

Once Upon a

SAINT

Story and illustration by Rebecca O'Loughlin



My dearest children,

This story begins in 1793. Father Seraphim had just been ordained a monastic priest, and he was given permission to dwell in a hut some miles away from his monastery, in a very thick forest in Sarov, Russia. It was illegal to be a poustinik (a hermit whose doors are open to guests) in Russia at the time, but Father Seraphim was in a remote place and the woods so dense that it would have been difficult for people to visit.

Father Seraphim ate vegetables that he grew and bread that he baked. He prayed the Divine Liturgy, the psalms, and the Rule of the Theotokos. He received his few visitors (human and animal!)

with joy, whether they came day or night, or during prayer. Father Seraphim kept a pot filled with blessed bread in his hut so that he could offer bread dipped in blessed wine (antidoron) to his guests. Once he sent his dear friend - a huge bear - to get honey for some visiting sisters.

Father Seraphim was walking in Diveyevo (several miles from his hut), when the Theotokos appeared to him, Ss. Peter and John beside her.

“My son,” Mama Mary told him, “you will help begin a new monastery on this spot some day. I will be the Mother of this monastery myself. For now I give you and my future sisters a

gift to show you my blessing.”

The Theotokos struck the ground, and a fountain sprouted out of the spot and split into several streams.

“The water that comes from this Spring will have the power to heal more people than the waters of Bethesda in Jerusalem. My future monastery will be a house of joy and hospitality.”

When our Blessed Mother disappeared, Father Seraphim built a well over the spot where the spring gushed forth.

Some years later, Father Seraphim was visited by a religious named Mother Alexandra.

“Father, I had a dream that Mama Mary asked me to start a monastery in Diveyevo. I have done this, but will not remain on earth much longer. Will you be our Starets and care for my spiritual daughters?” (A Starets is the leader and advisor of a monastery).

Father Seraphim wasn’t sure how the request would work, since Mama Mary had told him that she would be the Mother of the new monastery herself. He did not give a definite answer, but over the next several weeks, Father Seraphim fasted, prayed, and offered up great sacrifices.

“Beloved Mother,” he prayed, “Please show me what you want.”

When Father Seraphim finally went to tell Mother Alexandra that he would care for the monastery as she had asked him, she had already died. He was turned away: a different Starets had been chosen to oversee the sisters at Our Lady of Kazan Monastery. Father Seraphim didn’t worry about it. The problem was in the hands of the Blessed Mother, and he began his return to his hut in the forest.

The Theotokos came to him. “My son, why are you leaving? You must fulfill your promise to me and the request of Mother Alexandra. Take eight of the sisters from the Kazan community and start my new community where I showed you, by my healing Spring.”

Father Seraphim did as Mama Mary asked. He told his new spiritual daughters: “I have not chosen you, it is the Heavenly Queen herself who has chosen to entrust you to me.”

One time, when Father Seraphim was working outside, one of the sisters, who was sick, kept coughing as she tried to talk to him.

“Stop that coughing!” Father Seraphim demanded, splashing her with cold water from the Spring. Needless to say, the sister stopped coughing and was healed.

Saint Seraphim told the sisters that they should expect pilgrims to come, that they should joyfully serve and welcome them: “Happy are those who stay from dawn till dawn... because the Mother of God, our Queen of Heaven, visits Diveyevo daily.”

St. Seraphim died on January 2, 1833. Shortly after, the sisters of Our Lady of Kazan joined Saint Seraphim’s sisters of the Holy Trinity, and formed one Monastery. It was just as Our Lady had planned. Their rule (given to them by our Lady herself!) was one of prayer, joy, and welcoming strangers.

Not 100 years later, communism took over Russia. Soviet soldiers closed down the monastery, desecrated the Churches, dumped icons in the snow, stole Seraphim’s bones, cut down the forest of Sarov for lumber, and filled in the Theotokos’ Spring with cement. Soldiers encamped everywhere.

Then the soldiers started to see a peculiar apparition. A man dressed in all white kept appearing to them, asking them why they were destroying Our Lady’s Spring and monastery. Of course, it was Saint Seraphim! The holy man raised his staff during one of these “visions,” and struck the cement, cracking it in multiple places.

“The Blessed Mother’s Spring was given to me as a gift for her children.” Saint Seraphim said, and water gushed forth through the cracked cement, creating several pools of healing water.

A young soldier named Vasili, who did not believe in God, was given the task of filling in the new Spring with a bulldozer. He had no sooner begun when the bulldozer broke.

“Vasili!”

Vasili looked up. Where was that voice coming from?

“Vasili! Why are you destroying my Spring?”

Vasili shrugged: “I have orders to destroy the Spring.”

“Ah, well. You will not succeed, Vasili.”

Sure enough, there was no way to fix the bulldozer in a timely fashion, and when new bulldozers were requested, the area became “protected land” without any further explanation from the Soviet commanders. Pilgrims continued to visit the pools of the Theotokos’ Spring (even though this religious act could mean their imprisonment and death). Perhaps the Soviet soldiers were afraid of the man in white that had a habit of appearing and sternly chastising them?! Whatever the reason, the soldiers that were camped near the Spring permitted the pilgrims to come to the Spring!

In 1991, the communist regime fell in Russia. The sisters that had been scattered returned to Diveyevo and rebuilt their home. The bones of Saint Seraphim were given back to the Church at Diveyevo (they’d been sitting in an old Soviet basement museum).

The sisters of Diveyevo continue in the spirit of hospitality as Saint Seraphim taught them, welcoming more than 1000 visitors to the Springs daily. One of the sisters was visited by Saint Seraphim in the 1990’s:

“Put bread in my pot like I used to,” Saint Seraphim told her, “give the pilgrims antidoron from it, and it will carry the same blessing that I gave in my life.”

The pools of Diveyevo are named after various saints. People come for healing, both of the body and the soul. Some say that Diveyevo is the secret capital of Russia. This is because it kept the Christian Faith alive and flourishing in Russia even while communism tried to destroy it. There are many miracles associated with the Spring of Diveyevo, but the preservation of True Faith through the presence of Mama Mary and her spiritual son St. Seraphim is the greatest blessing of all.