

---

# *Journal of Religious Culture*

## *Journal für Religionskultur*

Ed. by / Hrsg. von Edmund Weber  
in Association with / in Zusammenarbeit mit Matthias Benad  
Institute for Irenics / Institut für Wissenschaftliche Irenik  
Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main

ISSN 1434-5935- © E.Weber – E-mail: [irenik@em.uni-frankfurt.de](mailto:irenik@em.uni-frankfurt.de)

---

No. 89 (2007)

## Charity in the Russian Orthodox Church

By

Natalia Pecherskaya\*

Almost two thousand years ago the question was asked, "And who is my neighbor?", and Jesus answered it with the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10. 29-37), and so the idea of charity was inseparably linked with Christianity. However, it is almost a common opinion that Western Christianity and Russian Orthodoxy have quite different approaches to this item. According to that opinion, the Catholic Church had more concern about one's bodily needs and explicit welfare, while the Russian Orthodoxy paid less attention to the "explicit man" and took more care of "the inner man".

The Russian Orthodox tradition - though it has its own method in ascetism, apotheosis, general and private prayer - pays too little attention to the needy and deprived members of society. To raise the question about mollification of the deprived people's torments and to see it as a way towards the Kingdom of God seems alien to the very essence of Russian Orthodoxy. Did the Russian Orthodox Church ever refuse to help beggars and cripples? Or do the facts still show another picture? Since when did Russian Orthodox Church start to neglect that task? Which reasons have proved that charity has been unable to flourish in the Orthodox Church and especially Russian Orthodox Church as flourished her spirituality and arts: icon painting, choral singing, and church architecture? Let us have a brief outlook on the history of the Russian Orthodox Church and find out if there are any reasons to explain the reason.

---

\* Dr. Natalia A. Pecherskaya, Rector, St. Petersburg School of Religion and Philosophy (SRPh), St. Petersburg, Russia. Website: [www.srph.ru](http://www.srph.ru). The paper was presented at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe-University, Frankfurt on Main, 26<sup>th</sup> of January 2006.

In Protestant Churches religious charity is usually called 'deacony'. This is a Greek word one can often find in the New Testament, it mostly means service gathering of offerings and daily distribution (cf. Acts 6:1).

What did 'deacony' mean for the Orthodox Church? In the table-book *A Concise Orthodox Encyclopaedic Vocabulary of Theology* issued in St. Petersburg in 1913, we read under 'deacony': "In ancient Christian Church: hospitals and charity institutions supervised by deacons and deaconesses". The editors of the Vocabulary seemed to consider 'deacony' as a notion dealing only with the past.

In Kiev Rus, from the very beginning charity had become a necessary part of religious life. We know that e.g. St. Princess Olga (died 969) she gave clothing to the nude and helped widows, orphans, beggars, and other needy. After Russia was baptized in 988, charity was rapidly developing.

St. Prince Vladimir (died 1015) took the commandments of the Gospel very seriously. He abolished death penalty, as well as tortures and mutilations. He also paid attention to the social meaning of the Gospels. According to chronicles, Vladimir let come every beggar and cripple to his and helped in their needs with food and drink, as well as money". The Prince also ordered to deliver help to the homes of those unable to walk.

'The Precept' of Prince Vladimir Monomakh (1113-1125) is full of similar items. He writes to his sons: "Most of all, you never forget the needy, but feed them as you can, and give to the orphans, and justify widows, do not let the mighty ruin a human being".

Sometimes it is said about medieval Europe that there was not a 'social aid' system anywhere organized as effectively as in Kiev Rus. Even if this might be an exaggeration, one must admit the fact that in Kiev Rus charity was well developed and organized.

A few centuries later, Russian charity suffered the first heavy blow. In 1239, Mongols conquered and ruined Kiev Rus. When Rus was at last unyoked from the Mongols in the late 15th century, the high moral level characteristic for Kiev Rus proved to be impossible to reach again. Violence, cruelty and injustice became rather a rule than an exception. During that period, charity found shelter in monasteries where monks and nuns continued to practice it. According to the hagiographies private and individual charity lived on, too.

After the 15th century church charity was carried out through monasteries and parishes that offered a variety of social services: teaching, medical treatment, education, aid, sheltering, etc. Those kinds of charity activities existed till the late nineteenth century. At the same laymen started to build ecclesiastical fraternities in the Western part of Russia. These communities were often called Fraternities of Love or Fraternities of Charity because they established hospitals, shelters and doss-houses for pilgrims and travelers, typographies and schools, in order to support the Orthodox Church.

The capacities of the Russian Orthodox Church in charity were seriously undermined by the decrees issued in 17th century by three Russian Empresses: Anna Ioannovna (1730-1740), Elizabeth (1741-1762), and Catherine II (1762-1796). Empress Elizabeth ordered to confiscate a great part of lands belonging to monasteries, and her successor Catherine II issued a decree closing more than a half of all monasteries and convents. The regular and secular clergy were offered petty salaries from the State Treasury.

This proved to be especially disastrous, because priests, deacons and their families had to live so poorly that some of them had even to beg. Consequences of those measures could be felt up to the late 19th century!

Speaking about the 19th century, and up to the pre revolutionary time we have to pay special attention to the charitable activities of two persons, recently canonized in Russia by Moscow Patriarchy, these are: parish priest John of Kronstadt (canonized 1990) and Great Princess Elizabeth Feodorovna, the sister of the last Tzarina (canonized 1992).

Father John Sergiyev, future John of Kronstadt, came to the fortress of Kronstadt in 1865 as a young priest, and started eagerly to help the poor and humiliated people. There were plenty of them in Kronstadt, as the fortress was a kind of a social filter for St. Petersburg. The matter was that 'anti-social' persons were not allowed to live in St Petersburg; drunkards and criminals were arrested and removed from the city to Kronstadt. They were the object of the young priest's particular care.

The charitable activity of Great Princess Elizabeth Feodorovna is an example of a more general service. She, as well as her sister Alexandra Feodorovna, was a German Princess of Hessen-Darmstadt house. In 1884, at the age of 20, she married Great Prince Sergey Alexandrovich, brother of the Emperor Alexander III. In 1890 she was baptized in the Russian Orthodox Church. It is said that her transfer to Orthodoxy was influenced by her acquaintance with Father John of Kronstadt. In 1894, when the new Emperor Nicolai II nominated her husband as Governor General of Moscow, so she moved there. On February 17, 1905, Great Prince Sergey Alexandrovich died in a bomb attack by the terrorist Ivan Kalyayev. In the days of mourning, the Great Princess endured a spiritual crisis. She visited her husband's assassin in jail and forgave him his evil deed. She asked the Court not to punish the assassin, and decided to devote her further life to service to the needy. With that purpose she established the nurse's Convent of St. Martha & Maria together with a hospital. Besides the hospital there was an out-patient's clinical department in the convent, a canteen, a shelter for the elderly, an orphan's shelter, and a doss-house. The Great Princess worked as a simple Red Cross nurse in all these establishments. In addition, she took the chair of the Moscow department of the Red Cross.

After the October Revolution in 1917, when the life of the Imperial House members was becoming all the harder, she replied quite briefly: "This will serve for their moral clearing and bring them closer to God". First Bolshevik groups who visited the convent could not but be impressed by her personality and her selfless work. "Who knows, - one of those Bolsheviks noted, - "maybe we are moving towards the same purpose, but through different ways". First, Soviet power offered total freedom to the Convent of St. Martha & Maria, and even provided it with food. The more sudden and amazing was its ruin at Easter day 1918: that day Great Princess and sister Varvara, who remained faithful to the Great Princess till their death, were arrested and sent to Yekaterinburg together with other members of the Tsar's family. Later they were transferred to Alapayevsk, a small town in the Urals. On June 17, 1918, Great Princess Elizabeth Feodorovna and other members of the Emperor's family and sister Varvara were thrown alive into one of local mines. In October, the White Guards' troops removed the corpses from the mine. It appeared that Elizabeth Feodorovna and one of the young Great Princess fell onto a small ledge at the depth of 15 meter, and Eliza-

beth Feodorovna, in spite of her own suffering, found forces enough to bandage the young Great Princesse's bruised head with tier head band of a nurse.

The final blow to destroy charity was done by Communism. After the October Revolution charity was getting harder and harder to perform, especially in an organized way. Patriarch Tikhon considered this a newly set task for old and new fraternities. "Form fraternities and councils out of good parishioners, if you find it useful in local conditions", he addressed the priests. During Volga starvation in the early twenties, Patriarch Tikhon established an All-Russian church commission for helping the starving. Soviet power, however, found the commission unnecessary. The Central Executive Committee ordered the confiscation of all valuable things from churches, including sacred "cups and other liturgical items", i.e. things sanctified for liturgy. Repression of the Russian Orthodox Church had started. In spite of that "intensive cultural and charitable activity of the young" existed in parishes up to 1928.

So, all charitable establishments of the Russian Orthodox Church were confiscated, no charitable activity was possible any more. Communism has proved its brutality by forbidding the citizens to show their pity for certain social groups: the deprived, i.e. those who needed pity most, those who had always been called unhappy. Nothing could be a more striking evidence of a decline of Christian world outlook. Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote in his Archipelag GULag; "One of the most favorite prison talks is the talk about prison traditions, about what it meant before to be in jail ... We were most of all amazed by the fact that it once had been a honor to be a political prisoner, that not only their real relatives never rejected them but even alien girls used to come and ask for an appointment as brides. And what about the former tradition of holiday gifts for the prisoners? In old Russia, nobody started to break his fast without bringing some food to prison, for the common benefit of nameless prisoners. There was Christmas ham, and pies, and Easter cakes. Even some poor old woman would bring a dozen of painted eggs, to lighten her heart. Where did that Russian kindness disappear? It was replaced by political consciousness! To what a brutal extent the people is frightened now, unable to care for those who suffer. It seems odd now. Now, if in some institution you offered to make a holiday gift gathering for prisoners of a local jail, those in charge will understand it almost as an anti-Soviet rebellion! We are brutes now."

Only private individual charity remained possible in Soviet times. Only after M.S. Gorbachev proclaimed the politics of 'glasnost and perestroyka' (openness and reconstruction) the Russian Orthodox Church could perform regular charity again, the word 'mercy' appeared in the press which was the first sign of new opportunities opened for charity. The very word reminded of pre-revolutionary fraternities and convents. The Russian Orthodox Church started to make first small steps towards organization of charity.

After the former Tolga monastery in Yaroslavl eparchy was returned to the Russian Orthodox Church, a nunnery was re-opened there very soon. Then in October 1990, the Patriarch sanctified Russia's first Christian hospital in St. Petersburg. In November 1990, Orthodox nurse's courses were opened in Moscow, and soon after that, a hospital temple was established at Moscow's First City Hospital.

The care of the poor, the aid for those in need and in pain, and charity as such have been circumscribed at the level of a congregation and depended on the work of a few committed individuals rather than on special ecclesiastical institutions. This special

feature of the Eastern Orthodox mentality seems still to be strong today. At the meeting of Moscow diocesan commission on church social activities, held on April 4, 2003 right after the Patriarch's speech, social work was said "to have been really beginning after ten years of Church's freedom"; however, as the meeting acknowledged, "this [social] work is led in most cases by individual parishes or active priests. In spite of the ecclesiastical discipline, there is no common, coherent understanding of how this work should be managed."

As the experience of recent years clearly shows, the initiatives that are in line with Eastern Orthodox tradition and match the historical memory of the Russian Orthodox Church, have better chances of success. One example of such traditional activity is congregational charity: distribution of clothes and food to homeless by churches and monasteries. The priest can commission women of the parish to help the elderly with buying food, bathing them, home making, and accompanying them to church. This kind of aid is quite common but not institutionally organized. As Metropolitan Sergey Solnechnogorsky said in his report "Now church charity goes back to authentic traditional forms which existed back in the late nineteenth century, when the care was carried out through monasteries and parishes that offered a variety of social services: teaching, medical treatment, education, sheltering, etc."

Similarly successful can be the activities of small groups based on traditions of monastic asceticism, such as the sisterhoods, who are active in medical institutions. The sisterhood is usually a group of around 30 women or less, who plan to take monastic vows. Some of the initiatives of individual activists have received great acclaim, such as Pokrov Hospital, surgery and traumatology department, where the church people are employed. Children's houses, young people Orthodox centers, psycho-neurological boarding houses, street children orphanage in St. Petersburg have been initiated by Father Alexander Stepanov in St. Petersburg diocese. A family orphanage was created by Father Nikolai Sremsky in Orenburg diocese, and an alms-house and an orphanage by priest Mikhail Patola in Belgorod diocese.

Much of traditional congregational charity simply is not listed in the official reports and in this way treated as non-existing. Sometimes sisterhoods, small shelters and orphanages do not register officially, in order to avoid bureaucratic red-tape and fiscal complications.

Yet, all these individual cases can not solve the problems the Russian Orthodox Church faces in the field of social work to-day. Whether these forms of charity are sufficient in today's society is doubtful because it requires a much larger scale of social work. Indeed, the complex situation in Russia requires new emphasis on the development of full-fledged organizational, institutionalized kinds of charitable work, which could be borrowed from the experience of western churches. This goal does not seem to be attainable, however, until a generational change occurs among the Russian Orthodox clergy. As the Patriarch puts it, "in addition to traditional qualities of restraint, caution, forbearance, flexibility, wisdom, tranquility and discipline, which were required from the pastors in the past, there are new qualities that are essential now: initiative, education, sociability, and good manners." The appearance of a new generation of Orthodox clergy is impossible without a profound transformation of the complex network of ecclesiastical educational institutions, which create another challenge for the Russian Orthodox Church.

It must be noted here that the training of new cadres for the ministry clearly lags behind the needs and the scale of the church's tasks. As reported by the Patriarch at the Moscow diocesan assembly, in 2002 there were only 43 full-time and 39 part-time graduates from the Moscow Church Academy, out of whom 23 received the degree of 'candidate of theology'. 119 priests graduated from the Moscow Seminary; 29 women graduated from the Choral School of the Church Academy, and 16 people finished the Icon Painting School. There were 278 specialists trained by the Saint Tikhon Theological Institute, including 115 priests and 35 deacons; altogether there are 1,749 full-time and 1,982 part-time students at this institute in 2004. In the near future fundamental reform of the whole system of clerical training and education of other church workers seems to be indispensable. Apart from the problem of recruiting and training clergy, serious efforts are needed to adjust historical traditions, historical obstacles named before with contemporary conditions and to modernize the financial and administrative management of the church.

All these factors related to the issues of the social work of the church require careful examination. Since Soviet times, there has been a long tradition of the 'double-dealing' in church accountancy at the lowest level of the hierarchy (parish, or congregation), which consisted in trying to conceal cash revenues from state control. This system did not disappear in the post-Soviet times; it even became stronger. The reasons for this were the economic chaos of the early stage of market reforms, the official politics of monetarism based upon a severe tax pressure, and the weakness of the law enforcement institutions. Donations by the faithful, revenues from selling candles and religious books, and other items have been rarely counted officially, and the distribution or spending of funds was left entirely to the will of a bishop or a priest. This led to the state of affairs in which the system of intra-church financial distribution, as laid out in the Church Charter, never worked properly. The money collected at any level of church hierarchy, including the congregation, diocese, or the central church apparatus, in most cases was left in the hands of those who were in charge of collecting it.

It must be added that even the developed system of redistribution within the Russian Orthodox Church could not simply subsist on private donations only, given the dramatic fall of living standards in early 1990s. In this situation, the activities of central, diocesan or inter-diocesan institutions completely depended upon the money that the respective prelate was able to raise. Yet the very ability of such fund-raising depended upon the privileges offered by the state. These privileges are likely to disappear and to become outdated in new conditions in which the state is trying to equalize all organizations in terms of tax and property. This must impel the Russian Orthodox Church to immediate reform of her financial structure.