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## Believers' Letters as Advertising: St Xenia of Petersburg's 'National Reception Centre'<sup>1</sup>

Yes, we receive a very large number of letters from various corners of our Orthodox Russia... A very large number of the letters are about miracles. We have booklets and pamphlets in which we cite these miracles. And we will reissue these books, and produce new publications describing new miracles. When people write to us, I specially pick out the letters dealing with miraculous occurrences and we include them in our new publications.

(From an interview with Archpriest Viktor Moskovsky, Parish Priest, Church of the Smolensk Ikon of the Mother of God, *Blagovest* internet newspaper, 26 December 2003)

Evgeny Rakhmanin, a clergyman at the Church of the Smolensk Icon of the Mother of God, Smolenskoe Cemetery, Vasilievsky Island, St Petersburg, wrote in 1913 in a pamphlet on the Blessed Xenia (whose tomb is housed in a chapel adjacent to the church), that: 'Rumours concerning many cases of intercession through prayer by the slave of God, Xenia, spread not just through Petersburg but throughout Russia, to the remotest borderlands. Hundreds of letters arrive from everywhere — from Siberia and the Caucasus, the Western Territory and the central provinces of Russia — with the request to pray at the grave of the slave of God, Xenia, so people may be rid of some sorrow or trouble' [Rakhmanin 1913: 89]. In letters of this kind, Xenia's admirers made offerings and asked for Masses to be said in her memory. Correspondents received in reply a notification written on a special form. Here is an example of this type of document, published in V.I. Kozachenko's book [2006: 139]:

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<sup>1</sup> *Vsenarodnaya priemnaya*: A *priemnaya* is what would be termed in British English a 'reception centre' or 'visitor centre', i.e. the part of an official government institution, such as a ministry or government agency, responsible for handling problems and complaints, and processing unsolicited callers, letters, and visitors. The word *vsenarodnaya*, or national, gives this particular 'reception centre' a status beyond and outside the state. [Editor].

*St Petersburg  
Chapel of the slave of God, Xenia  
Smolensk cemetery  
16 January 1915*

*Most gracious Madam C.J.,*

*We acknowledge with gratitude the offering you sent and consider it our duty to notify you that, as requested, the clergy held a service of remembrance [panikhida] at the grave of the slave of God, Xenia, on 16 January 1915.*

*Trusting in the mercy of God, we sincerely hope that all your good intentions and wishes will be fulfilled through the prayerful intercession of the slave of God, Xenia.*

*On behalf of the Smolenskoe Cemetery clergy*

*Archpriest Nikolai Triodin, PP*

The correspondence between petitioners and clergy did not always end here: if what was asked for then came true, another letter would arrive at the Smolenskoe Cemetery, bearing witness to Xenia's miraculous aid and expressing gratitude to the clergymen involved. How the system worked is clearly seen from a case mentioned in Fr Evgeny Rakhmanin's book:

*In the Kuban region, a man named Stefan had been ill for two years [...] One of the patient's relatives, Honoured Citizen<sup>1</sup> Ivan Osipovich Andrienko, wrote a letter to the Parish Priest of the Smolenskoe Cemetery, with a heartfelt plea to say a service of remembrance for the blessed Xenia and to remember Stefan and his illness in his prayers.*

*Andrienko's request was carried out, and a notification was sent to him.*

*Soon afterwards, Andrienko informed the Parish Priest: 'I am extremely grateful to you for your prayers to the Lord, and to the blessed slave of God, Xenia, for her warm prayer to the Lord: I am writing to inform you that our Stefan, who was ill, has now recovered through your prayer and that of the slave of God, Xenia. He was ill for two years, and now he is well' [Quoted from Kozechenko 2006: 232].*

Sometimes letters of this kind asked for a second Mass to be said as a sign of gratitude [Kozechenko 2006: 236].

These letters were included in the lists of the blessed Xenia's miracles alongside oral testimonies, popularising the emergent cult, and providing a frame for the then-unusual practice of 'miracles by

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<sup>1</sup> A title awarded before 1917 to some persons of non-noble origin, for example, to prominent merchants. [Editor.]

correspondence'. In addition, the testimonies formed the image of something like an office working for the blessed Xenia (consider, to begin with, the use of the bureaucratic term *notification*): an institution that the twenty-first-century compiler of a recent collection of letters calls 'the blessed Xenia of Petersburg's national reception centre' [Yakovleva 2006]. Finally, such publications promoted the idea of the effectiveness of that particular institution's work. Thus, the miraculous help was received not just through the prayer of a saint whom the Church had not yet got round to recognising, but 'through your prayer and that of [...] Xenia'. So it was necessary to thank not only the Blessed One, but also the staff of her 'office'.

In the Soviet period the 'reception centre' was closed and the correspondence was brought to an end, only to be resumed with renewed force in the 1990s. Services were restored at the newly-opened cemetery chapel (although it is true that instead of services of remembrance for the slave of God, Xenia, these were now Masses for St Xenia of Petersburg, canonised in 1988). The 'office' too resumed its work, with its staff receiving letters of the most varied character, replying to them (enclosing with the notifications a 'little relic', a rose petal dipped in holy oil sanctified at the tomb), and also presenting 'selected passages from the correspondence' between Xenia and her admirers for publication. It is these publications that form the object of our analysis.

In our article we try to establish the reasons prompting the Church in general, and the Smolenskoe Cemetery parish in particular, to publish believers' letters. To that end, we analyse the way the addressees and the writers of these messages are represented in various ecclesiastical publications. But we begin with a brief sketch of the social conditions under which the Russian Orthodox Church conducts its media work in contemporary Russia.

### **Peter Berger and the metaphor of the religious market**

Peter Berger's study *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (published in the US in 1967, and in Great Britain in the same year under the title of *The Social Reality of Religion*), put forward an influential conception of the mechanisms of secularisation in modern society. For Berger, as for many of his contemporaries, there was a clear and indisputable connection between the processes of secularisation and modernisation. The problem lay in how to relate these two phenomena. Berger considered that he could do this by introducing a 'missing link'. The link was 'pluralisation'. If prior to the onset of modernisation there was a monopoly on the creation of meanings in society and this monopoly belonged to a dominant religious institution (the Church), then in a modernising society the monopoly would inevitably break down. The hegemonic Church

would face new rivals in the form of other religious institutions, and also non-religious institutions that claimed an equal right to produce meanings — for instance, modern positivist science and the ideology of secular humanism. This process resulted in a relativisation of any single institution's perceived right and ability to provide a symbolic ordering of the world. First in the realm of economics, then in that of politics too, people's actions would start to be determined by non-religious motives. Thus there occurred what Max Weber called 'the disenchantment of the world'.

One of the chief peculiarities of this logical construction was the evolutionary determinism that it implied: modernisation inevitably led to secularisation. In other words, secularisation could be halted or reversed only by means of demodernisation. However, events since Berger's study was published, and also studies carried out by sociologists and anthropologists of religion in a wide variety of countries and social groups, have shown that Berger's hypothesis was fundamentally mistaken (which he himself has also acknowledged: [Berger 1999]). The hyper-modernised United States of America is in no hurry to secularise, and the rapidly developing countries of Eastern Asia and Latin America are undergoing an era of religious renaissance. Even Europeans, at one point seemingly quite indifferent to religion, in many respects remain religious people, abandon though they may their traditional denominations [Davie 1994]. What is more, it is precisely in those countries where some kind of religious monopoly is still maintained by a state church (as in Scandinavia), and where religious pluralism has been relatively slow to emerge, that secularisation has the greatest success.

As we see, Berger's fundamental idea was either wrong, or else applicable only to a limited set of social (national) contexts. However, as frequently happens, this pioneer of constructivism put forward some propositions that remain relevant to this day — they are even used by Berger's critics to rebut his views. For the purposes of our further considerations, the following points from Berger's book are important:

1. Describing a pluralist society in which various religious institutions cannot count on a monopoly in their own sphere, Berger used the extended conceptual metaphor of a *market* of religious services. The participants in this market — religious organisations, which play the role of enterprises — compete with one another, using such mechanisms as cartel formation and advertising. This metaphor has proved very attractive, and is widely used in sociological studies of religion. In particular, it was taken as a fundamental methodological device by supporters of what is called the 'religious economy theory' (see, for instance, the work of Rodney Stark and his colleagues: [Stark 1985]; [Stark, Iannaccone 1997]; [Introvigne, Stark 2005]).

2. Berger remarks that in the modern situation of a pluralist society religious organisations, presenting their own definition of reality, are forced to compete not only among themselves but also with various non-religious rivals, both organised (secular political nationalism) and otherwise (the modern value system of individualism) [Berger 1990 [1967]: 137-138].

We will try to define our own preconceptions on the basis of these propositions. At the foundation of our study there lies the following assumption, which provides a general theoretical and methodological framework for further exposition. Any social institution (a company, a political party, a religious institution) is interested in accumulating material and symbolic resources to secure and extend its activity, and also to support and reinforce its legitimacy.

It is obvious that in particular societies there exist aspects of social life in which the relevant institutions possess something like a 'natural monopoly' on 'entrepreneurial activity' in their own field [Ibid: 135-136]. If in such a society there is an idea of the structure of necessary demands that makes it obligatory to visit a segment of the social field that is completely controlled by institution X, then the individual's prospect of avoiding direct contact with it practically vanishes. In these circumstances the institution does not need special techniques to support its dominance.

But there have been and there are societies in which the necessity (or at least the beneficial character) of a particular institution's activity, and also its (exclusive or predominant) right to carry out such activity, are questioned or may be questioned by a significant part of society, even if only passively, through an avoidance of those segments of the social field in which the given institution tries to function or, where possible, to dominate. In these conditions it is forced to undertake special steps to show, firstly, that a significant part of society has a 'natural' need to occupy the field in which the institution operates; secondly, that the institution is effective in its activity; thirdly, that this effectiveness is linked with (or defined by) the specific nature of this institution; and, fourthly, that a significant part of the population supports the institution in its activity.

In other words, an institution that feels the prospect of losing its functionality and legitimacy and that is trying to preserve and even to extend its access to resources, needs to conduct an 'advertising campaign'. Let us imagine a commercial firm that produces particular goods or provides a particular service. The staff of the company are aware that it has competitors (although sometimes they pretend that the competitors are producing a completely different product, i.e. are not competitors). What is more, the staff of the company know that in certain circles of society there is an opinion that the firm's

product is outdated and that modern people have no need for it. Nonetheless, the firm cannot utterly change its profile. Under these circumstances, it must promote its product by convincing the potential consumer that he or she, either as a person or as a member of a particular social group, must naturally consume or try to consume whatever it is that the company produces. At the same time, the advertising might exploit demands that are assumed already to exist (i.e. when there is a certain consensus that the individual, whether as a member of the species *Homo sapiens* or as someone playing a particular social role, has such demands). But in a particular market situation an advertising campaign might be directed instead at the creation of new demands on the basis of ideas that already exist in society concerning people's 'natural' needs.

This general conception is adduced here not on the strength of its independent significance in understanding the phenomenon of the politics of institutional representation, but rather in order to indicate the different scales of the four aspects of an advertising campaign. The first (functional) aspect is linked above all with the dominant ideas about human and social needs, while the other three concern more concrete problems of promotional activity: demonstration of the quality of the product itself, the producer, and the consumer.

Now let us take as an instance of such an enterprise the Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate (ROC MP) (and here we would emphasise that our construct is essentially of a metaphorical kind, and is far removed from stereotypical anticlerical ideas about the essentially commercial nature of any religious institution). The ROC MP lost its monopoly right to produce symbols for its actual and potential flock long ago – decades, indeed over a century, back. For instance, neither public opinion nor the logic of rational capitalism will allow Orthodoxy (whether as a Church or as a worldview) to exert a determining influence in the economy. A characteristic fact is that most modern Russians feel that explaining the behaviour of a hierarch or an ecclesiastical structure by a desire for economic gain means rejecting any religious (spiritual) explanation for such behaviour. The ROC MP is supported by state structures, which gives it certain advantages in comparison with many competitors, but this support is relative. The Church is forced to reconcile itself to the fact that 'administrative resources'<sup>1</sup> cannot be directly employed to recruit new church members or to retain existing ones.

In addition, the church enters into a 'cartel agreement' with the so-called 'traditional religions'<sup>2</sup> of Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism in

<sup>1</sup> The phrase *administrativnyi resurs* is usually used in a political context, where it means something like 'incumbency factor'— the advantages that a candidate can derive from already controlling the administrative machine in the runup to an election. [Translator.]

<sup>2</sup> i.e. those that are deemed to be 'traditional' in the Russian Federation. [Editor.]

order to guarantee loyalty from the authorities and from a section of the public. The condition of this unwritten treaty is that structures representing the 'traditional religions' should limit their activities to certain ethnic groups (which also, to a certain extent, applies to the ROC MP's relations with the Catholic and Lutheran churches). But the main competitors that the church faces as an institution are the other Christian denominations, the new religious movements of a post-Christian kind (like the Church of the Last Covenant (Vissarionites)), and the secular worldview held by a significant part of society, which relegates the church and religion as a whole to a restricted segment of public space which is regarded as its legitimate field of operations. The ROC MP's task is made yet more difficult by many people's lack of confidence in institutional forms of religious life, which conflict with ideas of the individual nature of spiritual needs.

Under these conditions, church managers at various levels need to create an image of their institution, and of the product that it produces and distributes, that is likely to be attractive to *the man in the street* — the central figure in Peter Berger's book.

### Believers' letters as advertising

As is well known, the church (which here we understand as a social structure laying down rules of religious life for the 'simple believers'), is an institution of authority.<sup>1</sup> On this level its basic functions are to define what is right and what is wrong, to see to the maintenance of the norm and correspondingly to root out the non-norm. But things can work in other ways too. In a pluralistic society the church — which needs the legitimacy of its activities to be continuously supported in the eyes of the ('imaginary', and also quite real) consumer — has little chance of restricting itself simply to what Foucault termed 'surveillance and punishment'.

What is more, the limits of the church's controlling activity are themselves not defined. How far the ecclesiastical institution can exercise these functions is a matter for constant negotiation between the institution itself, other institutions (above all those of the state), broad public opinion, and the 'clients' themselves: the laity and (often) the rank-and-file clergy. It is difficult to define unequivocally who is the initiator of this debate, the church itself or its real or potential protégés. But it is clear enough that the religious institution

<sup>1</sup> We admit the limited character of this definition, and its divergence from the Christian ecclesiological understanding of the phenomenon of the Church of Christ as the community of all the faithful. In this sense the faithful are not objects of the church's activity, since they form part of its 'body'. But there is a whole series of entirely Orthodox contexts in which the church and the faithful can be treated as separate. It is sufficient to recall the popular maxim 'He who does not have the Church for his mother does not have Christ for his Father'.

consciously and consistently tries to justify its power by attempting to demonstrate that ‘simple believers’ are happy to enrol themselves in the church’s flock.

In this situation the church takes special steps to create particular platforms for communication with the faithful, which is also where the limits of what is allowed and permitted are felt. What is more, the church’s ‘advertising managers’<sup>1</sup> put forward an image of a church for ‘simple people’, and, consequently, an image of a church which listens to laypeople (and rank-and-file clerics) — the people of the Church — as well as dictating to them. Finally, strategies are sketched out for a ‘correct’, successful communication between simple believers and the institution — both in itself and as a mediator between the elevated and the profane worlds.

The format of publishing ‘letters to the editor’, i.e. letters addressed to various ecclesiastical structures, turns out to be a very useful technique for realising the strategic aims described above. Though not unique to the ROC, this type of advertising is not a straightforward borrowing, as might appear, of practices from the Soviet era (when the state represented its legitimacy and stability through the publication in the mainstream press of what were then known as ‘letters from working people’)<sup>2</sup>.

These days, believers’ letters are published in many different fora: ecclesiastical and quasi-ecclesiastical periodicals (both paper and electronic), and books; they are also posted on Internet sites. But one should not imagine that the pages of all Orthodox publications are full of letters. They appear rarely, if at all, in the official diocesan newspapers. This is understandable enough: the intended readers of official gazettes such as the *N Diocesan Informer* [*N-skie eparkhial'nye vedomosti*] will be first and foremost clerics and lay functionaries living within the diocese of N, who only need to be provided with official information.

Most other Orthodox periodicals, though, are eager to print believers’ letters. Editorial policy on precisely which such letters will be published can vary greatly from one publication to another. Thus, the back page of the *Pravoslavnyi Sankt-Peterburg* [Orthodox St Petersburg] newspaper carries the following announcement: *Dear*

<sup>1</sup> There is, of course, no such position in the ecclesiastical apparatus, and we employ the term as part of the extended metaphor of treating the church as a business. From this viewpoint, the business’s ‘advertising’ is conducted by special figures, whether appointed to do it or engaging in it on their own initiative, who define, for instance, the editorial policy of ecclesiastical or quasi-ecclesiastical publications.

<sup>2</sup> These publications also had an important ‘lobbying’ function, in that the letters departments of Soviet newspapers would forward concrete requests and suggestions to government institutions, with a request that they be answered within quite a strict timetable (usually 3 to 4 weeks). Sometimes government offices would then present projects as ‘already in train’ that had in fact been initiated only when the letter appeared. [Editor.]

readers! Please be aware that we do not accept poetry, or print advertisements soliciting financial aid to private persons, and we cannot enter into correspondence with people in prison. But there are other publications that are keen to correspond with prisoners, and that publish their letters. Thus, the *Pravoslavnyaya gazeta* [Orthodox Gazette], which is the official publication of the diocese of Ekaterinburg, has for several years carried a feature entitled *To our Brethren Confined in Bondage*, which by the mere fact of its existence encourages such 'brethren' to write letters to the editors. The same can be said of the 'verses by our readers' which many parochial newspapers gladly publish — despite the egregious lack of artistry of these.

It is obvious that the regularity with which a given publication carries readers' letters, not to speak of the existence of a letters section of a permanent kind, speaks to the editors' desire to create an image of their publication as 'of the people'. Thus, the *Narodnaya pravoslavnyaya gazeta vo slavu Svyatitelya Nikolaya 'Pravilo very'* [People's Orthodox Gazette to the Glory of St Nicholas "The Rules of Faith"] (published twice a year since 1997 in St Petersburg), devotes a considerable proportion of its total column space (up to a third) to publishing letters. What is particularly distinctive is that it carries some of these on the front page.<sup>1</sup> How a given editorial team understands and represents its claims to be 'of the people' is, of course, another matter entirely.

In discussing the advertising function of publishing 'readers' letters', we should distinguish two types of advertising items. The first type might be called 'direct advertisement' ('Thank you, dear editors'). Letters in which readers thank the newspaper or magazine for the very fact of its existence are often published as independent items. For instance, the *Dear Editors* feature in the *Orthodox St Petersburg* newspaper (*Pravoslavnyi Sankt-Peterburg*, 2007, No 1), carried the following text under the headline *Thank You For Your Work: I have subscribed to your paper for six years now and each month I wait impatiently for the next issue to come out. But even the old papers aren't thrown away: I give them to my friends [...]. Thank you to everyone who works on the paper for your work [...]. It's so interesting to read about the various monasteries and Russian holy places. You read it, and it's as if you'd been there yourself.* Another example, published under the title *A Voice from Ekaterinburg in Russkii palomnik* [The Russian Pilgrim], published in the USA (*Letters to the Pilgrim* feature, 2000, No 21–22, p. 94), ran like this: *Your publication has material of a very high quality, set out in a language that is simple (but not vulgar) and calm (but inwardly solemn, almost like the divine service). The photographs,*

<sup>1</sup> These materials are subsequently published as separate books, providing curious examples of devotional literature or even of Orthodox folklore [Rakov 2003; 2005].

*executed professionally and with love, show essentially a purely Russian way of seeing faces and landscapes. It's a strikingly-expressed sense of beauty. Published letters are sometimes very emotional (a letter entitled *I Weep as I Read*, in the *They write to us* feature, in *Rus pravoslavnaia* [Orthodox Rus], 2004, No 1–2), ran as follows: *Peace be with you, dear editorial staff! [...] I, the sinful priest Viktor would like to kiss you for the wondrous fruits of your labour! I weep as I read the articles in your paper. They are tears of joy and fear. Joy at the warm Russian hearts that have gathered around you, for whom I believe a great reward is waiting in Heaven. And fear because I am not myself as warm in my prayer as I should be [...]. My dears! The Lord save you! Such work strengthens faith and breeds boldness in prayer. And then nothing is frightening any more.*<sup>1</sup>*

Frequently, however, the praise and gratitude expressed to the publication is a kind of introduction to the main text of the letter (or, more rarely, both an introduction and a conclusion). Mostly, these expressions of praise and gratitude are thematically unconnected with the main content, but have been retained by the editors nonetheless, for understandable reasons (it hardly needs to be said that letters for publication are edited and shortened by the editors of practically all publications). The content of these items is on the surface: in the words of its (real or possibly fictitious) readers the publication is saying: 'We are in demand. Our publication resonates with people. People support us.' And this message is aimed not just at potential subscribers, but at a wider audience, who receive a simple idea: 'What's standing behind this publication isn't just the editors, it's the people.' How this 'people' is imagined depends on the ideological attachments of the editors, which is expressed not only in direct political (or, conversely, emphatically apolitical) utterances, but also through the types of letter published in the given journal. It is here that we encounter the second type of advertising: indirect advertising (or, more precisely, self-advertising).

Indirect advertising gestures not at the publication itself, but at facts that seem at first glance to exist independently of it. The newspaper or magazine is simply informing us of these phenomena. Here too the genre of 'readers' letters' is very useful: 'We are not the source of the information or the authors of the judgements: we are just transmitting them, we are just intermediaries.' Often, admittedly, this attitude admits the correction: 'We are not the only ones who think so, our simple readers think so too.' The *They Write to Us* feature in the above-mentioned *Rus pravoslavnaia* newspaper is a vivid illustration of this point of view.

<sup>1</sup> These are a few more titles from this feature in the same newspaper: *Everyone Reads the Paper* (1999, No 12); *They Won't Let Me Subscribe!* (2001, No 1); *Stay As You Are!* (2002, No 1–2); *We Read It From Cover to Cover* (2002, No 11–12).

The newspaper is well-known in Orthodox circles and beyond thanks to the extremely fundamentalist position of the editors under Konstantin Dushenov. The chief ideological vector of the *Rus pravoslavnaya* can be dubbed 'political eschatology': there is an international conspiracy against Russia and the Russian people, which can only be resisted by restoring an Orthodox monarchy in the country. The ideas expressed about what mechanism might bring about the monarchist restoration can hardly be called clear or realistic. In any event, the editors seem less concerned with these mechanisms than with exposing the conspiracy itself and the individuals who take part in it and who voluntarily or unwittingly assist its realisation (the list of such individuals includes not only 'natural enemies of all that is Russian' but also many representatives of the Moscow Patriarchate establishment).

As with any conspiracy theories, the utterances of the *RP* are open to criticism as being far-fetched ideas that only circulate among nutters. The editors therefore feel the need to show the existence of alarmist moods beyond their own regular writers. Here letters from 'outraged readers' can be very helpful: the authors confirm that the conspiracy exists, expose the treachery of particular individuals, and share the religio-political eschatological views of Konstantin Dushenov<sup>1</sup> (see the proud boast in the title of one letter, *I Consider Myself a Monarchist and an Anti-Semite* (2003. No 9–10)).

By publishing such letters, the newspaper creates an image of itself as a patriotic publication that expresses the longings of the masses and serves as a natural intermediary between the 'simple folk' and lites who are not interested in the monarchism and conspiracy theories of the 'Russian people'. This is by the same token an indirect advertising campaign, according to which the *RP* is not only popular, but popular precisely as a patriotic publication — a tribune for all really Orthodox people who support the Motherland and the Church. It is relevant to remark that the 'tribune' and 'speaking' motifs are found in other features' titles in the paper too, including *The Voice of a Russian Pastor*, *A Reader's Voice*, *Direct Speech*, *The Reader's Tribune*, *Dialogue with the Reader*, *I Cannot be Silent*, and, of course, *The Voice of the People* (as a variant: *The Voice of the People — the Voice of God*).

Another publication, the *Russkii palomnik*,<sup>2</sup> positions itself as a guardian of the traditions of pre-revolutionary Orthodox Russia, the traditions that have been preserved to this day in the Russian emigration, and sees itself as bringing this wealth back home (it is

<sup>1</sup> Konstantin Dushenov (b. Leningrad, 1960) is General Editor of *Rus Pravoslavnaya* newspaper, and a virulent anti-Semite, sentenced to three years' imprisonment in 2010 for incitement to racial hatred. [Editor.]

<sup>2</sup> A magazine with that title was issued in Russia from 1885 to 1917; the current magazine has been published in the USA since 1990.

characteristic that the magazine uses the pre-1918, unreformed orthography). Published readers' letters underline this mediatory role of the *Palomnik*. Many of them bear witness to how Orthodox life was maintained in the Soviet era, both in the USSR and overseas. There are also quite a large number of 'local reports' on the rebirth of Orthodox life in various corners of the former Russian Empire. The effect of 'living antiquity' is strengthened still further by the pre-revolutionary photographs of Russian Orthodox holy objects that are printed between the letters.

But the most commonly published type of letters to the editor (or to the institution — a diocese, a parish, etc. — that stands behind it) consists of accounts of miracles that have been brought about by a particular saint or relic. Such items can also be regarded as a kind of indirect advertising. One would think that the saints and relics discussed in the letters existed independently of the publications that carry such testimonies. But in fact these very publications are the 'promoters' of particular cults.

If we are speaking of veneration for saints, then a newspaper, journal, or Internet site that publishes information about miracles connected with a particular saint's intercession is taking on the role of a mediator between the object of veneration and the faithful. Sometimes (as with the publication of letters about the blessed Xenia) we are dealing with the popularisation of an existing cult. But some periodicals are active players in the field of suggested or desired canonisations. Thus, in the 1990s the same *Rus pravoslavnyaya* carried letters bearing witness to miraculous aid procured from the 'imperial martyrs' (Nicholas II and his family), who had not yet been canonised as saints by the ROC MP. Once they had been canonised, the newspaper started carrying reports from the faithful about miracles associated with the ideological inspirer of so-called 'political Orthodoxy',<sup>1</sup> the late Metropolitan of St Petersburg and Staraya Ladoga Ioann (Snychev).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> We take this term from a work by Aleksandr Verkhovskiy [2003].

<sup>2</sup> We reproduce here one such letter: *To I.V. Chipizubov, Ataman of Admiralty khutor, Neva stanitsa, city of St Petersburg, from S.Yu. Babicuk, Cossack. Report. [the original Russian uses the prerevolutionary term 'raport' — Editor]. I hereby bring to your attention that on 31.12.2000 I was a witness of the following event, observed when I was voluntarily safeguarding public order beside the grave of Metropolitan Ioann from 16.00 to 20.00 bells in the company of V.N. Basargin, Cossack. At 17.45 hours a man and a woman aged approximately 30 years approached the grave, said a prayer, and placed candles. In order not to disturb them, Basargin and myself strolled down the perpendicular alley. After the man and woman had departed I observed that only one candle was burning at the Metropolitan's grave, while the other had gone out. At that time the bells of the Alexander Nevsky Monastery rang out. Basargin said the service was beginning. The bells fell silent at 18.00, and we at once noticed a sharp crack and a bright flare by the grave: the second candle had flared up and was burning very brightly. I was struck by the fact that the light came on just as the bells stopped ringing. I don't even quite believe it, but I simply feel that I was a witness to a miracle. But I am hesitant about telling others. They might say it was a trick [Rus' pravoslavnyaya. 2001, No 7–8]. [Metropolitan Ioann Snychev, 1927–1995, who was Metropolitan in St Petersburg from 1990 to 1995, was notorious for his ultra-conservative, anti-Western, and anti-Semitic views. Editor].*

A characteristic example of the policy of glorifying saints (and indirectly of advertising the publication that reports it) is the activity of the *Blagovest* [Good News] newspaper of Samara. Here it would be more accurate to speak of a fairly straightforward strategy pursued by the editor in chief, A. E. Zhogolev, in which various advertising techniques are curiously combined. In general, the newspaper used to be glad to print testimonials about miracles concerning the most diverse range of saints and relics. The situation changed in 2001 with the appearance of a book entitled *The Blessed Sister Mariya*, devoted to the blessed elder Mariya (Matukasova) of Samara, who had passed away the year before. The book's author and compiler was the same A. E. Zhogolev, who seems to have collected material about Sister Mariya (including descriptions of miracles) while she was still alive. As is well-known, for someone to be canonised as a saint it is necessary that, firstly, they should be revered by the people, and, secondly, there should be evidence of posthumous miracles taking place as a result of that person's intercession. These two criteria are obviously somewhat tautological: if the faithful are asking one of the deceased to intercede for them before God, then the fact of popular reverence is established whether or not the prayer is answered with miraculous aid.

Be that as it may, the publication of collected testimonies about miracles is one of the chief instruments by which canonisations are secured. In the present case, the book about Mariya of Samara appeared too soon to include any large quantity of testimonies about her posthumous miracles. This lacuna was filled by letters to the editors of the *Blagovest*. It would seem to be an ordinary story, but it gains a particular colour from the fact that many of the miracles described involved the book that had been compiled by the editor in chief of the newspaper. We will quote one of the first testimonies. It was published in the issue for 23 November 2001, i.e. in the year in which the book came out.

*I want to share the abundant joy I experienced in reading The Blessed Sister Mariya. Sadly, I did not know Mother when she was alive, but when I read about her it was as though I came to know her face to face and to feel her prayerful protection. I have never found a religious book so easy to read: every word found a place in my heart. And the greatest miracle was this. I had a heavy cold, and I suddenly smelt a fragrance coming from the book! I didn't believe it, I thought I was mistaken, but that evening, when I started reading about Mother again, there was the same wonderful fragrance! And we felt a grace from Mother Mariya's prayers more than once. It is enough to appeal to Mother with some request, and at once she answers! Here is one example: my daughter can't rock the baby to sleep and she asks with a prayer, 'Mother, help me rock the baby to sleep!' And — miracles of the Lord! Straight away little Mashen'ka calms down and goes to sleep. And there are many such*

*instances! We thank the Lord that he has revealed to us such an intercessor and helper. Blessed Sister Mariya, pray to God for us! Nina, Samara.*

As we see, the book itself — which, of course, was advertised by the *Blagovest* as being a product of the same publishing house — becomes an ‘agent’ for the saint not only in the life but also in the home of the newly-acquired follower. In her turn, the follower sends a grateful letter to the book’s author, who is presented as a representative of the saint. It is no surprise therefore that several new miracles were connected with obtaining the sacred publication itself: the saint herself helps the faithful to find out about her. In the issue of 4 March 2004 we find the following letter, published under the headline *I Think It Was a Miracle*.

*I found out that Blessed Sister Mariya had been reissued from the Books By Post feature in the Blagovest. I took the decision to write off for the book, even though it’s not cheap on my pension. Going to the bank and receiving the pension is a blessing, but always having to stand in a queue darkens the joy of that blessing. So I arrive at the bank and I can’t believe my eyes: there’s nobody there except the cashier. I got my money nice and quickly, and as soon as I was done people started pouring in. I went to the post office: and there wasn’t a soul there either, and suddenly I had a thought: it must be Mariya Ivanovna of Samara helping me get through my business quickly and with no trouble, so I can order the book about her! Mariya (also Ivanovna) Krivobokova, Nesterovka village, Orenburg region.<sup>1</sup>*

Thus the book and the newspaper, as well as the editorial team and A. E. Zhogolev himself (some of the grateful testimonies are addressed to him personally) become mediators between the saint and the faithful, providing a channel of communication between them.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The title of the following letter is also eloquent: *It’s a book I always have on the table*.

<sup>2</sup> We quote one more letter that appeared in the *Blagovest* (2006. 7 April). The basic motif is thoroughly traditional (the saint brings someone to reason who had doubted her sainthood), but the references to the role played by the newspaper and the book in what happened make this text a perfect example of indirect advertising.

**This Book Came Back to Me...**

*Dear editors!*

*I heard about the blessed Sister Mariya (Matukasova) from the Blagovest paper and started praying to her. On many occasions my prayers were answered thanks to the prayers of Mother Mariya. But one day it occurred to me that if she hadn’t been canonised, I was praying to her for nothing — and there are lots of great saints I don’t find the time to pray to — so I decided to stop praying to her. Then in church a woman came up to me and asked me to sell her the book about the blessed Sister Mariya for a sick patient. That woman couldn’t have known that I had the book. I decided to give it to the person who was sick. When I was getting ready to take the book, I looked at the cover and I thought: ‘Mother Mariya, you are departing from me! Forgive me, a sinner, inadequate, lazy, now I will pray to you again.’ After about two weeks they brought me the book back and told me that the blessed Sister Mariya had appeared to the patient in a dream and strictly ordered that the book be returned to me. Blessed Sister Mariya, pray to God for us! Lidiya Chebykina, Togliatti.*

As we try to show below, the strategies by which letters to the chapel of the blessed Xenia are represented in the columns of the Smolensk church's publications can be seen in similar terms: as indirect advertising for the institution that controls the veneration of the saint.

### Letters to the Blessed Xenia

We approached the present investigation with the understanding that any attempt to include all the publications in which letters of the kind that interest us have appeared: would be unrealistic, given the staggering numbers in which books about the Blessed Xenia are brought out by ecclesiastical and quasi-ecclesiastical publishers. After visiting a number of church bookshops, the newspaper hall of the Russian National Library, and of course the Internet, we decided that we had enough texts to deal with the problems that interested us: the same letters started to be repeated, and the same representational strategies too.

So, our basic sources are, firstly, the official website of the parish of the Icon of the Mother of God of Smolensk (page entitled *Collection of Modern Testimonies to Miracles in Response to the Prayers of the Blessed Saint Xenia of Petersburg*);<sup>1</sup> secondly, the parish newspaper, the *Smolenskii khram* [Church of the Icon of the Mother of God of Smolensk] (section entitled *Miracles in Response to the Prayers of Mother Xenia*);<sup>2</sup> and, thirdly, two collections of letters compiled by L. S. Yakovleva [2004; 2006].<sup>3</sup>

We brought these four publications together on a simple principle: their compilers and editors are people (clergy or laity) who are directly involved with the Smolensk parish and with the blessed Xenia's 'reception centre'. In addition, we have reason to suppose that the authors of the publications (not to be confused with the authors of the letters) had tried to avoid editing the letters too heavily. Of course, that last point does not imply a claim that everything they publish is necessarily 'authentic'. The letters undergo a process of selection, and the texts are harmonised with the norms of orthography and grammar. It stands to reason that the letters are often shortened. (All this correcting work is visible from a comparison between versions of the same letter published in different collections.)

All the same, we are inclined to believe that the editors' chief way of proceeding was not correction in an overt sense, but tactful and intelligent 'touching up'. Our grounds for holding such a belief are

<sup>1</sup> <<http://st-xenia.spb.ru>>. The site contains 47 letters.

<sup>2</sup> We took the issues for 2001 and 2002, containing 43 letters.

<sup>3</sup> These books contain 31 and 189 letters respectively.

slender but significant. The editors did not, for instance, go about altering what the canon in an abstract sense would regard as excessively ‘simple-hearted’ expressions, which run through some sentences and even whole letters. We will give two examples. In one letter we can read the following: *I thank the blessed St Xenia for this too, and I believe she will definitely help [...] if, of course, it is within God’s will* [SKh 2001, No 2 (7)]. Any believer knows that everything in this world is within God’s will, but here the term ‘if it [...] is within God’s will’ creates a suggestive ambiguity.<sup>1</sup> The other example is a letter from a prison, included in Lyudmila Yakovleva’s collection [2006: 181–186]. It contains a number of interesting points, but what is important for us is that it ends with the following passage: *Please answer these questions, which other inmates have asked. 1. How much do you need to sleep and eat a day? 2. How old is humanity? 3. What are UFOs? 4. What are healers, sorcerers, psychics, and hypnotists (with details about their demonic power)? 5. Can you burn dead bodies? 6. Why do Catholics cross themselves left to right, what does the word Catholic mean, and what was the original reason why they split from us? 7. What are cloned people and zombies, how do they live, and what are they lacking compared to a person? 8. If a bandit attacked you and your mum and either he was going to kill you and your mum or you had to kill him, what should you do?* The fact that this fragment found its way into an Orthodox publication does not, of course, indicate an absence of censorship: but it does show that the editors are capable of using direct quotations for their own ends.

The print run of ‘parochial’ publications is quite modest, which cannot be said of books by ‘outside’ authors: these have gone into several editions with a run of up to 10,000 copies. Obviously these popular publications are practically uncontrolled by the clergy of the Smolensk church, who do not have the ability to influence the ideology of all the publications devoted to a saint who has become popular. But we will give a brief characterisation of these books with regard to their policy on publishing letters, in order to create a general media context. Here we will mention three books [Gorbacheva 2003];<sup>2</sup> [Kozachenko 2006];<sup>3</sup> [*Po molitvam blazhennoi Ksenii* 2006].

The first two stress the historical component in the representation of the blessed Xenia’s image and cult. Modern testimonial letters occupy a fairly modest place in them. The authors include them after many pages describing Xenia of Petersburg’s life and pre-revolutionary

<sup>1</sup> Characteristically, a different edition of the same letter (about which more below) corrects this phrase to read ‘if, of course, God wills it’ [*Po molitvam blazhennoi Ksenii* 2006: 124].

<sup>2</sup> All the letters in book (8) appear to be taken from V. I. Kozachenko’s book.

<sup>3</sup> This book, which first appeared in 2000, has gone through many editions which hardly differ from one another. It contains a section entitled *Letters about the Miracles of the Blessed Xenia* (30 letters in all), which the copyright notice attributes to materials provided ‘by the Church of the Smolensk Ikon of the Mother of God at the Smolensk Cemetery in St Petersburg’.

(lifetime and posthumous) miracles, accompanied with historical data and hagiographical comments. Texts of modern letters are published after mention has been made of the century-old practice of writing letters to the Smolensk church. The authors need these letters to underline the idea of an unbroken tradition, an idea that we feel is less important for the 'Smolenskians' themselves: *Decades have passed, but letters still arrive at the Church of the Smolensk Icon of the Mother of God at number 24 Kamskaya St, St Petersburg* [Kozachenko 2006: 241]; *Testimonial letters still arrive addressed to the Parish Priest of the Smolensk Church* [Gorbacheva 2003: 121].

Somewhat different is the third book mentioned, *Prayers to Blessed Xenia* [*Po molitvam blazhennoi Ksenii* 2006], which consists entirely of testimonial letters. Most of these are borrowed from overseas Orthodox publications, though this is indicated only in one case: 'The text is printed in accordance with the edition in *Pamyatka, posvyashchennaya proslavleniyu blazhennoi Ksenii Peterburgskoi, New York, 1978*'. A full 60 of the 98 testimonies are dated to the 1970s — a time when the Russian Orthodox Church abroad was preparing the Blessed Xenia's canonisation (she was only canonised as a saint in the USSR ten years later). The other letters are generally taken from the *Smolenskii khram* newspaper, from the parish's official site, and/or from Kozachenko's collection.

In including recent letters in their book, the compilers have been quite bold in editing their sources: they have corrected the style, changed accounts from the third person to the first, shortened letters, even combined two testimonies into one,<sup>1</sup> and, most revealingly of all, mercilessly cut the appeals to specific addressees as they appear in the sources. All these letters were received and published by the Smolensk Church or with a reference to its archive, but only three carry the note 'A letter to the Church of the Smolensk Icon of the Mother of God' with a direct appeal to an addressee (twice to a priest and once immediately to Xenia). The majority of letters have been

<sup>1</sup> We will give just one example of such editorial activity. In the *Smolenskii khram* newspaper (No 1) for 2002 we read: 'Dear Father! I have a big request for you: please say a Mass for the blessed Xenia of Petersburg with the request that the slave of God, Galina, be bestowed a child of the male gender. In February this year I asked for help with the construction of a church in our town, with the healing of a tumour, and with my desire for a child. So: the church is being built, the tumour has 'vanished', and in January (if, of course, it seems good to God) I will have a little boy. Since I am old (40) and not well (high blood pressure, kidney stones, etc.), I am praying to dear Xenia to help me in childbirth, and so that the baby is born nice and healthy, otherwise because of ecology we often have children born 'yellow' or with a destroyed nervous system. And I really want a boy. Pray for me, Father Viktor. With love for the Lord, a slave of God, Galina, Altai Territory, town of Gornyak.' And below: 'For 17 years they had been asking Xenia for a son. Then Dmitry was born. When they came to the chapel to visit the relics of Xenia, the little boy (who was just starting to talk) embraced the shrine and said 'That's my granny.' They were amazed in the monastery: five-year-old Dima was behaving like a deacon. That's what it means for a child to be from God, one you've prayed for. Story on Orthodox radio.' In the book *Po molitvam blazhennoi Ksenii* the second testimony is attributed to the author of the first letter, Galina from the town of Gornyak [2006: 116].

shorn of any references to addressees, which could sometimes be quite extended ('Peace be with you, dear Father Viktor! I have a request for you, listen to me') and simple-hearted ('Maybe I'm not writing this properly, but it comes from the heart. Thank you for existing'<sup>1</sup>); i.e. they have been denuded of everything that creates the atmosphere of a personal and almost intimate correspondence.

**'Dear Father', 'Dear Aunts', 'darling Xenia':  
the image of the addressee**

Turning to our main sources — publications associated with the Smolensk parish in St Petersburg — we will try to show how the letters' addressee is represented in these. Here too it is possible to identify two basic strategies.

The first is followed by the 'official organs' of the parish: the *Smolenskii khram* newspaper and the official site. The published letters (which are all testimonies concerning miracles) are mainly addressed to the Parish Priest, Father Viktor Moskovsky. A typical opening for such a letter is 'Hello, dear Father!', or 'Hello, Father Viktor.' In some letters the addressee is both the priest and St Xenia. In the latter case the priest's role as an intermediary between the faithful and the saint is particularly obvious: the request for help, and the gratitude, must be heard by both those who are 'responsible' for the miracle.<sup>2</sup> Much the same picture can be seen on the parish site.<sup>3</sup>

The frequency with which testimonial letters are addressed to the priest is probably not hard to explain: many (if not most) are the third element in a trio of correspondence between the believer and the Smolensk parish (the first element would be a letter from some believer asking the parish to say a Mass in St Xenia's chapel; the second would be a reply containing the notification, signed by the Parish Priest). In other words, people might not know when they write their first letter who specifically will read it, but the answer they receive makes the situation more definite. However, it would be possible to cite the testimony to a miracle without including any reference to a concrete person. This is sometimes done in the published versions (as a comparison between different editions of the same letter makes clear). Thus, the inclusion of personal details suggests we are dealing here with a consistent publishing policy whose

<sup>1</sup> Both of the phrases cut from the published text are included in Kozachenko's book [2006: 260] and on the parish site. Cf. [*Po molitvam blazhennoi Ksenii* 2006: 131].

<sup>2</sup> In the issues of the *Smolenskii khram* that we have examined, an addressee is named in 33 out of 43 letters; in 25 cases it is a priest, in 6 a priest and also St Xenia.

<sup>3</sup> On the site of the parish of the Smolensk Ikona of the Mother of God some 28 of 47 letters name an addressee, in 21 cases a priest and in 2 cases both a priest and St Xenia.

aim is to show the concrete person 'responsible' for successful communication with the saint (or relic).

Further evidence to support this hypothesis emerges from a comparison of the newspaper and website publications with the epistolary materials to be found in the two books compiled by Lyudmila Yakovleva. Using material from the Smolensk parish, she chose a different strategy of representing the addressee. Not one letter in Yakovleva's first collection [2004] contains an address to the priest. Here the compiler has tried not to draw the reader's attention to the figure of the letter's recipient(s); in only two letters can we read: 'Hello, good people, dear servants of the church' and 'Darling St Xenia, bless us sinners'. It is clear from the context of the published letters that someone receives them and publishes them, but the image of the recipient is not entirely clear. The implication is that it is probably a group of people (servants of the church), behind or above whom there stands St Xenia; thus, the ultimate head of the 'office' is not the parish priest, but the saint herself.

This representational strategy is pursued still more consistently in the second book compiled by Lyudmila Yakovleva [2006]. At the top of the first page, where we might often expect see the name of the organisation on whose behalf the author is writing, we read: 'National Reception Centre of the Blessed Xenia of Petersburg'. Later, among the numerous fragments from letters (of which, as noted earlier, there are 189) we find frequent references to addressees (in 125 letters).

The general impression — as we can assume the collection's compiler intended — is one of social variety. In defining his or her addressee, the correspondent lets slip information about his or her own status. A child writes 'Dear aunties', someone who is a regular churchgoer and 'simple' might address a letter directly to the Blessed Xenia, someone writes 'Dear brothers and sisters in Christ', and others again try to avoid naming any addressee, e.g. 'Hello. My name is Andrei' [Yakovleva 2006: 116].

Let us try to sketch a portrait of the addressee of the letters published in Yakovleva's collections. Most often here we encounter two types of greeting. Many writers address their requests directly to Xenia. *Mother Xenia, forgive me for pestering you so often. But I have no-one else to share things with, to get out everything that's been troubling me* [Ibid: 180]; *Please, Mother Xenia, make Lyosha—you know who I mean—forget his old love and really deeply love me and never cheat* [Ibid: 123]; *Hello, Xenia of Petersburg. This is Tatyana from Transbaikalia, a long way from St Petersburg. But you can do anything, can't you?* [Ibid: 128-129].

These letters closely recall the messages for the Blessed Xenia that are customarily left at her chapel (see [Filicheva 2006a; 2006b]). But

most of the letters are addressed to intermediaries, to Xenia's 'office', usually with a request to say a Mass for her, just to pray to her, or to pass on a request (64 letters in all): *I am writing to you in deep distress and I beg you on my knees: hear the wail of an unhappy mother. Say a Mass beside the holy relics of the blessed mother Xenia* [Yakovleva 2006: 144]; *Please, say a Mass on credit [...]. Mother Xenia is my only hope* [Ibid: 163]. Sometimes a letter shows confusion as to who is being addressed, which is one way of demonstrating the authenticity of the published letter 'from the people': *Pray to Mother Xenia of Petersburg [...]. Mother Xenia, step in, help... I beg the Blessed Xenia...* [Ibid: 28-29] or *I wrote my first letter and sent it to "the Blessed Xenia", like to "Grandma. In the countryside" [...]. A deep bow to you because you fight for every little sheep, as it says in the Gospel* [Ibid: 41-42].

This whole seemingly contradictory picture adds up to a thoroughly palpable image: St Xenia has her representatives (her office) at the Smolensk cemetery, whose job it is to maintain a *correspondence* between the saint and her admirers. Letters addressed directly to the saint can be sent to this office, and they will be transmitted word for word, but one can also write to the reception centre's staff and let them pass on something in their own words ('Beg Xenia that the soul of my errant daughter be healed' [Ibid: 89]). That is, a letter to the office equals a letter to Xenia, and a reply from the office equals a response from the saint herself (*When I sent my letter to Xenia's dear chapel I didn't think about whether I would get an answer or not. But a short time went by, and suddenly for no reason at all I started to worry and insistently to ask Xenia to reply. My impatience grew like an avalanche. One day I kept looking at the letterbox, and — I saw a letter from Petersburg! Believe me, I felt such untold joy, it was as if I had won a car [...]. And suddenly there was a fragrance in the room, like incense. My husband came running from the other room and asked, 'What are you doing, why does it smell like that?' And I replied, 'It's because darling Xenia the Blessed has sent a letter' [...]. [In my letter] I only asked darling St Xenia to pray for us* [Ibid: 101-102; emphasis in the published version. — JK, SS]).

The feeling that 'reception centre' correspondents frequently imagine their appeals to the saint in the terms of 'asking her to intervene' (in other words, as a lobbying strategy) is strengthened by the complaints against neighbours and officials that are often included. The publication of such texts is in full accordance with the image sketched in the collection, that of the office of a mighty patron.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A reference to Chekhov's tragic-comic story 'Vanka', a staple of the Russian schoolroom, in which the ill-treated boy hero, an apprentice in the city, writes in desperation to his grandfather, addressing the letter, 'To Grandpa. In the Countryside'. [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> 'I have been subjected to attacks from my new neighbour. He appropriates my land (we have a shared allotment). We go to court. He plays tricks, he won't submit to the court or the militia. All I get is threats. This new neighbour of mine is doing building work on our shared allotment. He's got no

In a situation like this, the figure of the priest as an intermediary between the saint and the faithful is overshadowed: the collection contains no direct greetings to clerics (requests to say Mass can be regarded as indirect references). But this cannot be viewed as a manifestation of any anticlerical attitudes on the part of the compiler, who felt herself obliged to publish an appeal from the Parish Priest of the Smolensk Church asking for donations on the last page of her book.

How does the Smolensk Church's clergy react to this strategy of representing the addressee of letters to the chapel? With no great guardedness, so far as we can see. It is clear that the Parish Priest — without whose approval Yakovleva's publications would have been impossible — sees no harm in the existence of letters addressed directly to the saint or to an office where some kind of 'dear aunties' work. It is likely that the cleric does not perceive any particular threat to his power in the simple-hearted avoidance of mentioning the church's intermediary role, precisely because he understands that the 'Orthodoxy market' — like the services offered, and the demand for them — is segmented to a high degree, and it is necessary to offer suitable 'products' for various different groups of 'consumers'. If Orthodox believers from the political or business élite need religious professionals and demand 'high quality services', then the simple folk make do with their own resources. And the faith of the simple folk, sincere, not always flawless from the canonical perspective, is necessary in that it offers other consumers of the product (Orthodoxy in general, and in our particular case, the cult of the Blessed Xenia) a quality that is beyond any price: authenticity. In the context of this analysis of published letters to the Blessed Xenia, the image of the 'typical believer', the object of her potential or actual protection, becomes a kind of rhetorical figure of the 'consumer of Orthodoxy'.

### Poor people (the image of the letter-writer)

So, the publication of letters to Xenia (and not only to her, of course) can be seen as *advertising* for Orthodoxy and for a concrete Orthodox sacred place. But a competently constructed advertising campaign on behalf of any firm hints, or directly states, who is the main and 'correct' consumer of the product; it paints a portrait in which the potential client might recognise him- or herself. Or else this image, being unattainable but representing a stimulus to ideal self-perfection,

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permission, but he just does his thing. There's no way of controlling him. I am appealing for the help of our holy intercessor Mother Xenia. Elena Dmitrievna.' [Yakovleva 2006: 85]. Cf. 'It's hard for a simple person to break through the armour of bureaucratic indifference. People are afraid to fight for their interests, they don't trust anyone. In 2002 the local administration issued an order to limit the use of land allotments in violation of the Constitution and the Land Code. Thanks to my prayers imploring Xenia of Petersburg to help the simple people (and I did not just ask for myself) this unjust order has now been overturned by our constitutional court' [Ibid: 142].

brings about a change in the consumer's needs. In other words, an advertisement tells certain people that people like them who have made use of the 'firm' and its services have got what they wanted as a result (and therefore that the viewer / listener / reader ought to follow the same example). Meanwhile, it hints to another part of the audience that consumption of the same firm's products can make them into part of a hitherto (or absolutely) unattainable world of 'correct consumption'.

Such an ideal consumer, in our case, is someone who is deprived, lacking something necessary for a normal 'human' life: a sufficient income, a family, health, simple everyday good sense (they are *na ve*). We will call them 'poor people'. It is this status as social 'invalids' that creates an image of the ideal believer that is attractive to potential consumers.

Speaking generally, this image of people writing to the saint or to her office is characteristic of all the publications we have examined. But our examples are taken from Lyudmila Yakovleva's 2006 collection, for the following reason. The compiler of this particular book has divided the believers' letters into thematic sections and accompanied them with brief commentaries which represent an attempt at a kind of sociological sketch of the modern Orthodox people (cf. Yakovleva's focus on the correspondence as a 'national reception centre').

Yakovleva herself understands her task in terms of a spiritual medical diagnosis. This is shown by the use of such images as 'the way the social organism is feeling', 'the pulse of the national body' and so on [Yakovleva 2006: 3]. In other words, we are confronted with a project whose explicit goal is to represent a portrait of St Xenia's (or her office's) typical correspondent. It is this that makes Yakovleva's collection a useful object for analysis.

'They live independently, they work a lot, and they have enough coming in. That's probably why they've got used to making do without God' [Yakovleva 2006: 172]. That is how Lidiya Ivanovna from the Altai Territory explains her lack of mutual understanding with her daughter and her son-in-law: she thinks it is the difference in their financial positions that is keeping them apart. Their success hinders them from coming to God. She would hardly want the parents of her beloved grandchild to give up work if they became religious. She is simply underlining a fact she finds obvious: economic success replaces the approach to God, making it unnecessary and impossible. Economic prosperity and faith are incompatible.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is very clear from a story included in a chapter under the characteristic title *Losing everything brought them closer to God*. Before: 'I [...] worked as a lawyer for a prestigious firm [...], but despite all my worldly prosperity I was extremely poor before God!' After: 'I lost my money, my connections, my work, and my family. But I found God!' [Ibid: 111].

Lidiya Ivanovna's letter contains a formulation of an idea that is important for modern Orthodox culture: the idea that poor people are the bearers of the true faith. To be poor, in this value system, is a good thing. The 'rich man' has to prove his faith; the 'poor man' can simply point at his situation.

The published letters represent (and understand) poverty in various ways. Firstly, it is an economic condition. The overwhelming majority of the blessed Xenia's correspondents, according to Yakovleva's collection, are living in deprivation or on the edge of poverty. There are letters from single mothers, sometimes out of work and caring for a sick child; from small entrepreneurs deep in debt; from the children of parents who drink; from families with a large number of children and only one breadwinner; from migrants who have not managed to establish themselves after moving from other parts of the former USSR. Many correspondents live in the countryside or in other economically backward regions.

Secondly, poverty is understood as a lack (of health, of children, etc.) or as unhappiness. 'My poor one!' says Xenia when she appears in a dream to a sick woman; she starts to 'pity and embrace' her, and also to heal her [Ibid: 45]. Many write about their status as social orphans: in other words, they lack what society regards as normal social connections, above all family connections. These are men and women who have left their spouses; parents who have lost contact with their children ('I who write to you am an unhappy orphaned mother' [Ibid: 101]); prisoners; people suffering as real or imagined orphans; and single people looking for a partner. The collection's compiler tries to extend the circle of potential admirers of St Xenia as widely as possible by indicating another group of the 'poor': young people who don't know anything about Orthodoxy, i.e. who are deprived of something very real, but who sincerely believe in the protection of the saint.<sup>1</sup>

The rhetoric of humility further strengthens the sense that the source of real faith is to be found among the 'downtrodden and humiliated': *Help me just for no reason, because there is nothing I can offer in exchange [...]. Fervent slaves of God turn to you. But so do the simple and the weak* [Ibid: 26; publishers' emphasis — JK, SS]. Curiously, the writer contrasts 'fervent slaves of God', who have the right to be helped from on high, with people like himself: 'the simple and the weak' who can only timidly hope for the saint's favour. But it is

<sup>1</sup> The compiler cites the following passage from a young person's letter to St Xenia as a vivid illustration of the position of 'modern youth': 'And also, please help me at school, so that the teachers like me. Make it so I get more and more beautiful, very classy, attractive, and happy. And make my parents let me go everywhere. And make it so I'm always successful in everything' [Ibid: 124]. Ignorance of Orthodox discourse etiquette is compensated for here by naiveté and sincerity.

precisely the writer's humility that raises the chances of his being heard.<sup>1</sup>

The letters to the blessed Xenia are divided into three parts: thanks for aid rendered, testimony to miracles, and requests. The last are practically all worded in the manner of a lamentation (cf. Nancy Ries's discussion of the extent of this genre in Russians' everyday speech practices, see [Ries 1997]), which involves a detailed description of the writer's orphan status and material poverty. We do not at all want to say that the letter-writers exaggerate the degree of their need and their pain. But they have to narrativise their sorrow, and they have to do so in such a way as to make the request look as convincing as possible, something that out of simple human feeling could not be refused. The authors employ a specific language of suffering and rhetoric of lamentation to achieve this end.<sup>2</sup>

The principle is simple: a good person is suffering undeservedly, and asks for justice to be done. In one letter from Yakovleva's collection, the author (Sinful Ekaterina) asks for her husband to get his wages back, for her son to find a good job, because (a) her husband is an 'Afghanistan vet' with many decorations, (b) he is sick, but still goes out to work, (c) *my pension is very small and my husband only makes a few kopecks, we barely have enough to live on* [Yakovleva 2006: 103]. The last two arguments are meant to persuade Xenia that these are genuinely poor people writing to her. Obviously, one does not have to be a model parishioner or fervent in prayer to receive help: the most important thing is to be sufficiently miserable. Not for nothing did the secular periodical *Kommersant* call the blessed Xenia one of the most democratic saints, one who even helps atheists [Florenskaya 2002].

It is quite obvious that the writers and publishers of these letters are consciously or unconsciously basing themselves on the experience of addressing petitions to state bodies, in particular social security offices, in which a request for help is preceded by an argument to justify the request, arranged in the style of a lamentation.

Those who venerate Xenia see her as an ordinary woman with an unhappy fate. Many letters include descriptions of meetings with her: in dreams, at the bus stop, at the market, in church, in the chapel

<sup>1</sup> There is an interesting conjunction in another letter of a description of the writer's own piety (veiled by a modest 'we', meaning 'my children and I') with a demonstration of humility. The writer seems suddenly to wonder whether she isn't praising herself too much, and to go over to the register of humility. 'The children and I spend Sundays and holidays in church, we often go to confession and Holy Communion, we pray morning and night. While we have been doing this I have had a change in my views on life, on the whole of this world and on myself in it. There are also times when I would like to be a mote of dust on the road so all the people could walk over me and trample me for my sins' [Ibid: 111–112].

<sup>2</sup> About a third of the letters published in the collection include descriptions of the writers' current poverty. Since such fragments tend often to be long, they do a lot to define the book's overall tone.

at the Smolensk cemetery. She is an old woman, or simply a woman, or an elderly woman, dressed in an old-fashioned long dress and jacket (the colours are mentioned and are always different), with her hair covered. She usually appears at the critical moment, as a miraculous helper or adviser, and remains unrecognised. Later the person sees an icon and recognises the woman they met, and that is how they find out who it was. In other words Xenia is ordinary, like many other people, poor, and unhappy. And, of course, she helps those who are like herself. It is noteworthy that the image of the holy fool Xenia, with her strange behaviour and her (eighteenth-century) male dress, seems to be too exotic and is not popular. In any case, that is never how she appears to people.

The subtitle makes clear that the compiler regards all the blessed Xenia's correspondents as belonging to the category of 'simple people'. 'Simple' here means powerless, poor, ordinary. It must be said that modern Orthodox discourse, whether in its official or its 'democratic' segment, is not generally marked by the Gospel's condemnation of riches (e.g. at Matt. 19. 24). On the contrary, strategies by which people can comfortably coexist in a society of powerful social inequality have been developed within the framework of Orthodox religious culture.<sup>1</sup> For those who regard themselves as belonging to the category of 'poor folk', one such strategy is to represent their own poverty as a sign they have been chosen. A 'simple' person has a greater chance of being heard by God. This quality, enriched by a certain experience of religious life, can become an important source of symbolic capital. For other Orthodox, who do not regard themselves as 'poor folk', poverty might seem a necessary quality for the accumulation of spirituality and for authentic tradition (for more details see [Kormina 2010]).

Here it should be added that the above-described strategy for representing an image of the Orthodox people is not the only possible such strategy. If this portrait is compared with the evidence we find in some political or politicised Orthodox publications (*Rus pravoslavnaya*, *Put khristianina* [Way of the Christian], etc.), we see that there 'the people' look quite different. They do not humbly beg, they powerfully demand; they do not weep, they threaten; they do not endure, they struggle. 'The people' in fundamentalist publications are not confined to their own private needs. They are driven by Church-wide and even national interests. Even the testimonies to

<sup>1</sup> The cases of social criticism that we are aware of refer rather to the Church's behaviour towards the powerful. An example of such a scandal is the burial of Nikolai Gavrilenko, leader of the Tambov mafia gang, at the Pskov Monastery of the Caves. The scandal was so great that the Patriarch had to remove the incumbent, Archimandrite Roman (Zherebtsov), who was responsible for the decision. It is revealing that both the press and the religious, who are still glad to tell the story, concentrate not on the personality of the bandit who was buried in that holy place but rather on the sum that was paid to the monastery.

miracles here are distinctive. In letters to St Xenia people describe miraculous healings, help in getting married, job-hunting, and even obtaining potatoes at a discount price. This descriptions contrast sharply with, for instance, a miracle in a letter printed in the collection *Miracles of the Imperial Martyrs* [*Chudesa tsarstvennykh muchenikov* 1995]. This vision, painted in the sombre colours of political eschatology—the visionary witnessed the Russian people ‘chanting their own requiem’,<sup>1</sup> — is a typical example of ‘political Orthodox’ narrative. The practice of recording ‘small miracles’ represented in the Smolensk Church’s testimonial letters can be seen as an attempt to create an alternative image of Orthodoxy: a ‘social’ Orthodoxy.

### Conclusion. Send us your letters...

In a recent work on the cults of John of Kronstadt and the blessed Xenia at the start of the 20th century, Nadezhda Kizenko concludes that there was an anti-modernist ideology behind the veneration of these saints [Kizenko 2003]. This conclusion is based on the fact that the main addressees of the cults were representatives of the least modernised part of society: women and the poor. The specific practice of veneration by means of notes and letters, however, has been historically connected precisely with the cult of the blessed Xenia and in fact provides proof of that cult’s modernity.

The idea of entering into a correspondence with a saint or his / her representatives assumes, firstly, a sufficient level of literacy. Since the overall literacy rate was fairly low in the Russian Empire at the start of the last century,<sup>2</sup> we can draw conclusions as to the strata of the population that were able to participate in this ‘correspondence’. Secondly, the existence of such a correspondence assumes a regular postal service and a developed practice of letter-writing. The letter becomes a substitute for pilgrimage, and it is the postal service that makes such a substitution possible. Thus, the ways in which the blessed Xenia — an urban saint, belonging to the capital city — was

<sup>1</sup> *In a dream I saw our Holy Trinity church. As always, there were a lot of people there, but this time it was all somehow not church people, it was the kind you meet in crowds in the street, in the shops, and so on. They were standing closely packed together. I went into the church, and it was obviously a funeral service, but I heard a strange song: the choir was chanting a strange, unusual chant: ‘Nyne upokoi, Khriste Bozhe, nas...’ [Lord God Christ, grant us eternal rest]. I couldn’t believe my ears: what were they singing? ‘Grant us eternal rest’ — us, they kept singing, the same thing over and over again, and with such inspiration, so harmoniously and loftily [...]. Then the priest stepped forward, gave a sign to the congregation, and the whole people started singing along with the choir: ‘Lord God Christ, grant us eternal rest...’. The priest was conducting and the people kept singing and singing. Next to me a woman shook her baby roughly and told it: ‘Sing, sing!’ — and floating above us you could hear the words: ‘Grant us eternal rest!’*

<sup>2</sup> According to the 1897 census, overall literacy in the Russian Empire was 24%, and in European Russia 30% (58% in cities and 26% in the countryside). Between 1897 and 1920, the proportion of the population aged 9–40 that enjoyed literacy rose from 28.4% to 44.1%. See Boris Mironov. ‘The Development of Literacy in Russia and the USSR from the Tenth to the Twentieth Centuries’ // *History of Education Quarterly*. 1991. Vol. 31. No. 2. Pp. 229–252. [Editor].

venerated fully reflected the spirit of the age at the moment when the cult was initiated at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century.

In the Internet era, believers can also use modern means of communication to get through to the saints. In a discussion on the forum on <<http://ovulation.org.ua>>, whose target audience is women experiencing the problem of infertility, one participant — who was preparing to visit St Xenia's chapel — suggested that users could send her the text of notes that she would convey to the chapel. The suggestion met with a lively response, and some 18 people sent messages.<sup>1</sup>

It is quite obvious that this kind of 'civic initiative' is undesirable for the Church. Once people have written their request in a note, they can appeal to St Xenia directly or ask acquaintances who are setting out on pilgrimage far or near (the forum participant mentioned above, for instance, lives in Petersburg), and they have no need for other intermediaries: the priest or the 'office'.<sup>2</sup> The clergy doubtless know that it is not just notes with requests that people bring to the Xenia chapel. Among the pieces of paper lying around the chapel or poked into cracks in the walls there are also requests for the commemoration of the dead or dying, often written on special forms that can be picked up in the church. But they are not given, as prescribed, to the priest to be read during the liturgy, together with payment for the ecclesiastical 'service' ordered: they are taken to the chapel. Thus the faithful prefer to appeal direct to the saint, who will herself pray for the health or the repose of the people named in the note. And, while church representatives might take a tolerant attitude towards request notes as a manifestation of the naive faith of simple folk who do not know the rules of Orthodox usage, notes of commemoration that do not pass through priestly hands must evoke a certain negative reaction. In these circumstances, the church needs special 'advertising campaigns' to preserve its position among modernised believers and to remind them that there are specific people who make it possible to communicate effectively with a saint. This article has dealt with the publication of believers' letters as one form that this advertising takes.

<sup>1</sup> This is a typical message addressed to the initiator of the communication: 'Thank you so much for taking the trouble. May you have the best of health! Please take our request as well: blessed Xenia, we pray you to give us, Xenia and Evgeny, health, to conceive, have an easy pregnancy, and give birth to a healthy little one. Thank you. We are waiting for a miracle and we believe in it.'

<sup>2</sup> Religious practices venerating St Xenia outside the church's control sometimes take on surprising forms. We encountered the following message on the 'Help for homeless dogs' forum at <<http://www.priut.ru>>: 'I visit the blessed Xenia and I often leave notes on behalf of our dogs in the shelter, asking for help in finding them homes. You can believe it or not, but I feel better after visiting that place: calmer and more harmonious. They say she helps quickly to solve problems, reveal good and bad people, and sort situations out. It's all real.'

### Abbreviations

- ROC MP — Russian Orthodox Church — Patriarchate of Moscow  
 RP — *Rus pravoslavnaia* (newspaper)  
 SK — *Smolenskii khram* (newspaper)

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