

THE POCHAEV ICON OF THE MOTHER OF GOD

*By the Very Rev. Alexander Golubov
Academic Dean,
Saint Tikhon Orthodox Theological Seminary*

The Pochaev icon of the Mother of God is one of the most venerated by Orthodox Christians, especially in Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, and the Balkans. Permanently housed in the Pochaev Monastery of the Dormition of the Theotokos in southwest Ukraine, the icon is widely renowned for healings of the sick and other miracles. The image, written in tempera in the Byzantine style and measuring approximately 13 inches by 10.5 inches, depicts the Mother of God tenderly inclining her head toward her Son, Whom she holds on her right hand. In her left hand, she holds a napkin, with which she covers the feet of the divine infant. Jesus is depicted imparting a blessing to those for whom He is «the Way, the Truth, and the Life.» On both sides and on the lower part of the icon are miniature images of seven saints. On the right, the Prophet Elias and, below him, the Martyr Menas, are depicted, while the Protomartyr Stephen and the Venerable Avraamius are featured on the left. Across the bottom of the icon one finds images of the Great Martyr Catherine and the martyrs Parasceve and Irene.

There are no written records of the establishment and early history of the Pochaev Monastery. In accordance with local historical tradition, however, the beautiful sub-Carpathian wilderness where the monastery is situated was first settled by several disciples of Saint Methodius, Enlightener of the Slavs [+855 AD], towards the end of the ninth century. Several centuries later, during the Mongol invasion of Russia, two monks from the Kiev Caves Monastery settled in the area after the Mongols had sacked their city. The monks, it is said, named their new abode after the river Pochaina, which flowed near the Kiev Caves.

According to tradition, around the year 1340 AD, one of the monks ascended the summit of Mount Pochaev to pray, when suddenly he beheld a pillar of fire burning in the wilderness. Calling out to the other monk to join him, he stood in prayer. The fire was seen also by some shepherds who were tending flocks in the area, among them Ivan Bosoi [«the barefoot»], who joined the monks in prayer. They beheld, surrounded by the flames and standing on a rock, the Most Holy Theotokos, the Mother of God. When the apparition finally disappeared, they saw that the place where the Theotokos had been standing had melted, leaving the imprint of her right foot embedded in the rock. Welling up over the footprint was a spring of clear water.

First written traces of monastic life on Mount Pochaev are found in unofficial 16th century documents of Polish kings Sigismund I and Sigismund II Augustus, which refer to «a monastery of the Greek Rite at the Pochaev mount,» already «very old and famous.» From the so-called «Fundushnaia Gramota»

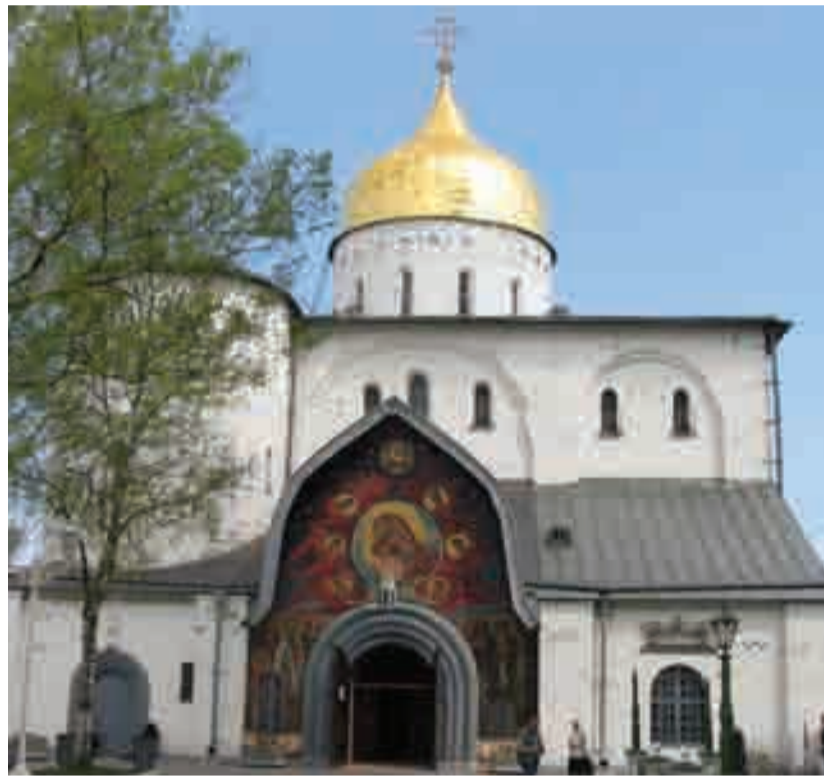
[«Writ of Endowment»] given to the monastery in 1597 AD by the Orthodox noblewoman Anna Goiskaya, the widow of a local public justice, Basil Goisky, as well as from the vita of the venerable Saint Job of Pochaev [born 1571?], Abbot of the Pochaev Monastery from 1596 until 1651, we learn other important details. In 1559, when on the behest of the Patriarch the Greek Metropolitan Neophyte came to Russia in search of financial support for the Church of Constantinople, he brought with him an ancient Byzantine icon of the Mother of God. On his way home from Moscow, Metropolitan Neophyte traveled to Volhyn, where he accepted the invitation of Anna Goiskaya to enjoy her hospitality in her castle in Orel, not far from Pochaev.

guidance a stone church in honor of the Dormition of the Theotokos was specially erected, which Goiskaya herself lavishly furnished with all necessary materials and appointments. After the death of Anna Goiskaya, her heir, a nephew who in the Reformation had converted to Lutheranism, plundered the Pochaev Monastery and took the icon home. Expressing his disdain for the holy image, he engaged in travesties of Orthodox services, during which he dressed his wife in priestly vestments while she shrieked insults at the icon. For this she was severely chastised by demonic torment. The poor woman's sufferings stopped only when she finally returned the sacred image to its rightful place in the monastery.

In 1675, Moslem Turks invaded the area and laid siege to the monastery. In response, the monks, together with the people who sought shelter in the monastery, began to sing the Akathistos Hymn before the Pochaev icon, supplicating the assistance and protection of the Mother of God. To the astonishment of the Turks, a vision appeared above Pochaev, in which they beheld the Most Holy Virgin, in brilliant and shining radiance, accompanied by Saint Job. The radiant Virgin was holding her protective veil over the monastery and was surrounded by a host of angels dressed for battle, with drawn swords. The invaders tried to repel the angelic host by shooting thousands of arrows into the air, but the arrows fell back, killing the men who had shot them. The Turks lifted the siege and fled in terror.

For almost 100 years in the 18th century and early 19th centuries [1721-1831], the Pochaev Monastery was in the hands of the Greek Catholics. During that time, the majestic three-altar Cathedral of the Dormition was built [1771-1783] by count Nicholas Potocki, and the icon was transferred there in 1791. In 1831, the Pochaev Monastery was once again returned to the Orthodox Christians. Two years later, the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church elevated the monastery to the rank of a «Lavra,» equating it in religious stature with the Kievian Caves Lavra in Kiev, the Holy Trinity-Saint Sergius Lavra near Moscow, and notably, the Saint Alexander Nevsky Lavra in St. Petersburg, whose particular singing and reading traditions were adopted in Pochaev. In 1869, the icon was covered with a metallic gilded «riza» studded with precious stones and encased in a star-shaped frame, the rays of which are inlaid with pearls and diamonds.

The flow of miracles from the icon continues to our own day. To accommodate the many thousands of pilgrims who arrive in Pochaev to pray to the Mother of God before her miracle-working image, the Pochaev icon is carried in festive processions for the feasts of the Dormition and the Nativity of the Mother of God, as well as in commemoration of the Most Holy Virgin's protection of the monastery from the Turks in 1675. There are approximately 300 extant miracle-working copies of the icon of the Pochaev Mother of God.



In gratitude for her generosity, as a blessing to Anna, Metropolitan Neophyte left with her the icon that he had brought from Constantinople.

Anna first placed the icon in her private chapel, where it remained for thirty-odd years. Over those years, however, the servants began to notice that at times the icon shone with a mysterious light, and had started to manifest miracles. Anna herself was prone to disbelieve the stories of her servants until she saw the icon emanating a bright radiant light. Among those who received healing from the icon was Anna's own brother, Philip, who had been blind from birth. After praying before the icon on the advice of his sister, he miraculously recovered his sight.

In 1597, Anna Goiskaya gave the miraculous icon as a gift to the Pochaev Monastery, now headed by the venerable Saint Job as Abbot, and richly endowed the monastery with lands and substantial material support. To house the holy icon, under Saint Job's

Pochaev Monastery

