

Life of the Holy New Martyr Grand Duchess Elizabeth

by Metropolitan Anasstasy

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Not every generation is destined to meet along its path such a blessed gift from heaven as was the Grand Duchess Elizabeth Feodorovna for her time, for she was a rare combination of exalted Christian spirit, moral nobility, enlightened mind, gentle heart, and refined taste. She possessed an extremely delicate and multifaceted spiritual composition and her outward appearance reflected the beauty and greatness of her spirit. Upon her brow lay the seal of an inborn, elevated dignity which set her apart from those around her.

Under the cover of modesty, she often strove, though in vain, to conceal herself from the gaze of others, but one could not mistake her for another. Wherever she appeared, one would always ask: "Who is she who looketh forth as the morning, clear as the sun" (Song of Solomon 6:10)? Wherever she would go she emanated the pure fragrance of the lily. Perhaps it was for this reason that she loved the color white—it was the reflection of her heart.



Grand Duchess Elizabeth

All of her spiritual qualities were strictly balanced, one against another, never giving an impression of one-sidedness. Femininity was joined in her to a courageous character; her goodness never led to weakness and blind, unconditional trust of people. Even in her finest heartfelt inspirations she exhibited that gift of discernment which has always been so highly esteemed by Christian ascetics.

These characteristics were perhaps in part due to her upbringing, which she received under the guidance of her maternal grandmother, Victoria, Queen of England and Empress of India. An unmistakable English stamp was placed on all her tastes and habits and English was closer to her than her native German.

The grand duchess herself acknowledged that a great influence on the formation of the inner, purely spiritual side of her character was the example of a paternal ancestor, Elizabeth Turingen of Hungary, who through her daughter Sophia was one of the founders of the House of Hesse.

Her rich natural gifts were refined by an extensive and wide education which not only satisfied her mental and esthetic needs but also enriched her with knowledge of a purely practical nature, essential for every woman with household duties. "Together with Her Majesty (i.e., Empress Alexandra Feodorovna, her younger sister) we were instructed during our childhood in everything," she once said in answer to how she became acquainted with all the details of housekeeping.

Chosen as the future wife of the Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich, the grand duchess arrived in Russia during the period when the country, under the firm rule of Alexander III, attained the blossoming of its



*Grand Duchess Elizabeth
and Grand Duke Serge*

might in a purely national spirit.

With her moral sensitivity and inborn love for knowledge, the young grand duchess began an intense study of the national characteristics of the Russian people and especially of their faith which places a deep mark on both their national character and upon all of their culture. Soon Orthodoxy won her over by its beauty and inner richness which she often would contrast with the spiritual poverty of Protestantism. ("And they are so self-satisfied about everything!" she said about Protestants.)

Of her experiences in the Roman Catholic world, the grand duchess sometimes recalled a trip to Rome which she had taken together with the late grand duke soon after the jubilee of Pope Leo the XIII. The latter knew well the unshakable firmness of Sergei Alexandrovich's Orthodox convictions and regarded him highly, having first made his acquaintance when the grand duke, still a child, was visiting Rome. This long-standing acquaintance allowed them to converse informally. Between them there even arose an argument about how many popes were named Sergius. Neither of these exalted disputants wanted to give way to the other and the pope had to withdraw into his library to check. He returned a bit upset.

"Forgive me," said Leo XIII, smiling, "although they say the pope is infallible, this time he fell into error."

The grand duchess, of her own volition decided to unite herself to the Orthodox Church. When she made the announcement to her spouse, according to the account of one of the servants, tears involuntarily poured from his eyes. The Emperor Alexander III himself was deeply touched by her decision. Her husband blessed her after Holy Chrismation with a precious icon of the Savior, "Not Made by Hands" (a copy of the miraculous icon in the Chapel of the Savior), which she treasured greatly throughout the remaining course of her life. Having been joined to the Faith in this manner, and thereby to all that makes up the soul of a Russian, the grand duchess could now with every right say to her spouse in the words of the Moabite Ruth, "Your people have become my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16).

The grand duke's extended tenure of office as Governor-General of Moscow, the true heart of Russia, where he and his wife were in living contact with the ancient, holy shrines and the immemorial Russian national way of life, must have bound the grand duchess even more to her new homeland.

Even during these years she dedicated much time to philanthropic activities, though this was considered one of the main obligations of her high position and therefore did not earn for her much public merit. As part of her social obligations the grand duchess was forced to participate in social life which was already beginning to oppress her because of its frivolity.



*Memorial at site of
Grand Duke Serge's death*

The terrible death of the grand duke Sergei Alexandrovich, who was torn apart by a bomb in the holy Kremlin itself (near the Nicholas Palace where the grand duke had moved after he left his position as Governor-General), began a decisive moral change in the soul of his spouse which caused her to forsake her former life once and for all.

The greatness of spirit with which she endured her trial evoked for her the deserved admiration of everyone. She even found in herself the moral strength to visit Kaliev, the murderer of her husband, in the hope of softening and healing his heart by meekness and complete forgiveness. These Christian feelings

she also expressed, through the person of the slaughtered grand duke, by having the following touching words of the Gospel inscribed upon the memorial cross, erected according to the plans of Vasnetsov, at the site of his death, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do..."

However, not everyone was capable of understanding the change which had taken place in her. One had to live through such a staggering catastrophe as this, in order to be convinced of the frailty and illusory nature of wealth, glory and the things of this world, and about which for so many centuries we have been warned by the Gospel.

For the society of that time, the decision of the grand duchess to dismiss her court in order to leave the world and dedicate herself to serving God and neighbor, seemed as scandal and madness. Despising both the tears of friends, gossip and mockings of the world, she courageously set out on her new path. Having earlier chosen for herself the path of the perfect, i.e. the path of ascetic struggle, she began with wisely measured steps to ascend the ladder of Christian virtues.

The advice of wise instructors was not foreign to her, guiding those starting out on the path of Christian activity to learn from others the way of life so as "not to teach oneself, not to go without a guide along a path which one had never traveled and hence quickly lose one's way; not to travel more or less correctly, nor become exhausted from too swift a run or to fall asleep while resting" (Jerome, *A Letter to the Monk Rusticus*).

Therefore she strove to understand nothing without the direction of spiritually experienced elders, especially the elders of the Zosima Hermitage under whom she placed herself in total obedience. As her heavenly guides and protectors she chose St. Sergius and St. Alexis of Moscow. She was entrusted to their special protection by her late spouse whose remains she buried at the Chudov Monastery in a magnificent tomb, styled after those in the ancient Roman catacombs.

The extended period of mourning for the grand duke, during which she retired into her interior world and was continually in church, was the first real break to separate her from what up until then had been her normal everyday life. The move from the palace to the building she acquired at Ordinka, where she allotted only two very modest rooms for herself, signaled a full break with the past and the beginning of a new period in her life.

From now on her main task became the building of a sisterhood in which inner service to God would be integrated with active service to one's neighbor in the name of Christ. This was a completely new form of organized charitable Church activity, and consequently drew general attention to itself.

At its foundation was placed a deep and immutable idea: no one could give to another more than he himself already possessed. We all draw upon God and therefore only in Him can we love our neighbor. Natural love so-called or humanism quickly evaporates, replaced by coldness and disappointment, but one who lives in Christ can rise to the heights of complete self-denial and lay down his life for his friends.

The grand duchess not only wanted to impart to charitable activities the spirit of the Gospel but to place them under the protection of the Church. Thus she hoped to attract gradually to the Church, those levels of Russian society, which up until that time had remained largely indifferent to the Faith.

Highly significant was the very name the grand duchess bestowed upon the institution she established—the Martha and Mary Convent, which name contains within itself the mission, the life of its holy patrons.

The community was intended to be like the home of Lazarus

which the Savior so often visited. The sisters of the convent were called to unite both the high lot of Mary, attending to the eternal word of life, and the service of Martha, to that degree in which they found Christ in the person of His less fortunate brethren.



The Martha and Mary Convent

In justifying and explaining her thought, the ever-memorable foundress of the convent said that Christ the Savior could not judge Martha for showing Him hospitality, since the latter was sign of her love for Him. He only cautioned Martha, and in her all women in general, against that excessive fussing and triviality which draw them away from the higher needs of the spirit.

To be not of this world, and at the same time live and act in the world in order to transform it—this was the foundation upon which she desired to establish her convent.

Striving to be an obedient daughter of the Orthodox Church in all things the grand duchess did not desire to make use of the advantages of her position fearing lest even in the smallest way she take liberties and depart from obedience, from the rules or specific statutes established for everyone by the Church Authority. On the contrary, she fulfilled with complete readiness the slightest desire of the latter even if it did not coincide with her personal views. At one time, for example, she seriously thought about reviving the ancient institution of deaconess, in which she was zealously supported by Metropolitan Vladimir of Moscow. Bishop Germogen (at this time of Saratov, later of Tobolsk where he was martyred), because of a misunderstanding, stood up against this idea, accusing the grand duchess without any foundation, of Protestant tendencies (of which he later repented), and counseled her to abandon her cherished dream.

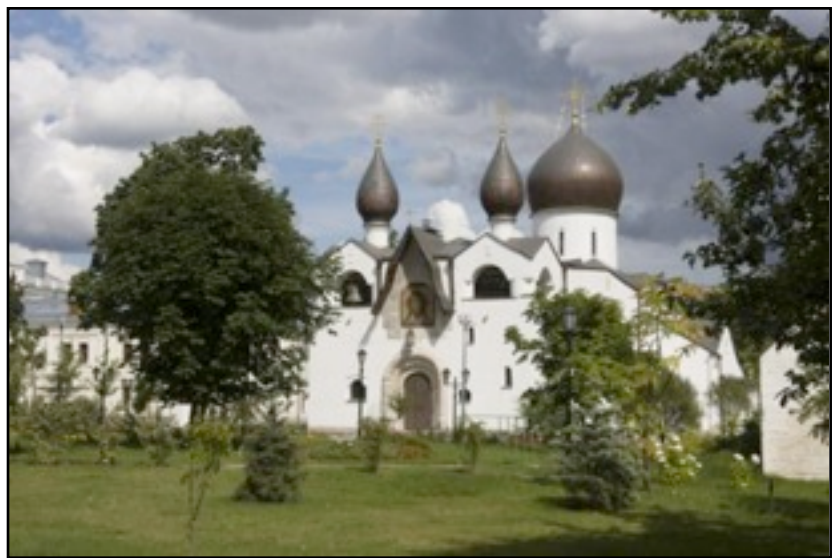
Having been misunderstood in the best of her strivings, the grand duchess did not stifle her spirit because of this trying disappointment, but rather put her whole heart into her beloved Martha and Mary Convent. It is not surprising that the convent quickly blossomed and attracted many sisters from the aristocracy as well as the common people. Nearly monastic order reigned within the inner life of the community and both within and without the convent her activities consisted in the care of those who visited the sick who were lodged in the convent, in the material and moral help given to the poor, and in the almshouse for those orphans and abandoned children found in every large city.

The grand duchess paid special attention to the unfortunate children who bore within themselves the curse of their fathers' sins, the children born in the turbid slums of Moscow only to wither before they had a chance to blossom. Many of them were taken into the orphanage built for them where they were quickly revived spiritually and physically. For others, constant supervision at their place of residence was established.

The spirit of initiative and moral sensitivity which accompanied the grand duchess in all her activities, inspired and impelled her to search out new paths and forms of philanthropic activity, which sometimes reflected the influence of her first, western homeland, and its advanced organizations for social improvement and mutual aid. And so she created a cooperative of messenger boys with a well built dormitory, and apartments for the girls who took part in this activity. Not all of these establishments were directly connected with the convent, but they were all like rays of light from the sun united in the person of their abbess, who embraced them with her care and protection.

Having chosen as her mission not only to serve one's neighbor in general, but also the spiritual re-education of contemporary Russian society, the grand duchess wanted to speak to the latter in a closer, more understandable language about Church art and Orthodox liturgical beauty.

All the churches founded by her, especially the main church of the convent, built in the Novgorod-Pskov style by the famous architect Shchusev and painted by Nesterov, were distinguished by their austere style and the artistic unity of the interior and exterior ornamentation.



the main church of the Convent of Martha and Mary

The crypt located under the arches of the convent church also evoked general admiration for its peaceful warmth.

The church services in the convent were always outstandingly well performed, thanks to the exceptionally capable spiritual father chosen by the abbess. From time to time she attracted other fine pastoral strength from Moscow and all parts of Russia to serve and preach. Like bees gathering nectar from all flowers, according to the words of Gogol, for her, as a true Christian, there was no ultimate course of study and she remained a conscientious humble student all her life.

All the external decor of the Martha and Mary Convent as well the internal structure, and in general all the material creations of the grand duchess were stamped with elegance and culture. This was not because she conveyed to it some sort of self-satisfying significance, but because this was the spontaneous action of her creative spirit.

Having concentrated her activity around the convent, the grand duchess did not sever her ties with those other social organizations and institutions of a charitable or spiritually enlightening nature with which she had been bound by close moral ties ever since her first years in Moscow. Among these, the Palestine Society occupied the first place, so close to her because it called to life the deep Russian Orthodox feeling of her spouse, Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich, for the Holy Land.

Having inherited from him the chairmanship of this society, she imitated him in holy zeal for Sion and in tireless concern over Russian pilgrims heading for the Holy Land. Her cherished dream was to go with them, though she already had earlier visited the holy places together with the late grand duke. The unbroken chain of activity and responsibilities, becoming more complicated with every year, prevented her for a long time from leaving Russia for the Holy City. Alas! No one then foresaw that she would arrive in Jerusalem only after her repose, in order to find there a place for eternal rest.

Her mind was always in harmony with her heart, and in the Palestine work she exhibited not only love and zeal for the Holy Land but a great working knowledge, as if she directly controlled all the institutions of the Society. During the last years before the war she was occupied with plans for the

construction of a metochion to St. Nicholas, in Bari, with a church worthy of the Russian name. The project and model of the building, executed by Shchusev in the ancient Russian style, was permanently exhibited in her reception room.

Countless papers and callers, the examination of various types of petitions and entreaties which were presented to her from all parts of Russia, as well as other affairs, usually filled her whole day and frequently brought her to the point of total exhaustion.

This did not hamper her from spending the night at the bedside of suffering patients or from attending services in the Kremlin and at the greatly loved churches and monasteries in all parts of Moscow. The spirit strengthened the weakened body, her only rest was pilgrimages to various parts of Russia for prayer. However, even here the people took away the possibility of her finding seclusion and quiet.

Greatly honoring her royal birth and great piety, the people ecstatically met her everywhere. The trips of the grand duchess to various cities of Russia, against her will turned into triumphant marches.

Concealing her struggles, she always appeared before people with a bright, smiling face. Only when she was alone or with a few close people, her face and especially her eyes reflected hidden sorrow—the mark of a great soul languishing in this world. Having detached herself from almost all earthly things, she even more brightly radiated an inner light, especially by her love and tenderness. No one could do an act of kindness more delicately—to each according to his need or spiritual temperament. She was not only capable of weeping with the sorrowful but of rejoicing with those who rejoice, which is usually the more difficult.

Though not a nun in the strict sense, better than any nun she observed the great law of St. Nilus of Sinai: "Blessed is the monk who honors every man as (a) god after God." Find the best in every man and, "Have mercy on the fallen," was the continual striving of her heart.

A meek spirit did not prevent her from blazing with holy wrath before injustice. Even more strictly she judged herself if she made some mistake, however involuntarily. Allow me to present a fact which witnesses to this facet of her character, as well as how her sincerity won out against an inborn reserve and the demands of social etiquette.

Once during the time I was vicar bishop of Moscow she offered me the chairmanship of a purely secular organization, not having any activities connected with the Church. I was involuntarily embarrassed, not knowing how to answer her. Understanding my position, she immediately said decisively, "Forgive me, I made a foolish suggestion," and thus led me out of a difficult situation.

The high position of the grand duchess along with her openness attracted many and various organizations and individual petitioners to her for her help, protection, or authoritative influence in the higher echelons of both local Moscovite and the central authority. She carefully replied to all petitions except for those which bore political overtones. The latter she decisively rejected, considering dealings with politics to be incompatible with her new calling.

She paid special attention to all institutions of Church, charitable or artistic and scientific character. She also zealously worked to preserve the more important daily customs and traditions which made life so rich in old, beloved Moscow. The anniversary holiday of 1912 gave her an unexpected chance to exhibit her zeal in this direction. Here are the circumstances of this activity, hitherto known only to a few people, including even those who had direct connection with this work.

During the elaboration of the program for the celebration of the hundredth anniversary of the War for the Homeland, there arose in the special committee organized in Moscow a heated debate over how to celebrate the Thirtieth of August, the final day of the anniversary festival in Moscow, where the emperor, according to ceremony was supposed to arrive from Borodino.

The representative of the ministry of the court offered to place at the center of the festival day a visit by the emperor to the Zemsky Kustarny Museum, which had absolutely nothing to do with the historical recollection of 1812. Others supported my proposed offer that this memorial for Russia, St. Alexander Nevsky's Day, be noted with a festive service of thanksgiving on Red Square. The ceremonial officialdom refused to put aside its plan, protecting itself with the impenetrable iron plating of "imperial order," a being whose existence no one, of course, could verify. As for me, a representative of the clerical department, and those who were of like mind, all we could do was submit to the inescapable.

At my meeting with the grand duchess I told her all about the conflict that had come to pass. Having heard out my tale in much distress she said, "I will try to write about it to the emperor. It's true," she added with a reserved smile, 'for us women, all is permitted.'" Within a week, she informed me that the emperor had changed the program according to our desires.

When the Thirtieth of August arrived it presented a magnificent picture of a genuinely national, Church and patriotic festivity which will never be forgotten by the participants. For this fete Moscow was indebted to the intercessions of the grand duchess who exhibited in the present circumstance not only her devotion to the Church but a deeply historical, purely Russian devotion.

At the beginning of the war she gave herself over with complete self-sacrifice to the service of the sick and wounded soldiers whom she visited not only in the hospitals and sanitoriums of Moscow but also at the front.



Grand Duchess Elizabeth and nuns tended to wounded soldiers

Like the empress, she was not spared the slander which accused them of excessive sympathy for wounded Germans, and the grand duchess bore this unwarranted, bitter offense with her usual magnanimity.

When the revolutionary storm broke out she met it with amazing self-control and calm. It seemed that she stood on a high, unshakable cliff, and from there fearlessly looked out at the waves storming around her and raised her spiritual vision to eternity.

She did not harbor even a shadow of ill feelings against the madness of the agitated masses. "The people are children, innocent of what is transpiring," she remarked quietly. "They are led into deception by the enemies of Russia." Nor was she depressed by the great suffering and humiliation that befell the royal family who were so close to her: "This will serve for their moral purification and bring them nearer to God," she noted once with radiant gentleness.

She suffered deeply for the royal family only when the thorns of grievous slander were woven around them especially during the war. In order not to give impetus to new evil gossip, the grand duchess tried to avoid conversations on the subject. If it so happened that because of idle people's tasteless curiosity the subject was broached in her presence, she immediately killed it by her expressive silence. Only once after returning from Tsarskoe Selo, she forgot herself and remarked, "That terrible man (i.e., Rasputin) wants to separate me from them but, thank God, he will not succeed."



The Royal Martyrs

The charm of her whole temperament was so great that it automatically attracted even the revolutionaries when they first arrived to examine the Martha and Mary Convent. One of them, apparently a student, even praised the life of the sisters, saying that no luxuries were noticeable, and that cleanliness and good order were the rule, which was in no way blameworthy. Seeing his sincerity, the grand duchess struck up a conversation with him about the outstanding qualities of socialist and Christian ideals. "Who knows," remarked her unknown conversationalist as if influenced by her arguments, "perhaps we are headed for the same goal, only by different paths," and with these words left the convent.

"Obviously we are still unworthy of a martyr's crown," the abbess replied to the sisters' congratulating her for such a successful end to the first encounter with the Bolsheviks. But that crown was not far from her.

During the course of the last months of 1917 and the beginning of 1918, the Soviet power to everyone's amazement granted the Martha and Mary Convent and its abbess complete freedom to live as they wished and even supported them by supplying essentials. This made the blow even heavier and unexpected for them when on Pascha the grand duchess was suddenly arrested and transported to Ekaterinburg.

His Holiness Patriarch Tikhon attempted with the help of Church organizations to take a part in her liberation, but was unsuccessful. Her exile was at first accompanied by some comforts. She was quartered in a convent where all the sisters were sincerely involved. A special comfort for her was that she was not hampered from attending services.

Her position became more difficult after her transfer to Alapaevsk where she was imprisoned in one of the city schools together with her ever-faithful companion, Sister Barbara, and several grand dukes who shared her fate.

Nevertheless she did not lose her abiding firmness of spirit and occasionally would send words of encouragement and comfort to the sisters of her convent who were deeply grieving over her (see letters below).

And so it continued until the fateful night of 5/18 July. On this night together with the other royal captives striving with her and her valiant fellow-struggler Barbara in Alapaevsk, she was suddenly taken in an automobile outside the city and apparently buried alive with them in one of the local mine shafts.

The results of later excavation there has shown that she strived until the last moment to serve the grand dukes who were severely injured by the fall and some local peasants who carried out the sentence on these people whom they did not know, reported that for a long time there was heard a mysterious singing from below the earth.



Nun Barbara (Yakovleva)

This was the great-passion-bearer, singing funeral hymns to herself and the others until the silver chain was loosed and the golden bowl was broken (cf. Eccles. 12:6) and until the songs of heaven began to resound for her. Thus the longed-for martyr's crown was placed on her head and she was united to the hosts of those of whom John, the seer of mysteries, speaks: "after this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands;...And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (Rev. 7:9, 14).

Like a wondrous vision she passed over the earth, leaving behind radiant traces. Together with all the other sufferers for the Russian land, she appeared simultaneously as a redeemer for Russia and as a foundation for that Russia of the future which is being raised up on the bones of the new martyrs. Such images have a timeless significance; their memory is eternal on earth and in heaven. Not in vain did the voice of the people declare her

a saint during her lifetime. (It is noteworthy that soon after the birth of the grand duchess, her mother, the Princess Alice, a woman with a great and meek spirit, wrote to Queen Victoria about the name given to her daughter. "We liked Elizabeth since St. Elizabeth is an ancestress of the Hessian, as well as of the Saxon House." The late grand duchess had kept this name after being united to the Orthodox Church and chose for her heavenly protectress, St. Elizabeth—5 September.)

As though in reward for her earthly struggles and special love for the Holy Land, her martyred remains, which according to eyewitnesses were found in the mine shaft completely untouched by corruption, were destined to rest at the same place where the Savior suffered and rose from the dead.

Exhumed on the orders of Admiral Kolchak, together with the bodies of other members of the royal house killed at the same time (the Grand Duke Sergei Michailovich, the Princes John, Igor, and Konstantine Konstantinovich, and the son of the Grand Duke Paul Alexandrovich, Prince Paley), their remains and the bodies of the grand duchess and Sister Barbara were taken first to Irkutsk and then to Peking where they remained for a long time in the cemetery church of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission.

From there, through the concern of her sister, Princess Victoria, the Marchioness of Milford-Haven, to whom she was closely bound during life, her coffin and Sister Barbara's were transferred from Shanghai and sent to Palestine.

On the 15th of January, 1920, the bodies of both sufferers were triumphantly met in Jerusalem by the English authorities, the Greek and Russian clergy, as well as crowds of the large Russian colony and local inhabitants.



Relics of Saint Elizabeth, church of Saint Mary Magdalene Jerusalem

Their burial took place the next day and was served by the head of the Church of Jerusalem, the Blessed Patriarch Damianos, together with a host of clergy.

As if destined for the purpose, the crypt below the lower vault of the Russian church of St. Mary Magdalene was adapted as a sepulcher for the grand duchess. This church, built in memory of the Empress Maria Alexandrovna by her august children, was not strange to the deceased, for together with the Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich she had been present at its consecration in 1888.

Located on a picturesque slope of the Mount of Olives, it is the best-styled and most graceful of all the churches one finds in Palestine, attracting one's gaze even from a distance by its colorful and purely Russian lines. The martyr herself could not have chosen a better resting place even if, having foreseen that she would have to repose for a time outside her convent, she had earlier prepared a grave for herself.



*Church of Saint Mary Magdalene,
Mount of Olives, Jerusalem*

Here, everything reflects her spirit: the golden domes of the church, sparkling in the sun amidst green olive trees and cypresses; the artistic interior furnishings, stamped with the inspiration of Vereshchagin, and the very character of the holy images, pierced through by the rays of Christ's Resurrection.

Even closer and dearer to her heart is the fragrance of the holy places, which breathes upon her sepulcher from all sides. Below, beneath the tomb stretches out a unique view of the Holy City with the great cupola of the Life-Giving Tomb rising on high; at the foot of her tomb, the Garden of Gethsemane where in agony the Divine Sufferer prayed until drops of blood appeared.

Further on, Gethsemane itself, the place of the Mother of God's burial and to the left one can discern half-concealed by the folds of mountains, Bethany, that true Convent of Martha and Mary, the sister of Lazarus, whom the Lord called forth from the grave; and above, the Church of St. Mary Magdalene joyously crowns Mt. Olivet, whence the risen Savior rose gloriously to heaven in order to crown from there all those who amid temptations remained faithful to Him until death (see Rev. 111:5, 21).

Excerpts of Letters from Grand Duchess Elizabeth to Nicholas II

5 January 1891

...It was an eventful day also for me as Serge afterwards spoke about his religion to me and I said then I should like to know it more thoroughly. Well a year and a half have passed and that summer I read lots with him but then came again many months of doubts and worries. I always wished to put off although au fond de mon coeur (at the bottom of my heart) I already belonged to your religion.

Alas I am very bad and did not have enough strength, enough faith. I felt at last how wicked it was so as to keep off worries and painful conversations with my old friends that I continued in outward forms and before the world to be a protestant when my soul already belonged to the Orthodox belief - it was lying before God and man and a very great sin, and I do so heartily repent...

18 April 1909

...You mention *the spirit of delusion* into which alas one can fall and of which often with Serge we have talked about. He with his large heart and tact whilst I was protestant never forced his religion upon me and found strength to bear up in this great grief of not seeing me in his faith, thanks to *Fr John*, who told him 'Leave her alone, don't speak about our faith, she will come



Tsar Nicholas II

to it of herself' and thank God it was so. Well, Serge, who knew his faith and lived in it as perfectly as a true Orthodox Christian can, brought me up and thank God warned me against this *spirit of delusion* you talk of. My nature is too calm to be carried away in that direction, but yet one must always be on one's guard as the devil slips in when we least expect...
...I took up the life I am now leading not as a cross - but as a road full of light God showed me after Serge's death and which years and years before had begun in my soul. I can't tell you when - it seems to me often that already as a child there was a longing to help those that suffer.

Above all those who have moral sufferings...In my life I had so much joy - in my sorrows so much boundless comfort, that I long to give a little of that to others. I could write pages and pages, and yet it is difficult to put on paper all I feel. I long to thank and thank every minute for all God gave me and long to bring Him my feeble gratitude by serving Him and His suffering children.

Oh, this is not a new feeling, this is an old one which always was in me. God has been so kind to me.....I - good gracious - what am I, no better and probably worse than others. If people may have said foolish exaggerated things it is my fault, but they don't say it to my face, they know I hate flattery as a dangerous poison. I can't help people loving me, but then you see I love them and they feel it. I try to do my best for them and people can be grateful although one must never expect it. I don't one minute think I have taken up *a spiritual feat*, it is a joy, I don't see my crosses nor feel them because of the boundless kindness of God I have always felt - I long to thank Him...

April 1909

...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. You know the Fr Mitrophan and had a good impression at Sarov, 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 boundless 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...

...My darling Serge rests in God with so many he loved who have gone to join him and God has given me on this earth a beautiful work to fulfill. Will I do it well or badly He only knows but I will try my best and I put my hand in His and go with no fear whatever the crosses and criticism this world may have in store - little by little my life has turned onto this way. It is not a fantasy of the moment and no disappointment ever can come - I can be disappointed in myself but then I also have no illusion and don't imagine I am different to others. I want to work for God and in God for suffering mankind and in my old age when my body can't anymore work I hope God will let me then rest and pray for the work I began and then I will go out of the busy life and prepare for that great home - but I have health and energy and there is so, so much misery and Christ's steps as guide are amongst the suffering in whom we help Him...

...If you find a minute's time to answer me, please do and say if you understand all and perhaps a kind little word add in your English letter in Russian that I can read it to the priest where you say you believe in him and are sure he will know how to help me if God wills difficult moments to come...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 boundless love for God and the Orthodox Church. Only to speak to him for a few minutes one sees he is modest, pure and a man of God, and God's servant in our church...

26 March 1910

...'*Patience is the home of the soul, humility is the food of the soul*' - one must not look from above down, one must feel oneself the worst of the worse, It seemed to me often like false to try and acknowledge one is the worst of the worse but that is to what we must come - with God's help all is possible. Don't look on my letter as a long epistle of preaching - I call it my confession to you. In two weeks my new life blessed I the church begins. I am as if bidding goodbye to the past its faults and sins and with the hope of

a higher goal and a purer existence. Pray for me deary. Oh, if you came and then spent the week of Lent and Easter - my taking of vows is even more serious than if a young girl marries. I am espousing Christ and His cause, I am giving all I can to him and our neighbours, I am going deeper into our Orthodox Church and becoming a missionary of Christian faith and charity work and Oh dear I am so unworthy of it all and I do so want blessings and prayers...

7 April 1910

Dearest brother dear,

I ask your blessing, prayers and forgiveness before the solemn day I am approaching. May God help me to be worthy of this task which is one of deep joy and soul's peace for me. May my humble trials find acceptance in His sight and may you deary as my earthly Sovereign get a little help in your work which I will try to do with God's help by bringing comfort to your children. Please please be convinced - that however awkward or sinful my poor earthly life may go - I am a true subject of yours - the will is always full of good intentions and religious wishes even if on the way I stumble and make endless mistakes. Serge died with joy for you and his country. It was two days before that he said how willingly he would give his blood if thereby he could be of help. I hope God may give me strength that never one can say I was unworthy of having been in olden times guided by such a true noble husband and true Christian.

With all my heart I kiss you and send my humble blessings and prayers.
Your true old friend and Sister, Ella

13 April 1916

... Today is 25 years I entered our beloved church and we had mass and a big Te Deum with the clergy who gave me images. In soul I was with Papa, Mama who was my God-mother and Serge reliving these years which in a month will be 25 in Moscow. All melts into intense gratitude to God, our Church and the noble examples I could see of true Orthodox people and I only feel so small and unworthy of God's boundless love and of the love I received in Russia - even the moments of sorrow were lit up with such comfort from above, the little human misunderstandings were so lovingly smoothed down that I can say 'thank God for all'. Pray for me deary and bless me. Your loving old Sister and humble subject and friend
Ella.

Last Two Letters from Grand Duchess Elizabeth to her Orphaned Nuns after her Arrest

Letter One

Bless, Lord.

May the Resurrection of Christ comfort and strengthen you all. At 6 o'clock we went past Rostov, in the evening Trinity St Sergius. May St Sergius, St Dimitri and St Euphrosyne of Polotsk guard us all with you, my dears.



Grand Duchess Elizabeth, 1914

Traveling is easy. There is snow everywhere. I cannot forget yesterday, all the dear sweet faces. O Lord, what suffering there was in them, Oh, how my heart ached.

With every minute you became dearer to me, how can I leave you, how can I console you, how can I strengthen you? Remember everything I told you, my dears. Always be not only my children, but obedient disciples.

Keep together and be like one soul - everything for God - and say like St John Chrysostom: 'Glory to God for everything'. I will live in the hope of being with you again soon and I want to find you all together.

Apart from the Gospels, read the Epistles of the Apostles together. Older sisters, unite your sisters. Ask Bishop Tikhon to take the 'chickens' under his wing. Set up a room for him in my middle room. My cell will be for confession and the big room will be a reception room. If there are no delays, it will take five days to get there. Catherine will return to you as soon as she can and will tell you how we got on.

Very sweet guardian-angels have been given to us. We sleep badly because of our thoughts. Thank you for the food, we'll get more on the way. I am trying to pray to St Sergius. I have a Bible with me, we shall read, pray and hope.

For the love of God, do not lose heart. The Mother of God knows why Her Heavenly Son has sent us this trial on the day of His feast.

'O Lord, I believe, help Thou my unbelief'.

'The Providence of God is unsearchable'.

Letter Two

My dear little children. Glory to God that you have all taken communion: you have all stood before the Saviour like one soul. I believe that the Saviour has been with you all on this earth and that at the Last Judgement this prayer will rise again before the face of God, as mercy for one another and for me.

I cannot express how I have been touched and overjoyed to the depths of my soul by your letters. You all without exception wrote to me that you will strive to live as I often spoke to you. Oh, how you will now perfect yourselves for salvation, I can already see good beginning, only do not be downcast and do not weaken in your good intentions, and the Lord, Who has separated us for a time, will strengthen you spiritually.

Pray for me, a sinner, that I may be worthy to return to my little children and be perfected for you and that we may all think how to prepare ourselves for eternal life. You remember that I often feared that you might find too much strength for life in my support, and I used to say to you: 'You must hold on more to God'. The Lord says: 'My Son, give Me your heart and your eyes that they may regard My ways'. Then you can be sure that if you give God your heart, that is, yourself, you give Him everything.

Now we are suffering the same thing, involuntarily, but only with Him do we find the consolation to bear our common cross of separation. The Lord found that it was time for us to carry His cross, let us strive to be worthy of that joy. I thought that, being so weak, we had not grown up enough to carry a heavy cross. 'The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away, as it was pleasing to the Lord, so it hath been'.

What an example St Job gives us with his humble submission and patience in his sorrows. It was for this that the Lord afterwards gave him joy. How many examples of such sorrow there are among the holy fathers and in holy convents.

Prepare for the joy of being together again, we will be patient, humble. Let us not murmur, let us be thankful for everything.

At the moment I am reading the wonderful book of St John of Tobolsk. Here is what he writes: 'The Merciful God preserves and gives wisdom and peace to each of those who surrenders his heart to His Holy Will, and with the same words He supports and strengthens the heart so that we do not transgress the Will of God, inspiring us secretly: you are always with Me, you are in My mind and memory, you will obey My will without hesitation. I am always with you, I watch over you with love and keep you, so that you will not lose My grace, mercy and gifts of grace. All that is Mine - is yours: My heaven, the Angels, and even more My Only-Begotten Son'. I am Thine, I Myself am Thine, and will be Thine, as I promised to faithful Abraham: 'I am thy shield; My reward is eternally great unto the ages of ages' (Genesis 1,15).

'My Lord, Thou art mine, truly mine...I hear Thee and I will obey Thy words with all my heart'. Say these words every day, and you will feel light, light in your hearts.

'But they that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint' (Prophet Isaiah). 'O Lord, I believe, help Thou my unbelief'.

My little children, let us love not in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth' (Epistles). May the grace of my Lord Jesus Christ be with you and my love in Jesus Christ be with you. Amen.

Your elder intercessor to God and loving mother in Christ,
Mother Elizabeth.

Letters from Grand Duchess Elizabeth Regarding her Conversion to Orthodoxy

January 1, 1891 to her father

"... And now, my dear father, I want to tell you something and I entreat you to grant me your blessing. More than over half a year ago during your last stay here you must have noticed the deep reverence that I feel towards the Russian religion.

All this time I was thinking and reading, and prayerfully asking God to show me the right way, and came to the conclusion that only in this religion can I find the true and strong faith in God which a person must have in order to be a good Christian. It would be a sin to remain — as I am now — to belong to one church formally just for the sake of the world around me, while inside myself — to pray and to believe the way my husband does.

You cannot imagine, how kind he was always to me: never did he try to force the faith on me, he left it completely to my conscience and discretion. He knows what a serious step this is for me, that I must be absolutely confident in my decision before I take such a step. I would have done it even earlier, it was only delaying this fearing that this would cause pain to you. But won't you understand me, my dear Papa?

You know me so well — you will see that I decided to take this step only through deep faith, and that I feel that before God I must stand with my heart pure and truly believing.

It would be so easy to remain the way I am now, but then how hypocritical, how false it would be! How can I lie to everybody pretending that I am a protestant and following all the due traditions in outward appearance, while my soul totally belongs to Orthodoxy.

I was thinking about all this profoundly, having lived in this country for over 6 years already and knowing that I have "found" the religion. It is my very strong desire to partake of the Holy Mysteries on Easter together with my husband. My decision might look impulsive, but I have been thinking about

it for already so long that I cannot put it off any more. My conscience would not let me procrastinate.

I beg of you to forgive me, your daughter, if your feelings are hurt when you read this letter. But isn't faith in God and religion one of the main consolations of this world?

Please send me only one line by telegraph, when you receive this letter. God bless you. It would be such a comfort to me, as I know, there will be many uneasy predicaments, as nobody would understand this decision. I am asking for only a short kind letter."

Excerpt from a letter to a friend

"My conscience would not let me go on as usual — that would have been sinful; during all this time my remaining in the old faith was a lie for everyone around me...It would be impossible to continue living the way I was. I even understand almost everything in the old Slavonic services though I had never studied the language. There are Bibles both in Slavonic and in Russian, but the latter is easier to read... You say that the outer glamour of the Church charmed me. You are wrong here. Outward appearance never enticed me, not even the sermons, it is the foundation of the faith that I admire. Appearance is only associated with the inner essence... I am being converted because I am sure and I feel that this is the supreme creed, and that I will do it with faith, profound belief and conviction that I have God's blessing for it."