

Icon of the Mother of God “Softener of Evil Hearts” visits All Saints Church, Kentlyn.



With the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill and His Eminence Metropolitan Hilarion, Archbishop of Sydney, Australia and New Zealand, the miracle-working and myrrh-streaming icon of the Theotokos ‘Softener of Evil Hearts’ is visiting parishes and monasteries in eastern Australia for three weeks during this month of December, 2009.

At 5.00pm Sunday the 13th of December, nearly 190 people gathered at the old monastery Church of All Saints at Kentlyn to welcome the Icon. The church is home to Sydney’s first permanent English language Russian Orthodox congregation, founded in 1999. Children scattered rose petals as Hieromonk Joachim received the Icon from it’s guardian, Sergei Fomin, and brought it into the church as the choir sang the troparion to the Icon.







The Icon was placed on a stand decorated with brightly coloured, fragrant arrangements of flowers brought by many of the faithful. Headed by Abbess Maria and the nuns of Our Lady of Kazan Convent, the capacity and overflow congregation included visitors from nearly all ROCOR's Sydney parishes, and Orthodox Christians from the Serbian, Greek and Antiochian Orthodox Churches. Assisted by Protodeacon Constantine Tzortzis, Father Joachim then served a molieben and Akathist to the Mother of God. Despite the uncomfortable heat of a Sydney summer afternoon, many members of the congregation joined the choir as they sang the Akathist, which was followed with reverence and attention.





At the conclusion of the molieben Father Joachim spoke about the need for our own hearts to be softened and reminded the congregation that Our Lord said ‘learn from me, for I am meek and gentle of heart’ and encouraged all those present to come with humility and faith to the Mother of God in her holy Icon and ask her to soften our own hearts and the hearts of those whom we love who have fallen astray. The choir then bravely sang the troparion to the “Softener of Evil Hearts” many times as each member of the congregation venerated the holy Icon and was anointed by Father Joachim with myrrh from the Icon. Much joy was manifest in the faces of many of the congregation and not a few were reduced to tears as they revered the Icon.



Many of those present commented on the joy filled and festive character of the service and the fact that they were able to understand the prayers and the Akathist in their mother tongue. At the conclusion of the anointing, opportunity was made for photographs to be taken, and many enthusiastically, yet reverently wiped the Icon with clothes and placed commemorative icons, prayer ropes and handkerchiefs on the Icon for a blessing.











Because many people had travelled long distances by the time the group photograph was taken only half of those who had attended remained. Finally, two hours after its arrival, the gathered believers bade farewell as the Icon left Kentlyn to continue on the remainder of its three week visit to Australia

Orthodox Christians in Brisbane, Canberra and Melbourne are fervently and sincerely encouraged to take the opportunity to attend the services to be conducted before the icon “Softener of Evil Hearts” when it visits their city. There is so much joy and peace to be had from venerating this wonderful blessing which Almighty God has given us in this icon of the Theotokos.

Prayer to the Mother of God in her Icon “Softener of Evil Hearts”

O much-suffering Mother of God, who art higher than all the daughters of the earth in thy purity, and in the multitude of suffering which thou didst bear on earth: accept our sighs of suffering, and keep us under the protection of thy mercy, for we know no other refuge and fervent protection than thee. But as one having boldness before Him Who was born of thee, help and save

us by thy prayers, that we may without hindrance attain the Kingdom of Heaven, where with the saints we may sing praises to the One God in Trinity, always, now, and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

**Troparion to the Mother of God in her Icon "Softener of Evil Hearts",
Tone 5**

Soften our evil hearts, O Theotokos,/ and quench the attacks of those who hate us/and loose all the rigidity of our soul./ For looking on thy holy image/ we are filled with compunction by thy suffering and loving-kindness for us,/ and we kiss thy wounds;/ we are filled with horror for the darts with which we wound thee./ Let us not, O Mother of Compassion,/ because of the cruelty of our hearts,/ perish from the cruelty of heart of those near us,// for thou art in truth the Softener of Evil Hearts.

**The "Softener of Evil Hearts" Icon
2/15 February**

"Softener of evil hearts"... What a great deal of hope there is in the name of this Icon: hope that some day justice will triumph on earth, that people will become kind and charitable, will begin to love one another. How difficult that is in our embittered world, and sometimes the mere sight of someone else's suffering is enough to soften our own evil hearts...

This Icon is also called the "Simon's Prophecy" Icon. According to the Evangelist Luke, the Holy Spirit told righteous Elder Symeon the God-receiver that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. And thus when, forty days after the Divine Infant's birth His parents brought Him to the Temple of Jerusalem, Symeon "was inspired" to come there as well, and took the Infant into his arms (hence the title "God-receiver"), and pronounced those famous words which ever since have been spoken at the conclusion of each Vesper service, and which are known as the Prayer of St. Symeon the God-receiver: "Now lettest Thou Thy servant to depart in peace, O Master, according to Thy word..." After that, he blessed St. Joseph and the Most-pure Mother of Our Lord, and addressed Mary with that same prophecy: "Behold, this child is set for the falling and rising again of many in Israel, and for a sin which shall be spoken against. Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." Just as Christ would be pierced with nails and a spear, so the soul of the Most-pure One would be pierced by a certain weapon of sorrow and pain in the heart, when she saw her Son's suffering. After that, the heretofore hidden thoughts of the people regarding the Messiah would be revealed, and they would face a choice: to be with Christ, or against Him. Such an interpretation of Symeon's prophecy became the subject of a number of icons of the Theotokos. All those who turn to them in prayer sense that with the softening of evil hearts comes an easing of spiritual and physical suffering. People come to recognize that when they pray for their enemies before such icons, their feelings of enmity are softened, and that internecine strife and hatreds abate, giving way to kindness.

Evidently the "Softening of Evil Hearts" Icon came from southwestern Rus', but unfortunately there has never existed any supporting historical documentation of its origins. Even when and where It appeared is unknown. The Immaculate One is depicted on the "Softening of Evil Hearts" Icon with her heart pierced by seven swords—three on either side, or one below. In Sacred Scripture, the number seven usually indicates something's fullness and abundance. In this case, it is the fullness of that boundless sorrow, pain and "sickness of the heart" experienced by the Theotokos during her earthly life. Sometimes, the Pre-eternal Infant is also depicted resting on her knees.

Another Icon, the "Seven Swords" Icon is quite similar to the "Softening of Evil Hearts" Icon. They differ only in the arrangement of the swords: on the "Seven Swords" Icon, there are three swords on the right, and four on the left. It is commemorated on August 13, Old Calendar.

During World War II, in the southern part of Voronezh Province, in a place known as Belogorye ("White Hill"—a reference to the chalk cliffs on the right bank of the Don near the town of Pavlovsk), there was a detachment of Italian mountain artillery men, allies of the Nazis. During the second half of December 1942, soldiers under the command of Lieutenant Giuseppe Pereigo found a "Softener of Evil Hearts" Icon in a bombed-out house. They gave it to their military chaplain, Fr. Policarpo, who was from Valdania. According to the locals, the Icon had come from the Belogorye Cave Monastery of the Resurrection near Pavlovsk. The Italians called the Icon the "La Madonna del Don," the Madonna of the Don—not to be confused with the Donskoy Icon of the Mother of God. After the Ostrog-Rossoshansk campaign by Soviet forces in January 1943, the remnants of the decimated Italian contingent left Russia. Chaplain Policarpo took the "Madonna of the Don" with him to Italy, where in Mestra, a part of Venice, a chapel was built to house it. It remains a centre of mass pilgrimages by friends and relatives of the Italian soldiers who perished in Russia.

Finally, there is another miraculous icon of the same type in the cathedral in the town of Zhizdra, near Bryansk, in southwestern Kaluga Province. It was known as the "Strastnaya" (i.e., Passion) Icon or, as it was described in the Cathedral inventory, the "And a sword shall pierce through thy soul also" Icon. It is also commemorated on August 13, the same day as the "Seven Swords" Icon and the far better known "Passion" Icon, which is of an entirely different appearance (the original miracle-working icon is in the Monastery of the Passion in Moscow. On it, near the "Hodigitria" image are two Angels and the implements of the Lord's Passion—the Cross, the sponge, and the spear. Unlike in other "Passion" icons, in the Zhizdra Icon the Immaculate One is depicted in an attitude of prayer. With one hand she supports the Infant lying at her feet; with the other hand she guards her breast against the seven swords pointed toward it.

Icon "Softener of Evil Hearts" That Streams Myrrh and Heals Hearts

Interview with Sergei Fomin, who travels with the icon of the Theotokos "Softener of Evil Hearts."

The myrrh-streaming icon of the Mother of God "Softener of Evil Hearts" has arrived in Australia, from Russia. After gaining reverence in the Motherland, the icon is now travelling to ROCOR parishes and monasteries in New South Wales, the A.C.T., Queensland and Victoria.

The icon is a plain lithography, the present-day work of Sofrino factory. It was kept in the Moscow apartment of Margarita Vorobyev. One day, the icon started streaming myrrh. This happened during the glorification of blessed Matrona of Moscow, on May 2, after the icon was placed on righteous Matrona's holy relics. Some time later, the icon was transformed. Those who see it now cannot distinguish the lithography from an ancient icon.

Sergei Leonidovich Fomin, Margarita's husband is accompanying the holy icon during its travels in Australia. A military man by profession, Sergei Fomin told us that he's been traveling with the icon for eight years, both in Russia and abroad.

At first - Sergei says - the holy image stayed in our home, where we read akathists and prayed... But, as the time went, the icon became well-known, and we started taking it to Moscow churches. Also, for us it was difficult to have visitors at home. After praying before the icon, many received help – some gave birth, some were cured of illness. People donated money, thus giving us the opportunity to build a chapel in honor of the icon Softener of Evil Hearts.

Now the chapel has become a church, although small, with an iconostasis and belfry. Our church is in the village of Bachurino, five kilometers from Moscow. Liturgies and molebens are served there.

This is not the only church built in honor of the icon. Churches are being built in places that we visited with it. One of them, not far from Larnaka in Cyprus, will be blessed soon.

In honor of the icon, churches were established in two prisons. One is in a prison for juvenile delinquents in Ryazan Region, where girls serve their terms for especially cruel crimes, including murder. Our benefactors took upon themselves the responsibility of building a church there. The girls helped them a lot; they even dug a foundation pit and wrote a song about the icon.

In Yaroslavl, a chapel in honor of the icon was built in a men's prison. In the city of Barnaul, Altay, there is a chapel in an orphanage.

Mother of God travels to jails, nursing homes and hospitals. Even in Germany we visited several jails and detention wards. We try to take Her to every place where there are Russian, Serbian and Romanian Orthodox. Everywhere people pray to Her and receive comfort.

Which cities and countries, apart from those you've already named, did the icon visit?

Several times it was in Saint Petersburg, Saransk, Tcheboksary, Bryansk and Tula; Yaroslavl and Nizhni Novgorod Regions; Sevastopol, Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, Kostroma and many other cities and villages. It is impossible to name all. With the icon we were in Georgia, and a year ago – in Greece, on Mount Athos. We always have a very warm welcome in the Czech Republic, where we frequently go in May. There, not only Orthodox, but Catholics as well, come to pray before the Mother of God. There are also examples of healing. People receive holy baptism; Catholics convert to Orthodoxy. We, of course, travel to our former republics – the Ukraine, Byelorussia and Moldavia. Everywhere the icon is received with joy and hope.

Where has the icon been in Australia, and where else will it go?

When we arrived in Sydney on the 8th of December we went straight to the Metropolitan's chapel of All Saints's of Russia, Croydon where His Eminence Metropolitan Hilarion greeted the

icon and served a welcoming molieben. That evening we visited the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul at Strathfield. The next morning we visited the Monastery of the Kazan Icon of the Theotokos at Kentlyn where we were welcomed by Abbess Maria and the sisterhood of the monastery. The icon was also taken to visit the residents of the Holy Cross retirement village. That evening we were once again at the Cathedral for the All-night Vigil in honour of the Kursk-Root Icon. Thursday the 10th of December was the 25th anniversary of His Eminence Metropolitan Hilarion's episcopal consecration, and the icon was present at the Divine Liturgy served by His Eminence and visiting hierarchs and many priest and deacons. The icon was also present at the anniversary banquet that evening. On Friday afternoon the icon travelled to Blacktown to the St Michael and All angels parish (ROCOR) and the parish belonging to the Moscow Patriarchate. On Saturday morning we travelled down the coast to Holy Dormition parish, Wollongong before returning to the St Sergius Nursing Home at Cabramatta. That evening the icon visited St Nicholas Church, Fairfield for the evening service. Sunday morning saw us again at Cabramatta for the Divine Liturgy at Holy Protection Church. In the afternoon we visited Father Joachim and his English language congregation at the old monastery church of All Saints at Kentlyn. In every place akathists and moliebens were served. Great numbers of faithful came to venerate the holy image. People asked for healing of their physical ailments; comfort in sorrow, grief and disharmony; softening of their own and the loved ones' hearts; spiritual and emotion support.

Next we will travel to Carlton, Newcastle, Gosford and Centennial Park parishes before heading interstate to Brisbane, Canberra and Melbourne.

Please, tell us about the most memorable instances of divine help you witnessed.

There are many couples now that, for medical reasons, cannot have children. Often, after such couples pray before the icon, they are able to have a baby.

Usually people tell us their stories of healing when we come to a city or church for the second time. I remember how in Yalta a paralyzed teen was brought to the icon. By the evening he was walking. He could not speak, though. When we came there for the second time, his grandmother asked for a drop of myrrh. She said she would put it on the boy's tongue, and, maybe, he will be able to talk.

A similar case took place in Barnaul. On the feast of the Dormition of the Theotokos, a four-year-old girl was brought to the icon. She was paralyzed from birth. Next day, for the first time in her life, the child tried to walk. When we came to Barnaul the following year, the girl's mother, in gratitude, gave the Mother of God her golden chain and cross.

Just before our departure to the United States, we were told the following story. An eighteen-month-old girl developed herpes of the mouth. The doctor, whom the baby's mother asked for help, misdiagnosed her. Subsequently, the treatment given to the girl was wrong, and the baby started suffocating. Then, the mother asked for myrrh, and, on her friend's advice, put the myrrh in the girl's mouth. That same day, for the first time in many months, the baby went to sleep peacefully. By morning, her mouth was clean, and the remaining few tiny wounds healed quickly.

We cannot read all these stories, described in detail by different people, without tears of gratitude for the Holy Virgin's gracious help.

We were told about the icon's assistance in ordinary life as well. In Yaroslavl, a young woman was a member of the "New Generation" sect and did not accept Orthodoxy. At that time, we brought the icon to the Tolga Convent. The woman's mother came to the icon and prayed that her daughter would come to the icon, too. In the evening they came together to kiss the icon, and the next morning the daughter said she wanted to be baptized. She left the sect and became a churchgoer. Relations between mother and daughter improved.

A molieben was served before the icon in the administrative building of the Chelyabinsk regional government. The mayor of Chelyabinsk received holy baptism at the time of our visit.

Did the Theotokos help you personally when you prayed before Her icon?

The most obvious case of assistance was in Sakhalin, when I prayed to Her very hard. We go to Sakhalin every January. It takes 10 hours by plane to get there. Once, when we got up early upon arrival, there was a blizzard, and all the drivers refused to take us across the hills. To make the things worse, while leaving the house, I fell, twisted my ankle and was in no condition to walk. We were supposed to go to the church of the neighboring city of Aleksandrovsk.

My companions picked me up and placed me on the seat of an all-terrain vehicle that was to take us to the church. The priest, who was with us, remarked that, if we were city government officials, we would have gotten the best transportation. But, he said, the Mother of God does not mind traveling in a truck.

As we were driving, I worried a lot that I would not be able to go with the icon any further. I prayed that my ankle would heal soon. In the city my friends took me to the hospital. My ankle swelled and looked like one big bruise. The doctor bandaged it, and by evening I was able to walk; by next morning I even ran. When I returned to Moscow, it hurt only a little and soon healed completely.

I will say more. A good friend of mine, a former commander of "Alpha," the special forces of the Federal Security Service, always anointed his soldiers with oil from the icon before they went on a mission to "hot spots" – for hostage rescue and other special operations. No bullet ever touched any of them.

Sergei, where will the icon go in the near future?

First of all, we have our own church now. People come there for services so they can pray to the icon. They don't want it to leave the church for long periods of time.

But so many people know about the icon; they love it and wait for it. The icon comes not only to large cathedrals, but also to distant villages, country priests and their small parishes – where no sacred thing was ever brought before.