



SAINT MARON THE ANCHORITE AND HIS TRADITION IN RUSSIA

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**The Maronite Research Institute (MARI)
and
Saint John and Saint Maron Church, Moscow, Russia**

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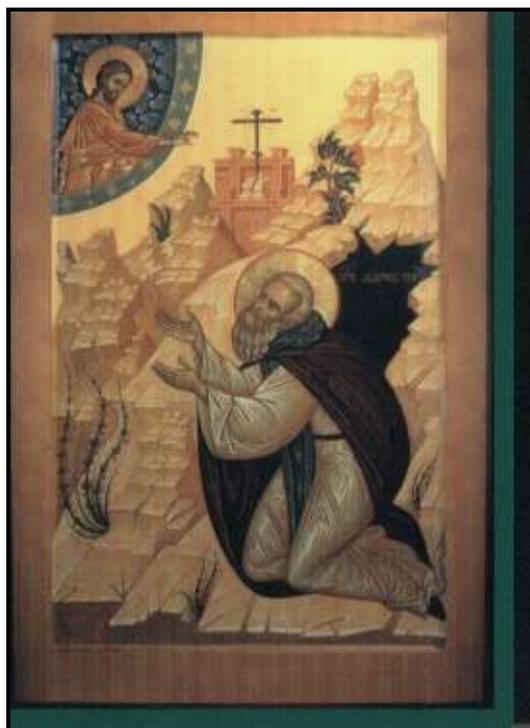
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Saint Maron the Anchorite and His Tradition in Russia

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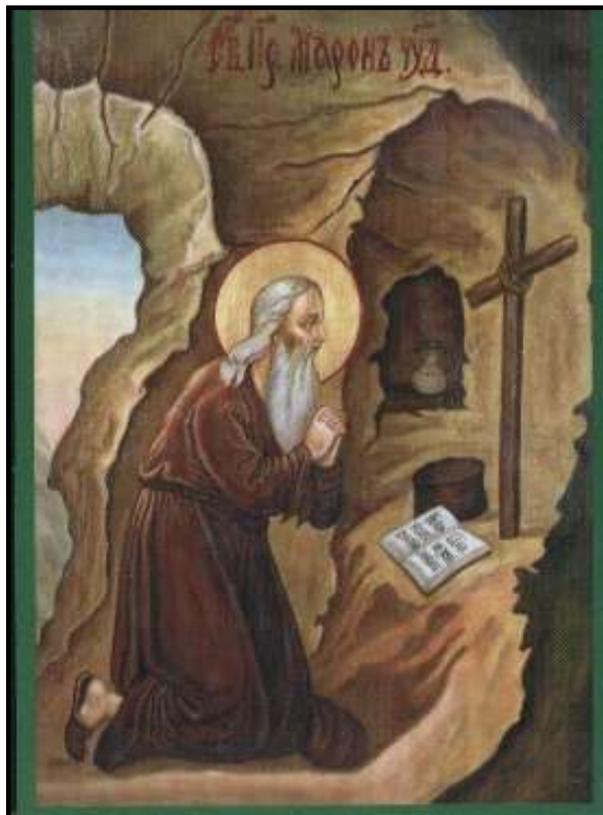
New Fresco of Saint Maron at the Church of Saint Maron Moscow (Hourani Private Collection)

I. Introduction

This article is based on a brochure translated by Dr. Andrius Valevicius, a Professor of Theology at the Université de Sherbrooke in Canada. Dr. Guita Hourani obtained the brochure, during her research expedition in Moscow and Saint Petersburg in the fall of 2001. Dr. Hourani, then Chairperson of the Maronite Research Institute (MARI) and Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Maronite Studies (JMS)*, was on a research trip to Russia to study both the history of the Church of Saint Maron in Moscow and the Russian Orthodox icons of the saint. These icons were produced in the the Monastery of Valaam, on the Island of Lake Ladoga, located across the Russian city of Saint Petersburg.



Dr. Hourani wishes to thank the following: The staff at the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate for granting her permission to conduct research; His Grace Bishop Niphon Saikaly, the representative of the Antiochian Church in Russia, for hosting her in 2001 during her research in Moscow; Professor Engelina Smirnova of the University of Moscow for her invaluable insights; and Reverend Father Alexander Marchenkov and each member of the congregation of St. Maron in Russia for their warm hospitality and genuine cooperation.



*Old Painting of St. Maron in Moscow c. 1880
(Hourani Private Collection)*

Dr. Hourani fondly remembers the former liaison, the late Ms. Irina Revasova, and thanks the current liaison, Ms. Elena Maslova, for facilitating communication between herself and the Church of St. Maron in Moscow. Dr. Hourani is grateful to Dr. Andrius Valevicius for his translation of the brochure on which this article was mainly based.

Over the years, Dr. Hourani has built a strong friendship with Father Alexander Marchenkov, pastor of the Church of Saints John and Maron in Moscow; this friendship keeps her informed of the most important events taking place at the church.

In this article, the authors share with the readers not only the brochure that summarizes the history of the veneration of St. Maron in the Russian tradition and the history of his church in Moscow but also the latest news about a piece of the relic from the saint's skull in Foligno, Italy. This relic was recently donated to the church in Moscow and is currently being venerated by the saint's Russian congregation. In addition, Dr. Hourani shares some of the most important and rare Russian images of St. Maron, which she has collected over the years.

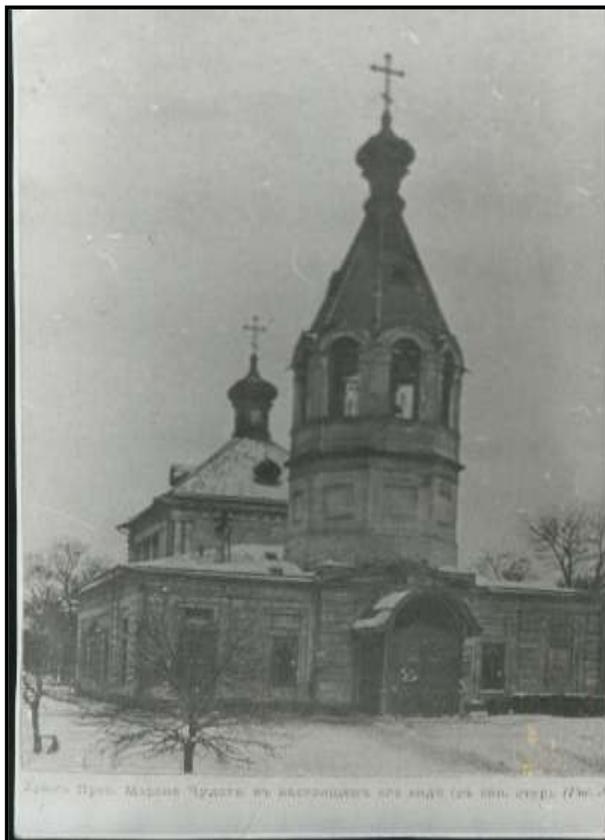


II. Translation of the Brochure¹

“Saint Maron the anchorite lived in the 4th - 5th centuries on a mountain situated in the region of Apamea in the Byzantine province of Syria Secunda. According to the Historia Religiosa of Theodoret of Cyrrhus (died ca. 458), he lived in the open air, near a pagan temple which he had converted into a church. His life was one of penance and prayer. He took refuge at times under a tent made of skins, in order to avoid bad weather. Not being busy enough with the usual day’s chores, St. Maron began to acquire the riches of philosophy.

Picture of St. Maron’s church in Moscow c. 1880 (Hourani Private Collection)

Saint Maron soon became known throughout the entire region. Besides the austerity of his life and the gift of miracles that he had, he had the gift of healing which made him a great celebrity during his lifetime. Crowds invaded his solitude. One could see, wrote Theodoret, the redness of fever disappear as he sprinkled someone with his blessing. Shaking would stop and demons would flee, all of this by just one remedy. Doctors use various remedies according to the nature of the illness, but the prayers of St. Maron were one remedy suitable to all afflictions.



Saint Maron not only healed sick bodies, but he also took care of the soul. He would heal one person from excessive desires and another from anger. In other words, he had the gift of ‘anger management.’ The first one would receive lessons in chastity and the second lessons in justice.

¹ The brochure was translated *verbatim* in an effort to present the hagiography of the history of his veneration in the Russian Orthodox Church. The translation from Russian into English was done in 2002 by Dr. Valevicius; a revision of this history has been published on the website of the Church of St. Maron the Syrian Hermit which we were not able to translate at this time. It should be noted here that Dr. Hourani has the largest collection of photos of icons, paintings and sculptures on Saint Maron.



By practising this kind of art, he planted many seeds of philosophy and let them grow; now this garden of God, wrote Theodoret, is flourishing in the region of Cyrrhus.

Great Jacob is a product of this plantation, the man to whom one could apply the words of the prophet: The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree: he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon (Ps. 91, 12).

It appears that St. Maron was a priest. Theodoret stated that Saint Maron consecrated a place to worship God and blessed the sick. These expressions in ecclesiastical language apply ordinarily to persons who are priests. The letter of John Chrysostom to Maron, written from Chrysostom's exile in Cucuse in Armenia in 405, is addressed to Maron, priest and hermit. The content of Chrysostom's letter is as follows:

Saint Maron's Church in Moscow after its renovation (Moscow, Russia, c. 1999)



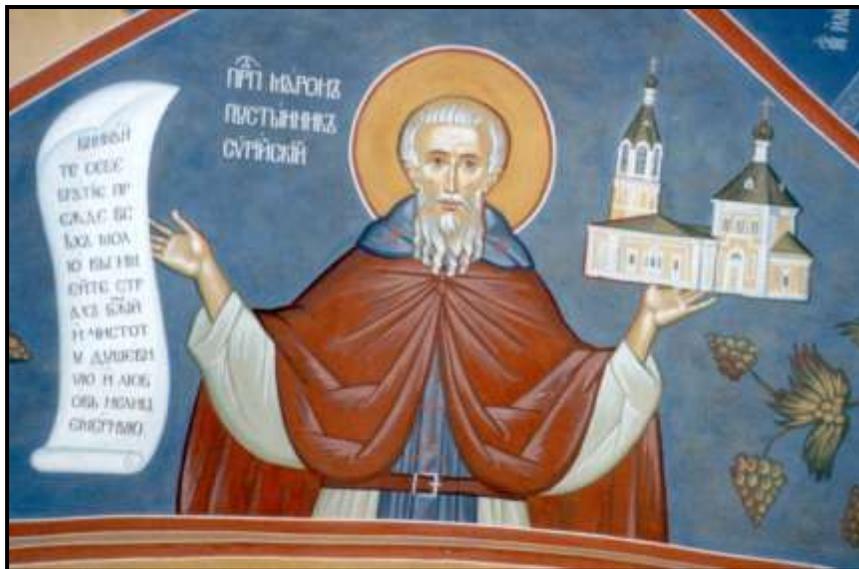
The bonds of affection and good will tie me to you and I can see you as if you were right here beside me. No distance can weaken the look of love. I would like to write to you more often, very pious Sir, but that is not easy due to all the obstacles in my way here [in exile]. Nevertheless, I send you my greetings each chance that I have and I want you to know that I never forget you and that I always carry you in my heart wherever I may be. Be gracious enough to inform me about the state of your health as often as you can. Even if we are separated in body, I always receive great consolation when I hear from you, even in my solitude. It is a delight for me each time I learn that you are doing well. But what I ask most of all, is that you pray to God on my behalf.

When St. Maron died, his remains were transported to a neighbouring place where a church was built and dedicated to his memory.



Theodoret, the only biographer of St. Maron, tells us nothing about the date of Maron's death. It is dated to the year 410. Theodoret became bishop of Cyrrhus in 423 and was already bishop of this city when he wrote the biography of Saint Maron. On the other hand, John Chrysostom wrote to St. Maron in 405. If a large church was built and named after St. Maron, as the Bishop of Cyrrhus tells us, then it is necessary to suppose there was an interval of some years between his death and the construction of this church. Therefore, it would not be too far from accurate to place the death of Saint Maron in 410.

The disciples who had united around St. Maron formed the nucleus of the Maronite Church. They founded a monastery dedicated to his memory which was known as the Monastery of Saint Maron. It was situated near Apamea (Qal'at al-Modiq), the administrative capital of the Byzantine province of Syria Secunda, in the valley of the Orontes River.



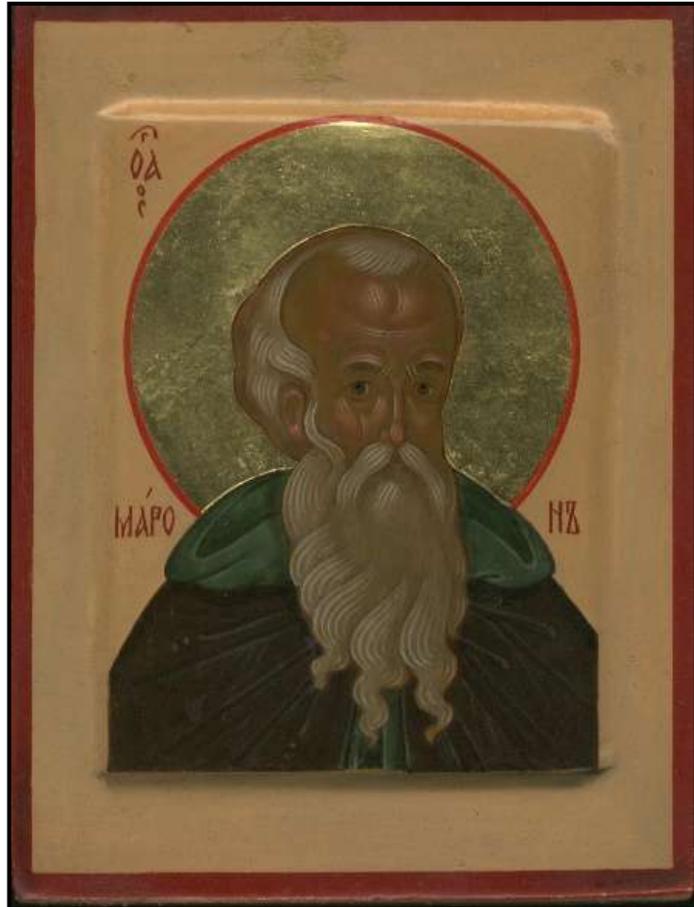
Another New Fresco Depicting St. Maron Holding a Maquette of His Church in Moscow at the Church St Maron Moscow (Hourani Private Collection)

The Monastery grew into a great enterprise. According to the historian Mas'udi (896-956), the Monastery of Saint Maron was a large building surrounded by 300 cells, possessing objects of gold, silver, and precious stones. It was from here that the Maronites eventually spread out in all directions. Historical documents tell that the monastery was already fully active in the first years of the 6th century. There is a report addressed to Pope Hormisdas from 517, written by the monks of Syria and signed by Alexander, Archimandrite of Saint Maron that tells of the violence unleashed against the monks of Saint Maron by the Monophysites and it also tells about the



massacre of 350 monks and the burning of the walls of the monastery. The Maronite church venerated July 31st as the feast of the 350 monks massacred by the Monophysites. During this early period, Greek was the official language of the Maronite monks. We know this by way of signatures and documents. The representatives of the monastery gave themselves Greek titles.

Thanks to these documents, we are able to establish the time of the foundation of the monastery in the 5th century, some years after the building of the church dedicated to Saint Maron. The monastery held great prestige in the area. The historian Abu-l Fida (d. 1331) wrote that the Emperor Marcian (Reigned 450-457) expanded the monastery in the second year of his reign, i.e. 452. The Byzantine historian Procopius of Caesarea (c. 500 – c. 565) informs us that Emperor Justinian the Great restored its walls, no doubt torn down by the Monophysites.



Russian Icon of St. Maron Moscow (Gift to Hourani from Reverend Alexander Pastor of St. Maron's Church in Moscow)

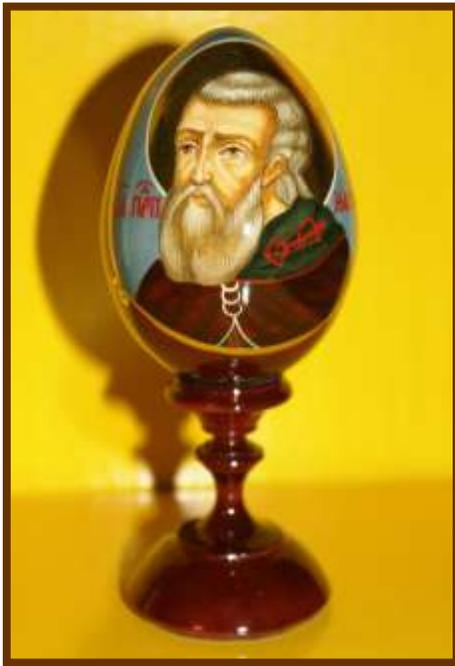
The Monastery of Saint Maron was a source of edification for the whole area. Its renown gave considerable prestige to the monks, and they, noted for their knowledge and their virtue, attracted many faithful who came to them from all directions. This popularity displeased not only the enemies of orthodoxy, but even Christians. Sooner or later, out of jealousy, the monastery was bound to be destroyed.

When did this happen? It could not have been before the tenth century. According to a note added to Fol. 126b of British Library manuscript 17169, which is a Syriac manuscript written in 581, the Monastery of Saint Maron still existed in the middle of the eighth century. This note tells us that this manuscript came into the library of Saint Maron's in the year 745.² Furthermore, the monastery was still fully active

² William Wright, *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum Acquired Since the Year 1838. Part II* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1871), 450-454.



towards the end of that same century, as can be seen from a letter which the Catholicos-Patriarch of the Church of the East, Timothy I (780-823) wrote to its monks in 791. This letter is preserved in the Chaldean monastery of Saint Hormisdas near Alqosh in the Diocese of Mosul. The monastery was still flourishing at the time of Dionysios I of Tel Mahrê (818-845), the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, during this period the Maronite bishops were still chosen from among the monks. The monastery was destroyed before the middle of the 10th century.



Mas'udi tells us that it was destroyed, as well as the cells which surrounded it, due to repeated incursions by Muslim Arabs and the violence of the Sultan. Which Sultan? Certainly a contemporary of Mas'udi known to everyone. By using the definite article, Mas'udi felt no further identification was necessary. Moreover, Mas'udi appears to have been familiar with the monastery, because of the vivid description he gives of it.

***Painted Egg in the Authentic Russian Tradition
(Commissioned by and Property of Hourani)***

All these indications therefore permit us to place the date of destruction of the Monastery of Saint Maron, the cradle of the Maronite Church, in the first half of the 10th century. It was this Monastery of Saint Maron that gave its name to the Maronite people. The name Maronite was not only given to the monks, but to the faithful who had put themselves under their direction.

During the 6th century Christological controversies, the monks of Saint Maron's were the staunchest defenders of the definition of Chalcedon. However, there are signs that in the 7th century the monks embraced the Monothelite doctrine. Due to the Arab invasions towards the end of the 7th century, some of the Maronites immigrated to the mountains of Lebanon which became their spiritual centre with the transference of the patriarchate from the see of Antioch. At the time of the Crusades, the Maronite Church entered into communion, more or less intermittently before the 15th century, with the Roman Church. When the Maronites did join the Roman Church definitively, the union was integral, without schism.



An interesting outcome of the above is that an entire church grew up from the reputation of one man from whom we have no writings at all, and all we know about him is contained in a few pages of writing.

Saint Maron in Russia

The first mention of the Church of St. Maron in Moscow dates back to 1642. It was during the reign of Tsar Mikhail I Feodorovich (1613-1645) and the tenure of the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, Iosif (1642-1652). The area in which the church stood was called the City of Women. The reason for this name is unknown, but it may have referred to a kind of fortress in the neighbourhood which was manned by women and where women sought refuge from Tartar invaders.

An Old Icon of St. John the Baptist and St. Maron at their Church in Moscow (Hourani Private Collection)



In February 1727, a wooden church was built and consecrated to St. Maron and it would seem to have contained some of his relics. On July 12th 1730, by order of Empress Anna Ioannovna, a new stone church was to be built in honor of St. Maron. The construction took place between 1731 and 1747. The church soon became famous for a miraculous icon of St. Maron which adorned the interior of the church. Apparently, St. Maron was quite well known in Russia at the time and people would come to the church, either asking about St. Maron or



expressing their devotion before his relics. St. Maron was known to be the saint who could release people from dark forces. People would come to the Church of Saint Maron in order to draw holy water.

In 1812 Napoleon marched into Russia with his army. The Muscovites, not wanting to deliver their city to the Antichrist Napoleon, set fire to it. It is during this French occupation that the Church of Saint Maron was severely damaged. It had stopped functioning as a church already many years before. In 1831, a businessman named Lepioshkin had the church restored. A side altar was built to honour St. John the



Baptist. At this point, the church started to have a very lively history. The Church of Saint Maron became a major charitable project of the Lepioshkin family. They renovated and cared for the church, both materially and spiritually, for 74 years. The Lepioshkins took care of the priests of the church, fed and housed the orphans in the neighbourhood, built a hospice for the poor and bought icons for the adornment of the church. The church was fully consecrated by Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow on October 29th, 1944.

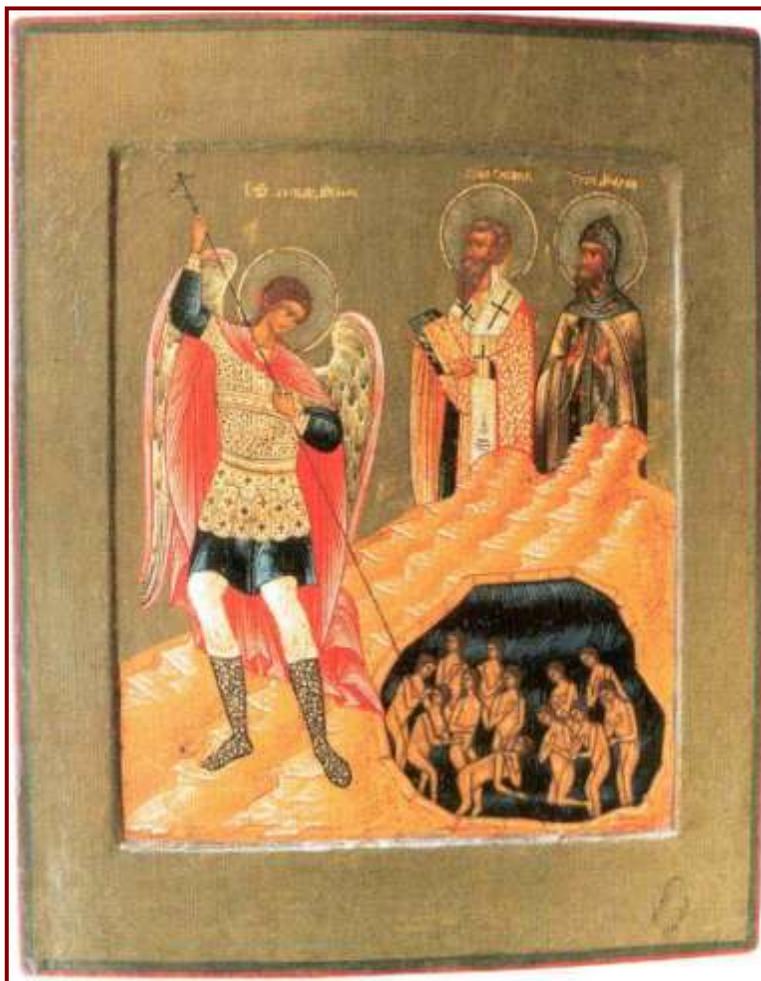
Another Russian Icon of Saint Maron (Hourani Private Collection)

In 1885 Saint Maron's Church had opened the first parochial school in Moscow. The church had many fine pastors herding its flock: archpriest Sergei Lavrentsev, archpriest Alexander Voskresenski and martyred Father Sergei Makhaev. At the beginning of the 20th century there was a severe flood in Moscow and many families moved into the parochial school next to the church. During World War I, a hospital was set up in the church. Uniforms for soldiers were also sewn there. In 1918, on the feast of St. Maron, the liturgy was celebrated by the legendary Patriarch of Moscow and of all of Russia, His Holiness Tikhon (1917-1925). Before celebrating the liturgy, he blessed a copy of a miraculous icon of the Mother of God.



The church had some of the most sophisticated bells in Moscow which were played by the famous Moscow carilist K.K. Saradjev. Some of the most famous musicians in Moscow would come to hear him play.

The years before the Revolution of 1917 were glamorous years for the church. Cures and miracles were taking place at the Church and one of the Lepioshkin women became a nun. She later became a hermit after the Revolution and she was only able to keep her monastery open by turning it into an agricultural center. Her monastery had 60 nuns who fed hundreds of people on a daily basis. In the 1930s she was arrested and accused of anti-Soviet activity. She was sent to Siberia and died on the way when she reached Central Asia. She is buried in Central Asia and was canonized in 2000.

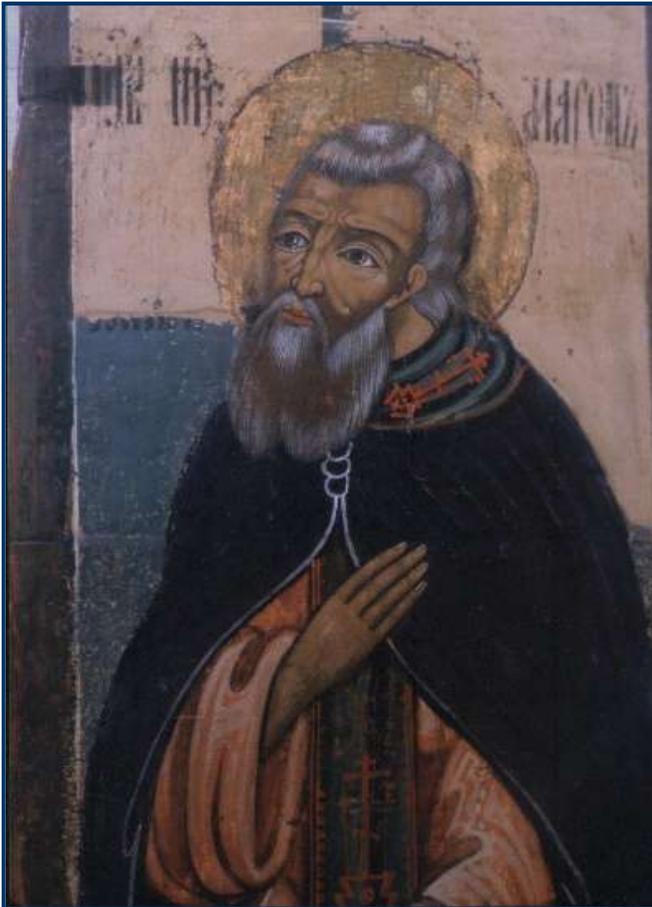


Another Russian Icon of Saint Maron (Hourani Private Collection)

The years after the Revolution of 1917 were tragic for the Church of Saint Maron. In 1922, all items of value were taken out of the church: icons, vestments, vassals. This is what happened to most churches in the Soviet Union. Sometimes state officials carried away these holy treasures, but often it was just looters from the street, representatives of the new atheist proletariat. Despite this pillaging, parishioners refused to give up their church until 1930 when the church was finally closed. The church then became a garage for snow ploughs. The walls were damaged, there were no windows left and there was no heating.



In the 1960s the church was to be demolished, but when the authorities saw how much that would cost, they decided not to do it. They reasoned that it would be less expensive just to let the church crumble on its own. However, the church did not crumble and in 1992 it was returned to the Moscow Patriarchate. The first priest in charge of the church was Father Alexander Marchenkov. A choir soon started to sing in the church on a regular basis. People started to come to the church. Volunteers began to clean it up. Regular liturgical services began in 1995. A miraculous icon of St. Maron was returned to the church from the Church of Saint John the Baptist. In recent years, a team of very talented iconographers have decorated the church walls again with beautiful icons. In the sacristy, some of the frescoes from the old times have survived and have been restored. Among these frescoes are icons of St. Maron from the 17th century. The main icon in the sacristy is devoted to the Mother of God. There is also an icon of St. Maron in the church, depicting St. Maron in prayer in the desert.



In 1977, a Sunday school opened in the parish and in 1998 on the feast of St. Maron, the church was blessed by Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow and All Russia.

Saint Maron Icon in Orel in Russia, courtesy of Professor Engelina Smirnova (Hourani Private Collection)

The Church of Saint Maron had a relic of St. Maron which was given to the church by an amazing turn of circumstances. Two women met outside of Russia in a foreign country. One was a Russian woman and the other a Jewish woman. The Jewish woman told the Russian woman that she had a relic of St. Maron. The Russian woman announced that she was from the Church of Saint Maron in

Moscow. Subsequently, the Jewish woman gave the relic to the Russian woman who then returned the relic to the Church of Saint Maron. The history of the relic had been the following: the relic had at first been at the Church of Saint Maron when the church was closed down by the Communists. During the closing of the church, the relic was



given to the Church of the Ascension and the priest of that church gave the relic to his daughter, who then gave it to the Jewish woman. However, it is not known where the original relic would have come from or where it is today.

III. New Relic from Foligno, Italy

However, a new relic has been acquired from Foligno in Italy where it is believed that Saint Maron's skull is housed.³ The relic was requested by the Russian Orthodox Church from the Vatican. On February 27, 2013, the relic was brought into the church of Saint Maron in Moscow during the official visit of His Beatitude Cardinal Mar Bechara Boutros el-Rahi, Maronite Patriarch of Antioch and the entire East.



Reliquary of St Maron's Relic in Moscow (Hourani Private Collection)

A special reliquary was made to contain the relic. The reliquary was realized by two sisters Galina and Marina Politanskaya, painter and jeweler, respectively. The precious gems that adorn this reliquary were donated by members of Saint Maron's Church in Moscow.

³ For more information about the skull of St. Maron, see Guita Hourani, Saint Maron's Relic: "Ornament of the Divine Choir of Saints," *Journal of Maronite Studies*, Maronite Research Institute (MARI), JMS, January 1997, [http://maroniteinstitute.org/MARI/JMS/january97/Saint_Marons_Relic.htm] and Maria-Rita Parroni Marzetti, "Volperino, Italy Celebrates Saint Maron's Feast Like a Phoenix Rising from the Ashes," *Journal of Maronite Studies*, Maronite Research Institute (MARI), JMS, October 1998, [http://maroniteinstitute.org/MARI/JMS/october98/Volperino_Italy.htm].



Two of the Maronite Patriarchs have recently visited the Church of Saint John the Baptist and Saint Maron in Moscow: His Beatitude Cardinal Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir in 1987 and His Beatitude Cardinal Bechara Boutros al-Rahi in 2013.

IV. Conclusion

Saint Maron is a saint of the universal church, but the Russian Church prays for him on February 14th (Old Style)/February 1st (New Style). Religious ceremonies in Russia dedicated to Saint Maron date back to the 14th century. In all of his icons, St. Maron is depicted as a Saint who helps people with fever and those who are sick, other icons depict him as an anchorite/hermit kneeling in prayer. In the Maronite Church, St. Maron's feast day is February 9th.