

This morning we take a look at a woman who was a nun in the Russian Orthodox Church in the first half of the 1900's who particularly made her mark on this world while living in Paris. Mother Maria of Paris (as she came to be known), however, is probably the most unorthodox orthodox nun you've ever heard of. And if you ever wondered if your life is too far gone or too unorthodox, or too painful, to be used by God, then you need to get familiar with her – because she was anything but orthodox and had much tragedy as well, and yet through that, or even because of it, shined the light of Jesus in the darkest parts of our world.



She was born in 1891 in the city of Riga, in Latvia. Her name was Elizaveta Pilenko (she went by Liza), and her family was well-to-do, coming from Ukrainian aristocracy, and they were also devout Orthodox Christians. Her family moved several times. In 1906, when she was 14, her father died at the young age of 49. As a result, she declared herself an atheist, and she became disconnected from her faith and the Church. Soon after her family moved north, to St. Petersburg. Here, she was exposed to the poor and the uneducated for the first time in her life, and she wanted to help them. “She did not see the church as alive, but as a mere tradition-laden institution...that was...dead and useless. But the poor people she saw everywhere engaged her mind and soul.”ⁱ

Like Hannah More last week, Liza had a penchant for writing, though hers was confined to poems. Her poetry and her passion to help the poor brought her in connection with many others who had the same vision, including a man she married at age 18. However, she noticed a disconnect with many of the people: **There were a lot of people interested in *talking* about the poor and how to help them...but no one seemed interested in actually *doing* something about the problem.**

She divorced her husband in 1913. Soon after she became pregnant by another man, and gave birth to her first child, Gaiana. During this time, her passion for the poor led her back toward the Christian faith, and she enrolled at the Ecclesiastical Academy to study theology, becoming the first woman to do so. One particular turning point for her in regards to her devotion to God was when she had the opportunity to pray in front of this iconic painting at a church in St. Petersburg titled, “Mother of God, Joy of All Who Sorrow.”



In late 1918 or early 1919, she married again, and by 1922, she and her husband, Daniel, had two children of their own – Yuri, and then Anastasia. On March 7, 1926, when she was 34 years old, tragedy again touched her life, when her youngest child, Anastasia, died at the age of 4 from disease. This time, rather than



Figure 1: Mother Maria, Anastasia, Yuri, Gaiana (Left to Right)

leading her away from God as when her father died, the death of her daughter drew her into a deeper relationship with Jesus. Her hasty marriage to Daniel informally came to an end a few years later, in 1927, and a divorce made it official in 1932...but her new calling in life took shape at this time: into a ministry for the poor. She began to travel around France for the Russian Christian Movement, an organization that started in 1923 to help struggling Russians who had move to France due to political persecution in Russia. She began to engage with them, and to visit refugee camps. She was usually invited as a speaker to encourage them, but inevitably she ended up counseling, working alongside them scrubbing the floors, eating with them, and so forth.

Eventually, two Russian Orthodox bishops, who had become her spiritual mentors in Paris, supported her desire to become a nun. In fact, one of the bishops seems to have actually suggested the possibility to her. “I could never be a good nun” she replied. “I know,” he answered. “But I would like you to be a revolutionary nun.” She was surprised by this, because all of her models of nuns were early Christian monastics. How could a twice married mother of

three become a nun? But that is exactly what she became.

She became a nun at the end of March, 1932, just a few weeks after her divorce from Daniel. Rather than holing up in a monastery, she saw the world as her monastery. She sought to be the mother to everyone she encountered. She writes, **“Today, there is only one monastery for a monk—the whole world...Christ gave the whole world to the Church, and she has no right to renounce its spiritual edification and transfiguration” (Mother Maria of Paris).**ⁱⁱ Mother Maria, as she came to be known, bought a home in Paris and opened it to the destitute and the struggling. The first home was so popular, she had to sell it and buy a larger one...and in addition to it other buildings were rented. She would go out into the streets of Paris, sometimes for days at a time, being with the homeless and the destitute and inviting them to her home to be cared for and loved, as well as begging for food that she would place in a sack she carried over her shoulder, to bring back to the house. Up to 120 dinners were served some nights, and thousands of people passed through the doors of her home. She prayed with and for them, she led Bible Study, they had times of worship. It became legendary for the hospitality, grace and Christian love that could be found there for those who were truly down and out, and she disciplined them in Jesus.



She continued to be unorthodox, however. As one church leader said, “I was simply staggered when I saw her for the first time in monastic clothes. I was walking along Boulevard Montparnasse, and I saw, in front of a café...a table, on the table was a glass of beer and behind the glass was sitting a Russian nun in full monastic clothes.” People were critical of her for her dress (she dressed poorly even for a nun who’d taken a vow of poverty), they criticized her for her drinking and her smoking, she was criticized for being too casual about ritual religious observances, for not living in a monastery, for going out and living on the streets and she having relationships with the most filthy of people. It should be noted that, other than the smoking and the clothing, all of those criticisms were leveled at Jesus at one time or another,

as well. She once told her friend, and I think this sums her up about as well as could be, **“At the Last Judgment, I shall not be asked whether I satisfactorily practiced asceticism, nor how many bows I have made before the divine altar. I will be asked whether I fed the hungry, clothed the naked, visited the sick, and the prisoner in his jail” (Mother Maria of Paris).**ⁱⁱⁱ

Tragedy again struck in July of 1936 when she got word that Gaiana, her first-born, and who had returned to Russia after marrying a year before, died from typhus. Gaiana was 22 years old. Eventually, with World War 2 in full swing, her ministry came to include Jews who were hiding from the Nazi regime that was spreading across Europe. Paris was taken by them on June 14, 1940. Life in Paris changed radically, as a result. The persecution of the Jews prompted her to begin taking them in and trying to protect and serve them however she could. Eventually, she was found out by the Nazis, and she was arrested on Wednesday, February 10, 1943, along with her son, Yuri, and both were taken to prison camps. He died a year later, on February 6, 1944.

A couple months after his death, Mother Maria was transferred to the Ravensbrück prison camp. She was a light to the other prisoners – leading Bible study, praying with people, and serving them however she could. One survivor said of her, “She was never downcast...she allowed nothing of secondary importance to impede her contact with people.” On Good Friday, March 30, 1945, two years after she was first arrested, and with her health in poor condition, she was taken to the gas chamber at Ravensbrück, and the next day she died.

It took almost 60 years for her to be recognized as a Saint by the Orthodox church, probably in large part because she was so unorthodox. She was a revolutionary nun who was a light shining in some of the darkest places the world has ever known. And yet much of her unorthodoxy helped to bring about a prophetic witness into the world, that the church was lacking. Eric Metaxas writes, **“Mother Maria remains an indictment of any form of Christianity that seeks Christ chiefly inside the walls of our churches.”**

And there are two things that stand out to me about her. First, is her

unwavering commitment to serving people in need. She was inspired by Jesus' teaching, which she quoted and I shared with you a moment ago, from Matthew 25, our Scripture reading for this morning. **“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me” (Jesus, in Matthew 25:35-36).** Mother Maria did every single one of those things. And the reason she did it is because she saw a glimpse of Jesus in every one of those people. She said, “About every poor, hungry, and imprisoned person the Savior says, “I”; “I was hungry and thirsty, I was sick and in prison...”

She took those words to heart; that when she was ministering to these people she was ministering to Jesus...that when she was ministering to him, she was ministering to them...to the people on the fringes of society, hanging on for dear life. And that was literally true once Paris was overtaken.

And to use Metaxas's word: **She's still an “indictment” for the church today.** How much more would the light of Christ shine through us Christians and into the world, if serving people were higher on our list of priorities? We live in a world that recognizes the problems and the inequities that exist. Regardless of religious beliefs: We are more aware of poverty, of crime issues, of disease, of starvation, of oppression, of corruption, of injustices of all kinds...we are more aware of these things now than we ever have before. And I believe people want to do something about these things...though like Maria discovered when she was in her late teens and early 20's, many people like to talk about it and express concern...but a lot of people don't end up doing very much to alleviate the situations. Life gets busy. We don't know how to help. We feel like our efforts don't really make a dent. I'm guilty of this, too. But the Church ought to be leading the charge against these kinds of wrongs in our world, and she's a reminder of that.

That's one reason I'm so excited about the Blessing Bags that we'll be assembling and making available for people to have with them to give to people in need. I know it's a very small thing...it's not on par with Paul Allen's recent pledge of \$30 million to provide housing for the homeless in

Seattle...but what we're doing is a way to help, and it is a way to show the compassion and the love of Jesus to people in our own communities who are down and out, and on the margins of society. There are some other folks in our church who have started to get involved with the New Bethlehem Day Center up the street. It's a day shelter for women and children who are on the margins of society. I imagine that more of us could be involved there. Several of you help out at the Food bank in Woodinville on Saturdays, and others of you help stock their shelves with food by bringing donations here to church. These are just a few ways that people right here are seeking to actually make a connection to the poor and the hungry, to bless them and encourage them...and if you want to help reach out to these kinds of people, then these are a few ways that can be done right here at Rose Hill, among others.

So Jesus invites us to serve "the least of these." And when he adds, in verse 40, "these 'brothers and sisters of mine,'" he's not meaning "faith brothers and sisters" as in "brother/sister in Christ." Rather, it's simply his way of identifying with people. **We all have a certain degree of "brotherhood" and "sisterhood" in our shared humanity, and that's what he's expressing in verse 40.** All people are created in the image of God; Jesus is working in their life in some way, and when we minister to them, we help them to see God's hand of grace and mercy in their lives, and draw people closer to Him.

Now, if your response is: Pastor Brian, you don't know me very well. You wouldn't want me serving...I'm not holy enough...or I'm too broken by grief to be of any use to anyone and help them in the midst of their own pain and difficulties of life. If that's your thinking, let me tell you, Saint Maria was right there with you. This is a twice married, twice divorced, had a child out of wedlock, former atheist, monastery- and religious ritual- avoiding, beer drinking and cigarette smoking nun. Look: you can't make this stuff up. If she can become a nun, then I could become the pope some day. And if she can touch thousands of lives with the love of Jesus, then God can work through people like you and me who have our own pasts that aren't perfect, and even our current living that maybe doesn't always conform to perfect religious expectations, and touch people's lives in deep and profound ways by simply serving them, giving them dignity, and seeing Jesus in them when

no one else will.

And it's not as though she had a pain-free existence: her dad died when she was 14, two divorces certainly weren't totally enjoyable, and if they were, then the marriages certainly were not, and all three children died before she did. This is a woman who grieved heartily over these losses...the first one led her away from God...but the others drove her into a deeper relationship, a greater dependence on God, and a commitment to being the mother of whoever she came in contact with, as best she could. Undoubtedly: **The pain and loss that she had experienced enabled her to have incredible compassion for the people to whom she ministered.** And as a result, when they encountered her, they encountered Jesus. They saw his hands, felt his love, heard his words through all that she said and did. Like her, our own pain and grief and tears can make us a powerful and compassionate witness of God's love. God can take those difficult stretches of life we've been through and use them for His glory and to touch someone else's life with his love.

You know, you don't have to be on track to be canonized as a saint to be used by God to touch people's lives. I already mentioned a few simple ways that through ministries of Rose Hill you can impact people in need. There are others, and there are all kinds more beyond what we have here. But if you're not serving "the least of these" in some way – on your own, through your small group, through other ministries in the church, I would really encourage you to consider how you might do that. Because: **Jesus has some strong words about caring for those who are on the margins of society, such as the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, those who need clothes, the sick, and the prisoner.** When we take care of them, we take care of Jesus. In other words, those are holy encounters where Jesus is present. May we, like Mother Maria, care for the least of these...maybe not as Revolutionary nuns, but as revolutionary Christians, sharing the love of God across the spectrum of society. Let's pray...Amen.

ⁱ Eric Metaxas, *7 Women and The Secret of Their Greatness*, p. 88-89.

ⁱⁱ Ibid. P. 97. There is a type-o, however, and the word, "one" is accidentally omitted by Metaxas. Online research shows that the quote should read as I've given it here in the sermon.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. P. 98.