



St. Mitrofan Srebrianski – Father-Confessor of the Martha-Mary Convent

Many considered the Grand Duchess Elizabeth to be an unerring judge of character. This was certainly borne out in her choice of Priest Mitrofan Srebrianski as father-confessor for her Martha-Mary Convent. Some people charged that he was too severe, but in a letter to Tsar Nicholas, dated April 1909, the Grand Duchess contradicted these reports with the following recommendation:



St. Mitrofan Srebrianski

'... You know Fr. Mitrofan and had a good impression at Sarov [where she had accompanied the Tsar in 1903 for the glorification of Saint Seraphim], at Orel he was adored and here many come from far to our little church and find strength in his beautiful simple sermons and confession. He is large, nothing of the narrow-minded bigot, all founded on God's unbounded love and forgiveness — a true Orthodox priest keeping strictly to our Church — for our work God's blessing, as he has laid the foundation as it ought to be — so many he has brought back to faith, put on the right road, so many thank me for the great blessing they have received being able to come to him. No exaltation — but you know me well enough that I love calm deep religion and would not choose a fanatic as priest in one way or the other. /.../ I tell one has tormented him that you might be vexed by my conduct and think he influences me to cut myself off from you all and kill myself through an ascetic life and much work whereas not one of these suppositions is true. He confesses me, guides me in the church and gives me an immense help and example through his pure simple life, so modest



and high in its unboundless love for God and the Orthodox Church. Only to speak to him for a few minutes one sees he is modest, pure, a man of God, and God's servant in our church."

Fr Mitrofan was born 31 July 1870. From 1896 he served in Orel and was a military chaplain with the 51st Chernigov regiment, whose nominal chief was the Grand Duchess Elizabeth. While with the regiment at the front in the Russo-Japanese War, from 1904-1906, he kept a diary of his experiences, which was serialized in a Russian journal. When his marriage proved to be childless, he and his matushka Olga agreed to live as brother and sister, in the manner of Saint John of Kronstadt. They later received the monastic tonsure at the hands of Patriarch Tikhon on one of his visits to the Martha-Mary Convent. As father-confessor of the community, Fr. Mitrofan daily served the Divine Liturgy and three times a week gave lectures. In the same letter to the Tsar, Saint Elizabeth writes, "Our lectures with the priest are most interesting — quite exceptionally so as he not only has his deep faith but has read immensely. He begins from the Bible and will end by church history and all showing the way how the sisters can after speak and help those in moral suffering."

After the arrest of the Grand Duchess in 1918, Fr. Mitrofan continued to spiritually nurture the sisters until 1926, when the communists forced the convent's closure and he himself was arrested. He spent the next sixteen years in various prisons and camps of the Gulag before settling in exile in the village of Vladichnoye in the Tver region. There he died on 5 April 1948 from pneumonia. He was buried in the village cemetery. When, two years later, his matushka died and was lowered into the same grave, the lid of Fr. Mitrofan's coffin shifted to reveal his incorrupt relics. Local veneration of Fr. Mitrofan began soon after his repose.



Matushka Natalia Sokolova

A more vivid picture of this remarkable priest is provided in the reminiscences of N. N. Sokolova. She was in



her early 20s when she became interested in a young man whose family had been branded “enemies of the people” Her mother disapproved of their developing relationship, and when an acquaintance told her about the holy life of Fr. Mitrofan Srebriansky, Natalia anxiously awaited an opportunity to visit the elder in his place of exile and seek his advice:

It was a frosty November day. We walked briskly over the hard earth with its patches of ice and dusting of snow. The endless fields, broken only here and there by frozen canals, stretched out in unrelieved monotony. There were no bushes, no trees, no villages in sight the entire eight kilometers that separated the railway station of Kriuchkovo from the small village of Vladichnoye.

The village looked grey and dreary. There was not a soul in sight, the trees stood naked. On the very edge, beneath a row of tall black lindens, nestled a small thatched cottage with three tiny windows. Here lived, for many years already, the much-suffering Fr. Mitrofan from Orel, the former father-confessor of the Martha-Mary Convent in Moscow. Two elderly nuns took care of Fr. Mitrofan and his matushka, who was paralyzed and bedridden. They were expecting us. Opening the heavy door and bending our heads, we stepped over the high threshold and were enveloped at once by warmth and coziness.

To the left was an enormous Russian stove, to the right — Batiushka’s bed, partitioned off by a curtain. In front of it was a small iron stove with a black pipe leading into the pipe from the Russian stove, in the right front corner was a crowd of icons with burning vigil lamps, beneath which was a small table with various holy objects. In a tiny white bed, with her head to this table and her feet towards the stove, lay matushka, so thin as to bear more resemblance to one dead than to one who was alive. The pale November light, filtering through the windows, illumined a long, narrow table which stretched along the front wall. There remained a space of about two yards to the left corner which was also hung with icons. Along the left wall up to the stove stood a narrow wooden bench, which was moved to the table at mealtimes.

Batiushka was heavysset, dropsical, with a long sparse beard and thin grey hair. His breathing was labored and he arose from his chair with evident difficulty. He welcomed me affectionately. “A student, the daughter of a professor from Moscow has come,” he announced. “What’s more — she’s an artist, Fetch my church. I want to show it to her.” From a shelf above Batiushka’s bed, the nuns brought down a paper model of a well-known architectural gem, a church in Kolomenskoye. They told me that Batiushka had spent hours with a compass, making patterns from a small drawing, and then cutting them out and pasting them together. “This morning he asked us to bring down this elegant church and blow the dust off,” in preparation to show it to me.

He quickly understood, however, that a creation by human hands did not easily impress a girl from the capital. I looked at the paper church without interest. What I wanted was to peer into the temple of his soul. My own soul had been aching for the past two years, and I had come to Fr. Mitrofan for healing, for advice and in hopes of receiving a blessing for marriage. It appeared that Batiushka understood my desires and he began pouring out stories, one after another, about his childhood, his work, his sufferings.

There were many children in his family. His father was a priest. The children used the formal “you” in speaking to their parents. When a child turned four, the father took him to the mother and solemnly announced that from now on the child was able to keep all the fasts.

The Srebriansky children were very respectful of their parents — something rarely encountered nowadays.



“Father would come home tired and sit down,” related Batiushka, “and we would pull off his boots. Once one of my younger sisters was pulling off a boot and my father somehow impatiently shoved her with his foot. I stood up for my sister, and caught it for criticizing my father.”

It w’as very touching to hear the story of how the young Mitrofan asked his parents’ blessing to marry, so that he could later become a priest.

Batiusbka loved his wife with true Christian love. More than once during the day, I saw him tenderly bend over the invalid and offer to do something for her, asking if she wanted something and trying to guess her wishes from her facial expressions, for she could neither move nor speak, although she was fully conscious. “Olga, darling, my dear companion, how much she endured together with me! She traveled hundreds of kilometers down the Irtysh on a raft to visit me in exile. You cannot imagine what it is to spend a whole week on a raft, without a roof, exposed to wind, rain and sun! Without any accommodation, not to speak of food! And she still managed to visit me, she did not leave me alone in distant Siberia. What a great support that was for me!”

“When God did not give us any children, we decided to maintain chastity. What a torture we took upon ourselves. It was easier for her as a woman. But for me — to have beside you the object of your ardent desire, to have every right to her — to have the blessing of the Church — and nevertheless to languish and cut off the passions of the flesh in the name of a voluntary podvig for the sake of Christ. One can bear such suffering only with God.”

Our conversation was frequently interrupted. Batiushka had people coming to see him all the time. Soon he had everyone sit down at the table. There was no electricity in the village. The November day was rapidly overtaken by evening shadows and on the table there appeared a kerosene lamp. Some old women were leaving. Outside it was cold and dark. One of them felt uneasy. “What is there to be afraid of? We have nothing to fear even from the evil one. How many times has he come and sat down in the chair right under the icons. Such insolence — he dares to sit down right next to the Holy Gifts! And he proceeds to mock me; he kicks me in my big belly [Batiushka had a hernia]. But I don’t feel it. After all, unless God allows it, he can’t do anything.” “Batiushka, you should make the sign of the Cross at once, so that ‘he would disappear.” “Yes, he disappears instantly; he can’t bear the Cross,” responded Batiushka. “But I don’t hurry. I take a good look at him — he’s so repulsive, so ugly, impotent.”

Batiushka took a Russian Bible and read some psalms, he read in a loud voice, with feeling, and requested that everyone listen. “This is a conversation of a soul with God, and one must read the psalms in Russian, so that they would be intelligible both to the mind and to the heart.”

At times Batiushka became especially animated. He would suddenly begin walking back and forth across the room with light, rapid steps, his blue eyes sparkling as he related some fascinating incident from his life, transporting us into the past. It is 1905. Batiushka is a young military chaplain among the soldiers on the Far Eastern front. Here he is giving communion to the wounded, there he is confessing the dying; here he is serving funerals, here he is serving a molleben before a battle. He described all the events of this period in a book, *Notes of a Military Chaplain*, published in 1906. The book came into the hands of the Empress’s sister, Grand Duchess Elizabeth. She wanted to meet the author and, after the war was over and Fr. Mitrofan was again serving in Oral, she invited him to Moscow.



It was at that time that the Grand Duchess was contemplating the establishment in Moscow of a women's monastery of the type she had encountered abroad. Among the drafts of a rule of such a community was one submitted by Fr. Mitrofan. The Grand Duchess approved his draft, but was unable to locate for the sisters a spiritual father with the qualifications required by Fr. Mitrofan's rule — he was to be a married priest who lived with his matushka not as a wife but as a sister. When she could not find such a priest, the Grand Duchess offered Fr. Mitrofan to take the position himself. He was called to Moscow but he declined the offer: He loved his Orel parish and pitied his flock, who were loathe to part with their beloved spiritual father. Fr. Mitrofan was very popular in Orel; everyone respected him and sought his advice.

“At the end of the Liturgy, after people had kissed the cross, they would continue coming up to me. With some I would talk, another would ask for advice, a third wanted to share his grief — and this would go on for hours. Meanwhile, matushka would be waiting with dinner, but I seldom left the church before five o'clock,” related Batiushka.

However, as devoted as Fr. Mitrofan was to his flock, the Grand Duchess's offer was considered almost as an order, and Batiushka did not dare refuse her. He promised to think it over, but as soon as he left Moscow, he resolved to decline. “On my return journey to Orel, I stopped off at an estate near Moscow. I went by myself for a walk in the park. My soul was churning with vacillating thoughts. I thought of my hometown, the tears of my spiritual children, and my heart was torn. I determined to turn down the Empress's sister. And so I walked down the shaded alleys, delighting in nature's splendor, in the flowers — when suddenly I felt that one of my arms had gone numb. I couldn't move it. I tried to raise it but in vain: I couldn't move my fingers, I couldn't bend my elbow. My arm was totally useless! I was aghast. Of what use was I without an arm? I couldn't serve! I understood that the Lord was punishing me for refusing to submit to His holy will. Right there in the park I began to pray fervently, begging the Creator to forgive me. I promised to agree to go to Moscow, if only the Lord returned the use of my arm. About two hours went by, and the paralysis gradually wore off. I returned home perfectly healthy and informed my parish that I had to leave them. Such an uproar! Tears, laments, sobbing ... I myself wept together with my dear parishioners. They pleaded, they urged me to reconsider. I had promised the Grand Duchess that I would come to Moscow, but I did not have the strength to tear myself away from my beloved children, my dear parish. Months passed. Moscow was waiting for me, but still I delayed, vacillating. Finally I was persuaded that to part from my flock was beyond my powers, and I wrote to decline the position. Shortly thereafter I again lost the use of my arm, and again I was called to Moscow. Full of grief and despondency, I went in Moscow to the wonderworking Iveron icon of the Mother of God. It had been taken all over Russia, and when it returned to Moscow, people flocked to it. I stood in the crowd, my cheeks wet with tears, and asked the Queen of Heaven to heal my arm. I promised once again, firmly and resolutely, to accept the Grand Duchess's offer and move go Moscow, if only my arm were restored and I could perform the Mysteries as before. Reverently, with fear of God and hope, I venerated the wonderworking image. I felt life return to my arm; my fingers moved! Then I joyfully informed the Grand Duchess that I had come to a decision and was moving to Moscow.

“But, oh, how difficult it was to realize this. On the day of my departure, the train was scheduled to leave the station at nine o'clock in the morning. Meanwhile, thousands of people jammed the station and the roadbed, so that the train was unable to move. The mounted police were called and it was not until three o'clock that my train finally pulled out, accompanied by the laments and mourning of my forsaken spiritual children.”



Batiushka sank heavily into his chair and bowed his head. It seemed that his strength had left him: again I saw before me a weak and sick elder, living out the final year of his much-suffering life.

It was the November holidays, and that evening there arrived unexpectedly from Moscow the renowned homeopath Peskovsky. Approaching matushka's bed, he kneeled down and with tears kissed her frail, paralyzed hands. "She was like a mother to him," explained Batiushka. "At the age of ten he was left an orphan and lived with us like a son."

Night fell and by the light of a candle evening prayers were read according to the lengthy monastic rule. Then from somewhere there appeared pillows and blankets, and we began to think how to arrange sleeping places for nine people in one cottage././

In the morning everyone dispersed, and I had a chance to talk to Batiushka about my life... He sat me down beside him on his bed and instructed me on how to behave with my future husband.

"We men are coarse by nature, and because of it we prize affection, gentleness, meekness — qualities that we lack. Nothing so repels a man as brazenness, harsh coarseness or insolence in a woman."

People gathered for a long prayer rule, which was followed by breakfast. Batiushka's every word etched itself in my memory. Drinking tea from the steaming samovar, he remarked, "Oh, if you only knew what it sometimes means to have a cup of hot tea! I was summoned from my prison cell for interrogation, However, I was in such a state that I could neither reason nor speak... The interrogator — God bless him — took pity on me and ordered that I be brought a cup of strong, hot tea. This revived me, and I was able to answer his questions.

"I was sentenced to be shot. I sat in a cell with others who were similarly condemned. Every day several of our number were called out never to be seen again. Oh, that was a stressful night, anticipating my own death the next day! But just then the patriarchal locum tenens, Vladika Sergei, signed a paper stating that, according to the laws of the Soviet regime, the Church was not subject to persecution. This saved our lives, and executions were commuted to exile. But what an arduous journey that was! For several days and nights, we lay on platforms in the cars, forbidden to get up. Our bodies ached; we wanted desperately to move around. Meanwhile, a young soldier with a rifle walked back and forth and barked at us sternly. After all, one could not trust criminals to move about the cars, and among us were all kinds of bandits. I prayed, exhausted from lying prostrate for so long. Then I stuck my head into the passageway and addressed the soldier. 'Dear fellow, you must be from Voronezh.' How did you know?' asked the youth in astonishment. 'Well, I'm from Orel. In Voronezh do you know such-and-such a place?' We struck up a conversation, the fellow's face lit up with a flood of memories about places dear to his heart. Circumspectly he whispered, 'Get down, walk around.' That saved me. It was the Lord's mercy. I didn't know that he was from Voronezh; it was the grace of the priesthood. That and that alone. People think I know something, that I'm clairvoyant. It's simply the grace of the priesthood.

A few years before he died, Fr. Mitrofan was raised to the rank of archimandrite and bore the name Sergius. His matushka became a nun — Mother Elizabeth. Batiushka explained that he had accepted this rank with the blessing of the Optina elder, Fr. Anatole, He was surprised when I responded that I had never heard anything about the last Optina elders. I myself was amazed at Batiushka's interest in politics and current events. There was no radio -the village was remote — and Batiushka asked everyone to buy him all



sorts of newspapers and magazines, even if they were a week old or more. He delighted in the sharp wit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Vyshinsky, and tried to discuss international affairs with me, but I was thick-headed and ill-informed.

Fr. Mitrofan was an optimist by nature. He believed that science would attain such a level that it would prove the existence of another, spiritual, non-material world. Then people would become convinced of the existence of God, they would come to believe in the immortality of the soul and there would be the “first resurrection.” i.e., the resurrection of the soul from the darkness of sin. *All the nations which Thou hast created will come and worship before Thee, O Lord, and shall glorify Thy name* (Ps. 85:9)

“But this paradise will not last long on earth. Spoiled over thousands of years, sinful man will soon find submission to God to be irksome and unbearable. Then people will rise up against God and openly declare war against Him... And then the end will come. God will not destroy the world before He has given everyone a chance to believe in Him.” It was the first time I had heard such an idea about the future. I told my relatives, and no one believed me. But no one can force their opinions on another; each person has his particular talent from God; each person has his own understanding, his personal faith in the future.

Batiushka instructed me as to what attitude I should have in my relations with others. “There are no bad people in the world; there are only sick souls, subject to sin, that deserve to be pitied. One must pray for them; they need our compassion..”

It came time for me to leave. I cried, my heart contracted as though I sensed a prolonged separation from this God-pleaser whom in such a short time I had come to love. I promised to come see him again, but Fr. Mitrofan said firmly, “No, in this life we won’t see one another again. You’ll come to my grave.” He put on his overcoat and came outside to see me off. I stopped repeatedly to look back at the little cottage in front of which stood Batiushka, supported by his nephew. He blessed us again and again as with frequent backward glances we trudged along in silence, as though reluctantly. The day was gray, quiet, frosty.

Soon began the Nativity Fast, then the feast days and, on Meatfare in early February, our wedding. A week later my husband was ordained and we were overtaken by the bustle of parish life. I so regret that instead of going right away to see Batiushka, we wall papered our room. Then came icy cold weather, sicknesses, Great Lent with all its services. We did not expect that Batiushka would leave this world so soon. Winter melted into spring and Batiushka departed to the Lord on the eve of the feast of Annunciation. So Fr. Mitrofan celebrated Pascha not in the dilapidated hut among barren fields, but in the radiant kingdom of our Heavenly God and Father, among the saints of the Church triumphant.

Source: [Orthodox America](#)