

Stilling in Ravensbruck



Against the background of the horrific rise in antisemitism in this country and elsewhere in recent years, it is appropriate to reflect on the life and teaching of a Russian Orthodox nun, who perished in a gas chamber at Ravensbruck just weeks before the end of World War 2. St Maria of Paris was a very unusual nun. A one-time Socialist Revolutionary, she was twice-married, fled Russia after the Bolshevik takeover, and ended up in Paris with many other Russian emigrés. Having embraced the religious life, she acquired a property which became a house of prayer, as well as a shelter for the poor, the homeless and the down-trodden of Paris. Following the German occupation in 1940, it also became a place of refuge for Jews. For this 'crime', St Maria, her priest and her son were packed off to various concentration camps. In 1985 Yad Vashem, Israel's official memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, recognized her as 'Righteous among the Nations'. She was canonized by the Orthodox Church in 2004.

Even in the midst of the horrors of the concentration camp, St Maria was able to find stillness in the company of God. She saw the clouds of smoke from the crematoria as symbols of hope. She said: *When they rise higher, they turn into light clouds before being dispersed into 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.*

Throughout her life as a nun she was also a great thinker and writer of poetry. She was particularly keen to emphasize the corporate character of Christianity, and the unity of Christians, both within the Body of Christ, and within the wider mass of humanity. The importance of being prepared to see the image of the suffering Christ in those who came to her door was uppermost in her life and in her teaching.

In this sense, she offers a different kind of approach from that of most of the Holy Fathers who are venerated in the Orthodox Church. In their writings their focus is chiefly on the individual Christian and his or her personal relationship with God, as highlighted in the words of the Jesus Prayer: *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.* And yet both of these approaches are not contradictory but complementary. They belong together. What St Maria does is to remind us that, as we come before Christ, for our one-to-one with Him, seeking His stillness, we come not as isolated individuals, but as members of His Body, and as members of a human race whose flesh He deigned to assume for the benefit of us all.

We enter the silence with these words of St Paul to the Corinthians:

For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being one, are one body, so also is Christ.

We leave the silence with these words of St Maria of Paris:

Anyone who abides in the temptation of self-salvation alone, who follows the path of egotism, be it even holy egotism, simply does not hear what Christ says, and does not see what His sacrifice on Golgotha was offered for.