

THE SECOND UNCOVERING OF THE  
HOLY RELICS OF ST. ALEXANDER\*

*There is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed;  
neither hid, that shall not be known.*

—Luke 12:2

ON JULY 30, 1998, Russia's faithful hastened in streams to venerate the newly rediscovered relics of St. Alexander of Svir in the Church of the Martyrs Vera, Nadezhda and Lyubov and their mother Sophia in St. Petersburg. After an absence of almost eighty years, one of the most beloved of the Saints of the Northern Thebaid was returning to the place of his monastic struggles.

Eight decades earlier, on January 5, 1918, the Bolsheviks took over a major section of Russia's Northern Thebaid: the area around Olonets and Lodeynoye Polye. On the very next day Bolsheviks appeared at the Svir Monastery, at the reliquary of St. Alexander. Such a repository of sanctity was an obvious hindrance to the devil and his minions, who were then taking over the Russian land. Yet on that occasion they were inexplicably unable to do any harm to the Saint's relics or to remove them. The Communists made several more attempts, and only on their sixth attempt, on December 20 of that year, were they able to remove the incorrupt relics of St. Alexander. This inaugurated the infamous "campaign for the liquidation of relics," which continued from 1919 until 1922, during which time the relics of sixty-three Russian saints were stolen, subjected to "scientific examinations," displayed as "mummies" or even as "fakes" in anti-religious museums, or destroyed.

It was at this time that the entire northern region of Russia was turned into a vast concentration camp. The Northern Thebaid was

\*Translated from *The Holy Venerable Alexander of Svir* (Moscow: Palomnik, 2003), in Russian.

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desecrated and defiled, yet was also sanctified by becoming one of Russia's many Golgothas. The St. Alexander of Svir Monastery suffered the fate of many of the monasteries of that area: it became a concentration camp, commonly known as "Svirlag" ("Svir Camp"). Later it became, in turn, a home for war invalids, a children's home, a technical school, and housing for military units. Finally, the Holy Trinity portion of the monastery was turned into a psychiatric hospital, a part of which remains so to this day.

The monastery was badly abused over the years. However, God did not allow the relics of St. Alexander to perish. After the relics were confiscated by the Bolsheviks, they were taken first to Lodeynoye Polye. The local Chekist commission asked for an investigation into the authenticity of the relics. They were to be examined by Soviet scientists in hopes of proving that they were fake—a hoax perpetrated by the Church to fool the faithful. But much to the embarrassment of the Bolsheviks, their findings only confirmed what had been recorded at the first uncovering of the Saint's relics in 1641: that this was indeed St. Alexander, and that his body was, to an astonishing degree, incorrupt. His skin was light in color and elastic. His facial features were clearly discernible and bore a remarkable resemblance to icons painted of the Saint between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. An academician, Peter Petrovich Pokryshkin, was not afraid at such a time of persecution to write an uncompromising reply to the Chekists' inquiry: "Acknowledging the relics of St. Alexander of Svir to be undoubtedly historical artifacts, the location of which should be in a church, we ask that measures be taken for the preservation of this national historical treasure."\*

From Lodeynoye Polye the relics were brought to St. Petersburg (then Petrograd). At this time a directive came from the Commissariat of Justice to have all relics placed in museums. St. Alexander's relics

\*It is known that Peter Petrovich Pokryshkin was unable to endure the horror of those times, and entered a monastery of the Nizhegorod diocese, from which he wrote that he renounced all scientific ranks and honors. His monastic life was short, however: he died in 1922 during a typhus epidemic.

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A recent photograph of the Holy Transfiguration portion of the Svir Monastery, which has been fully returned to the Church, and in which monastic life has been restored.

were brought to the city's anatomical museum, which was located in the Military Medical Academy. There the relics were put on display, but were left unregistered—an obvious attempt by the museum workers to conceal them. At the same time attempts were made to display false relics of the Saint, which bore no resemblance to his historical description, to the public as part of the Communist plan to discredit the Church, but these attempts came to nothing. It was thanks to one of the scientists, V. N. Tonkov, not a “militant atheist” like his colleagues, that the relics were left in the Military Medical Academy in St. Petersburg, relegated to oblivion. There they remained for almost eight decades, awaiting the moment when, by God's providence, they would be returned to believers.

On June 14, 1997, nearly six years after the collapse of Communist totalitarianism in Russia, the Holy Transfiguration portion of the St.

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The original Holy Trinity portion of the Svir Monastery.

Alexander of Svir Monastery was entirely returned to the Church. The Holy Trinity portion, which is located one third of a mile from the other portion, was partially returned to the Church on September 22, 1998.

The search for St. Alexander began in 1997, with the blessing of Metropolitan Vladimir of St. Petersburg. Most documents from the Soviet period had been either lost or destroyed, but the prayerful research efforts of the sisters of the Protection-Tervenichi Convent, under the direction of their spiritual father, Abbot Lukian (Kutsenko), now superior of the St. Alexander of Svir Monastery, were rewarded at last. In December of that year the holy relics of the Saint were found. When the relics were examined, they exactly matched the original description from the first uncovering of the relics in 1641. They were as incorrupt as they had been before their confiscation. According to anthropological and ethnological experts, the relics were of a man belonging to the Veps people—a very small group of Finnish origin, located in the very area where St. Alexander was born and where he later built his monastery.

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Finally, after the identity of the Saint had been proven beyond doubt, Metropolitan Vladimir gave his blessing for the Grace-filled relics to be brought to the church of the Martyrs Vera, Nadezhda and Lyubov and their mother Sophia for four months of public veneration prior to their return to the Saint's monastery.

Before the relics were moved to the church, a Moleben was served in the examination room of the Medical Academy. To the astonishment and spiritual delight of those present, the hands and feet of the Saint began to exude drops of fragrant myrrh, as if the Saint were saying, "Yes, I hear you.

It is I!" This outpouring of Grace continued when the relics were brought to the church. The floral fragrance of the myrrh was so intense that bees swarmed near the Saint's feet.

Priest Alexey Young (now Hieromonk Ambrose) was in St. Petersburg when the relics were there. Describing his experience of venerating the relics, this American pilgrim wrote: "With a shock I saw that the Saint was not only incorrupt, but his skin was not at all darkened by the passing of nearly five centuries; it was as white as that of someone living today. As I kissed the bare feet I could see the miraculous myrrh forming, like drops of rich honey, between the toes."\*

Icons of the Saint which were blessed on the reliquary likewise



Believers venerating the Saint's holy relics at the Svir Monastery.

\* From Fr. Alexey Young, "Pilgrimage to Russia," *Orthodox America*, nos. 155-56 (March-June 1998). This paragraph has been added by the editors.

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began to give forth either myrrh or fragrance. Novice Alexander of the St. Alexander of Svir monastery stood continuously at the reliquary, observing and noting not only the quantity of the flow of myrrh, but the miraculous healings which took place there. People were healed of numerous ailments: paralysis, cancer, skin and bone diseases, and demonic possession.

After the relics were brought to the St. Alexander of Svir Monastery in November 1998, healings continued to occur in their presence. The flow of myrrh also continues intermittently. It has been noticed that this miracle increases in intensity when groups arrive in which there are not only believers, but doubters as well. To the present day the monastery keeps records of the miracles that take place through the relics of God's Saint. It is commonly believed that God has preserved the relics in such a miraculous state of incorruption because St. Alexander is the only saint besides the patriarch Abraham to have been vouchsafed a visitation of the Holy Trinity in the form of three angels. During that visitation, the Holy Trinity even touched the Saint, and that touch has evidently made his body impervious to corruption. Wondrous is God the Holy Trinity, Who is glorified in His saints!

Below we present a few of the many miracles that have taken place after the second opening of the relics of St. Alexander:

### I. HEALING OF A PARALYTIC GIRL (AUGUST, 1998)

Everyone knows that there is no greater sorrow for a mother than a child's illness, and if that illness is incurable, then the mother's grief is increased tenfold. It was with such a heavy burden that a young woman entered the church\* with a five-year-old girl in her arms. The girl was a small, thin creature, with a sad little face, her arms hanging

\*This miracle took place in the St. Petersburg Church of Martyrs Vera, Nadezhda and Lyubov and their mother Sophia.—ED.

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The Holy Transfiguration Cathedral. St. Alexander's relics are located on the right side of this church.

lifelessly at her sides. It turned out that the little girl's legs were in the same condition—the child could not walk. In conversation with the mother it was explained that the little girl had had damage to her central nervous system since birth. She was the fifth, but not the last child in the family. Looking at the mother, it was impossible not to notice how hard this was for her; however, there were no traces of despondency visible on her refined, pretty face. Doctors had not been able to give any hope to the unfortunate mother. Such a severe infirmity could be healed only by the power and will of God. And it happened right there, at the Saint's reliquary, before the eyes of the astounded people in the church, which was full to overflowing. All this took place just as described in the Gospel according to St. John (9:1–14), when Christ's disciples, seeing the man blind from birth, asked Jesus: *Who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind? Jesus answered, Neither*



The ancient Church of the Protection of the Theotokos. On this site the Mother of God appeared to St. Alexander.

*bath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.*

The mother went to the reliquary of St. Alexander of Svir. With the help of the novice who stood by the reliquary, she laid the little girl on the surface of the glass that covered the relics. The child was left thus in a prone position for a short while. Then the mother, taking her from the reliquary, sat the little girl on the floor, so as to venerate the relics of the Saint herself. While praying, she did not notice that her daughter left. The girl stood up on her suddenly strengthened legs, as though someone invisible had picked her up and set her on

her feet, and off she went, not supported by anyone. Silence reigned in the church, and the people made way as the girl approached them. They made a wide corridor for the girl and her mother, who, having realized what had happened, now ran ahead of her daughter, holding her arms out over her so as to catch her dear one at any moment. In this way they reached the church exit, and there her mother took the child in her arms and stood up. Everyone saw on her face, wet with tears, what she was experiencing at that moment: joy, gratitude, confusion, fear, and doubt—"Might she again cease to walk?" A year later we learned that little Vera—that was the name of the healed child—was not only walking, but running.

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### 2. HEALING OF CRIPPLED LEGS

MAY–SEPTEMBER, 2000

Another similar incident of healing took place with Andrei, a resident of Podporozhe. After he had been in an automobile accident his legs lost their ability to move. This handsome, tall, strong man dragged his legs behind him, leaning on crutches. No physical therapy or massage could improve the condition of the immobilized man. But faith in his recovery never left him. Guided by this faith, Andrei persistently came to the Monastery of St. Alexander of Svir, to the shrine of his relics. There was a total of four such trips, with varying intervals of time between them. Each time, standing at the reliquary, he would earnestly entreat the Saint for help. What he promised in his prayers to the Saint, and how this man prayed, when he basically had little knowledge of the Church, has remained a mystery to everyone. On the last of those occasions everyone who was in the Svir Monastery's Church of the Lord's Transfiguration became a witness to the manifestation of God's mercy to the cripple, who had come for the fourth time to the relics of St. Alexander. This time his legs were strengthened to such an extent that he left his crutches and took his first unsure steps on his own. He soon came again to the monastery in order to have a thanksgiving Moleben served. Less than a month had gone by. Andrei entered the church only lightly leaning on a cane.

### 3. FAITH CONQUERS DISTANCE

SEPTEMBER, 2000

Almost all the inhabitants of the Svir Monastery know about this amazing incident, which happened to a family living in Rostov-on-the-Don. Residents of this city frequently make charter pilgrimages to the relics of St. Alexander of Svir. However, this time two Rostov residents took a plane there, not with a charter pilgrimage but on their own. They made such a hurried trip because they feared to lose someone dear

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The Holy Trinity Cathedral as it looks at the present time.

to them: he was the husband of one of them and the brother of the other. This man, for whom they had come to bow their heads before the reliquary of the great wonderworker, was at that time in serious condition. He had just undergone his third operation for pancreatic cancer, and they had taken him in a hopeless condition “to die at home.” His relatives, however, did not want to give in before the “inevitable end” and, despite their own poor health and old age, they had set out on the long trip. With tearful prayer they fell on their knees before the relics of St. Alexander of Svir. This was early on a Sunday morning. According to the words of the man’s daughters, who had stayed with their father that morning, he felt so well for the first time that he got out of bed and even dared to get behind the wheel of his car. He was full of energy and strength. When his wife and sister returned from the St. Alexander of Svir Monastery, they were amazed at his healthy appearance. Not only were they happy for him, but they were overcome with thankfulness to

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God and their prayerful intercessor, St. Alexander. Two weeks later they returned to the monastery, in order to pay their debt of gratitude in the very place where they had sent up their fervent prayers.... All that has been described above took place in September of 2000. In the summer of 2001 the women again returned to the monastery, but this time they were accompanied by the formerly sick man. He had personally wanted to thank St. Alexander for the mercy that had been shown him. According to the testimony of the healed man, living as he did far away from the northern monastery, he had not been familiar with the Saint to whom his relatives had turned with faith and hope.



Interior of the Holy Trinity Cathedral, showing the progress of the restoration of the frescoes.

### 4. HEALING FROM CANCER

Here is a testimony concerning a healing from cancer, a dread disease which not only kills physically, but also instills tremendous fear and despair in human souls. The sick woman in this case did not give in to despair, but turned for help to God and the Most Holy Theotokos, at the same time asking the prayerful intercession of St. Alexander of Svir. We present her letter here:

“I, Nina Ivanovna Malinina,\* born in 1956, and living in St. Petersburg, attest to the fact that in November of 1998 cancer was discovered

\* Not her real name.



Newly installed reliquary of St. Alexander in the Transfiguration Cathedral.

in my left breast (a biopsy had been taken, which showed the presence of cancerous cells). An immediate operation was recommended. We made arrangements with a specialist at the Radiology Institute in the town of Pesochno. Due to circumstances, the doctor who was to perform the surgery left for Moscow for a week, and so the operation was postponed to November 26, 1998. During this interval of time between the diagnosis and the operation, I was present three times at Molebens at the shrine of the relics of St. Alexander of Svir. I venerated the relics many times and wiped the afflicted spot with myrrh that I had received after a Moleben in the Church of the Martyrs Vera,

Nadezhda and Lyubov and their mother Sophia. I would like to note that, after the Molebens at the Saint's reliquary, a quiet and extraordinary joy would settle into my soul. I am a parishioner of the church dedicated to the Icon of the Theotokos "Inexhaustible Cup," where Fr. John Mironov serves. The services there are very Grace-filled, but the Molebens at the Saint's reliquary were extraordinary, regardless of which batiushka was serving. There were many priests, from various churches, and they took turns. By the prayers of St. Alexander of Svir, God showed mercy to me—I was healed of my terrible infirmity. I was operated on, and the results of the histological analysis showed that there was no cancer. I have medical evidence confirming the diagnosis before the operation and the results of the tests afterwards. Because of my carelessness and the usual worldly bustle I did not communicate this to the

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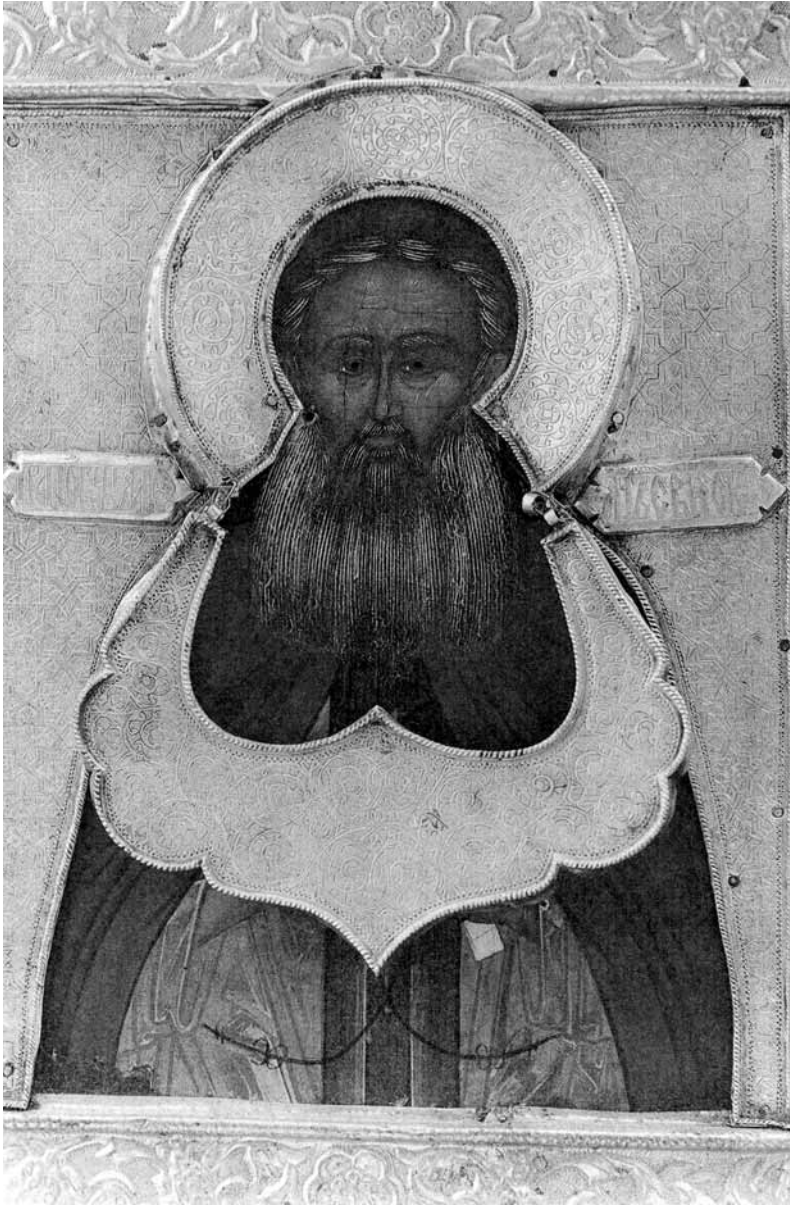
monastery of St. Alexander in 1998. Only when I learned how important these testimonies are for those who doubt the authenticity of the relics did I, with bitter repentance and belated gratitude, write this letter. I feel very guilty for my silence. Lord, have mercy on me.”

*Special thanks to the monks of the Hermitage of the Holy Cross in Wayne, West Virginia, who provided the pictures and Russian-language sources from which this article has been compiled.*

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Sixteenth-century Russian icon of St. Alexander of Svir.

# *Akathist to our Holy Father St. Alexander of Svir*

Translated from the original Slavonic.

## KONTAKION I

Chosen Saint of Christ and wonderworker, O venerable father Alexander, \* thou hast shone forth to the world like a divinely radiant star; \* for the goodness of thy life and the multitude of thy miracles we praise thee in hymns with love. \* Do thou, as one having boldness before the Lord, free us from every danger by thy prayers that we may cry out to thee:

Rejoice, O venerable father Alexander, wonderworker of Svir!

## IKOS I

Thou didst have an angelic disposition, O venerable father, and like a bodiless one thou didst complete a blameless life on earth, leaving for us a wondrous model of spiritual perfection, that we might emulate thy virtues and call out to thee thus:

Rejoice, divinely bestowed fruit of pious parents;  
Rejoice, thou who didst loose the barrenness of them that bore thee!  
Rejoice, thou who didst turn their lamentation into joy;  
Rejoice, thou who wast chosen by God from thy swaddling bands!

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Rejoice, thou who wast foreordained to serve Him from thy mother's womb;  
Rejoice, thou who, from thy youth, didst love Him alone with all thy heart!  
Rejoice, thou who didst regard all the beautiful things of this world as nought;  
Rejoice, thou who didst oppress thy flesh through fasting and prayerful vigil!  
Rejoice, blameless vessel of the Grace of God;  
Rejoice, abode of the Holy Trinity, adorned with purity!  
Rejoice, man of spiritual desires;  
Rejoice, O consecrated head, ordained by the right hand of the Most High!  
Rejoice, O venerable father Alexander, wonderworker of Svir!

## KONTAKION II

Seeing thy soul like unto a field well tilled for the bearing of spiritual fruit from thy youth, the Lord directed thy thoughts to the seeking of the one thing needful, O venerable one. Therefore, for the sake of the love of Christ, thou didst leave thy father's house and thy parents and, having freed thyself from every vain passion, didst hasten to the desert monastery of Valaam for monastic labors, crying out to God Who saved thee: Alleluia!

## IKOS II

With divinely enlightened understanding thou didst comprehend the vanity and inconstancy of this world, in which joy is replaced by sorrow and prosperity is struck by unexpected misfortunes. Therefore thou didst desire the eternally incorruptible good things, O venerable father, and didst hasten to seek them through the renunciation of worldly goods and through voluntary poverty, moving us to cry out to thee:

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Rejoice, lover of desert stillness;  
Rejoice, zealot of humility and unacquisitiveness!  
Rejoice, perfect model of true self-renunciation;  
Rejoice, all-surpassing manifestation of the monastic life, equal to that  
of the angels!  
Rejoice, rule of faith and piety;  
Rejoice, mirror of patient obedience!  
Rejoice, lover of monastic silence;  
Rejoice, thou who didst acquire spiritual tears!  
Rejoice, thou who didst obtain eternal blessedness through temporal  
weeping;  
Rejoice, thou who didst destroy the wiles of the enemy by unceasing  
prayer!  
Rejoice, thou who didst subject thy flesh to thy spirit by vigil and labor;  
Rejoice, thou who didst subdue the passions by fasting and abstinence!  
Rejoice, O venerable father Alexander, wonderworker of Svir!

### KONTAKION III

Overshadowed and strengthened by the power of the Most High, thou didst set aside all fleshly wisdom at the monastic tonsuring of the hairs of thy head, O venerable one. Like a greatly skilled soldier, having acquired the monastic schema as a breastplate of salvation and having armed thyself with the unconquerable weapon of the Cross of Christ, thou didst fight against the invisible enemy, the devil, overcoming his exalted pride with profound humility, and crying out unceasingly to the Lord: Alleluia!

### IKOS III

Having an abundant fount of tears and the Grace of great contrition, O God-pleaser, thou didst bedew thy bread with tears and mix thy drink with weeping from the great abundance of thy divine desire and love for the Lord. Therefore we bless thee with these cries: