

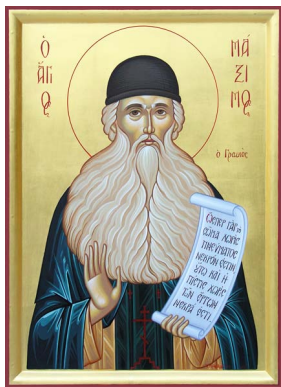


■ On the Occasion of the Commemoration of St. Maximos the Greek († January 21, 1556)

Piety and Religiosity*

“The time has finally come for
Christianity to become a religion of deeds.”

The Greek enlightener of Russia, St. Maximos the Greek (1470-1556), spent the last five years of his life at the Lavra of the Holy Trinity, founded by St. Sergius of Radonezh.



He was visited there by Tsar Ivan the Terrible, who, together with the Tsarina Anastasia and their young son, the Tsarevich Dmitry, was setting out on a pilgrimage to the St. Cyril of Belozersk [or White Lake] Monastery.

Putting his life in danger, Saint Maximos made every effort—though in vain—to convince the outwardly religious ruler to set aside the pilgrimage in favor of rendering assistance to the poor women and unprotected orphans who were victims of the war against the Tartars during the annexation of Kazan.

The Saint welcomed the Tsar into his cell with the words:

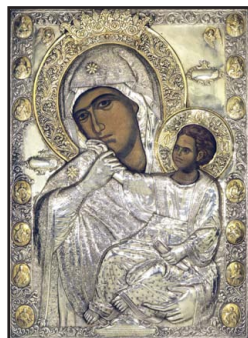
“I give thanks to Almighty God, Tsar Ivan, that He has deemed me worthy to see you with my own eyes before the time comes for them to close. May God's protection be with you, great Emperor of Orthodoxy! And, if it pleases you, you have my own humble blessing as well.”

“That is why I am here, Elder,” replied the Tsar, “because I want to have your blessing, as do the Tsarina and the young Tsarevich, who is not yet a year old.”

“I have heard, my Tsar, that you are thinking of making a long journey. Is it true what they say?”

“It is so,” replied Ivan. “I am going to Belozersk to venerate the Relics of St. Cyril. I have made a vow to do so.”

“When you were gravely ill,” the Saint then said, “I prayed to all the Saints. I even prayed to the wonderworking Icon of the Panagia of Vatopedi, but I did not go to Vatopedi! From here, in my cell, I prayed to her, and the Panagia heard me...”



The Tsar was perplexed. It was not so much the Saint's words as his tone of voice that he did not like. Possessing an observant mind, Ivan understood that he was supposed to decipher the meaning behind the words he was hearing. He asked:

“So it is not a good thing for me to go and fulfill my vow?”

“It is not,” came the immediate reply.

Ivan was by now bewildered.

“But I am going to venerate St. Cyril at his own monastery!”

“Tsar Ivan, when you are called upon to do a great good deed, but do not do it, and instead of the great good deed you do a different deed, of lesser worth, then know that you are not doing something good, but something bad! Reckon that you owe five but give only one. Well, then your debt remains!”

“And just what is it that I am not giving? What is the great good deed that I am not doing?”

“There are innumerable prayers one can say with words, but above them all, Tsar Ivan, is the prayer of deeds. The Lord said: 'Do not say to Me “Lord, O Lord,” but put My commandments into practice.' But as for you, now, instead of deeds, you are setting off to utter mere words. That is what is bad about what you are doing.”

Ivan remained silent. He was not thinking. He only felt a terrible anger within him at the Saint's words.

“So what are you telling me to do?” he asked after a pause.

“Last year, you won Kazan from the infidels and many valiant Christian soldiers fell in battle. They left behind widows, orphaned children, and mothers, broken-hearted and unprotected. Well then, you should think about them now. Return to Moscow and consider how you can lighten their pain.”

Putting his hand on his heart, he added, with a look of inexpressible pleading on his face:



Monastery of St. Cyril on the White Lake
(Cyril-Belozersky monastery)

“Do as I tell you, and I will pray for you day and night, until my death. Show the suffering your compassion. There is no better prayer! And be sure, my Tsar, that the Lord will hearken to such a prayer and glorify your name unto all eternity!”

“Elder,” Ivan replied, “both what you are telling me to do and that which I have in mind to do can be done. The one does not impede the other!”

“But it *does* impede it!” shouted the Saint with emotion. “It impedes it a great deal, Tsar. I beseech you, listen to me: It is not simply that you will bring relief to the widows, the poor, and the others who are in pain. What is even more important is the example you would be setting! What I am telling you now is not of my own feeble inspiration. Listen to me carefully. Lead the way; teach the people by your own example, Tsar, to set aside empty words and to place importance on deeds. That is what our Lord wants. And this is the moment, Tsar Ivan! Now that your Empire has become stronger and invincible, the time has come, here in your Empire, for Christianity to become a religion of deeds.”

“And what if I continue on my journey, Elder, as I began it?”

“If you continue it, you will be doing a great evil! And the pain you will experience will be just as great. You, also, will suffer a great misfortune, and indeed very soon..”

“What misfortune are you talking about?” asked the Tsar in anger.

“There where you are going, you will lose the Tsarevich,” replied the Saint, having been enlightened by God.

Ivan grew deathly pale. He feared the prophecy, but overpowering his fear was his wrath.

“What? Are you threatening me?” he shouted. “How dare you, a mere mortal, tell me things that only God decides? Retract what you said about the Tsarevich.”

In his eyes, the Saint saw the Tsar's terror at the fulfillment of the prophecy, and therein lay his only glimmer of hope.

“Lord, come to our aid!” and he made the sign of the Cross. He ap-

proached Ivan, looked him penetratingly in the eyes, and said:

“Tsar Ivan, if you do not hearken to my words, you will lose your son!”

Enraged, Ivan bellowed like an animal, stamped his foot with all his might, and made for the door.



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The pilgrimage took place as planned. The Tsar scorned the Saint's call to philanthropy, which would have been an occasion for a general change in the mindset of many merely externally religious people. In accordance with the prophecy, however, the Tsarevich Dmitry, Ivan the Terrible's firstborn son, could not endure the hardships of the journey and died on the road.

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(*) Source: “Consolation and Edification,” vol. V (September - November 2014), p. 2-3. Translated from the Greek