

The Marian Dimension of Mother Maria's Orthodox Social Christianity

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Elizaveta Iurievna Skobtsova (1891-1945), familiar to many by her monastic name “Mother Maria,” has in recent years become an exemplar of modern Orthodox social engagement. Often hailed as Orthodoxy’s Dorothy Day, Skobtsova is known for the network of shelters, soup kitchens and medical facilities she opened for impoverished Russian émigrés in Paris during the 1930s. Perhaps her most radical work was in the French Resistance movement, where her assistance to French Jews led to her arrest by the Nazis and deportation to the Ravensbrück concentration camp. Many have read about Mother Maria’s dramatic life and times in the excellent biography by the priest and Slavist Sergei Hackel, whose *Pearl of Great Price: The Life of Mother Maria Skobtsova* has been translated into many languages and was republished numerous times since its first appearance in 1965.¹ Mother Maria’s memory has been kept alive by a most diverse group of devotees, including the Holocaust Memorial Authority Yad Vashem, Soviet pop culture, and, the Eastern Orthodox Church, which canonized her as a saint in 2004.²

Resources related to Mother Maria’s social initiatives have flourished in recent years. The most notable examples in English

¹ Sergei Hackel, *A Pearl of Great Price* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1981).

² Among Jewish admirers, see for example, Mordechai Paldiel’s *Saving The Jews: Amazing Stories of Men and Women who Defied the “Final Solution”* (Rockville, MD: Schreiber Publishing, 2000). In the Soviet Union, Mother Maria was hailed as an anti-fascist hero, as *Mat’ Mariia* was directed by Sergei Kolosov (Russia: Mosfilm, 1982). Kolosov wrote the screenplay with Elena Mikulina, author of the novel *Mat’ Mariia: roman* (Moscow: Sovremennik, 1983). The canonization of Skobtsova and her collaborators was most avidly promoted in *Vestnik russkogo studentcheskogo khristianskogo dvizheniia* (also called *Le Messenger*), the mouthpiece of the Russian Student Christian Movement (*Russkoe studentcheskoe khristianskoe dvizhenie*; ACER-MJO in French), the most important social-benevolent and religious organization of the Paris Orthodox emigration. See in particular *Vestnik* issues no.176 (1997), no. 181 (2000), and no. 182 (2001).

include the sociologist Fr. Michael Plekon's probing analyses of Mother Maria's writings and activities, and Jim Forest's numerous essays and resources for the Orthodox Peace Fellowship.³ In this article, I would like to add to the existing corpus of scholarship on Skobtsova's social work by investigating the figure of Mary, the Mother of God, in her texts and life. I suggest that the Mother of God was the essential link between Skobtsova's theological ideas and the practical employment of these ideas. Understanding the role of Mary will provide a deeper understanding of Skobtsova's vision of social Christianity, while at the same time revealing her unique contribution to modern Orthodox Mariology.

Godmotherhood as a Social Principle

I will begin by laying out the basic theoretical framework of Skobtsova's social vision. As she writes in her well-known essays of the 1930s, such as "The Second Gospel Commandment" and "The Mysticism of Human Communion," her point of departure is Christ's two commandments in Matthew 22:37-39 "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind," and "Love your neighbor as yourself." Together they form what she refers to as the "bi-une commandment."⁴ The first Gospel commandment calls on the individual to strive for knowledge of God; it outlines the believer's personal spiritual responsibility. The second Gospel commandment calls for love of the other; it is the foundation for Christian collective life. Only through observance of both, Skobtsova emphasizes, the first *and* the second Gospel commandments in tandem, do we fulfill Christ's main directive.

³ See Michael Plekon's chapters on Skobtsova in his *Living Icons: Persons of Faith in the Eastern Church* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002) and his commentary to the chapter on Skobtsova in *The Teachings of Modern Christianity on Law, Politics, and Human Nature*, ed. Frank S. Alexander and John Witte, Jr. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 233-294. Jim Forest, founder of the Orthodox Peace Fellowship and editor of the journal *In Communion*, has contributed many articles on Skobtsova's life and works. See his website at <http://incommunion.org> (accessed April 10, 2010).

⁴ Elizaveta Skobtsova, "The Second Gospel Commandment," 47. Unless otherwise noted, citations here are to the English translations by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, published in *Mother Maria Skobtsova: Essential Writings*, part of the Orbis Modern Spiritual Masters Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003).

By emphasizing the importance of the second Gospel commandment, Mother Maria felt that she was filling a gap in the Eastern Christian theological tradition. She notes that from the Patristic era onward, with the rise of ascetic spirituality, Eastern writers concerned themselves almost exclusively with the inner, personal spiritual pursuit. Only in nineteenth century Russia, Skobtsova argues, did social engagement finally receive proper attention in Orthodox discourse. She turns to her predecessors in modern Russian religious thought, and suggests that Alexei Khomiakov's notion of *sobornost'* (conciliarity or collectivity), Vladimir Solovyov's doctrine of *Bogochelovechestvo* (Godmanhood, or the Humanity of God), and Fyodor Dostoevsky's call to take responsibility for the other are all, at their core, dedicated to exploring the dogmatic, moral, philosophical, and social ramifications of the second Gospel commandment.⁵

But the important thinkers who preceded her, Skobtsova claims, never provided the guidelines to put these principles into effect. This became her mission: "It is our duty," she writes,

to bring these theoretical ideas and philosophical systems, the ideas of *sobornost'* and Godmanhood...into practical use – for our own personal spiritual routes, for our innermost and inward lives, as well as for our external endeavors.⁶

As she writes time and again, theological principles must be applied not only to our internal spiritual practice, but also to our outward lives. This means effecting practical change in society around us. "There is no doubt," she insists, "that the Christian is called to social work: to organize a better life for the workers, to take care of the elderly, to build hospitals, to take care of children, to fight against exploitation, injustice, need and lawlessness."⁷ For Skobtsova, social engagement is an essential way to fulfill the second Gospel commandment.

⁵ Ibid., 59.

⁶ Ibid., 59-60.

⁷ Ibid., 54.

Mother Maria was certainly not the first to insist that the Church take active part in community outreach. By the time she was publishing her essays, all of the Christian denominations (including the Russian Orthodox Church) had been developing large-scale social initiatives. While Skobtsova lauds the efforts of the Catholic *Rerum Novarum* and Protestant Social Christianity movements, she argues that they lack a fundamental element. The Western Churches base their social programs on “rationalistic humanism,” she writes, and simply apply Christian principles to secular society.⁸ In doing so, they disregard the mystical and eschatological foundation of Christianity that sees life as constant movement toward union with God, the pursuit of *theosis* (deification). The aim of real social Christianity cannot simply be improving the lot of the least fortunate – it must be to transfigure life. We transfigure life through authentic interaction with the other, she writes, our goal must be the “mysticism of human communion” (*mistika chelovekoobshcheniia*). True relationships with the other, especially with those in need, make us see the Incarnated Christ in each person; thus communion with fellow humanity is at the same time communion with God. “Only mystical human communion,” Mother Maria insists, can be the true spiritual basis for Christian activism, “for the kind of social Christianity that has not yet been born, a Christianity that addresses the world.”⁹

How do we form these transfigurative relationships? What sort of interaction leads to “mystical human communion?” Love, of course – but Mother Maria has a particular type of love in mind. Love is not, she writes, sentimental care or appreciation of others from a distance. She does not refer to the warm emotional attachment we have to our nearest and dearest. We must love our neighbor in a radically engaged and selfless way. She calls for active love (*deiatel'naia liubov'*), a dramatic even fierce compassion for the other. Her choice of language and imagery conveys the dynamic tenor of this ethos. We must transform our spiritual generosity into a weapon of love, she writes, become an

⁸ Elizaveta Skobtsova, “The Mysticism of Human Communion,” 75-76.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 82.

instrument in God's hands, a warrior in his army. Armed with true spiritual love, she writes, we are like David, "with nothing but the name of God, rushing into battle with Goliath."¹⁰ Christian love is not meek and passive; you reach mystical communion with the other when you lay your soul bare, feel your heart pierced by the sword of compassion and bleed for your neighbor.

This brings us to the role of Mary in Skobtsova's social vision. The Mother of God is *the* model of this radical, transformative love for the other, she is "the great symbol of any genuine relationship among people."¹¹ And most specifically for Skobtsova, the Mother of God standing at the cross reveals the core of the Christian social ethos. Skobtsova develops the Marian dimension of her social Christianity most thoroughly in her 1939 article "On the Imitation of the Mother of God" (*O podrazhanii Bogomateri*). The essay begins with a provocative critique of contemporary Christian culture. She notes that in both Western and Eastern Christianity has developed a highly individualistic, self-centered spiritual orientation. Even one of the faith's central tenets – the imitation of Christ – is often misapplied and actually fosters this individualistic spirituality. Though essential for the religious life, Skobtsova makes the astute observation that the personal quest to reach God may lead a person to isolation, withdrawal from society and the rejection of family, friends, and community. The unintended result has become an overemphasis on "my cross, which defines my personal route to God, my personal following of Christ's path."¹² In contemporary Christian culture, she observes, what should be collective experience has become personal, "Our Father," has become "My Father," "Give us this day our daily bread" is "Give me this day my daily bread."¹³ "There is no room for the Church," she writes, "for *sobornost*, for the Divine-human perception of the whole Christianprocess."¹⁴ Christian culture is just as individualistic and

¹⁰ Skobtsova, "Second Gospel Commandment," 57.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹² Elizaveta Skobtsova, "On the Imitation of the Mother of God," 65.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

fragmented as modern secular society, “deprived of all true mystical roots,” and thus is spiritually stagnant.¹⁵

Skobtsova’s solution, as the article’s title suggests, is to complement the imitation of Christ with the imitation of Mary. While we follow the path of the Godman (*Bogochelovek*), we must also embark on the route of the Godmother (*Bogomater*’). In other words, we must fulfill the first Gospel commandment by emulating Christ’s self-sacrifice, as well as the second by imitating his mother’s compassion at the foot of the cross. The world will move closer to God when Christians supplement the quest for *Bogochelovechestvo* with the engagement of *Bogomaterinstvo* (Godmotherhood).¹⁶

What exactly does Skobtsova mean by imitating the Mother of God? How can people emulate her Godmotherhood? Many of the traditional attributes that Christianity applies to the Mother of God – silence, obedience, and meekness – are not the Marian traits Skobtsova has in mind. She doesn’t envision the Mother of God at the cross as the stoic, motionless mourner we see in conventional Orthodox iconography, nor is she the emotionally rapt mother known in Catholicism as the Mater Dolorosa. While Skobtsova’s writings echo Russian folk or popular piety, where Mary is often rendered as spirited or even headstrong, Skobtsova’s mourning mother never veers from the firm ground of scripture.¹⁷ Her Marian touchstone is the “double-edged sword” (*oboiudostryi mech*’), the “cross and sword” motif based on Symeon’s prophesy in Luke 2:22-40. As the Gospel states, when Mary brought her infant Jesus to the temple, the elder Symeon foretold her maternal suffering at the crucifixion with the words, “a sword shall pierce your heart also.” According to the exegetical tradition, the cross of Christ is

¹⁵ Ibid., 66.

¹⁶ Skobtsova borrows the term from Fr. Sergius Bulgakov, who nominalized Mary’s traditional title of *Bogomater*’ (Mother of God) as “Godmotherhood” (*Bogomaterinstvo*). See his use of this term in his Marian treatise, *The Burning Bush: On the Orthodox Veneration of the Mother of God*, trans. T. Allan Smith (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

¹⁷ On Mary in the Russian folk tradition, see Joanna Hubbs’ *Mother Russia: The Feminine Myth in Russian Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

the sword that pierces his mother's heart; Symeon's prophesy prepares Mary for the deep maternal anguish that awaits her, but also indicates her participation in her Son's mission.

Skobtsova reads this conventional exegesis in a social dimension. The unity of the sword and cross, for her, represents the indivisibility of the first and second Gospel commandments, the necessary integration of personal and collective spiritual pursuits, of private and social life. Skobtsova insists that Mary's suffering wasn't just her own. Godmotherhood teaches an inherently public lesson. Just as Christ's self-sacrifice gave the world a new moral code, so did Mary's suffering at the foot of the cross. "The two-edged sword," she writes, "...teaches us all something and obliges us to something."¹⁸ At Golgotha, Mary gave humanity a new task by demonstrating how to act toward fellow man: "It is precisely on the route of Godmotherhood," she writes, "that we must find the justification and substantiation of all our hopes, find the religious and mystical meaning of true human communion."¹⁹ Mary's sword of compassion teaches us how to truly love our neighbor; thus it must be the main tool for creating relationships and ordering the community.

The first step in putting Godmotherhood into practice, Skobtsova writes, is to understand Mary's experience at the crucifixion. Mary felt *with* – not *for* – her son. She underscores the Mother of God's participation with Christ on the lexical level by using the prefix "co-" (so in Russian; *sin* in Greek):

He endures voluntary suffering on the cross – she involuntarily co-suffers with Him. He bears the sins of the world – she collaborates with him. She co-participates, she co-feels, co-experiences. His flesh is crucified – she is co-crucified.²⁰

¹⁸ Skobtsova, "On the Imitation of the Mother of God," 67.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 68.

While Christ is the model of passion, his mother is the model of *compassion*. At Golgotha, Mary fully transcended herself and felt her son's pain. When Christ took on the sins of the world, so did she; when his body was broken, so was hers. Mary united herself with her son's fate on behalf of, with, and for him. She annihilated her own will and became entirely receptive to the other. Her son's cross pierced her heart like a sword and gave birth to true compassion.

As Skobtsova describes, Mary was no indifferent bystander at her son's death; her maternal love was dramatic and even violent. She was like a warrior poised for battle, wielding her sword of compassion. Mary, Skobtsova writes, was able to say "Behold the handmaiden of the Lord," even in the direst circumstances, "when dripping with blood, even when feeling the sword piercing [her] heart."²¹ Despite her own immense pain, she found the fortitude to endure the sufferings of another.

Skobtsova insists that this radically engaged love is the core of the second Gospel commandment. We must not abandon our neighbor when he or she imitates Christ, rather we must accept their cross like Mary did, willingly participate in another's Golgotha "by opening our own heart to the stroke of the double-edged sword."²² This is "the true measure of love," she insists, "the limit to which the human soul should aspire."²³ Only when we take up our neighbor's cross "is it possible to talk about proper relations to another."²⁴

Who is called to imitate the Mother of God? In no way does Skobtsova limit the Godmotherly impulse to women. She borrows her mentor Fr. Sergii Bulgakov's theological anthropology, arguing that each human soul unites the image of both Christ and Mary, we are "a diptych of the Mother of God with her Child," the *Bogochelovek*

²¹ Ibid., 72.

²² Ibid., 71

²³ Ibid., 72.

²⁴ Ibid.

and the *Bogomater*.²⁵ Thus all human beings –female *and* male – are essentially bound to both Christ and Mary, and must engage both: “The Son of God and his Mother – these are the age-old archetypes, symbols by which the soul orients itself on its religious paths.”²⁶ Imitating Mary is just as fundamental to human nature as imitating Christ: “It is completely natural for humanity to strive to realize in itself the image of the Mother of God in human Godmotherhood.”²⁷

The Marian ethic, Skobtsova believes, has the potential to transfigure the community because it brings people into communion with each other, and thus into communion with God. Expanding the traditional association of the Mother of God and the church, she suggests that Mary’s active material compassion binds the *ecclesia* together.²⁸ Since the crucifixion, Mary has co-suffered with her children, the ecclesial community, and to this day the Marian church continuously recapitulates the drama of Golgotha:

As the Mother of Godmanhood – the church – is pierced even now by the suffering of this body of Christ, the suffering of each member of this Body. In other words, all the countless crosses that mankind takes on its shoulders to follow Christ also become countless swords eternally piercing her maternal heart. She continues to co-participate, co-suffer with each human soul, as then on Golgotha.²⁹

In compassionate acts, the church, the collective, and Mary become one: “Godmotherhood – in Her and with Her – belongs to the whole church. The Mother Church – in Her and with Her – participates in

²⁵ Ibid., 69.

²⁶ Ibid., 70.

²⁷ Elizaveta Skobtsova, “Pochitanie Bogomateri,” cited from the collection of her essays published in *Zhatva dukha: Religiozno-filosofskie sochineniia* [Harvest of the spirit: religious-philosophical essays], ed. A.N. Shustov (St. Petersburg: Iskusstvo, 2004), 186.

²⁸ Skobtsova, “On the Imitation,” 69.

²⁹ Ibid.

Godmotherhood.”³⁰ The entire community participates in the Son’s self-sacrifice and the Mother’s compassion. Every person who imitates Mary takes part in her work, and re-defines the community as a tight-knit mystical family. Each individual maternally embraces all of society: “the human soul thereby adopts the whole body of Christ for itself, the whole of Godmanhood, and every man individually.”³¹ When you love somebody in a Godmotherly way, Skobtsova writes, you don’t just recognize the divine image in the other, you give birth to Christ within yourself.

Skobtsova firmly believed that the Godmotherly impulse must be applied not just within one’s family or ecclesial community. When we treat all people with Marian compassion, we engage in the “churching of life” (*otserkovlenie zhyzni*), bringing a glimmer of the divine into everyday existence. We begin to recognize people as “living icons” that decorate the temple of creation, and the “entire world as one church, adorned by icons which must be venerated, which must be honored and loved.” By reaching out to those in need with true compassion, we enact “true and profound divine service” (*podlinnoe i glubinnoe bogoslužhenie*) and participate in what Mother Maria called “liturgy outside the church” (*vnekhramovaia liturgiia*).³² For Skobtsova, social outreach is not philanthropy, it is a mystical project that builds “collective life.”³³ Good works do not only improve material conditions, she writes, they create a mystical family where the social order moves closer to God.

In her essays of the 1930s, Skobtsova proposes that Mother of God embodies the foundation of the Christian social ethos – love for the other. Mary is also a vivid example of this love put into practice. With her attention to Mother of God at the cross, Skobtsova’s writings provide the faithful not only a conceptual framework, but also a model

³⁰ Skobtsova, “Pochitanie Bogomateri,” 186.

³¹ Skobtsova, “On the Imitation,” 71.

³² Skobtsova, “The Mysticism of Human Communion,” 79-80.

³³ Elizaveta Skobtsova, “Pravoslavnoe delo,” cited from *Zhatva dukha*, 363.

to follow, a blueprint for bringing this radical compassion in their own lives.

Skobtsova's Godmotherly Route

Skobtsova was herself a prime exemplar of Godmotherhood in practice. The figure of the suffering mother, in fact, had a profound personal resonance for her. When she emigrated to Paris in 1924, she was joined by her second husband, Daniil, and three children, the teenaged Gaiana, and toddlers Yura, and Nastya. Just as the family was becoming accustomed to difficult émigré life, Nastya contracted meningitis. By the time she was hospitalized in the Pasteur Institute, her condition was irreversible, and the four-year-old died in March of 1926. Nastya's death was a turning point in Skobtsova's life and religious development. The trauma of losing a child made her see maternity in broader, spiritual terms. She was catalyzed into action. As she recalled to a friend:

I became aware of a new and special, broad-reaching and all-embracing motherhood. I returned from the cemetery a different person. I saw a new road before me and a new meaning of life. And I had to incarnate that feeling in my life.³⁴

After Nastya's death, Skobtsova followed the example of the Mother of God and transformed her maternal anguish into active love for those around her. She propelled herself into social work, volunteering at various Russian aid organizations. Within a few years, she felt the need to formalize her social-maternal activities, and decided the best way to do this was through the church. She had been separated from her husband for several years already, and after he agreed to an ecclesiastical divorce, Skobtsova was tonsured as a nun and took the name "Maria."

She immediately took the honorific "Mother" and fervently began her life of maternal monasticism. Mother Maria's first order of business as a nun was to lease a large house at 9 villa de Saxe in

³⁴ Hackel, *Pearl of Great Price*, 16.

Paris' seventh *arrondissement* which she turned it into a boarding house for unemployed and needy women. Within a few years the space was too small for the many who flocked there, and Skobtsova managed to procure the building at 77 rue de Lourmel in the fifteenth *arrondissement*. At "Lourmel," as it was called, Mother Maria reached out to her community on a larger scale. Within months, several dozen women and even entire families resided there. The Lourmel family included prostitutes, drug addicts, alcoholics, and those with physical and mental handicaps. Approximately 120 dinners were served there on a daily basis. In addition, Skobtsova organized frequent religious-cultural seminars, meetings, and conferences. The Lourmel chapel, decorated by icons painted by Skobtsova herself, held daily services.

About two years after starting the Lourmel community, Skobtsova realized that her efforts could be expanded even further. She procured funds from a variety of sources, including Anglican, ecumenical, and international agencies such as the YMCA and the League of Nations. In September of 1935, she initiated one of the most effective social welfare services of the Russian emigration, "Orthodox Action" (*Pravoslavnoe delo*), an organization of "practical Christian work."³⁵ Skobtsova and her team of volunteers opened at least three more boarding houses, including one for families and another for single men, as well as soup kitchens, infirmaries, and a nursing home. When a wealthy Russian donated a spacious country house in the Paris suburb of Noisy-le-Grand, Orthodox Action turned it into a sanatorium for tuberculosis patients.

Mother Maria's children Gaiana and Yura were part of her ever-growing spiritual family, and could often be found at Lourmel, participating in its daily activities. In the mid-1930s, Skobtsova was devastated by another personal maternal tragedy. Gaiana, who was in her early twenties at the time, was swept up in the wave of pro-Soviet sentiment and returned to the USSR. Less than a year later, in June 1936, Skobtsova received a letter notifying her that Gaiana had died from typhus.

³⁵ Orthodox Action put out two almanacs in the late 1930s, *Pravoslavnoe Delo. Sbornik I and Sbornik II*.

The following year, Skobtsova published a book of 83 religious poems, which, while praising God, also provide starkly honest insight into her difficult spiritual pursuit.³⁶ The themes of maternal loss, Marian compassion, and social engagement intertwine in many of these lyrics. A notable example is the poem “I won’t keep anything” (*Ne budu nichego berech’*)³⁷, accompanied by a sketch that poignantly conveys how she perceived her maternal work:



76. РИСУНОК В КНИГЕ «СТИХИ»
Бумага, тушь. 1937

In this sketch of Mary holding her dead son, Skobtsova depicts the moment when the sword of compassion pierces the Mother’s heart.³⁸ This *pietà* composition, like Michelangelo’s famous sculpture in St.

³⁶ Elizaveta Skobtsova, *Stikhi* [Poems] (Berlin: Petropolis Press, 1937).

³⁷ Cited here from *Ravnina russkaia: stikhotvoreniia i poemy, p’esy-misterii, khudozhestvennaia i avtobiograficheskaia proza, pis’ma* (The Russian plain: poems, mystery-plays, prose and autobiographical fiction, letters), ed. A.N. Shustov (St. Petersburg: Iskusstvo, 2001), 151.

³⁸ Sketch reprinted in Ksenia Krivosheina’s *Krasota spasaiushchaia. Mat’ Mariia (Skobtsova): Zhivopis’, grafika, vyshivka* (St. Petersburg: Iskusstvo, 2004), 191.

Peter's Basilica, shows Mary out of proportion, much larger than Jesus who lies in her arms. But the subject of Skobtosva's drawing is not only the Mother of God and her child. The female figure is clearly a reference to Skobtsova herself – a woman dressed in simple monastic robes, barefoot, sitting on plain chair. By casting herself in the Marian role, Skobtsova underscores that she is striving to imitate the Mother of God and see all of the dying “children” who come to her at Lourmel as the suffering Christ.

Skobtsova, who understood the deep sadness of losing her children, found comfort and hope in the figure of the mourning Mother of God. By imitating Mary, Skobtsova felt she was incarnating Godmotherly compassion into everyday life, transforming pain into joy, ugliness into beauty, material poverty into mystical bounty. In her maternal outreach to those in need, Skobtsova strove for communion with those around her, which, she believed, was necessary for communion with God.

Our Mother of Ravensbrück

The maternal ethos Skobtsova embodied in her social outreach of the 1930s reached its dramatic climax during World War II. Though most of her work was directed towards aiding displaced Russian émigrés, her efforts were not limited to her compatriots or co-religionists. In the tense years leading up to the war, Skobtsova and her close circle of friends – which included the philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev, literary critic Ilya Bunakov-Fondaminsky, and historian George Fedotov – were vocal critics of totalitarian state socialism and fascism alike.³⁹ This group was profoundly opposed to Hitler and his policies, and rejected his anti-Semitic philosophy on religious grounds. The Nazi occupation of France propelled Mother Maria into action, and she eagerly joined the Resistance movement.

As the persecution of Jews increased, Skobtsova decided it was her Christian duty to co-suffer with them. She opened the doors of

³⁹ Skobtsova expressed her political views in essays and lectures such as “Rasizm i religiia” [Racism and Religion], *Russkie zapiski* 11 (1938): 150-157, and “Razmyshleniia o sud'bakh Evropy i Azii” [Reflections on the Fate of Europe and Asia] (unpublished lecture, 1941), printed in *Zhatva dukha*.

Lourmel and the sanatorium at Noisy, which were soon packed with Jewish individuals and families.⁴⁰ In the summer of 1942, close to twelve thousand Jews (mostly women and children) were arrested and herded into the sports stadium Vélodrome d'Hiver before being sent on to concentration camps at Drancy or Auschwitz. The Vél d'Hiv, as it was called, happened to be located just a few blocks from Lourmel. Dressed in her monastic garb, Skobtsova was able to convince the guards to allow her into the stadium. She spent days ministering to the prisoners, bringing them food and clothing and providing moral support. Legend has it that she smuggled several Jewish children out of Vél d'Hiv to safety in a garbage can.⁴¹

Mother Maria's house at Lourmel functioned as a point on the "underground railroad" of the French Resistance until early 1943, when word of her activities was leaked to the Gestapo. German officers came to Lourmel on February 8, 1943 and arrested Skobtsova and her collaborators, including her son Yura. Skobtsova was sent to Ravensbrück, a concentration camp for women, some fifty miles outside of Berlin.⁴²

Survivors recall Skobtsova's calmness, perseverance, and even good cheer during the two years she was at Ravensbrück. She continued her maternal service even in these most extreme circumstances. She refused to let the humiliation, disease, and degraded moral atmosphere of camp life shake her faith. Her obligation was the same as it had been at Lourmel – to enact Marian love and create community with those around her. Survivors recall Skobtsova going out of her way to minister to the other women and build friendships across ethnic, national, and religious lines. One described the familial feeling she

⁴⁰ On Skobtsova's work in the Resistance, see Krivosheina, *Krasota spasaiushchaia*, 109, Hackel, *Pearl of Great Price*, chapters 8 and 9 and Georgii Benevich's article, "The Saving of the Jews: The Case of Mother Maria (Skobtsova)", *Religion in Eastern Europe* 20, no. 1 (2000): 1-19.

⁴¹ Hackel describes this episode in *Pearl of Great Price*, 114-115. It has recently been made the subject of the children's book *Silent as a Stone: Mother Maria of Paris and the Trash Can Rescue* by Jim Forest and Dasha Pancheshnaya (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 2007).

⁴² Arrested with Skobtsova were her collaborators Fyodor Pyanov, Fr. Dimitrii Klepinin and Yura Skobtsov, who were sent to Buchenwald. See Hackel, *Pearl of Great Price*, 127-128.

cultivated among the inmates: “We were all cut off from our families, and somehow she provided us with a family.”⁴³ Others remember her maternal care, how she embraced them “like children”⁴⁴ and shared her meager food and clothing rations with those more needy than she. To boost morale, she led discussion groups on the Bible, history and literature. She encouraged her fellow inmates to look ahead, to dream of the future. In order to bring some beauty into the ugliness of camp life, she embroidered and wrote poetry.⁴⁵

By the winter of 1944-45, the extreme conditions had worn Mother Maria down. E.A. Novikova, a Ravensbrück survivor, saw Skobtsova work on her last creative endeavor, an embroidered icon. Though the original is lost, Novikova described it to the artist S.A. Raevsky-Otsup, who rendered the following reproduction:⁴⁶



⁴³ Solange Périchon, cited in Hackel, *Pearl of Great Price*, 131.

⁴⁴ Rosane Lascroux, cited in Hackel, *Pear of Great Price*, 137.

⁴⁵ Skobtsova is believed to have composed at least two poems in the camps, but neither survived. Her embroidery of the liberation of the camp by the British army, stitched on a handkerchief, remained intact. See Krivosheina, *Krasota spasaiushchaia*, 165.

⁴⁶ Image from website <http://www.mere-marie.com/224.htm>

The composition – Mary holding the infant Christ, already crucified – is unusual for the canon of Orthodox iconography. But it is entirely fitting for Skobtsova’s *oeuvre*. In its subject matter, the icon is a meditation on maternal suffering and compassion, the central themes of Skobtsova’s life and work.

The interplay here between iconographer and her text, and, consequently, the icon and its viewer is complex. While icons are traditionally painted (or “written”) anonymously, the established authorship of Skobtsova’s icon adds significant depth to its religious message. With its self-referential quality, the icon recapitulates Mother Maria’s own biography and spiritual path. As a deeply personal image, it reminds the viewer of Skobtsova’s maternal mourning at the loss of her children. It also tells the story of her life in emigration, her struggle to follow Mary’s footsteps by ministering to the “children” of her community. Finally, it mirrors her compassionate outreach to fellow inmates at Ravensbrück. Individual biography and the divine narrative are intertwined. In meditating on this icon, the viewer sees its divine prototype – the Mother of God – but also acknowledges the face of its human author, the real woman who strove to imitate the Mother of God in all circumstances.

Several survivors have recalled that as Skobtsova was becoming physically weaker, she made the ultimate sacrifice for her neighbor by volunteering to take the place of another, healthier, woman who was next on the extermination list. As the Ravensbrück records indicate, Elizaveta Skobtsova died in the gas chamber on March 31, 1945, and, according to the Orthodox Church, received the crown of martyrdom.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have tried to show that in Skobtsova’s vision of social Orthodoxy, the Mother of God plays a pivotal role as the link between the conceptual and practical levels, theory and practice, ideas and life. Her descriptions of spirited, engaged, and active Marian compassion infuse her religious teachings with relevance and applicability for the modern believer. By imitating Godmotherhood

in her own life, Skobtsova demonstrated how self-sacrificial, compassionate love could be reached in the most quotidian to the most historically cataclysmic circumstances. Thus, together with her key formulations “second Gospel commandment” and “mysticism of human communion,” Skobtsova’s notion of Godmotherhood must be recognized as an essential contribution to the modern Orthodox corpus on social engagement.