

The Life of Blessed Xenia of St. Petersburg



The only record of "vital statistics" which has been left us concerning Blessed Xenia is the epitaph on her gravestone:

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT. HERE RESTS THE BODY OF THE SERVANT OF GOD, XENIA GRIGORIEVNA, WIFE OF THE IMPERIAL CHORISTER, COLONEL ANDREI THEODOROVICH PETROV. WIDOWED AT THE AGE OF 26, A PILGRIM FOR 45 YEARS, SHE LIVED A TOTAL OF 71 YEARS. SHE WAS KNOWN BY THE NAME ANDREI THEODOROVICH. MAY WHOEVER KNEW ME PRAY FOR MY SOUL THAT HIS OWN MAY BE SAVED. AMEN.

Who wrote it, no one knows, but this is all we know about the early life of Blessed Xenia: only that she lived during the reigns of the Empresses Elizabeth Petrovna and Catherine II and that she was married to the imperial chorister, Col. Andrei Theodorovich Petrov. From this latter fact we may assume that she was of the lesser nobility.

Presumably, in her early years, she led an ordinary, though comfortable life, performing no services that merited recording or recognition. It would seem that she was happily married and completely devoted to her husband who was, perhaps, a bit worldly. He was still young and in good health when he died suddenly one night at a drinking party.

The unexpected death of her beloved husband completely shattered Xenia Grigorievna and her personal world. She was twenty-six years old, childless and her husband to whom she was passionately devoted had suddenly died without the benefit of the Holy Mysteries. The distraught widow looked around herself, at all her possessions, at her inane little world and suddenly began to realize the vanity and transitory nature of all earthly joys and treasures. She came to realize that there is true value only in heavenly treasures and real joy in Christ.

To the utter amazement of her friends and relatives, Xenia Grigorievna began to give away literally all that she possessed. Her money and personal belongings she gave to the poor and she even gave away her house to her dear friend Paraskeva Antonova.

Finally, her relatives decided that she had taken complete leave of her senses and they petitioned the trustees of her late husband's estate to prevent Xenia from disposing of her wealth, on the grounds that she was mentally unbalanced due to her husband's death. The trustees called Xenia in and, after a long and careful examination, ruled that she was perfectly sound of mind and had every right to dispose of her property as she pleased.

People preoccupied with worldly matters would naturally assume that anyone who gave away his wealth must be insane. They were incapable of seeing that Xenia had undergone a complete rebirth; she was changed from a worldly woman into a spiritual being. Having realized that there can be no true happiness on earth and that worldly possessions are only a hindrance to the attaining of true joy in God,

Having, therefore, relieved herself of all such hindrances, Xenia suddenly vanished from St. Petersburg for eight years. It is said that during these years she lived at some hermitage with a sisterhood of holy ascetics, learning about prayer and the spiritual life from an elder. It was during this time that she was called to the highest feat of spiritual perfection, that of being a fool for Christ's sake. To this end, she returned to St. Petersburg, clothed herself in one of her late husband's old uniforms and linens and thereafter refused to respond the name of Xenia Grigorievna, answering instead only to the name of her late husband, Andrei Feodorovich. It was as if she, in her deep devotion to her husband, had hoped in some way to take upon herself the burden of his unrepented sins and of his unfortunate demise without the Holy Mysteries. Sorrowing for her own sins and for his, she left her home and began her long pilgrimage of wandering through the streets of the poorer district of St. Petersburg known as the Petersburg Borough (Peterburgskaya Storona). She was most often to be found in the vicinity of the parish of Saint Matthias where the poorest people lived in shabby huts.

At first, the people of the Borough thought that this strangely dressed, scarcely shod woman was merely a simple minded beggar, and evil people, especially the street urchins, would often persecute and laugh at her. With complete meekness, however, she kept before her the image of the guiltless Great Sufferer, Christ Jesus, who, without a murmur, heard all

accusations, bore all persecutions, suffered terrible torture and crucifixion. Because of His example, the Blessed One strove to bear her hardships meekly and in silence, forgiving offenses in accordance with the last earthly prayer of Jesus, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Only once did the people of the Petersburg Borough see her in anger. The street boys, seeing the ragged old woman, began as usual to laugh at and torment her. The Blessed One ordinarily bore all this without murmur. On this occasion, however, the boys did not content themselves with verbal abuse, but seeing that she did not take notice of their mocking, they began to throw mud and rocks at her. At last they exhausted even the patience of Blessed Xenia and she flew at them, waving her cane in the air. The residents of the Borough were so startled at seeing the Blessed One in such anger that they took immediate steps to prevent any further offenses toward her. As our Lord Jesus Christ had said, "A candle is not bought to be hidden under a basket... but to be placed on a candle stand."

So it was with God pleasing Xenia. Gradually, people began to realize that Xenia was no mere beggar but someone much more. They began to invite her into their homes and offer her warm clothing for the severe Petersburg winters as well as alms. She would never accept the clothing and took only the small copper pennies, which were called the king on horseback because there was a horseman (actually, St. George) struck on them.

She would distribute these copper pennies to the poor, at times, apparently, with some prophecy. On one such occasion Xenia met a devout woman on the street. Handing her a five kopeck coin, she said, "Take this five piece, here is the king on horseback; it will be extinguished." The woman accepted the copper five piece and went on her way pondering the meaning of the Blessed One's words. No sooner had she entered the street where she lived than she saw that her house was on fire. Running toward her home, she arrived just as the flames were being quenched. Then she realized that the Blessed One had been foretelling this with her strange words.

On one occasion Paraskeva Antonova was sitting in the home which the Blessed One had given her, when Xenia arrived for a visit. Entering the house, she looked irritably at Antonova and said, "Here you are sitting and sewing buttons and you don't know that God has given you a son! Go at once to the Smolensk Cemetery!" Antonova, knowing Xenia to be truly saintly and knowing that no idle word came from her lips, did not even question this strange command but believed at once that something extraordinary was about to happen and she immediately hurried to the Smolensk Cemetery.

On one of the streets of Vasiliev Island near the cemetery, Antonova saw a large crowd of people. Being curious, she approached the crowd to see what was taking place. It seems that a coachman had knocked down a pregnant woman who then give birth to a child right there on the street and died immediately afterwards. Filled with compassion for the child, Antonova took it to her own home. All the efforts of the St. Petersburg police to discover the identity of the mother or locate the father or relatives of the tiny orphan proved in vain and so the child remained with Paraskeva Antonova. She provided him with a good upbringing and a sound education, loving him as her own son. Eventually the boy became an eminent functionary and lovingly cared for his foster mother in her old age. He also revered, with sincere piety, the memory of the Servant of God, Xenia who had shown much kindness to his foster mother and who had taken such a hand in his own fate.

Among the friends of Blessed Xenia there was a widow, Mrs. Golubev, and her seventeen-year- old daughter who was noted for her beauty. Xenia like this girl very much because of her meek, quiet character and her kind heart. Once Xenia

came to visit them and the girl began to make coffee. "My beauty, — said Xenia, turning to the girl, — here you are making coffee and your husband is burying his wife in Okhta. Run there quickly!"

The girl was shocked. "My what?! I don't have a husband... and burying his wife!". "Go!" — Xenia answered sternly, not liking any kind of objection. The Golubevs, knowing well that the Blessed One never said anything without a reason, immediately obeyed her command and set out for Okhta. Here they saw that a funeral procession was headed for the cemetery and they joined in with the crowd of mourners. A young woman, the wife of a doctor, had died in childbirth and was being buried.

The Liturgy was celebrated, then the funeral service, after which the Golubevs followed as the coffin was carried to the grave. The funeral had ended and the people began to leave; however, they chanced upon the sobbing young widower who, at the sight of the grave mound over the remains of his beloved wife, lost consciousness and fell to the ground near the Golubevs. Both mother and daughter strove to bring him back to consciousness and to comfort him. They became acquainted and, eventually, the young Golubeva became the wife of the doctor.

God's gift of clairvoyance does not always deliver good news. Sometimes it is used to hint at the approaching illness or death of someone in order that they might prepare themselves for their fate. Such was the case when the God pleasing ascetic arrived to other guests in the Krapivin home at the time and they all stood and greeted the Blessed One warmly. Xenia conversed with them for a while and then rose to leave, thanking the hostess for her hospitality. As she was departing, however, she turned to Krapivina saying: "Here is green krapiva (nettle) but soon it will be wilted."

Whether or not Mrs. Krapivina understood these words is not known for certain, but other guests did not attach any special significance to them. Much to everyone's amazement, though, Mrs. Krapivina, who was still young and in good health, suddenly became ill and died. Only then did the guests understand that the words, "Here is green krapiva (nettle) but soon it will be wilted," foretold the death of Mrs. Krapivin. Seeing in Xenia this gift of clairvoyance and her meek and humble way of life, people began to realize that she was a true fool for Christ's sake. Many residents of the Borough were sincerely happy to receive her in their homes and it was noticed that some sort of blessed peace and happiness always settled over any home that received her with sincerity. Mothers found that if the Blessed One fondled or rocked an ill child in its cradle, the child would always become well. So parents would hurry to Blessed Xenia with their children whenever she approached, convinced that if she blessed them, or even patted them on the head, they would remain healthy.

People gradually began to accept her strange behavior as some sort of sign from God and often, her behavior would be strange indeed. Two days before the Feast of the Nativity of Christ, in 1761, for example, Blessed Xenia ran anxiously along the cold and snow filled streets of the Petersburg Borough, loudly crying out: "Bake bliny (pancakes), bake bliny, soon all of Russia will be baking bliny!" As usual, no one could figure out the meaning of these strange words of the Blessed One, but on the day of the Feast, the Empress Elisabeth Petrovna reposed suddenly. When the terrible news spread through the city, it became clear to all that the Servant of God had been foretelling the death of the Empress.

Occasionally, Xenia would drop in to visit some friend or acquaintance, converse for a while, and then suddenly fall silent, as if listening to something. All at once, she would leap up and leave quickly. If the hostess asked why she was leaving and where she was going, the Blessed One would only wave her stick in the air and say, "I must hurry, I am needed there."

She possessed absolutely nothing except the rags on her back and often, upon arriving at the home of a friend, she would cheerfully announce, "Here is all of me." For a long time no one knew where the Blessed One spent her nights. The residents of the Borough were not the only ones to wonder about this, for the local police were also curious about the matter. Upon investigating they discovered that the elderly little woman spent her nights in an open field, praying and making prostrations in all four directions, and she did this no matter what the season or weather. It was a miracle of God that the Blessed One survived the severe St. Petersburg winters in this way. It happened at times that her nights would be spent in some other task. On one occasion in 1794, toward the end of Xenia's long life, a new church was being built in the Smolensk Cemetery. Workers began to notice that, during the night, someone would haul mounds of brick to the top of the building where they were needed. The workers were amazed by this and resolved to find out who this tireless worker could be. By posting a watchman they were able to discover that it was the Servant of God, Xenia.

"It was necessary, — says one writer, — for her to possess either some super human power or to carry within herself such a strong spiritual fire, such a deep, undoubting faith with which the impossible becomes possible. When one considers God's great saints, however, who performed such wondrous miracles by their faith, wonders incomprehensible to the human mind, we cannot consider the Blessed One's ascetic feats as unprecedented or impossible for a person in the flesh. Xenia truly bore that faith with which all things are possible. While still living in her body, her soul always soared above this world, dwelling in a living, direct communion with God."

The Blessed One was always ready to help anyone in any way possible. During the day she would wander about the streets, her face reflecting her internal spirit of meekness, humility and kindness by its warm, friendly glow. At night, in all seasons, she would go into a field and enter into conversation with God Himself. Finally the time came when Xenia was no longer to be found in the streets of the Petersburg Borough nor in the field; her radiant face shone no more amidst the rude shacks of the St. Matthias parish. God called His servant to rest from all her struggles and took her to Himself. Xenia was one of those candles which God lights on earth from time to time in order to light up the path of salvation for the faithful, as the Savior Himself had said, "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father Which is in Heaven" and "If, therefore, your entire body is full of light, no part of it being in darkness, then the whole of it shall be full of radiance as when the bright shining of a candle gives off its light."

Source: <http://www.stxenia.org/stxenia.html>

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