**Sermon for the Feast the Protection of the Mother of God**

+ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today we celebrate the feast of Pokrov, the Protection of the Mother of God. This feast, though not widely celebrated outside the Russian Church, is very dear to the hearts of the Russian people. It is on this feast that we celebrate the love that the Mother of God has for us. It is a celebration of the protection and great care that the Mother of God shows us. A motherly love, with warmth and affection, yet a love with great power – and the Mother of God proves this to us time and time again.

Is it no coincidence that this most wonderful feast falls not long after the feast of our beloved St. John the Theologian? As our Lord, Jesus Christ hung upon the Cross, He saw His most pure mother and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby. *He said to His mother, "Woman, behold thy son!" Then He said to the disciple, "Behold, thy mother!"* (John 19:26,27) From the time that our Saviour willed to give to the Mother of God as an adopted child the human race in the person of His beloved disciple, St. John the Theologian, the protection of the Mother of God has not ceased for a single day. Through time and all of history, it has been this way ever since – the Mother of God is our own mother and protector, who intercedes for all in every corner of the earth.

This feast was established and celebrated by the Russian Church since the 12th century, and the feast commemorates the rescue of the Byzantine capital, Constantinople, from attack and plunder over a millennium ago. During the All-Night Vigil at the Blachernae church, at which the people of Constantinople prayed with great wailing and tears to be saved from destruction, the Fool-for-Christ St. Andrew beheld our most Holy Lady Theotokos entering the Royal Gates of the temple surrounded by an assembly of the Saints. St. John the Baptist and St. John the Theologian accompanied the Queen of Heaven. After much time in prayer, the Mother of God took off her veil and spread it over the people praying in church, protecting them from enemies. The most Holy Mother of God shone with heavenly glory and her protecting veil gleamed “more than the rays of the sun.” While gazing at the miraculous vision with trembling, St. Andrew asked his disciple Epiphanius, “Do you see the Mother of God and Queen of Heaven?” Epiphanuis answered, “I do see Holy Father, and I am in awe.”

Through the protection and intercession of the Mother of God, the invaders turned back and the city was saved.

It is not simply on this occasion that we see the protection of the Mother of God in the lives of the faithful. The Protection of the Mother of God has covered the whole Christian race throughout all time. Yet we see this to be particularly true in Russia. Not only has the Mother of God personally appeared to many of the great Russian saints, like St. Sergius of Radonezh and St. Seraphim of Sarov, but veneration for the icon of the Mother of God has played an significant role of the faith and history of Orthodox Rus, and most especially the Vladimir and Kazan icons of the Mother of God. The Kazan icon is even seen as the “Protection of Russians” – the Protection of the Most Pure Theotokos over the Russian land.

During the Time of Troubles in 1612, the army of Dimitry Pozharsky bore a copy of the miracle-working Kazan icon in his ranks and routed the Polish invaders out of Moscow. In 1649, in memory of that event, an all-Russia feast of the Kazan Mother of God was instituted for October 22. In 1709, on the eve of the battle of Poltava, Tsar Peter prayed with his army before the Kazan icon, and they were victorious. In 1812, this same icon blessed the Russian soldiers who defeated the French invaders. It was on October 22 – on the Feast of the Kazan Icon - that the Russian army inflicted the first great defeat in the war against Napoleon and his invading army.

And who can forget the wonders that the Kazan icon of the Mother of God worked for the Russian soldiers during WWII which we recall in trapeza every year? One such account is typical of many similar accounts of the miraculous aid of the Theotokos to the Russian troops:

During the assault on Königsberg in 1945, the Soviet troops were in a critical situation. Suddenly, the soldiers saw their commander arrive with priests and an icon. Many made jokes, “Just wait, that’ll help us!” The commander silenced the jokers. He ordered everybody to line up and to take off their caps. When the priests finished the molieben, they moved to the frontline carrying the icon. The amazed soldiers watched them going straight forward, under intense Nazi fire. Suddenly, the Nazis stopped shooting. Then, the Russian troops received orders to attack on the ground and from the sea. Nazis died in the thousands. Nazi prisoners told the Russians that they saw the Virgin in the sky before the Russians began to attack, the whole of the Nazi army saw Her, and their weapons wouldn’t fire.

At least one copy of the miracle-working Kazan icon processed through the cities of Moscow, Leningrad and Stalingrad, and none of these cities fell to the Nazi invaders.

Throughout all the many hard times in Russia, in all campaigns and wars (including World War II), Russian troops always carried with them the icons of the Mother of God—the Kazan, Smolensk, Vladimir, and Donskaya icons. And the Russian land always felt the help and protection of the Mother of God.

Especially notable is the miraculous appearance of the icon of the “Reigning” Mother of God. This occurred in the year that the last Russian Emperor, Tsar Nicholas, abdicated the throne, on March 2, 1917. In the Virgin’s hands were a royal scepter and orb. She said that from henceforth, she herself would protect Russia. In place of the Tsar, the Mother of God herself rules Holy Rus. And even now, the Resurrection Gate at the entrance of Red Square has been rebuilt since it’s destruction by the Soviets, and you can visit the Iberian Chapel at the gate where all day and all night, all throughout the year, molebens are served before the Iveron icon of the Mother of God for the protection of the Russian land. Here, bowing and making prostrations and lighting candles, the Russian people once again implore the Mother of God for her intercessions and her protection over the Russian land.

Accounts of miracles worked by the Mother of God are not legends or pious stories. These are real events, and they happen even in our own time. One such miracle happened just this past January, when a miracle by the Holy Theotokos was reported at one of the monasteries of Saidnaya in Syria. The town of Saidnaya is one of the most famous Orthodox Christian pilgrimage sites in Syria, though much of the town and the churches and monasteries there have been damaged or destroyed by the Muslim rebels in the country.

A miraculous incident took place when a rebel group fired rockets at one of the monasteries. The nuns inside the monastery experienced the rocket launch towards their monastery, which produced a tremendously load boom which shook the whole monastery. They were sure that the rocket would kill them and also damage the monastery complex, but to their surprise, nothing happened.

A few days later one of the military generals from the Syrian Army visited the monastery to convey Nativity and New Year greetings to the nuns. During the conversation the officer asked whether the monastery had experienced anything unusual recently. The nuns told the officer about the rocket which was fired by some rebels at the monastery but did not strike them. The officer was amazed at what he heard and he confirmed that even he saw the rocket which was fired towards the monastery, but he along with some others saw something very strange and unusual. The rocket was about to hit the monastery but suddenly a women dressed in blue vestments appeared in the sky and took the rockets by her hands and threw them away. This was a great wonder to all of them. The general wondered who that lady was, she who was dressed in blue with radiant grace surrounding her. Finally they realized that it was none other than the Holy Theotokos the mother of Christ our God.

The Mother of God hears our prayers when we cry out to her. Even if we are weighed down with sins, if we repent and cry to the Mother of God to intercede to her Son for us, she will help us, even as she interceded to her Son at the wedding of Cana. For her intercessions are more powerful than the prayers of all the other saints, as she is *the very Mother of God* – the beloved mother of Jesus Christ. She is our “Champion leader,” as we sing every evening in the Kontakion of the Annunciation. “As thou art one with might which is invincible, from all dangers that can be do thou deliver us!”

And we must pray to the Mother of God! It is only with faith in God that we can do anything. With faith, Peter walked on water. With faith, David slew Goliath. With faith, harlots and murderers become saints. With faith, the blood of the martyrs becomes the seed of the Church. With faith, the Theotokos said ‘yes’ to God, and brought the light of Salvation into a sin-weary world. With faith, and with God, all things are possible. But without faith, and without God, we can do nothing but fail. Without faith, all of our pride and cleverness and worldly solutions will come to ruin.

Two examples illustrate this truth perfectly. One is the story our beloved Port Arthur Icon. On the eve of the Russian-Japanese War, the Mother of God appeared to an aged sailor on pilgrimage in Kiev. This old man was moved and experienced the uttermost awe, but the Theotokos comforted him and said, “Russia will soon be involved in a very difficult war on the shores of a far sea; many a woe is awaiting her. Paint an icon showing my appearance as it is now and send the icon to Port Arthur. If the icon is in that city, Orthodoxy will triumph over paganism and Russian warriors will attain my help, my patronage, and their victory.” Though the icon was painted, it never made it to Port Arthur in time due to the lack of faith of many of the Orthodox military men entrusted with the icon, and Port Arthur fell – the Russian Navy defeated. St. John of Kronstadt used to say that Russia failed because of negligence towards the holy icon, and Met. John of St. Petersburg said:

Let us think: is it not because Russian people have left their religious unity and forsaken the ancient holy things and testaments of their forefathers that woes and disasters now torment Russia?

The second example is the Fall of Constantinople in 1453. Though Constantinople was protected for so long by the Mother of God, many believe that it was not until certain Orthodox hierarchs and representatives compromised the Holy Orthodox faith at the Council of Florence that the Mother of God’s protection was lifted over the Queen of Byzantine cities, and it fell to the Turks.

In these examples, worldly reason and calculation replaced faith in the protection of the Mother of God, and replaced faith in Christ. And so, left to human reason and devices, we can only expect disaster.

It is easy to look around in the world today and to think that faith in the protection of the Mother of God is all but disappeared. Yet for all of the troubles in the world today, we must not loose heart. In the Mother of God, we have a steadfast and fervent intercessor, who looks upon us as a mother does, with unfailing love and mercy. In the words of Fr. John of Krestiankin:

During this present, difficult time, when the earth has grown old, is burdened by faithlessness, lawlessness, and ignorance of the knowledge of God’s commandments, has our Fervent Intercessor turned away from us in her zeal for the glory of her Son and God? No, my dears, this could not be. Needy children are dearer to a mother. As long as there is at least a “little flock” left… to bear and preserve faithfulness to Christ’s commandments and hope in the intercessions of the Mother of God, *we will not perish*.

And so we pray to the Mother of God with our whole heart and with our whole mind and say: “Rejoice, O our joy! Protect us from all evil by Thy precious omophorion!”

Amen.

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