



My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

This Sunday (July 20th) our Church commemorates two great Saints: one ancient, and one from our own time. Concerning the first, we only need to read the universal Epistle of Saint James: *“The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest” (James 5:16-18).*

Concerning the second, Mother Maria Skobtsova, New-Martyr of France, we must return to the beginning of the Epistle: *“Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord...” (James 5:11)* Mother Maria’s life is a testament to the power of endurance through faith. She was born Elizaveta Pilenko, in 1891, in Latvia.

Though she was raised by pious Orthodox Christian parents, she lost her faith as a teenager, after her father fell asleep in the Lord. She then sought to find the answers to life's problems through art and politics--becoming an accomplished poet and marrying a prominent Bolshevik. However, her hunger for fulfillment led her to the conclusion that action was more important than thought, and her practice of serving the needy eventually brought her back to Christ.

Following the Russian Revolution, she fled to Paris, where a series of tragedies changed her life. The death of her young daughter deepened her faith, and when her second marriage ended, the Metropolitan of Paris, suggested that she be tonsured as a nun (giving her the name Maria), which would allow her to continue her charitable work in the world. She founded a home which served meals for the homeless, single mothers, and those struggling with abuse or addiction. By 1937, her home was serving 120 dinners a day, and she herself was cooking the soup, begging for food, and creating the icons for their chapel. Of course, within a few years’ time the Second World War would begin, and Mother Maria would find herself in an occupied land. However, she chose not only to remain in Paris, but to continue her charitable work, in ways that were dangerous to her life.

She began to assist the Jews of France by creating fake baptismal certificates for them. When nearly 13,000 French Jews were arrested, Mother Maria visited them for three days in the sports stadium where they were being imprisoned, bringing them food, and even rescuing children, by smuggling them out of trash cans. For all these noble works (including helping Jews escape into unoccupied southern France) Mother Maria was arrested in February 1943 and deported to the Ravensbruck concentration camp in Germany. Mother Maria did not allow these circumstances to alter her fundamental spirit: she continued leading group discussions on

literature and theology for her fellow prisoners. On March 31, 1945 (that year, Holy Saturday), shortly before the camp was to be liberated by the Allies, Mother Maria was taken to the gas chambers; some suggest that she took the place of a Jewish prisoner.

My dear brothers and sisters, in some respects these twin feasts concern Saints who were unafraid to defy those who held earthly power. This was as true of Elijah, who rebuked the immorality of the royal family of Israel, as it was for Mother Maria in her own time. How, we ask ourselves, were they able to accomplish their Godly work, without giving in to fear? Would we ourselves be able to do this? And I humbly suggest that we turn back to St. James's words about the prophets, completing the thought that I allowed to be left unfinished: *"You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful"* (James 5:11). In the face of life's struggles, this may be difficult to remember, but surely Elijah held fast to his belief in a compassionate and merciful God, as he prayerfully waited for God to provide food through the ravens; and Mother Maria likewise never abandoned her understanding of what it meant to be a Christian, imitating Christ's willingness to lay down his life for our brothers and sisters.

May these two great Saints continue to intercede for us and remind us of God's great compassionate love for us, both now, and always.

+SEVASTIANOS
Metropolitan of Atlanta