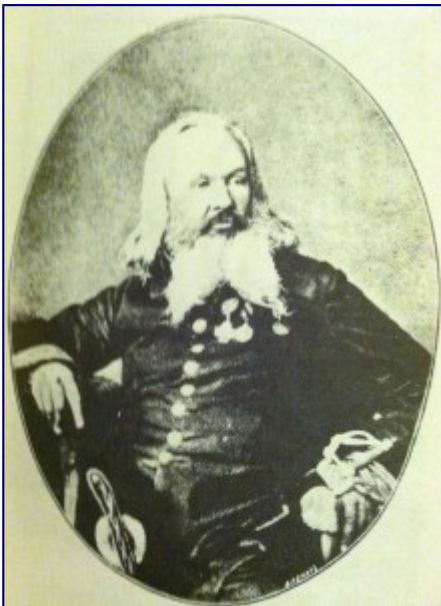


N.A. Motovilov's Unfortunate Illness



Nikolas Alexandrovitch Motovilov, “Seraphim’s servant” as he liked to call himself, had been granted a miraculous healing and the further privilege of seeing with his own eyes St. Seraphim’s illumination by the light of Tabor or, in other words, by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Being a fervent and sincere man, he wanted to perpetuate Father Seraphim’s memory. So he decided to visit Kursk (the saint’s birth-place) personally in order to collect information about his childhood and youth; he also wanted to visit the Kiev-Florovsky Monastery. The journey had very sad consequences for Nikolas Alexandrovitch. Through the permissive will of God, the enemy inflicted upon him an illness in

revenge for his literary labours; for his writings served to enhance the fame of one of God’s Saints — Father Seraphim — to a very considerable extent.

Certain circumstances which preceded N.A. Motovilov’s illness throw light on its origin. Once during a talk with St. Seraphim the question somehow arose as to the reality of diabolic assaults on men. Motovilov who had had a worldly upbringing did not fail, of course, to doubt the existence of the evil power. Then the saint told him of his terrible fight with the devils for one thousand days and nights, and by the power of his word, by the authority of his holiness which excluded all possibility of even the shadow of a lie or exaggeration, he convinced Motovilov of the existence of devils, not as phantoms or figments of the imagination, but as a stark and bitter reality. The impetuous Motovilov was so stirred by the elder’s talk that he cried from the depths of his soul:

“Father, how I should like to have a bout with the devils!”

Father Seraphim, in alarm, cut him short:

“What on earth are you talking about, your Godliness! You don’t know what you are saying. If you knew that the least of them can turn the world upside down with it’s claw, you would never challenge them to a fight.”

“But Father, have the devils really got claws?”

“Ah, your Godliness, whatever do they teach you at the university? Don’t you know that the devils have no claws? They have been represented with hoofs, horns and tails because it is impossible for the human imagination to conceive of anything more hideous. And they really are hideous, for their conscious

desertion of God and their voluntary resistance to divine grace made them, who before the Fall, were angels of light, angels of such darkness and abomination that they cannot be portrayed in any human likeness. Still some likeness is necessary; that is why they are represented as black and ugly. But having been created with the powers and properties of angels, they possess such indomitable might against man and everything earthly that, as I told you already, the least of them can turn the world upside down with its nail. Only the divine grace of the Holy Spirit which has been given to us Orthodox Christians as a free gift through the merits of the God-Man, our Lord Jesus Christ – only this frustrates all the wiles and artifices of the enemy.”

An uncanny feeling crept over Motovilov. While he was still under the saint’s protection he could defy Satan’s malice. But, by the permissive will of God, his reckless challenge did not remain unanswered. It was accepted.

When Motovilov went to Kursk after Father Seraphim’s death, he did not get much information about the childhood and youth of the saint. Of the near relatives who had known Father Seraphim as a child, some were dead, while others had forgotten the facts. Even the house where the saint was born and brought up was destroyed, and new buildings had sprung up in its place. However, one old man was found who was a contemporary of Father Seraphim, and who supplied Motovilov with the facts which have been included in all the editions of the saint’s life. The actual journey to Kursk and his stay there were without mishap. The storm broke out on his way back to Voronezh.

Motovilov was obliged to spend a night at one of the post-stations on the road from Kursk. As he was quite alone in the room for travelers, he took his manuscripts out of his suitcase and began to sort them out by the dim light of a single candle which scarcely lit up the spacious room. One of the first records he discovered contained a description of the cure of possessed lady of noble parentage called Eropkin at the Shrine of St. Metrophan of Voronezh.

“I wondered,” writes Motovilov, “how it could happen that an Orthodox Christian who partook of the most pure and life-giving Mysteries of the Lord could suddenly be possessed by a devil, and moreover, for such a long period as over thirty years. And I thought Nonsense! It is impossible! I should like to see how the devil would dare to make his abode in me, especially when I frequently have recourse to the Sacrament of Holy Communion.”

At that very moment he was surrounded by a horrible, cold, evil-smelling cloud which began to make its way into his mouth, while he made convulsive efforts to keep it tightly shut.

The unhappy Motovilov struggled desperately, trying to protect himself from the stench and icy cold cloud of the cloud which was gradually creeping into him. In spite of all his efforts it got into him completely.

His hands became exactly as if they were paralyzed, and he could not make the Sign of the Cross; his mind became frozen with terror and he could not remember the saving name of Jesus. Something terrible and repulsive had happened, and Nikolas Alexandrovitch experienced a time of dreadful torture. A manuscript in his own handwriting gives us the following description of the torments he experienced:

“The Lord granted me to experience in my own body, and not in a dream or apparition, the three torments of hell. The first was that of the fire which gives no light and which can be extinguished only by the grace of the Most Holy Spirit. This agony lasted for three days. I felt myself burning, yet I was not consumed. Ten or eleven times a day they had to scrape off the hellish soot which covered my whole body and was visible to all. This torture ceased only after Confession and Holy Communion, through the prayers of Archbishop Anthony of Voronezh who ordered litanies to be said for the suffering servant of God Nikolas in the forty-seven churches and monasteries of his diocese.

Then I was tormented for two days by the unbearable cold of Tartarus, so that fire could neither burn nor warm me. According to the wish of His Grace, Archbishop Anthony of Voronezh, I held my hand over a candle for about half an hour, and though it was thickly coated with soot, it did not get warm in the least. I described this experiment on a whole sheet of paper and signed it by stamping it with my sooty hand. Both these torments were visible to all; yet with the help of Holy Communion I could partake of food, drink and sleep to some extent.

But the third torment of Gehenna, though it was still shorter by half a day, for it lasted only a day and a half (possibly a little more), caused me the greatest terror and suffering as it was something indescribable and incomprehensible. It is a wonder that I remained alive! This torment also disappeared after Confession and Holy Communion. This time Archbishop Anthony himself administered the Holy Sacrament to me with his own hands. This torment was the undying worm of Gehenna. The worm in this case was visible only to Archbishop Anthony and myself. But my whole body was riddled with this pernicious worm which crawled through the whole of me and in an indescribably frightful manner gnawed at my vitals. Though it crawled out through my nose, mouth and ears, yet it went back in again. However, God gave me some power of it, and I could take it into my hands and stretch it like rubber.

I feel myself compelled to make this declaration, for God did not grant me this vision for nothing. Let no one think that I dare take the Lord's name in vain. No! On the day of the Lord's awful judgment, He Himself — my God, my Helper and my Protector — will testify that I did not lie against Him, my Lord,

and against the operation of His Divine Providence which was accomplished in me.”

Soon after this terrible test which is beyond the experience of ordinary men, Motovilov had a vision of his patron St. Seraphim who had comforted the sufferer with the promise that he would be cured at the exposition of the relics of St. Tikhon of Zadonsk and that until that time the devil residing in him would not torment him so cruelly.

The exposition of the relics of St. Tikhon actually took place thirty years later, and Motovilov lived to see it and was in fact cured according to his great faith.

On the day of the exposition of the relics of St. Tikhon of Zadonsk (1865), Motovilov was standing in the sanctuary praying and weeping bitterly because the Lord had not granted him a cure for which his tortured soul was waiting according to the promise of St. Seraphim of Sarov. During the Song of the Cherubim, he glanced at the bishop's throne in the apse and saw St. Tikhon there. The holy prelate blessed the weeping Motovilov and vanished from sight. Motovilov was healed instantly.

(St. Seraphim of Sarov: A Spiritual Biography by Archimandrite Lazarus Moore. Chapter IX: Are the Torments of Hell a Reality? pp. 209-215)