

PERSONAL IMPRESSIONS OF FR. SERAPHIM (ROSE)

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Many of you have undoubtedly read the thousand-page biography of Fr. Seraphim — it has been translated into both Russian and Georgian — and I have no intention of even attempting to summarize his life as a whole. I shall simply try to give a few impressions from my own experience of what he was like as a person and as a spiritual father. These impressions will necessarily be rather sketchy, and I will be glad to fill in or to clarify as necessary during the question and answer sessions.

For those of you not yet acquainted with Fr. Seraphim a brief introduction would be in order.

Fr. Seraphim had no Orthodox roots. He grew up in a fairly typical American family in southern California. Already as a youth, he became disillusioned with his mother's Protestant faith, and, gifted with a brilliant mind, he began searching for truth. He felt certain that there must be an absolute truth, and that this truth must rest in God. After years of persistent and agonizing search—through science, philosophy, Buddhism, hedonism—God opened his heart to the Orthodox Faith, and in 1961, on the Sunday of the Prodigal Son, he was received into the Orthodox Church.

Shortly thereafter he met the future Fr. Herman, and together they formed a brotherhood with the aim of fulfilling the two greatest commandments: love for God — through a monastic life of prayer and the ascetic struggle of purifying the soul, and love for neighbor—through the missionary publication of edifying and inspiring Orthodox texts in the English language. In order to fulfill this more perfectly, without distractions, they purchased an isolated piece of property in

the small hamlet of Platina in the mountains of northern California, moving there from San Francisco in 1968. It was there that I, together with my best friend Solomonia, first visited them, in November 1976. It took just a few conversations to sense that these two monks were not interested in preserving Orthodoxy as part of an ethnic Russianness; they weren't there in the remote wilds of northern California out of any romantic idea of being forest ascetics; they were firmly Christ-centered, their minds and hearts fully dedicated to living and spreading the Gospel within the context of the Faith held and transmitted through the centuries by the One, Holy, Universal and Apostolic Church, the Orthodox Church.

At that time, by God's Providence, there were only the two monks and a young black boy, Gleb—whom Fr. Seraphim home-schooled—living at the monastery. The fathers were overwhelmed with work, and we were overjoyed when they invited us to return for Great Lent, which we did the following February.

I had the great blessing of knowing Father Seraphim quite closely over the last six years of his life, during which I lived in Platina or nearby. My first impressions of him did not change. First and foremost, he was a true monk—quiet, serious, reserved, very focused, wholly dedicated to the life and work of the monastery: to the church services and to the missionary outreach of the printed word — through articles in the magazine they published, *The Orthodox Word*, as well as various books. At the same time, he was very approachable, easy to talk to—no matter what your level of spiritual life; a careful listener, very straightforward, a clear thinker, who possessed a profound depth and breadth of intellect. In spite of his erudition, he could speak to anyone at any level of spiritual life — he was particularly good in relating to older youth and young adults. Although Fr. Seraphim had anemia, which limited his stamina, he gave the impression of being energetic, always walking with big strides; taking a

break from the intellectual work of research and writing to cut wood, work in the garden, or stand at one of the two old letterpress printing machines. But what impressed people most— those who met him—was both his intensity and, at the same time, the sense of inner peace he had; he always seemed content, and together with his seriousness he possessed a quiet warmth. It was wonderful just to be in his presence.

Conditions at the monastery — which could more properly be called a hermitage or skete—were still quite rugged: there was no running water; during winter snow was packed into kitchen pots and placed on the wood stove of the trapeza to melt, while a cattle trough served as a cistern to collect rain water in the spring; it rarely rained during the summer, forest fires were a danger, and on the feastday of Prophet Elijah in early August we all prayed fervently for rain — and he often responded. The summer after our arrival, a well was drilled, thanks to money provided from the Benevolent Fund of St John of San Francisco. Water could then be drawn by a hand pump and no longer had to be [needed to be] hauled from the Platina store. That, however, was the extent of the “plumbing,” and for the next several years the cistern and snow melting continued. A generator provided electricity for the print shop, but otherwise they used only kerosene lamps or, more commonly, candles, most in the form of candle stubs sent up in boxes from the sepulcher of St John in San Francisco. Each evening after compline and evening prayers, Fr. Seraphim would stand at the door and ask if we had enough firewood, enough candles. He did this so unobtrusively that it was easy to overlook such consistent thoughtfulness, but that was typical of his character.

Winters were cold and there was no insulation in the buildings, and we all wore knit hats to bed. Heat came from primitive wood stoves, although when we first arrived there was no stove in the church and Fr. Seraphim’s hands would turn

blue. We tried to supply anything that might warm them — a small camp stove for the altar, hand warmers — nothing was very effective. But he never complained.

Fr. Seraphim valued the isolation of Platina; it was an hour's drive to the nearest town of any size, and four hours from San Francisco; visitors were relatively few. One winter we were snowed in for two weeks. Father Seraphim was delighted. As a monk, he preferred minimum contact with the "world." On those occasions when Fr. Seraphim was obliged to go to town, he often asked me to drive him, perhaps because I spoke little on these trips. Although he himself could drive, I think he appreciated the time to pray, to think. He was a private person, very reticent, never spoke about himself... One had the impression — or so I did — that he had been born a monk. I regret now that I did not take advantage of these times to ask questions, but at that time, I felt little need to do so. As I said, it was enough just to be with him.

Even before the monks were ordained to the priesthood, they unfailingly kept the daily cycle of services. Because of their workload, they were unable both to be in church for the full cycle, but during services, while one worked the other would be in church. In the late afternoon, when Matins was served, the bell would ring for the Magnificat, and we would all drop what we were doing and go to the church for that hymn.

If Fr. Seraphim was not serving, he would stand at the right cliros, and we would be on the left. We soon learned most of the tones by ear and were able to sing from texts, using music only for the Cherubic Hymn and the Eucharistic Canon. At that time the *Lenten Triodion* was not yet available in English, and Fr. Seraphim, standing on the right cliros with the Slavonic text in front of him, would simultaneously intone each phrase in English like a canonarch, and we,

would then chant the phrase from the left cliros. Fr. Seraphim, loved the services; even the rubrics interested him. And he served very naturally, without the slightest artificiality or drama. His sermons were always brief and had some practical application.

Father Seraphim had a naturally pleasant singing voice, a soft tenor. The Bridegroom services at the beginning of Holy Week were particularly memorable. The royal doors were opened, revealing a blaze of light. Father Seraphim would stand in the middle of the dark church and sing the exapostilarion: "I see Thy bridal chamber, adorned, O my Saviour..." His singing was very prayerful, compunctionate, and one could not help but be transported to stand with Adam, weeping outside the gates of Paradise. One of his favorite hymns was "Noble Joseph," and as he lay dying in the hospital, a few of us stood at his bedside one night and sang "Noble Joseph," at which, although he gave no sign of consciousness, tears began to flow down his cheeks. I lived for a time by myself in a secluded cabin in the woods that Solomonia and I had built at the fathers' request at the western border of their property, some distance from the monastery enclosure. Father Seraphim would sometimes come carrying a basket of provisions. He announced his coming by singing softly as he drew near. He loved the simple Russian Znamenny chant; he thought it more appropriate to the Western ear than the strictly Byzantine chant, better able to move the heart.

One of Father Seraphim's favorite times of year was the first week of Great Lent: conversations were kept to a minimum, rugs were pulled out of the church, trapeza was exceptionally simple: on the first few days, Fr. Seraphim always assigned himself to the kitchen; meals consisted of dried fruits, nuts and perhaps a light soup.

During trapeza throughout the year, Fr. Herman, who sat at the head of the table, would typically relate the life of one of the 19th-century ascetics of piety [podvizhniki blagochestiye]—he had a phenomenal memory — while Fr. Seraphim ate. Afterwards Fr. Seraphim would translate some Russian text in front of him directly into a battery-operated tape recorder. When we were there, he was translating Fr. Michael Pomazansky's *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*. He valued Fr. Michael particularly for his tone: When pointing out differences with Roman Catholicism or Protestantism, he never disparaged or attacked them but simply stated the Orthodox teaching. It was this tone that Fr. Seraphim also took in his writings. He was very critical of those clergy who engaged in bitter polemics, but even when he strongly disagreed with them, his tone was firm but never accusatory or argumentative.

He had no desire to be original, but conveyed the traditional Orthodox teachings that he had assimilated from his reading of the Holy Fathers, and from his contact with St John, Bishop Nektary and his brother Ivan Kontzevich, and others deeply rooted in Orthodoxy. Even in his monastic strivings, all Fr. Seraphim desired was to follow the traditions of the monastic fathers that had preceded him. He had a particular affinity for the 19th-century elders of Optina Monastery, and he named his cell Optina. It was, I think, partly by keeping in mind the lofty example of these elders and others of the past, who he felt were of such superior spiritual caliber, that he was able to develop a rare humility, very difficult to attain in one so intellectually gifted.

These times, in Fr. Seraphim's opinion, were not the time for elders; (He once told me: "Never put your trust entirely in one man.") in our spiritual immaturity we do not deserve them; our elders are to be found between the covers of books. We were all encouraged to build up a spiritual library of solid Orthodox texts. Among these were books such as *Unseen Warfare*, the *Discourses* of Abba

Dorotheus, *The Arena* by St Ignatius Brianchaninov, the Letters of Elder Macarius of Optina, and anything by St Theophan the Recluse. By immersing ourselves in such books, our souls would more easily become permeated with the true spirit of Orthodoxy, the “savor” as Fr. Seraphim would say, and we would more easily be able to recognize—and to avoid being infected by—the spirit of this world. He discouraged the reading of more exalted texts such as the *Philokalia* or the teachings of St Isaac the Syrian (then newly translated), as he saw that converts tended to gravitate towards such texts long before they were spiritually mature enough to apply them properly to their own spiritual lives. What was important to Fr. Seraphim was not so much knowledge as it was practice. The whole point of any reading was to apply its lessons to our daily lives. And in what he called, “this age of feeble faith,” if we could but strive to be genuine, kind, warm-hearted Christians, this would already be a *podvig*, a worthy ascetic feat.

Having a brilliant mind and being a natural academic, Father Seraphim had struggled mightily against relying on his mind in order to develop an Orthodox heart, and he did all he could to help others move in that same direction. For this reason he recommended the reading of good literature that could help to warm the heart and inspire Christian feelings. He particularly liked Charles Dickens. There at the monastery, an older teen came to stay for some weeks, and together they read aloud *David Copperfield*. Both wept.

Yet another hindrance towards leading an Orthodox life was America’s lifestyle of comfort: “Take it easy.” Southern California, where Father Seraphim grew up, was dominated by the entertainment industry. A “Disneyland mentality” was a favorite pejorative. In general, Fr. Seraphim disliked any frivolity, any wasted time. He encouraged families with TVs to throw them out, or at least to severely limit any viewing, as it was just another way of becoming infected with

worldliness. One shudders to think what he would say in this age of addiction to cell phones.

Father Seraphim understood the value of suffering in spiritual life, and for this reason, he thought that families with problems were in a much better position spiritually than those whose lives flowed more smoothly. Those families who had difficulties — chronically sick children, financial woes—tended to have a more serious attitude towards life, and to more easily recognize their need for God, they were more open to the spiritual life.

The Platina fathers themselves did not seek to make conditions at the monastery more comfortable. It was livable, but it was often physically difficult or demanding. There were constant mechanical problems: the generator, the printing machines, the linotype [a typesetting machine]... Vehicles were never entirely reliable; flat tires were not uncommon, and in winter tire chains were often needed to drive the two miles up the hill in the snow. Spring and fall rains turned the two-mile dirt road into a slippery slope of red clay soil, made more challenging by deep ruts and gullies. I remember numerous times at the wheel, driving up with Fr. Seraphim, with fervent prayer and the repeated singing of the magnification to the Mother of God, for whom he had particularly great veneration. (This we would sing in Slavonic.)

Fr. Seraphim never became upset by any mechanical failure or external problems; they were merely nuisances to be worked out. He always saw these difficulties in spiritual terms; whenever something would go wrong in this way he would ascribe it to the Evil One trying to discourage them. When such difficulties came as they were in the midst of printing an issue of *The Orthodox Word*, Fr. Seraphim's first thought was that it was to be a particularly important issue, since the Evil One was trying his best to discourage them. With patience

such problems could be overcome. Fr. Seraphim much preferred such attacks to frictions in personal relationships, to which we women were, unfortunately, more prone.

In hindsight, I began to see that quite beyond the difficulties posed by these external challenges, Fr. Seraphim had his own personal sufferings. I have often referred to Fr. Seraphim and Fr. Herman together as the “Platina fathers.” During the entire the time we were with them, both Solomonia and I had the impression that they worked very well together, that in spite of being such different personalities they were indeed of one mind and one heart. It is only years later that I have come to understand — or so it is my opinion — that Fr. Seraphim was able to preserve his calm demeanor only through the painful struggle of crucifying himself. This was true suffering, the suffering of which saints are made. This became increasingly evident over the last few years of Fr. Seraphim’s life. The two monks had very different personalities. In what I am about to say, I do not wish to disparage Fr. Herman in any way, as he had his great gifts as well: He was exceptionally warm, full of energy, and able to inspire — and did inspire — hundreds of people. But he himself admitted to me soon after Fr. Seraphim’s repose that Fr. Seraphim was the tree while he was just the wind. And what good was wind without a tree? Fr. Herman was Russian, of an artistic background. He was very gregarious and enjoyed joking with people. He easily drew the attention — and adulation— of young people, while Fr. Seraphim kept himself in the background. Most visitors and pilgrims who came to the monastery came primarily to see Fr. Herman. This suited Fr. Seraphim, although he was only too glad to spend time with those who had serious questions. And serious-minded Americans felt more comfortable with his straightforward approach.

As time went by, Fr. Herman became increasingly restless, taking any opportunity to be driven into town. The more attention he received the more he desired it. After Fr. Seraphim's repose this weakness in Fr. Herman's character proved near fatal as he fell into the trap of being a guru. His joking character did not conform to Fr. Seraphim's desire to have a serious monastic brotherhood, and it is not surprising that on his deathbed he told Fr. Herman that should he survive he would leave him. Although the fathers were meant to be in obedience to one another, in practice Fr. Seraphim almost always yielded to Fr. Herman. I think he did this deliberately in order to humble himself. He was so evidently the more gifted, and to constantly take the lower seat must have required immense self-control.

Whether or not this became easier for him as the years passed I do not know. I can only guess that he was able to do this only because he kept his mind focused on the "one thing needful," and he had a burning [ardent] desire to be with Christ and his saints. He was also deeply satisfied by the work he was doing; he loved the monastic life there in the wilderness, and had no desire to go anywhere else. As a young man he often felt as though he were in a "living hell." By contrast, when, shortly before his repose one of his spiritual children asked him how he was feeling, he said quite simply, "I'm in paradise."

This was the fruit of his Christian maximalism, his belief that one should be wholly Christian — or not at all. And if anyone has been inspired or otherwise helped by Fr. Seraphim, he can give Fr. Seraphim no greater expression of his gratitude than to endeavor, in whatever measure he can, to emulate him in becoming a Christian maximalist. To this end, may we all keep in mind the words of Saint Herman, words that have appeared on the title page of each *Orthodox Word* since its beginning: "From this day, from this hour, from this minute, let us strive to love God above all, and fulfill His holy will."

