

March 31

Mat' Marija Skobcova (1891-1945) nun and martyr

On March 31, 1945 Elizaveta Jur'evna Pilenko, better known today as Mat' Maria, died in the Nazi concentration camp of Ravensbrück.

Elizaveta was born in Riga, Latvia, in 1891. She moved to St. Petersburg, and during her high school and early university years she was a protagonist in the lively intellectual and political debates that characterized Russian life at the beginning of the twentieth century. One of her classmates was the poet Marina Cvetaeva, and Elizaveta also loved poetry. In search of something that would satisfy her desire for social justice, she joined the first revolutionaries.

In 1923 Elizaveta emigrated to Paris with her second husband, a White Army official. She met the leading figures of Russian Orthodoxy in exile - Bulgakov, Florovsky, and especially Berdyaev, Fedotov, and Metropolitan Evlogy. A profound spiritual crisis led her to ask for a divorce, which she obtained with the consensus of the Orthodox Church. In 1932, she took monastic vows in the presence of Evlogy.

Now a monastic, Mat' Maria - as everyone in the Orthodox diaspora had begun to call her - founded a unique monastery in Paris, dedicated to offering hospitality to the very poor, and especially to the many Russian immigrants who had recently arrived in the city.

Arrested in 1943 for having assisted in the expatriation of Jewish children, Mat' Maria died in the gas chamber at Ravensbrück, taking the place of a fellow prisoner. With this last gesture she concluded a life that she had given without reserve to all those whom she had met.

John Donne (1571-1631) priest

In March 1631, after preaching his most beautiful sermon, the priest and great English poet John Donne died at the age of 59.

John was born in the heart of London into a Catholic family, and lost his father when he was very young. The picture of him that emerges from his early poems is of a serious and bright student and a young man who liked to enjoy life.

In his early twenties Donne joined the Church of England after a long period of reflection. When he married Ann More, who was still a minor, without her guardian's permission, he was imprisoned and lost all of the career prospects his talents had opened to him. But with Ann he eventually had twelve children, and found meaning for his life in his family.

A highly gifted poet, whose descriptions of the beauty of human and divine love are in a category of their own, Donne was less interested in writing for publication than in sharing his art with his closest friends.

After turning down repeated offers of ordination to the priesthood, he was elected to Parliament, and one year later he finally became a priest at the personal request of King James.

During the last years of his life, Donne channeled his extraordinary writing ability into an intense preaching ministry, which led him to become Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral. His sermons, with their literary beauty and wealth of biblical and patristic references, became models of preaching in the Church of England.

BIBLICAL READINGS

Prov 4:1-9; Jn 16:12-15

THE CHURCHES REMEMBER...

ANGLICANS:

John Donne, priest and poet

COPTS AND ETHIOPIANS (22 baramhat/maggabit):

Cyril (d. 386/387), bishop of Jerusalem (Coptic Church)

LUTHERANS:

Acacius of Melitene (5th cent.), bishop in Armenia

ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS AND GREEK CATHOLICS:

Hypatios the Thaumaturge (d. ca. 326), bishop of Gangra, hieromartyr

Nikolaj Velimirovic (d. 1956), bishop of Ohrid and Zica (Serbian Church)