job to carry the sins of people against me either. It was God's, and what an ever-unfolding richness this taste of salvation is. At the end of this healing time we went outside together. It was not dark in the visioning prayer. There were so many stars stretching to infinity. The sky was all shimmer with a moving veil of light. (I had seen photos of the northern light but didn't know that they move.) Either Matushka Olga said, or we both heard in our hearts - I can't remember which -- that the moving curtain of light was to be for us a promise that God can create great beauty from complete desolation and nothingness. For me it was like proof of the healing -- great beauty where there had been nothing before but despair hidden by shame and great effort.

What is one to make of these accounts? If nothing else, for now, one can acknowledge the special place that Matushka Olga has had in the lives of certain native people and a growing number of contemporary women. But it is in the slow and gradually expanding process of knowledge which moves from local veneration to broader awareness that God reveals how He can be "wonderful in His Saints." Matushka Olga was herself a midwife and may have also known from personal experience the traumas of being abused earlier in her life. Perhaps it is in this role as an advocate for those who have been abused, particularly sexually, that God will continue to use Matushka Olga in drawing "straight with crooked lines", His work of "creating beauty from complete desolation and nothingness."

If God wills, may it also one day be possible to exclaim: "O Blessed Mother Olga, pray to God for us!"