

Mother Maria Skobtsova

She smokes and drinks.

She doesn't collaborate well.

The church doesn't know what to do with an Orthodox Nun in the world.

She is twice divorced and doesn't seem to be able to live by anyone's rules, except God's.

She often leaves church before it ends or sometimes doesn't go at all.

A Christian who wore a Star of David and stood up to Nazis.

Her door is always open.

Her table is always spread wide ready for the next one.

She was warm and funny.

The best people love her

and the worst people killed her.

Justice:

1. In court, standing before her accusers, she boldly defended her own case, declaring:
My loyalty was not to any imagined government, but to those whose need of justice was greatest, the people. Red or White, my position is the same—I will act for justice and for the relief of suffering. I will try to love my neighbor.

Grief

2. Tragedy struck the family in 1926. After keeping vigil by her daughter's bedside for a month and watching her beloved child die, Elizabeth wrote:

When someone you love has died, the gates have suddenly opened onto eternity, all natural life has trembled and collapsed, yesterday's laws have been abolished, desires have faded, meaning has become meaningless, and another incomprehensible meaning has grown wings on their backs..... Everything flies into the black maw of the fresh grave: hopes, plans, calculations, above all, meaning, the meaning of a whole life. If this is so, then everything has to be reconsidered, everything rejected, seen in its corruptibility and falseness.

3. **New Monasticism:**

Non-possession should be active. The monk should seek where to place the gifts given him by God precisely for that end. And that implies the necessity of monastic activity in the outside world, but in all its forms: social work, charity, spiritual aid... these are the result of an intense desire to give one's strength to the activity of Christ, to the humanity of Christ, not to possess it, but to spend it for the glory of God.

4. ***She was a very unusual nun in her behavior and her manners. I was simply staggered when I saw her for the first time in monastic clothes. I was walking along the Boulevard Montparnasse and I saw, in front of a cafe, on the pavement, there was a table, on the table was a glass of beer and behind the glass was sitting a Russian nun in full monastic robes. I looked at her and decided that I would never go near that woman. I was young then and held extreme views. -Anthony Bloom***

5. *She was out-and-about early every morning, especially visiting the vegetable markets to pick up reject vegetables which she could take back for her soup kitchen for the homeless, for refugees in the Rue de Lourmel in Paris. ...the little house was full of a mixture of homeless people, street people in Paris, exiled professors of philosophy from St. Petersburg, ecumenical guests, slightly scandalized and dismayed Russian clergy, and her own family and friends.*
6. *Her complete lack of self-consciousness about the life she was leading. I suppose that's one of the things that strikes me about her. She was supremely herself. " -Rowan Williams*

7. **Motherhood I.** : After her daughter's burial, Elizabeth reconsidered her whole life. She became aware that God was calling her to share the love she had for her daughter with all people, especially "for all who need maternal care, assistance, or protection". She felt she saw a "new road before me and a new meaning in life."

Motherhood II. a theme to which she returns: in the late 1920's with Nikolai Berdyaev. Berdyaev was a philosopher of real note and a friend. But what provoked Mother Maria to pick a fight with him was an essay of Berdyaev's in which he had contrasted the fertility of the thinker who generates creative ideas, from the commonplace, physical fertility, of a mother. Mother Maria wasn't having any of it. She said:

Actually, I think this is completely the wrong way around. What does a mother do? A mother produces a new person. Now, there's nothing quite like that. It's not like producing an idea. All the philosopher can do creatively is imagine ideas; but the philosopher can't generate a person. A mother makes a person, a unique image of God, an actual, un-substitutable, non-exchangeable image of God. So, let's be clear here. Let's be clear here! The language that privileges male rationality over female physicality really won't do here. You've got to understand that the way in which motherhood works has something to say to you, Berdyaev, a married but childless male, and maybe you should just shut up and listen a bit when some of us want to talk about the experience of mothering.

7. **Love Your Neighbor**

"The way to God lies through love of people. At the Last Judgment I shall not be asked whether I was successful in my ascetic exercises, nor how many bows and prostrations I made. Instead I shall be asked did I feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and the prisoners. That is all I shall be asked. About every poor, hungry and imprisoned person the Savior says 'I: 'I was hungry and thirsty, I was sick and in prison.' To think that he puts an equal sign between himself and anyone in need. . . . I always knew it, but now it has somehow penetrated to my sinews. It fills me with awe.

8. **Liturgy**

She wrote, later in the 30's, a couple of quite powerful essays about what she called the "liturgy after the liturgy." When you've shared in the worship of the Eucharist, then you've got to go out and live Eucharistically. You've got to live in the world as if the world were like the sacrament itself, carrying the meaning and invitation and challenge and love of God. You've got to live in that

sacramental environment, and you have to be yourself a sacramental person, making yourself available to be eaten and drunk by those around you. And that's the *"liturgy after the liturgy."* It leaks out of the doors at the back of the church. The power of Divine presence and Divine invitation in the Holy Eucharist is something that cannot be contained behind locked doors. And therefore, the liturgy is vital and central because it generates changed lives and changed relationships. It's a very intense, uncompromising account of Christian love. Love is not a feeling, not even a set of actions. *Love is the state in which we live.* Love is the nature of the connection that God has made between us and others in and through the Holy Spirit, in the likeness of Christ.

9. Star of David

Not long before her arrest in 1942, the Nazis mandated Jews to wear the Star of David. Throughout Europe, many Christians looked the other way. The law didn't apply to them, so therefore it wasn't a Christian problem, right?

Mother Maria had no time for such terrible theology. *"Well, this is all very deplorable, but actually it's not a Christian problem."* And Mother Maria came back and said, *"There is no such thing as a Christian problem. If they're coming for the Jews, they're coming for the Christians. Our destiny ought not be separable from that of the Jews, because we are in the same story as they are. So, yes, we ought to wear the yellow star."*

10. *For her, exile was an opportunity "to liberate the real and authentic" from layers of decoration and dust in which Christ had become hidden. It was similar to the opportunity given to the first Christians. Of paramount importance, "We must not allow Christ to be overshadowed by any regulations, any customs, any traditions, any aesthetic considerations, or even any piety."*

11. Ravensbrück

Prisoners who survived the war remembered her. One of them, Solange Perichon, recalls:

Mother Maria had used the ever-smoking chimneys of the camps several crematoria as a metaphor of hope rather than being seen as the only exit point from the camp. "But it is only here, immediately above the chimneys, that the billows of smoke are oppressive," Mother Maria said. "When they rise higher, they turn into light clouds before being dispersed in limitless space. In the same way, our souls, once they have torn themselves away from this sinful earth, move by means of an effortless unearthly flight into eternity, where there is life full of joy."

Rosane Lascroux, recalled:

"She exercised an enormous influence on us all. No matter what our nationality, age, political convictions -- this had no significance whatever. Mother Maria was adored by all. The younger prisoners gained particularly from her concern. She took us under her wing. We were cut off from our families, and somehow she provided us with a family."

On the 30th of March Mother Maria was selected for the gas chambers -- Good Friday as it happened. She entered eternal life the following day. The shellfire of the approaching Red Army could be heard in the distance.

12. Sainthood

Controversial in life, Mother Maria remains a subject of contention to this day, a fact which may explain the slowness of the Orthodox Church in adding her to the calendar of saints, an event that finally occurred in 2004. Her day of commemoration is 20 July. While clearly she lived a life of heroic virtue and is among the martyrs of the twentieth century, her verbal assaults on nationalistic and tradition-bound forms of religious life still raise the blood pressure of many Orthodox Christians. Mother Maria remains an indictment of any form of Christianity that seeks Christ chiefly inside church buildings.

-Jim Forest, Orthodox Theologian

“God is incarnate in each person. And we need to accept this awesome revelation of God unconditionally, to venerate the image of God in [our] brother. Only when [we] understand that, will yet another mystery be revealed to [us] -- one that will demand [our] most dedicated efforts...” MM

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<https://jerryholsopple.bandcamp.com/album/on-the-breath-of-god>

--For a transcript and audio of Rowan Williams' 2025 seminar on Mother Maria, please email me at mzt3522@gmail.com

