

A Homeless Wanderer Who Found the Kingdom

This weekly bulletin insert complements the curriculum published by the Department of Christian Education of the Orthodox Church in America. This and many other Christian Education resources are available at <http://dce.oca.org>.



On January 24 the Church celebrates the memory of Blessed Xenia of Petersburg. She was born in the 18th century to a noble family, and married a colonel who was a member of the Imperial Chorus. But she is probably best known as a "Fool for Christ."

This term is based on Saint Paul's words in I Corinthians 4: 10: "We are fools for Christ's sake." The men and women who became "Fools for Christ" or "Holy Fools" gave up the normal life of family, job and home. They lived in complete dependence on God, and rejected the pursuit of security, status, or the respect of other people.

Xenia's early life followed the conventional path for a young woman of her time. But it changed dramatically when her husband Andrei died suddenly at a lively evening party with his soldier companions. She had loved him dearly and was concerned that there had not been time for him to make a final confession and to receive the Eucharist before he died. We don't know exactly how her concern influenced her next actions, but we do know that she sold her considerable possessions and gave away the proceeds, began wearing Andrei's military uniform, and called herself by his name. She gave her house to a friend, stipulating that it must be used to give shelter to those who could not afford to provide shelter for themselves. Her shocked family tried to have her declared mentally incompetent, but the court found her to be of sound mind.

Xenia left Petersburg and set out on an eight-year pilgrimage, going from one monastery to another and seeking spiritual guidance from the elders and holy people she met along the way. When she returned to Petersburg, she lived as an impoverished wanderer through the streets of the city's worst slum.

Out of fear and mistrust, some people treated this strange woman in a tattered military uniform with derision, shouting or spitting at her. But others were kind, offering her a bit of food or money out of the little they had. She would always give these gifts to needy people, and became recognized for her own charity as well as the good effect she seemed to have on those around her. They began to ask for her blessing, and welcome her presence.

Xenia, like other holy fools, was given the gift of doing miracles and seeing the future. She was able to save people from coming dangers, and once bluntly told a single woman who hoped to marry, "As you sit here drinking coffee, your future husband is burying his first wife." Some time later, the woman met and married the widower to whom Xenia was referring.

In her chapter on Saint Xenia in the book *Encountering Women of Faith*, Barbara Harris succinctly describes the gift holy fools give us: "With their eyes turned toward God and through extreme poverty and humility, fools offer us an extraordinary example of a voluntary kenotic [self-emptying] life."

Troparion - Tone 5

Having lived as a stranger in the world,
you outwitted the deviser of evil
by your pretended foolishness, O Xenia.
You received the grace from God
to foresee and foretell things to come.
Now, as you have been translated from earth to heaven,
you are numbered with the choirs of the angels.