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# A CITY OF SAINTS: THE FORGOTTEN RELIQUARIES OF PARIS

For several decades, Fr. Nicholas Nikichine, Parisian Moscow Patriarchal priest and church historian, has traced the Church traditions, historical lineage, and scientific documentation of the treasured relics of France. A native of the Russian village of Sarov, where St. Seraphim lived out his monastic life, Fr. Nicholas' evidence for authenticity and his deep insight into French Christian history are always fascinating – and sometimes surprising.

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RTE: Fr. Nicholas, when one begins to speak of relics, not only non-believers, but even sincere Christians often ask, “How do we know these are real?” The cynicism about relics that crept into the West after the French Revolution and Protestant Reformation has affected us all, and even Orthodox are unaware that there is often a reliable trail of historical evidence.

FR. NICHOLAS: In some instances there was manipulation with relics, and this contributed to the lack of veneration among Protestants, but yes, nonetheless, in many cases we can trace a reliable, distinctive history of relics in Europe. I am not proclaiming, as a general principle, that every relic and historical text we find in the West is authentic, but we need to look fairly at the historical facts with our Orthodox eyes and our Orthodox spiritual principles.

We must also remember that the negative attitudes presented about relics were usually based on simplistic and primitive arguments, and were part of a larger fight against the Church and Christianity in general, not a search for truth. These arguments are not valuable for us. We ourselves see that the contemporary western Church is the victim of an anti-Christian struggle.

From this viewpoint, we are their allies. Western secular society is now struggling with the Catholic Church, but if we Orthodox in the West become more visible, they will fight the Orthodox Church with the same arguments. This is why we must study. In my research on early Christian relics in France, in each case the point of departure was not simply historical interest, but my personal conviction that there was something important here.



Fr. Nicholas Nikichine

However, in tracing these relics and trying to answer secular and Protestant arguments that they are not authentic, and in fact, are meaningless – a view often held by people who have given themselves the right not to believe in any authority or tradition above their own opinion – I must admit that my own conviction remains the weakest link as long as I am contaminated by my own sins and passions.

RTE: You have many relics in France, though, particularly around Paris.

FR. NICHOLAS: Yes. It is only within the last decade that the Orthodox in France have realized that within a 200 kilometer radius of Paris they have many holy places. Some of them include:

- The Lord's Crown of Thorns was, and still remains, the most important French state relic. It was first brought from Constantinople in the 13th century and is enshrined in the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. It is brought out for public veneration the first Friday of each month, and every Friday of Great Lent.
- From the 13th century, the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Amiens has enshrined a portion of the skull – the facial bones – of St. John the Baptist. This shouldn't confuse those who know that Mt. Athos also claims to have the "head of St. John." This naming is a pious habit, because even if you have just a part of the head or the hand, you wouldn't say, "we have five centimeters of the skull," you would say, "we have his head." On Mt. Athos, they have a different part of the skull, but in Amiens we have all the bones of the face, and you can even imagine his personality behind these relics.



Cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris

- The main relic of the Cathedral of Chartres is the Veil of the Mother of God. It is two meters and fifty centimeters long, about fifty centimeters wide, and was brought to France during the reign of Charles I (Charlemagne). Tradition says this was the veil worn by the Virgin during the Annunciation, and thus the direct witness of the beginning of the events of the New Testament.
- In the center of Paris, in the church of St. Etienne-du-Mont, we have the relics of St. Genevieve, the patron saint of Paris, who halted the invasion of Atilla the Hun by her prayers.
- Also, in the center of Paris, in the Church of St. Leu-St. Gilles, we have a major portion of the relics of the Empress Helen. We think of France as the center of modern culture, sophisticated and imbued with the cult of pleasure and luxury, so it is astonishing to discover that even great saints and monks have found their final resting place here.
- Fifty kilometers from Grenoble, in the ancient abbey of St. Antoine, are the relics of St. Anthony the Great, and this was a great center of pilgrimage for hundreds of years. These relics of St. Anthony played a great role in France's spiritual history as St. Anthony is credited with having abruptly stopped a horrible outbreak of the *mal des ardents*\* in the 11th century.
- In the south of France, near Marseilles, is the head (anatomically, the entire skull) of St. Mary Magdalene. Just to discover this was astonishing.

Of course, after we found this out, the question arose, "Are these relics real?" because, as you say, the mentality of the Orthodox is also very influenced by the skepticism of the surrounding secular society towards everything touching the Catholic Church and religion. This controversy extends even to the Crown of Thorns, and it was part of my work to study the historical documents, the history of these relics, and to determine if it was possible and useful for us Orthodox to venerate them. I was astonished to find that with each of the relics I've mentioned, I didn't find any serious spiritual objections to veneration.

Some years have passed since we began these investigations, and now we have another argument in their favor. With no encouragement or organization from our side, Orthodox pilgrims have begun coming from Greece, Russia, and Serbia. Although we have historical and scientific probability

\* Mal des Ardents: Ergotism, a plague ravaging Europe periodically for centuries. Also called Sacred Fire and St. Anthony's Fire.

for these relics, we cannot absolutely prove anything in the past, but now these spontaneous Orthodox pilgrimages give us an additional spiritual argument for their authenticity.

RTE: Before we speak about the details of your research, can you tell us how to answer modern rationalist objections to the veneration of relics?

FR. NICHOLAS: When you look at saints you can see them as historical figures and try to determine whether certain details of their lives are real or invented, etc. This is historical criticism, but it is only one aspect. More importantly, we can take examples from their lives, we can imitate them as servants of the Church, as good theologians, and so on. But there is another purpose for our contact with the saints. The aim of our life is union with God. With the approach of God we are filled with joy, and when we feel this, we are also conscious that our life is brief, and that there are many ways to be misled. If we are honest with ourselves, it is not even easy to concentrate on our daily prayers. We can't say that God is too high, but it is not easy to raise our human spirit to Him. This is why, when the Christian Church came up from the catacombs and the Councils began defining Christian doctrine, the Church fathers also understood that we are not alone on earth, that there are other instruments of our salvation. The saints are not intermediaries between us and God, but they are helpers, guides, like good brothers and sisters, assisting in the difficult elevation of our souls to God.

The Church understood that after their deaths these martyrs and saints continue to link this world with the heavenly world. This is the main field of our relations to the saints, and the practical purpose of my studies – that we can learn to pray and receive assistance in prayer, before our own repose. We believe that this or that saint, closer to God than ourselves, can pray for us in our spiritual and material difficulties. This is a grace given to them by God to assist us with the problems of this world, with relationships, with society, all of which reflect our spiritual difficulties.

In regards to prayer, "If you want to learn to swim, you must get into the water." It would be senseless to only take a theoretical course in swimming, to listen to an explanation that you must remain with your hands positioned so, and your feet so. You simply must go into the water, and it is the same with prayer and the saints. You must try, as you try with God, to enter into direct contact with them as persons.

The value of this experience for me is that, while God is everywhere, the saints are also everywhere because they are not limited by their material bodies. A direct analogy to the existence of relics is that although we know that the whole earth is good, that all of nature is good, we also have the Holy Land and holy places, where spiritual relations and contact are simply easier. This holy geography is one of the methods by which God teaches us. If He is “everywhere,” then for us mortals this also means that He is nowhere, because as human beings we must fix our attention somewhere.

This is why an absence of material confirmation by science is not so important. For instance, we know that with icons, the second and third generation copies – not only the originals – often become vessels of grace. Of course, if we pray in front of an icon painted by St. Luke, we would expect to pray more easily, but in all of our prayers before icons and relics, we mustn’t demand anything from God. He has told us, “Ask what you want, and I can give it to you.” But this doesn’t mean that He *must* give it to us. He alone knows what is useful for us. In prayer, we must always make this reservation: “Thy will be done.” We know that our own desires and will are not always good for us and many of them do not correspond to God’s providence.

Our difference with Protestants is over this mystery of the Church, the whole Church in heaven and on earth, and when I invite Christians to pray before the relics, I use my faith in the Church and in her spiritual experience. The witness of the Church is clear: from the fourth century, in every Christian corner of the world, the Church publicly venerated saints, that is, the righteous who have reposed and have been officially recognized by the Church as having attained union with God. No one was considered a saint in his own lifetime.

This problem of faith is really a problem of the Church. Either a church is simply a place where we come together to hear some spiritual songs, to pray together, or it is an institution that exists in both heaven and on earth, and in this case its earthly aspect is only a partial manifestation of the whole institution. Certainly, part of this institution is the building, the earthly structure with priests and bishops, but the other is the unseen world, the saints and Christ. This part we don’t see with our physical eyes, but it must be a real part of our faith. We have saints, we have their relics – bones, clothing, icons – and sometimes by the providence of God, these physical objects become doors to the unseen world.

They are doors, but only doors. We must go through them. They are not like a warm stove that is always burning, always cozy, always available for you to warm yourself at. No, God demands our participation. Otherwise this would not be a matter of faith; it would be a law of nature. Faith is necessary because God is above nature. By His Nature He is above nature. It is evident that no human being can be satisfied by nature alone.

If God was completely separate from nature, nothing on earth could link us to heaven; but because He became incarnate, He has blessed matter. Supernatural grace has moved through nature, and this means that some material phenomenon can be the means of His intervention, the means of going to Him.

I can explain this rationally to some degree, but faith is also a problem of your heart and will, and here we have the example of the Apostle Thomas. What he demanded of the Lord was actually very crude, “Open your shirt and let me touch your ribs, because I don’t believe this.” But I think that this story was left in the Gospel to encourage the same behaviour from us. It is only through giving ourselves wholly to satisfy this righteous hunger for knowledge that we receive a response that is above nature, a supernatural affirmation.

In one way, it is easier to sense this otherworldliness of relics here in the West, because in Russia, except for the Russian saints, there are only small portions of relics. In Russia, even a tiny particle of a relic gathers a huge crowd and you stand in an enormous queue for hours with no time to stand alone in front of the relic and pray. Here in Europe, there is another problem: you have very great relics of Christianity, and few come to venerate them. Not only do few come, but the presence of the relic even generates doubt. This experience is valuable for us because we must be conscious of the tragedy of the West – the separation of the Christian society from its source; this must be a lesson for us not to repeat this mistake.

### The Amiens’ Relics of St. John the Baptist

RTE: Can you tell us now about the evidence for some of the relics you’ve studied?

FR. NICHOLAS: All of the major relics that I mentioned earlier have reasonable historical and scientific arguments from many different sources, and this



*Cathedral of Notre Dame d'Amiens*

varied coherence is a strong argument in itself. Also, in learning the history of these relics, we Orthodox are discovering another view of the history of the western Church and a new way of looking at these historical events.

For example, the head of St. John the Baptist was obtained during the sack of Constantinople in 1204. This was a great tragedy for the eastern Church, but now we see what has happened in Asia Minor, in Turkey, from the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453 to the present. If the head had remained there, would it have been lost or destroyed when Constantinople fell to the Turks (as many relics were), or would it still be accessible for veneration? Now, this relic is in France, in a very beautiful cathedral, and it is possible for the Orthodox to venerate it in the most open manner. May 25, according to the Julian calendar, or June 7th according to the civil calendar, is the feast-day of the Third Finding of the Head of St. John the Baptist, and on this feast in 2004 we celebrated the liturgy with this relic on the altar. This could never happen in modern Turkey, and this kind of reflection changes our estimation of the historical event of the transfer of this relic to Amiens. God has His own providence.

God allowed the transfer of these relics here, and this western society is preserving them faithfully. Certainly, France is undergoing a period of de-Christianization, but we still see daily veneration of these relics by a small number of faithful Christians. Another very well-known example from the 11th century is the transfer (“translation”) of the relics of St. Nicholas from Myra of Lycia (also now Turkey) to Bari in Italy. In the service dedicated to this event we say, “It was not useful in God’s sight that these valuable relics rested without activity in the desert of Lycia.” We Orthodox need to be reverent before God’s providence in this.

This continuing veneration by even a minority of French faithful is one of the spiritual arguments for their authenticity. In each case I’ve studied, I’ve found local people who believe, and scholars who have documents, historical books, and records that demonstrate the historical and scientific arguments proving the relic’s authenticity. Admittedly, these people are small in number. The great number of French Catholics not only do not know anything about their own holy places, but they aren’t very interested in them. This is not their error; they themselves are victims of the anti-Christian, anti-ecclesiastical, and anti-relic mass media. Unfortunately, every weak point of western Church history is magnified to generalize the impression of the weakness of

the whole Church. The Catholics had their misadventures, and the credulity of simple people was at times turned to profit by bad clergymen, but still, when you study the history of the great relics, there is no room for these simplistic objections.

On the contrary, we have very positive and powerful arguments. We can cite the example of the head of St. John the Baptist in Amiens, which, anatomically, is a facial bone without the jaw. At the same time, a church in the diocese of Verdun reputedly had the jaw of St. John. A commission was organized to study the two relics, and in this case, the jaw in Verdun turned out to be that of another person, post 10th-century, but the conclusions of the same commission about the relics of St. John at Amiens were astonishing. The Amiens bone dates not only from the first to the third century after Christ, but this skull fragment was determined to be that of a man of Mediterranean origin, from age 30 to 45 and further, there was an ancient hole inflicted by a sharp instrument, just at the bottom of the forehead. According to Orthodox tradition, we know that after his beheading, Herodias stabbed the head with her knife as her revenge for his denunciation of her illegitimate marriage to Herod. Although this is not so important to the scientific examiners, we do have this argument from our own tradition, along with other historical and anthropological arguments for the relic's authenticity.

In the history of the great relics, we almost always have this scientific and spiritual correlation. For example, in the history of the Shroud of Turin, the historical documentation is not very convincing, but the most striking arguments come from the scientific side, whose findings have been continually revised over the past few years.

After the French Revolution, we had what was called a "Catholic Renaissance" in France. The crude rationalism and criticism of the revolutionaries and Protestants trying to discredit relics prompted the Catholics to search out the histories of these objects. They studied, they launched archeological investigations, and they arrived at a higher level of objective argument in favor of the authenticity of many of these relics than had been known before. Not only in France, but also in the Christian East, we still have many documents that have not been investigated because of language barriers, antiquity, and inaccessibility.

As we continue to study, we are finding even more arguments favoring authenticity, but my view is that rational investigation can never be suffi-



*Sepulchre of St. Genevieve of Paris*

cient proof. It is limited by the nature of rationalism. The main argument for us is the argument of our faith. It is not the fact that this relic, this bone, is really from St. John the Baptist that is ultimately important, but whether this relic can in some way affect our modern life, our personal destiny. We know from the history of the Church that if this relic is from St. John the Baptist, then we have a greater guarantee that our weak prayer will have more result here than in another place.

The place that we want to arrive at is to show that it is not only possible, but useful, to pray in front of relics. We have enough evidence to show that they support our prayer. God and the saints themselves give us enough arguments. However, even if I invite pilgrims to these holy places, personally, I do not dare to impose this veneration as a certainty. It is only the whole Church that can authorize this. Often, people ask, “Can you prove...,” and I have to honestly say, “No,” but the level of my rational knowledge shows me that my faith can support my belief, that I can pray in front of these relics with confidence that my faith is not forced by primitive and insubstantial arguments.

### St. Genevieve of Paris

RTE: Thank you. Will you tell us now about some of the western saints whose relics rest in France and are venerated by the Orthodox? Perhaps you could begin with St. Genevieve, the patroness of Paris.

FR. NICHOLAS: In St. Genevieve, we find that it was a weak woman who stopped Attila the Hun, the same Attila before whom the great warriors and governors of the empire trembled. And it was to this woman, out of all the theologians and clergy in France, that St. Simeon the Stylite sent a greeting from his pillar in Syria.

His greeting to her is recorded in all the variants of the *Life of St. Genevieve*, but not in those of St. Simeon the Stylite. Why? Because he was the greatest contemporary figure of eastern monasticism, and she was still an unknown anchorite. Hers was one of tens of thousands of blessings he gave to those who sought him out, but, of course, it was important to St. Genevieve – as important as if we had received a blessing from one of the Optina elders. Certainly, our children, our grandchildren and our great grand-children would remember this.

The Russian Orthodox have been building churches here in Paris for over a century, and there have been many clever people among them, but even so they hadn't “noticed” the spiritual richness of the West. Almost no Orthodox knew that the head of St. John the Baptist was in Amiens, or the Crown of Thorns in Notre Dame. To good Orthodox these relics are incomparably great instruments of spiritual life, but even so, there was no attention. And among these instances of ignorance is the fact that St. Genevieve wasn't even recognized until recently by contemporary Orthodox in France.

The recognition was her own miracle. We have some accounts that she appeared, in the form of an old woman, to a very ill Russian émigrée in the 1930's, and asked why the Russians didn't pray to her, the patroness of Paris. When you have a good spiritual conscience you ask yourself what it is that you've seen in a dream or vision – a spiritual fact, or an illusion? This woman was healed from her severe headaches and she and her husband attempted to find out something about the saint she had seen. The only link they had was an old Russian acquaintance living in the woods of St. Genevieve-des-Bois. In going to visit him, “by chance” they missed their road and found the cavern-shrine to St. Genevieve with a statue of the same saint this woman had seen in her dream. This coincidence had a great spiritual effect on the Russian community. Around the same time, Russian émigrés came to know of this link between St. Simeon the Stylite and St. Genevieve, and when they understood that there had been a conscious connection between one of the greatest Syriac fathers and this French saint with a strange name, it was like a revelation for them – a sign that she could be venerated by the Orthodox. It is no accident that the most famous Russian Orthodox retreat house in Paris and the greatest Russian cemetery in France are both situated in the city known for the veneration of St. Genevieve.

The *Life of St. Genevieve* was printed in the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* in 1954 or 1955, and she was the first spiritual door for Russians into the veneration of western saints. We had had earlier Orthodox church theologians in the West who knew of her, but their message had not been received by the émigrés. There was a gap between Bulgakov, Lossky, and the simple Russians who escaped here from the social catastrophe of the Russian Revolution.

When we read the lives of western saints of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, their lives and ascesis often seem strange to the Orthodox mind;



but when you read the life of St. Genevieve, you see clearly that she is one of us. The first moleben to be served before a previously unrecognized western saint was done before her relics in early 1941. Now it is an annual tradition that on the first Sunday after January 3, her feast-day, the Orthodox have a joint moleben for her feast. Because St. Genevieve is not yet official in the Russian calendar, we use France's new calendar feast day. We hope to organize a monthly prayer before her relics. She is, by her own declaration, the patroness of Paris, and as we have two or three thousand Orthodox émigrés living around Paris, many of them in very poor conditions with document and life problems, this would be very useful.

St. Genevieve also had other feast days, particularly that of November 26, when she stopped a great epidemic of the "*mal des ardents*." Five years ago, when there was great public media pressure to gather funds for AIDS and some other incurable maladies, we felt that simply giving money was a contradiction for us because we know that the greatest alms come from God and His saints. It is not money and science that will wipe out these diseases. As believers, we must either accede to this collection of funds, or we must address our prayers to those who have helped in the past. And that is why this feast-day was restored.

We've restored it as a common event, as far as is possible for Orthodox and Catholics. We don't do a church service together, but we do read the Psalter through the entire night, along with St. Genevieve's life and the narrative of her miracle. This is another step in her veneration. Because she is the patroness of Paris, both the Catholic and Orthodox submit to this.

RTE: When I saw the icon of her and St. Simeon the Stylite over her relics, I had a very strong sense of the East and West meeting there.

FR. NICHOLAS: Yes, and it took courage to introduce an unknown western figure, her life and story, to the eastern Orthodox world. Another person who advanced the veneration of local French saints was St. John Maximovitch, the first Orthodox hierarch to urge the veneration of local French saints. He said that if we are here, we must ask their help. It contradicts our Orthodox spirituality if we only appeal to the saints of Russia or Greece, and for the second and third generations abroad, it becomes very artificial. It is important to live with the grace of this land, as well as the grace of the universal Church. We must believe in God's providence, and revere the righteous ones that God has placed here.

After the revelations of St. Genevieve, it was the authority of St. John that allowed us to take the next step. Since his repose, the emigration itself has slept, and we still have no general studies of the lives of these western saints. We have works by specialized students or church historians, but nothing from the practical viewpoint.

### Equal-to-the-Apostles, St. Helen

FR. NICHOLAS: Another great saint in Paris, as I mentioned, is St. Helen, and the historical account of the translation of her relics is very wonderful. After hundreds of years in Rome, in the ninth century her relics came to one of the great provincial monasteries of the diocese of Rheims, and later to Paris. The fact that she has chosen to rest in Paris is a very great consolation. It is also a great sign that the mother of St. Constantine, the first Christian emperor, an empress herself, has chosen to rest in a church on the worst street in Paris. This street of St. Denis, once used for royal coronation processions from Rheims and for funerals in the Abbey of St. Denis, is now one of the most degraded in the city. St. Helen found the Lord's cross under the temple of Venus, and now she rests in the street in which Venus is venerated. But this is probably a sign for us from God because we know that St. Helen restored the Holy Land, and her coming to us in her relics can be seen as an offer of her spiritual aid to restore the profaned land of France. She no longer has the physical force of empire to restore this land, but with God's power anything can happen.

RTE: Can you tell us how you traced St. Helen's relics to Paris?

FR. NICHOLAS: It was very astonishing to discover that almost her whole body is in the center of Paris. The first question, of course, is, why was this not known?

We Russians, who know how Russia has suffered, can't imagine that France has suffered even more from another point of view. We don't remember, for example, that there were almost one hundred years of religious wars in the 16th-17th centuries. In the 19th century, France did not have one revolution, but four – the "Great" French Revolution in 1789, then again in 1830, 1848, 1871 (the Commune) – and at the beginning of the 20th century, another massive attack on the Church; confiscation of church property, separation of church and state, and the expulsion of the monastic



*St. Helen's Relics, Church of St. Leu - St. Gilles, Paris*

orders with a second confiscation of their property. All of these cataclysms were accompanied by the destruction, desecration and theft of Christian relics and church treasures. Relics were destroyed as harmful superstition and you can understand why French society degenerated after these catastrophes. Now, it is possible to talk to modern people about God only in a general way: about faith in God, about the fundamentals of Christian life, not about things like relics. This has resulted in a great severing from our roots because from the early Church, saints' relics were venerated as complementary instruments of our spiritual life and the common heritage of the entire Christian world.

The French don't reject St. Helen, they have simply forgotten her. She is not interesting now for modern society, and her problems are not our contemporary problems. She is not mentioned in a single guide to Paris, although they mention the Church of St. Leu-St. Gilles where she rests – the church's 16th century origins, the statues, etc., but St. Helen and the fact that her relics are here is not interesting to modern minds. The first time I was there, it was only the rector who knew that St. Helen was entombed in a niche four or five meters above the altar; the people of the church knew nothing about it. Now, however, all of the church personnel know.

RTE: I suppose that the original reason for not speaking of it was the fear of another confiscation of church property.

FR. NICHOLAS: Yes, it could have been. But, the next question for us is, "How did she come here?" Certainly, the first assumption of any Christian would be that St. Helen's relics are either in Constantinople or Rome. Rome was her first resting place – she was buried in a Roman mausoleum, and her original sarcophagus is now in the Vatican Museum. In the seventh century, her sarcophagus was opened and the relics were exposed for veneration in the Church of Sts. Peter and Marcelline (third-century martyrs) that juxtaposed the mausoleum.

In the ninth century, under the French Carolingian dynasty, the arts, sciences, theology, and politics flourished. Many monks traveled to Rome and other large centers of learning, and in Rome, one French monk received a revelation to take the body of St. Helen to his monastery in the diocese of Rheims. He was a simple man, and he did what he felt God had told him. This translation of her relics is astonishing, but if you understand the ninth

and tenth centuries, you can see that it was not impossible. Even now the Greeks don't agree with the translation of St. Nicholas' relics, but we know that if the move hadn't been allowed by God's providence, the saint would not have been translated. It was God who told the Venetian merchants, "It is time to take these relics..."

I say this because the translation of St. Helen's relics wasn't the usual well-planned ceremonial transfer. When this monk brought her body back to his monastery of Hautvillers – and he was a simple man, not the head of a delegation or a brilliant academic – he was met with astonishment. Just imagine, if someone came to you and said, "Here are the bones of Franklin Roosevelt..." People would say, "He's crazy. Not only could he not have the bones, but bones aren't signed. How do we know?" The same astonishment greeted this monk on his return, as is recorded in the monastery chronicles of the translation. This was the Middle Ages, society was in turmoil, and frankly, it would have been easier to obtain human remains and commit fraud than it would be now. So, the superior of the monastery and the senior monks set up a commission to investigate his claim. First, they sent a competent representative to Rome to see if the relics had really disappeared. Then they contacted the pope of Rome, because if the relics had disappeared, if they had been stolen, they were now in their monastery and they were in trouble. This is all known from the chronicles.

The body was indeed missing, and from the very time the monk claimed. But the pope was a spiritual man and when he learned about the revelation and the miracles that had accompanied the translation, rather than demanding the relics' return, he thought that this was probably the will of God and of St. Helen. We know that in the history of the Church, saints have often chosen their own resting places. For example, in the life of St. John the Baptist, after the second finding of his head in the sixth century, the Byzantine emperor wanted it brought to Constantinople. The reliquary was placed in great state on a special imperial conveyance, but nothing moved. The horses strained, the soldiers pushed, but quite simply, nothing happened. This was a spiritual century, though, and the emperor understood that St. John wanted to stay where he was. The pope's decision about St. Helen was similar; he saw God's hand in it. Our century, undoubtedly, would proclaim, "Return! Punish!"

The monastery superiors also examined the monk carefully. Not only were there questions about his own truthfulness, there was also the hypothesis:



*Russian Cathedral of St. Alexander Nevsky (Rue Daru), Paris.*

“The body has disappeared, the pope of Rome agrees that the relic should remain in our monastery, but because he is simple, perhaps this monk was a victim of trickery. Perhaps someone else stole the real body of St. Helen and pawned off another corpse on him. But this was laid to rest with the relics perfectly matching the description from Rome. In the meantime, they had proposed that the monk undergo a test with a cauldron of boiling water, “If you affirm this is the body of St. Helen, then go into this water.” He did, and came out whole. This was one of the registered miracles, with many witnesses, and for them to go to this length meant that the investigation was extremely serious. The sincerity of the monk, the depth of his faith in St. Helen, the historical, juridical and canonical arguments: all were examined. It also demonstrates the integrity of the monastery, because the monks could have simply inquired as to the disappearance of the relics without telling the pope that this great spiritual treasure had fallen into their hands.

Another sidelight is that Hautvillers was not one of our modern monasteries that exists for twenty years and then disappears. This monastery existed from the seventh century until the 1789 French Revolution, over a thousand years. It was well-ordered, with continuity and traditions, and it disappeared only because of the catastrophe of the French Revolution. The fact that this was the monastery of Dom Perignon, who invented champagne, seems like a humorous aside, but it does tell us about the high intelligence of these monks. To discover that one must turn a bottle fifteen degrees every few weeks for three years to obtain a good champagne, you must be not only clever, but illumined. Few of us knew that this discovery was made in the great monastery of St. Helen.

During the Revolution, the monastery property and church treasures were confiscated, the monks were martyred and dispersed, and the monastery buildings sold for stones. When Dom Grossard, the econom (monk-cellarer) of the monastery, knew that the revolutionaries were coming, he took the body of St. Helen and hid it. He himself suffered the same fate as Russian monks of the 20th century: arrest, prison, exile. Only after thirty years was he able to return as priest of a village near the desecrated monastery.

Dom Grossard was quite a normal, practical man, and as he grew older he knew that he must decide what to do with the relics. He felt that it was not the will of St. Helen to continue reposing in a simple village church. The last abbot of the monastery, Talleyrand-Perigord, had now, providentially,

become the Bishop of Paris, and he told the monk, “Yes, it isn’t right that these relics should repose in an unknown place, but just wait a bit.” Many of the churches of Paris were still in ruins, but just at this moment in history the Order of the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre – suppressed during the French Revolution – was restored. Because she had recovered and rebuilt the Christian shrines of the Holy Land, the Knights considered St. Helen as their patroness, and the bishop of Paris offered them the relics for safekeeping. Dom Grossard brought the relics with all the accompanying documents of authenticity, some of which had been handed down since the 12th century, for they had been examined and described many times.

The Knights of the Holy Sepulchre had their own church in Paris, the Church of St. Leu - St. Gilles, and this was where St. Helen was laid to rest. Even now, they hold their celebratory services there. When the Knights were again suppressed, their church became a simple parish, and they offered the relics to the parish, where they still remain. Later, the Knights were allowed to reassemble, and the parish of St. Leu-St. Gilles has always respected their historic relations with St. Helen.

The Knights today are other knights, and when I discovered that the body of St. Helen was there and contacted them, they were rather indifferent. Now, as they see pilgrims coming, however, they are more interested. I first contacted them to request permission to see the document stating that St. Helen is their patroness. This contact was very useful because, although they are no longer the official guardians of St. Helen, the Knights still participate in the guardianship of the Crown of Thorns by keeping order during the public veneration services in the Church of Notre Dame de Paris. Thanks to their influence, in 2002, we received permission to organize an annual Orthodox veneration of the Crown of Thorns, and this is now part of the official protocol of Notre Dame. Of course, we had always been allowed to participate in the general veneration, but because Notre Dame is aware of the canonical problems of co-celebration, they have set aside a special day each year (usually the Friday of the Veneration of the Cross during the third week of Orthodox Great Lent), for the Orthodox to hold their own service.

We held the first Orthodox moleben before St. Helen’s relics in 1997, and I invited Fr. Andrew Fyrrillas, an old Greek priest and my professor of patrology at the Theological Institute of St. Serge. He was almost in tears. He had long known that St. Helen was here, but it had been impossible for him to verify the authenticity of the relics and to organize a celebration. After some

study, I am convinced more than ever of my conclusions. Because of many historical details and evident spiritual signs, I'm sure that this is St. Helen.

RTE: Why did it take so long for the relics to be acknowledged by the Orthodox?

FR. NICHOLAS: Because we are very few. There are only twenty or thirty clergy here, and not only are we fully occupied with parish life, but we must each work at another job to support ourselves and our families. If there is any free time, some have interests in theology, others in missionary work. It just happened that I was the one interested in the historical aspect. Now, not only Archbishop Innocent of the Moscow Patriarchate, but also Romanian and Serbian hierarchs and clergy participate in the festal veneration of this relic.

### St. Dionysios the Areopagite

RTE: St. Helen and St. Genevieve have very secure historical places in the Church, but can you speak now about the controversy surrounding St. Dionysios the Areopagite? I believe that you are one of only a handful of modern historians who believe that he ended his life in France as a martyr, and the first bishop of Paris.

FR. NICHOLAS: If you read modern encyclopedic articles, they all say that that the first bishop of Paris was a Greek, also named Dionysios, who arrived in the third century. But until the 17th century, both tradition and scholastic authors record the first bishop as being the disciple of St. Paul, Dionysios the Areopagite. In my research I tried to uncover what arguments were used "for" and "against" this 17th century change of belief. To my surprise, I discovered that the greatest argument given against the first bishop of Paris being the apostle of St. Paul is a text by St. Gregory of Tours, who wrote the first history of the French Church. Parallel to this, I found other sources pointing out that this text has many contradictions, both external and internal, and is counter to St. Gregory's other writings, in which he cites people whom he had mentioned previously as contemporaries of the first bishop of Paris, but who, in this secondary text, he states as having lived during the apostolic times, not in the third century. So, the major argument against a belief that was held by the universal Church for 1700 years is based on a passage that was contradicted by its own author.

Secondly, this text of St. Gregory's is the only text in the whole Christian Tradition to say this until the 17th century, and it wasn't used as an argument against St. Dionysios the Areopagite being the first bishop of Paris until the 17th century. But why was this text suddenly being used? What was the aim?

Because if the first bishop of Paris was St. Dionysios the Areopagite, then the Church of Paris has an apostolic origin, through St. Paul. If the first bishop was of the third century, then it is another thing. To be the son of a king or of a commoner are two different things. Another point is that St. Dionysios had a real impact on theology and philosophy, and if he was here, it is important that we pray to him and be inspired, not only by his works, but by him as a person, particularly if, as I believe, he finished his life here in Paris.

This case was very useful because we understood through it that we must revise many of the negative conclusions of modern critics who have been influenced by their own internal western ecclesiastical problems, such as Protestant and revolutionary criticism. For us Orthodox, there was no such pressure to revise Church history.

As a further example, the value of this text of St. Gregory of Tours was denied by the great historians and specialists on the Middle Ages before the First World War, but these historians were a small group, and their conclusions were not delivered to a wider public. If you go to the modern entries for St. Dionysios, the conclusions of these earlier scholars are not recorded, but now even modern scholars are rejecting this text of St. Gregory of Tours as an argument. We also have archeological findings that lead us to the apostolicity of the Church of Paris.

The first complete *Life* of St. Dionysios that we have is from the ninth century, and this is why the rationalist critics of the 17th century claim that these facts were invented in the ninth. But if we accept this, then we have the same problem with St. Nicholas, because his first complete life was compiled only in the eighth century. Certainly, this was sufficient reason for the modern Catholic Church to devalue St. Nicholas, who is no longer considered a universal saint but a local saint. For us this is nonsense, because we know that St. Nicholas is spiritually present in every Orthodox church.

When we look at these modern conclusions, we find that although the first complete *Life of St. Dionysios* was written in the ninth century, the sources of this *Life* are from the fifth, and between the first and the fifth centuries



*Church of St. Denis*

was a long period of invasions in the West, when many texts, libraries and relics were lost. We find the same problem for almost every saint of the first and second centuries, and this is why this argument is weak for the Orthodox conscience.

The fact that St. Dionysios was the bishop of Athens, and afterwards the first hierarch of Paris, was accepted by Methodius, Patriarch of Constantinople; by Michel St. Celle (a 9th-century saint); and, even closer to us, by St. Simeon Metaphrastes (12th century) and St. Demetrius of Rostov (18th century). We know that these saints had very clear minds and if there was any doubt or cloudiness in the tradition, they attempted to clarify weak or controversial points. They did not want to spread legends. They checked their sources to see if they were credible or not. For us this is a strong argument. For instance, we see in the *Life of St. Dionysios* by St. Demetrius of Rostov that St. Dionysios finished his days in Paris, and for us this has the ring of truth because in the Russian edition this part of his life takes only a few lines – St. Demetrius didn't have the possibility to visit and write more, but he also didn't enlarge St. Dionysios' life through hearsay. He wrote only what he knew from the universal Church.

Now we can come to Paris, and it is very interesting for us to see that St. Dionysios not only became the first bishop of Paris, but around his tomb are buried all of the kings of France. The building of the Cathedral of St. Denis (St. Dionysios), which houses these tombs, marked the birth of the Gothic style, the style of the great French cathedrals (which, by the way, was termed "Gothic" only during the Renaissance, to define it as a barbarian style as opposed to the antique ideals proclaimed by the Renaissance.) But this idea of introducing light into the church was a theological idea, and large sums of money were given to materialize this idea around the relics of St. Dionysios. It has never been an easy matter to find a sponsor for a theological idea, but the money was given because St. Dionysios was a great theologian, a great spiritual personality, a disciple of St. Paul, and the only spiritual figure of this stature in France.

When you first come here you ask yourself why this French king, Dagobert, a great-grandson of Clovis, gave such a huge sum of money to build this church, and why did he ask to be buried here? Why did St. Genevieve herself come on pilgrimage here? Why did Charles Martel, the ancestor of Charlemagne ask that he be buried here head down, because he didn't consider himself worthy to be buried in the usual position? When

Charlemagne himself was asked, “How do you govern your kingdom?” he answered, “With the special help of St. Dionysios.” This wasn’t a lesson of catechism, it wasn’t publicity-seeking, it was simply that here, near St. Dionysios, he felt something. Charlemagne was also a source of other relics, such as the Robe of Christ in Argenteuil and the Veil of the Mother of God in Chartres, which he probably received by way of Byzantium. He was a great military figure of the eighth century – he had armies, he had cavalry – and to receive his aid, the Byzantines offered the relics. If all of these kings were eager to be buried here instead of building ornate personal mausoleums and churches for themselves, this means that St. Dionysios was greatly honored.

Only relatively recently have the suppositions spread that he was actually a third-century martyr. But there were many Gallic martyrs in the third and fourth centuries, and martyrdom alone is not a sufficient reason to generate such widespread veneration. To be venerated, a saint must have some characteristic details by which he distinguishes himself; he must be defined as a personality. Simply being the first bishop is not sufficient reason – this is the pride of *our* times, “I am the first, I have the first place, I have the rights of an author, of an inventor...”, and we transpose this mentality to those spiritual times and to those people: “first bishop, second bishop....” The first bishop wasn’t always the most venerated, certainly. In Tours, St. Martin was not the first, but he is the most venerated.

I emphasize once more that St. Dionysios’ relics are still preserved here, along with his companions, Martyrs Rusticus and Eleutherius. In Russia, we use the term *moshchi* for relics, which also has the intimation of “power.” Bones naturally turn to dust, but his are still incorrupt. So, if we want to correct something, we can remember that the most important thing is not that we come to Paris to drink champagne or cognac or to go to Pigalle Square, but because here we have St. Dionysios, St. Helen, and St. Genevieve.

RTE: Yes. Before we go on, will you elaborate a little on what you mean by saying that a saint must be defined as a personality before he can be venerated?

FR. NICHOLAS: Yes. For example, the early desert Fathers didn’t write great works, but their personal force was so great that for many generations their personalities were stamped upon their spiritual schools, in the spirituality of their followers. In France, we also see this spiritual continuity, which



Frieze of the Beheading of St. Dionysios

means St. Dionysios must have been a truly great spiritual figure. The traditional identification of St. Dionysios the Areopagite was agreed on until the 17th century – and why do we have to dismiss it now? Not one of the other explanations corresponds with the spiritual evidence.

RTE: It strikes me that although these kings were sophisticated men of the world and warriors, they all obviously had a living sense of the saint. It's not consistent with human nature that generation after generation would have bothered with something that didn't seem real to them.

FR. NICHOLAS: I would like to remind you that the Robe of Christ in Argenteuil and the Veil of the Mother of God in Chartres both came through Charlemagne, and if he distinguished the shrine of St. Dionysios and proclaimed St. Dionysios himself as his special intercessor, it means that he felt something very strong here, even stronger than in the case of the above-mentioned relics. We must take this spiritual argument seriously.

I don't deny the fact that some people don't feel St. Dionysios, that they feel they receive more help, say, in Chartres, praying before the Veil of the Virgin, or in another church, but that is not important for us. What I want to emphasize is that St. Dionysios can be a source of grace for us. If he was only a simple martyr with an unknown biography, and all we knew about him was that after his death he picked up his head and walked for a distance, this is not unique. It is a fascinating detail, but it is not sufficient – we also have Beauvais Cathedral. Lucianus, the first bishop of Beauvais, was also a martyr, also probably from apostolic times, and he also walked after his head was cut off. But what is Beauvais today? It is a small town with no spiritual aura. But here we have the Cathedral of St. Denis, we have the university that for centuries has considered him to be its patron, and we have all of Paris spreading out around it.

We also have the argument of St. Genevieve who went to Tours to venerate St. Martin, and then, it is related, returned to pray at the tomb of St. Dionysios. Her biographer does not feel that he has to explain this great personal devotion. If this had been an unknown saint, he would have explained who he was and why she revered him, but it just says that she went to venerate St. Dionysios. There is no added commentary in her *Life* because he was known throughout the world as the beloved disciple of St. Paul. If you go back and read Chapter 17 of the Acts of the Apostles, and St. Dionysios' *Life*, written in the ninth century, it is clear.

We also have small portions of his and his companions' (Priest Rusticus and Deacon Eleutherius) relics in other churches around the world. Spiritually, this is important for us because he embodies a link between East and West, rationalism and revelation, modern science and the limits of this science. We criticize western mentality, and surely, most modern mentality doesn't correspond to the ideals of the New Testament, but nevertheless, the writings of St. Dionysios were very important to the development of rational western thought. There were two great influences on the period of scholasticism. One was Aristotle, and the other is St. Dionysios the Areopagite. Why? Because St. Dionysios the Areopagite had left works of theology illuminating the relationship between the rational mind and revelation. His works dominated the scholastic mentality, and for us this means that to understand the modern West, the scholastics, and the rise of rational thought, we have to know the works of St. Dionysios.

RTE: The writings of St. Dionysios had a tremendous impact throughout Christendom, but modern academics are almost unanimous in believing that they were written by an unknown Syrian in the sixth century. What do you think of this?

FR. NICHOLAS: When we begin to study his works, we come to understand that their spiritual value is incomparable. This is not a theological treatise, a moral teaching – no – it is very spiritual, and this means that the author must be a great spiritual personality as well.

Modern science has proposed fifty or sixty candidates as authors of St. Dionysios' writings, but not one has been accepted. There have been objections to all of them, and now they are coming to the conclusion that "one Syrian author..." etc. However, these books are of the first importance and that means that this author must also be of the first importance. In the text, the author presents himself as Dionysios, and this is another problem. Why would an author of such brilliantly spiritual works write under a false name? If he says, "I am Dionysios," and we judge by the fruit, we should believe.

The problem for modern minds is the objection that academics have found cited within the text a passage believed to be by Proclus, a fifth-century philosopher. St. Maximus the Confessor, however, knew about this objection and refuted it. Indeed, when we compare the two texts, and understand that someone has cited without reference, the problem is, "Who cited whom?" The first cited the second, or the second cited the first?



For Protestant professors of the 19th century it was clear: a theologian cites a philosopher – the philosopher is very clever, a theologian couldn't possibly be. I say this with some humor because I know the opinion of St. Maximus the Confessor, who tells us that even brilliant ancient philosophers lied. For instance, in his prologue to a commentary on Dionysios' works St. Maximus states as a certainty that the philosopher Platon certainly knew the Bible, but he never cited it when he borrowed. He also tells us that St. Basil was quoted by many early philosophers who never mentioned that they had lifted their idea from Basil. For me this is very important. The conclusion that these works cannot have been written before the sixth century is based on the evidence of these "later citations," which use this unproven affirmation that it is always a theologian who cites a philosopher.

Another objection to the early date of the texts is that the liturgy and the sacraments referred to in the text are very developed and many believe that it is impossible that the early Church would have had this, but this is because we have the rationalist, Protestant view that when Christ came we had nothing, that He only presided over the breaking of the bread and gave the institutional words, and only later did the clergy create a service around this.

No, Judaism already had very elaborate rituals, and now we know that the form of our liturgy was greatly dependent on these highly developed synagogue rituals. The first communities were composed of Jews, and, of course, they adapted their rituals to Christian purposes. There are several other aspects to this, but I mention this one to explain why, for me, the modern objections are not clear.

The scholars may say that this author is not St. Dionysios, but then who is it? The alternatives have all been rejected, including the theory that it is a collective work. All of the great spiritual figures are known, and these fifty or sixty candidates probably cover all of the possibilities.

As a parallel, I can give the example of the adoption of Mendeleev's periodic table of chemical elements. There were plenty of theories of elements before that, but there were objections to all of them. Mendeleev proposed a system that was accepted because he gave the most simple explanation of matter. Here in the works of St. Dionysios, probably the most simple explanation is to recognize that at the end of the first century there really were great theological minds, like that of St. John the Evangelist.

If we accept the modern view that this wasn't possible, we will soon find ourselves in the mire. Some Christians are already beginning to say that the

Gospel of St. John is too theological for the first century, but the New Testament is so fundamental that these critics don't yet dare to propose their conclusions to a wider society. These scholars are not Protestant by nature, but once you begin revising the New Testament, you undermine your own foundation. We also have the question of Church Tradition and of how it was formulated. If we begin denying Tradition, we will very quickly have other and greater problems.

We Eastern Orthodox often see western society as richer and more intelligent in the exact sciences, and so it seems that in their faith they also must be more clever, more sensitive, more developed, but this is not true. Materially and intellectually, we can receive much from the West, but spiritually we must be very careful because these scholars too often impose their intelligence onto a weak faith, in the absence of real spiritual experience.

Even the Orthodox scholars who agree with the view that these are not St. Dionysios' writings, are not posing the legitimate spiritual questions that some of the western theologians such as Urs von Balthasar have dared them to bring forward. These western theologians don't pretend to have literary proof that these writings are of St. Dionysios because the matter is complicated, but nevertheless, some of them have underlined these spiritual difficulties, including the reference of St. Maximus the Confessor about the borrowings of philosophers and the evident spiritual level of the writer. An author like this must have been a spiritual giant, and this means that he was known. We don't write spiritual classics first and then become spiritual giants. St. Dionysios' works are answers to questions.

An atheist says that everyone creates God according to his imagination, and now we are attempting to transpose the laws of our modern civilization, our own culture, onto the functioning of a spiritual society that was born in the first century. Contemporary society has the problems of rights, of authors, of compensation, of glory, which means that "if you cite me, you pay me." These saints were not avid for money or glory. They were evangelists. Their only motivation was to glorify God, to follow His providence, and to serve those around them. ✦