

## “Maria Skobtsova: Making a Saint in the Eastern Church Today”<sup>1</sup>

Michael Plekon

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Fordham University theologian Elizabeth Johnson has been one of the most insightful students of the communion of saints and the more recent issues of who gets canonized and who does not. Kenneth Woodward gave us a remarkable look at this process of saint-making in his classic study, *Making Saints* (1990). Johnson’s effort, *Friends of God and Prophets*, takes a hard look at both the history of the identification and veneration of holy women and men, and the more recent problems of the process, in the Catholic communion, centralized in the Vatican. She points out, as did Woodward, the difficulties of any but an elite being recognized as possessing heroic virtue and having led lives that reflected the “official” image of holiness sought by the Catholic magisterium. With an explosion of individuals made either blessed or saints by Pope John Paul II during his papacy, the questions Johnson raised were all the more important.

Public recognition of worthiness, including a place in the calendar of saints, was now to be granted from a single authoritative source, thus shifting what had been an acclamation close to the spiritual life of the people to an increasingly bureaucratized process.... Since the right to name the community’s exemplars reinforces the authority of the one who canonizes, this was one

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<sup>1</sup> This essay originated as a lecture given at the 2013 Strasbourg Ecumenical Institute conference on “Saints without Borders.”

more element in the centralization of power in the hands of the papacy.<sup>2</sup>

Both Johnson and Woodward, in different ways, question not just the process of canonization but also the rationales. In the Catholic Church, the process is long, complicated, and expensive. And the choice of those canonized raises questions about the message these saints bring to the world. As Johnson notes, married couples and parents – laity in general – are under-represented, with canonizations coming principally from the ranks of the clergy and religious orders. Those with any political edge or theological creativity appear to have difficulty being admitted to the process and then real problems getting through it. This was the case till recently for Oscar Romero until Pope Francis ended the delay. Elizabeth Johnson views the outcome quite negatively:

While canonization developed in response to historical forces, its exercise at this point in time also has a negative impact on popular and theological awareness of the communion of saints. Saints have become an ever more elite group, proclaimed for their heroic virtue and their power to produce spectacular miracles. The unfortunate result has been that meaning of the term “saint” itself has shrunk in Christian usage to refer mostly to those who have been named as a result of this official juridical scrutiny. Not only does this overshadow the theological meaning of the term “saints,” which embraces all persons of love and truth, but existentially the official ideal of perfection rewarded by this process becomes rarified to the point where people reject their own identity as holy and blessed: “I’m no saint.” ... Transferring what ideally is a grace-filled discernment by a local community to a centralized bureaucracy, furthermore, has resulted in a certain uniformity among the canonized saints reflective of ... a clericalized culture ... that is overwhelmingly

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<sup>2</sup> *Friends of God*, 100–01.

favorable toward men who are priests or bishops and toward persons of aristocratic and upper-class origins. These “canons” are likewise biased against the full and legitimate use of sexuality by both women and men.<sup>3</sup>

Even more recently, with the canonization of Kateri Tekawitha, Kathleen Sprouws Cummings has noted the difficulties of choosing candidates for sainthood in a divided church.<sup>4</sup> In the past few years, I have been interested in persons of faith in the Eastern Church and beyond.<sup>5</sup> Most especially, I have been impressed by the diverse as well as ordinary, everyday forms of holiness that Paul Evdokimov has called “hidden.”<sup>6</sup> I have listened to people within and outside the churches, to activists and writers on their journeys toward God.<sup>7</sup> The rest of what I will have to say here will not be criticism of what a canonization process does by way of damage to the sense of the communion of saints among us. There is much more that could and should be said about this as we explore “saints without borders,” that is, saints across churches and theological perspectives, cultures, and historical periods. I want to look at the more local procedure for identifying and then recognizing holy women and men among the people of God in the Eastern Orthodox churches. At the same time this will entail looking at the kinds of saints, the personalities, lives, words and actions of these persons of faith not to mention the important roles that images or icons of them play in the East. I will use recently canonized Mother Maria Skobtsova to illustrate all these.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>4</sup> “Native Daughters: Making Saints in a Divided Church, *Commonweal*: <http://www.commonwealmagazine.org/native-daughters>.

<sup>5</sup> *Living Icons: Persons of Faith in the Eastern Church* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2002, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> *Hidden Holiness* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> *Saints as They Really Are* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> In addition to the Russian and French language editions of her work, see *Mother Maria Skobtsova: Essential Writings*, Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, trans. (Maryknoll, NY: 2003). The best biography in English is Sergei Hackel, *Pearl of Great Price: The Life of Mother Maria Skobtsova 1891–1945* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1981). More recently in addition to a collection of Mother Maria’s writings edited by