The Life of Our Venerable Father Sergius of Radonezh

Our venerable father Sergius of Radonezh, abbot and wonderworker, was one of the great monastic fathers of the Russian Church. Through humility, prayer, obedience, and love for the Most Holy Trinity, he became a spiritual father not only to monks, but also to princes, bishops, and countless Orthodox Christians. His life remains especially dear to those who seek wisdom from God, for as a child he struggled greatly to learn, yet through prayer and divine grace he received the gift of understanding.

He was born about the year 1314 near Rostov, into the pious household of Cyril and Maria. At Holy Baptism he was given the name Bartholomew. Even before his birth, the ancient Life of the saint relates that God gave a sign concerning the child. While his mother was attending the Divine Liturgy, the child cried aloud from within her womb three times. Those who heard it were filled with wonder, and his mother understood that the child had been marked out for the service of God.

From infancy Bartholomew showed an unusual inclination toward fasting and prayer. The Life relates that on Wednesdays and Fridays he would not take his mother's milk. These early signs were not the cause of his holiness, but they foreshadowed the life of ascetic struggle that he would later freely embrace.

As he grew older, however, Bartholomew encountered a trial that caused him great sorrow. His brothers learned to read without difficulty, but he struggled to recognize and understand the written word. His teachers reproved him, his parents worried for him, and the young boy himself grieved deeply because he longed to read the Holy Scriptures and the sacred books of the Church.

This struggle became one of the defining moments of his childhood.

One day his father sent him to search for some horses. While walking through the fields, Bartholomew saw an elderly monk standing beneath a tree in prayer. The boy approached quietly and waited until the elder had finished. When the monk asked what he desired, Bartholomew did not ask for riches, honour, or success. He asked that God grant him the ability to understand his lessons and to read the divine books.

The elder prayed for him and gave him a small portion of blessed bread. He told the boy to receive it as a sign of the grace of God and assured him that the Lord would grant him understanding.

Bartholomew invited the elder to his parents' home. There, the monk asked the boy to read from the Psalter. Bartholomew hesitated, remembering his former difficulty, but in obedience he opened the book and began to read. To the astonishment of his family, he now read clearly and with understanding.

From that time his difficulty was overcome.

The Church remembers this episode not merely as a miracle of learning, but as a revelation of the kind of wisdom that would shape the whole of St. Sergius's life. Knowledge was not given to him as a possession or a cause for pride. It was received through prayer, humility, obedience, and dependence upon God. The boy who once struggled to read would later become a spiritual teacher to an entire people.

As Bartholomew entered his youth, his love for prayer deepened. He attended the divine services faithfully, fasted with increasing seriousness, and desired a life wholly devoted to God. He longed to become a monk, but his parents asked him not to leave them in their old age. He obeyed them.

The family eventually moved from the region of Rostov to Radonezh. In their later years Cyril and Maria themselves embraced the monastic life before peacefully departing this world. Only after fulfilling his duty toward his parents did Bartholomew begin to pursue the solitary life for which he had long prayed.

Together with his older brother Stephen, he withdrew into a remote forest wilderness at a place known as Makovets. There the brothers built a small cell and then a wooden church dedicated to the Life-Giving Trinity.

The wilderness was severe. Food was scarce, the winters were bitter, and wild animals roamed the forest. Stephen eventually found the solitude too difficult and departed for a monastery in Moscow. Bartholomew remained alone.

He was tonsured as a monk and received the name Sergius.

For a time he lived almost entirely in solitude. He laboured with his own hands, prayed through the long nights, fasted, and endured temptations and fear. The ancient Life speaks of assaults by demons attempting to drive him from the wilderness, but Sergius overcame them through prayer and the sign of the Cross.

Among the best-loved traditions from these years is his friendship with a wild bear. The animal began coming near his cell in search of food. Sergius would share with it what little bread he possessed, sometimes giving the bear his own portion even when his supply was small. The story reveals something characteristic of the saint: gentleness without sentimentality, poverty without anxiety, and trust in God even when there seemed to be barely enough for the following day.

Sergius had sought solitude, but holiness rarely remains hidden for long.

Other men learned of the ascetic living in the forest and came asking to join him. At first only a small brotherhood formed around his cell. Each monk built his own dwelling, and together they gathered for prayer. Sergius did not seek leadership and was reluctant to become their superior. But the brethren repeatedly asked him to serve as their spiritual father.

In obedience he eventually accepted ordination to the priesthood and the responsibility of being their abbot.

His manner of leadership remained strikingly simple. Though he was abbot, Sergius did not place himself above the brethren. He cut wood, carried water, baked bread, prepared food, made candles, repaired the cells, and served the monks in ordinary tasks. When the monastery was poor, he himself sometimes worked for others in exchange for a little bread.

He taught chiefly by the life he lived.

The community grew, and with growth came new trials. A stricter common life was eventually established, encouraging the monks to hold things in common rather than live as largely independent hermits. St. Sergius received encouragement for this form of monastic life from Patriarch Philotheus of Constantinople, and Metropolitan Alexis of Moscow supported him.

Not everyone welcomed the change. At one point conflict arose within the brotherhood, and rather than struggle for his own authority, Sergius quietly departed. He established another monastic community on the Kirzhach River. Only later, at the urging of Metropolitan Alexis and the brethren, did he return.

This refusal to cling to position marked the whole of his life.

His reputation as a spiritual father spread far beyond the monastery. Bishops, princes, monks, and ordinary people came seeking counsel and prayer. The sick were brought to him, and the Church preserves accounts of healing through his intercession. He was also known for spiritual discernment and for mysteries that revealed the closeness of the heavenly world.

On one occasion, those serving with him at the Divine Liturgy beheld an angel ministering beside him at the altar.

Metropolitan Alexis, recognizing the holiness and wisdom of Sergius, wished him eventually to become his successor as metropolitan. Sergius firmly refused. He had no desire for ecclesiastical dignity. His vocation was not to rise in rank, but to remain a servant of God and father to those entrusted to him.

His influence nevertheless reached deeply into the life of the Russian lands. At a time when rival princes frequently struggled with one another, Sergius was called upon as a peacemaker and spiritual counsellor. He urged reconciliation, unity, repentance, and fidelity to the Christian life.

The most famous political event associated with him occurred in connection with Prince Dmitry of Moscow and the struggle against the forces of Mamai, culminating in the Battle of Kulikovo in 1380.

The early Life of St. Sergius preserves the tradition that the saint foresaw victory and strengthened Prince Dmitry with prayer and encouragement. Later chronicles and ecclesiastical traditions developed the account more fully, including details surrounding the prince's visit to the monastery and the participation of monastic warriors. Because these details come to us through different layers of the historical tradition, they should not all be treated as though they appeared identically in the earliest Life.

What is central to the Church's memory is that St. Sergius did not glorify war. He called the prince to faith in God, gave spiritual encouragement in a time of grave danger, and continued in prayer while the conflict unfolded. His role was that of a spiritual father who sought the protection and peace of his people while directing their hope toward God.

Yet the deepest events of St. Sergius's life were not political.

One night, while praying in his cell, he received a vision of extraordinary beauty. He saw a multitude of birds, and a voice revealed to him that just as the birds were beyond counting, so would his spiritual children multiply. In later generations, disciples of St. Sergius and those formed by his example would establish monasteries throughout the Russian lands, carrying the traditions of prayer, labour, simplicity, and communal life into new regions.

The greatest of the saint's recorded visions came near the end of his life.

While St. Sergius was praying before an icon of the Most Holy Theotokos, a brilliant light filled his cell. The Mother of God appeared to him together with the holy Apostles Peter and John. St. Sergius fell to the ground in fear and reverence.

The Most Holy Theotokos assured him that his prayer had been heard and that she would not abandon his monastery. Her protection would remain over the place during his life and after his departure.

This promise became one of the great treasures of the monastery founded in the wilderness by the once-unknown monk.

As St. Sergius grew old, he prepared quietly for death. He entrusted the brotherhood to his disciple St. Nikon and withdrew more deeply into prayer. He urged the brethren to remain steadfast in the fear of God, purity of life, humility, and sincere love for one another.

On September 25, 1392, having received the Holy Mysteries and commended his soul to God, our venerable father Sergius peacefully departed this life.

His influence did not end with his repose.

The monastery dedicated to the Holy Trinity became a great spiritual centre, and generations of monks looked to Sergius as their father. His disciples and those inspired by them carried monastic life into forests and remote regions, founding new communities and strengthening the life of the Church.

For Orthodox Christians, however, the greatness of St. Sergius lies not chiefly in the institutions that came after him, nor in his influence upon rulers, but in the simplicity of his path.

The child who could not read prayed for understanding.

The young man who desired the wilderness first obeyed his parents.

The hermit who wished to remain hidden accepted responsibility for others.

The abbot served his own monks with his hands.

The spiritual father who counselled princes refused honours for himself.

And through all things, St. Sergius placed his hope in the Most Holy Trinity.

Epilogue: The Uncovering of His Holy Relics

Thirty years after the repose of St. Sergius, preparations were made for the construction of a new church at the monastery. On July 5, 1422, his grave was opened and his holy relics were uncovered.

The later hagiographic tradition records that the relics were found incorrupt, even though water had surrounded the burial place, and that his clothing also remained preserved. The relics were solemnly enshrined and became a source of consolation and healing to the faithful.

The Church continues to commemorate the uncovering of the relics of St. Sergius on July 5, while his principal feast is celebrated on September 25, the day of his repose.

Through the prayers of our venerable and God-bearing father Sergius of Radonezh, O Lord Jesus Christ our God, have mercy on us and save us.

Amen.