

St. Alexander of Svir and His Holy Relics

Six years ago, in 1998, the incorrupt relics of St. Alexander of Svir were discovered. Now located in the reopened Svir Monastery, they continue to work miracles for those who pray before them with faith. On the occasion of the publishing of the third edition of The Northern Thebaid, which contains the complete Life of St. Alexander, we are presenting the following brief Life of the Saint, together with accounts of the first and second uncovering of his wonderworking relics and his Akathist. This material has been translated from books recently published in Moscow, and is appearing here in English for the first time.

A BRIEF LIFE OF ST. ALEXANDER OF SVIR*

SAINT ALEXANDER was born on June 15, 1448, in the village of Mandera on the River Oyat in Novgorod, Russia. The village was situated opposite the Ostrov Monastery of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple. The future saint was named Amos in holy Baptism. His parents, Stephen and Bassa, were pious peasants of limited means, and they gave their children a Christian upbringing. When Amos came of age, his parents wanted him to marry, but he thought only about how to leave the world for the sake of his soul's salvation.

*Translated from *The Marvelous Wonderworker of All Russia, Holy Venerable Alexander of Svir* (St. Petersburg: Holy Trinity Monastery of St. Alexander of Svir, 2002), in Russian.



The cave on Valaam Monastery's Holy Island in which St. Alexander labored.

Early in his life he learned of the Monastery of Valaam, and often brought it to mind. Finally, according to the will of God, he met some monks from Valaam. Their conversation about the holy monastery, their rule of prayer, and the three types of monastic life [anchoretic, skete, coenobitic] continued for a long time. And so, inspired by this conversation, Amos conceived the idea of going to Valaam, the “Athos of the North.” Having asked his parents’ blessing to travel to a nearby village, he left them for good and set out on his way. After crossing the River Svir, on the bank of Lake Roshinsk the Saint heard a mysterious voice which informed him that he would later build a mon-

astery on that spot, and a great light overshadowed him. When he arrived at Valaam he was accepted by the abbot, who tonsured him with the name Alexander in 1474. He was then twenty-six years of age.

The zealous novice began to labor at physical work, obedience, fasting, and prayer. After some time had passed his father arrived at Valaam, seeking him. The Saint succeeded not only in calming his upset father, but in convincing both him and his mother to receive the monastic tonsure. The parents were obedient to their son. Stephen was tonsured with the name Sergius, and Bassa with the name Barbara. Their graves are revered even to this day in the Oyat Monastery, which is again functioning.

Alexander continued to labor ascetically on Valaam, astonishing

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the strictest of the Valaam monks by the severity of his life. At first he labored in the common life, and then in stillness on an island now called Holy Island, spending ten years there. To the present day there is preserved on Holy Island his narrow, damp cave, which can accommodate one man only with difficulty. The grave that St. Alexander dug for himself is likewise preserved there. Once, when standing at prayer, St. Alexander heard a Divine voice: "Alexander, depart from hence and go to the place which was shown you before, in which you can be saved." A great light indicated to him a place to the southeast, on the bank of the river Svir. This was in 1485. There he found "a pine forest of great beauty, the place being full of trees and lakes and beautiful in all directions, and where no one among men has yet lived." The Saint erected a hut on the bank of Lake Roshinsk. Holy Lake lay one third of a mile further, and was separated from him by Stremnino Hill. He spent several years there in total solitude, feeding himself not with bread but with the greens that grew there. God revealed His luminary to the boyar Andrew Zavalishin (subsequently St. Adrian of Ondrusov)* and through him to many others. The monastery began to grow, and the report of its superior's gifts of clairvoyance and his healing of physical and spiritual infirmities quickly spread throughout the whole neighboring land. The Orthodox people glorified Alexander of Svir as a saint even during his lifetime.

In the twenty-third year of the Saint's life in the wilderness, a great light appeared in his room, and he saw three men enter. They were clothed in radiant garments and illumined with a heavenly glory brighter than the sun. The Saint fell to the ground, but They took him by the hand and raised him up. From Their lips the Saint heard the command: "Beloved, as you see the One speaking to you in Three Persons, build a church in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Trinity One in Essence.... I leave you My peace, and My peace I grant unto you."

* See the Life of St. Adrian of Ondrusov in *The Orthodox Word*, nos. 230–31 (2003), pp. 176–93.



Interior of the chapel built over the spot where Saint Alexander had his vision of the Holy Trinity.

A chapel was later built on the site of the appearance of the Holy Trinity, and to this day men's souls tremble at this spot when they think about the nearness of God to His people. One is amazed that, in light of the abundance of Divine visitations vouchsafed St. Alexander, he always remained a humble monk, desiring in all things to serve the brethren and the simple villagers who came to the monastery.

Several years before the Saint's repose God placed in his heart the good thought of constructing a stone church in honor of the Protection of the Most Holy Theotokos with a refectory. Once at night, when the foundation had already been laid, after

the completion of his usual rule of prayer the Saint saw an extraordinary light illumining the whole monastery. In the already-begun church of the Protection, at the site of the altar the Most Pure Theotokos was sitting with the Pre-eternal Child in royal glory upon a throne, surrounded by a throng of the bodiless heavenly host. The Saint fell to the earth upon his face before the majesty of her glory, for he could not look upon the brilliance of this inexpressible light. Then the Most Pure Lady commanded him to rise and consoled him with the promise that she would remain inseparable from the monastery and would aid those living there in all their needs, both during St. Alexander's life and after his death.

A year before the Saint's repose he summoned all the brothers and

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declared to them that the time was approaching for his passage from this mournful and sorrowful temporal life into the next life, eternal, painless and ever-joyful. He designated four hieromonks—Isaiah, Nicodemus, Leontius and Herodion—and commanded that his successor as abbot be chosen from among them. Thereafter, until his repose, he did not cease to instruct his brethren in a God-pleasing life. St. Alexander reposed on August 30, 1533, at the age of eighty-five. In accordance with his testament, he was buried in the far hermitage, near the Church of the Lord's Transfiguration, behind the right side of the altar. In 1547, only fourteen years after his repose, he was numbered among the saints.

Those with various ailments, who have come to his holy relics and venerated him with faith, have received abundant healings: the blind have regained their sight, paralytics have received strength in their limbs, and those suffering from other illnesses have received complete healing. Demons have been cast out from the possessed, and the barren have conceived children.

Wondrous is our All-good God in His saints, Who has glorified His servant in this temporal life, working signs and miracles by his hand. And even after his death He has deigned to place his honorable and holy body in His Church, that it might shine there like a great beacon by its most glorious miracles.



St. Alexander's vision of the Most Holy Theotokos at the site of the Church of the Protection.