



Ecclesiastical Art and the National Shrine

BY GERALDINE M. ROHLING, Ph.D., M.A.Ed.
ARCHIVIST AND CURATOR

For more than thirty years, beginning in 1928, the sub-basement of the National Shrine was home to a museum and art gallery. The dismantling of this gallery occurred during the construction of the Upper Church (1955-59). The promotion of the sacred arts, a little known chapter in the mission and history of the National Shrine, was revived during the autumn/early winter months of 2007 with the 150th anniversary of the birth of Bishop Thomas J. Shahan (11 September 1857), the founder of the National Shrine.

The Foundation for Sacred Arts

September – October 2007, the Shrine hosted the opening of the national tour of the juried exhibit, *Redeeming Beauty: Religious Works of Contemporary Artists*, which featured approximately fifty works in both painting and sculpture, sponsored by The Foundation for Sacred Arts (www.thesacredarts.org).

Many of the artists, whose works were displayed, attended the opening of the exhibit on August 30, and appreciated the remarks shared by his Excellency, The Most Reverend Pietro Sambì, Apostolic Nuncio to the United States, Monsignor Walter R. Rossi, Rector of the National Shrine, and Mr. James Flood, director of The Foundation. In addition,

two lectures on sacred art and the works exhibited were presented by Hamilton Reed Armstrong (August 30) and Nora Hamerman (September 20).

Moscow Exhibit and Concert

The exhibit, *The Russian Orthodox Church in the XXth Century*, opened on December 7, 2007.

Dedicated to the restoration of canonical communion within the Russian Orthodox Church, this exhibit was part of a larger program (Europe and UNESCO headquarters) aimed at informing and educating the world public about the spiritual revival in modern day Russia. The exhibit included photo documents, religious art and personal artifacts of some of the significant representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church both in Russia and the Russian Church abroad during the time of their separation.

The National Shrine is the Patronal Church of the United States in honor of Mary, under the title of Immaculate Conception. This devotion to Our Lady is something that we share with the Russian Orthodox Church, which the many artifacts, particularly the icons of the Mother of God, demonstrated.

Throughout history, there have been moments of astounding synchronicity. One such moment occurred

Whitney Jacob



Whitney Jacob



Rachel Ross, Monsignor Walter R. Rossi, James Flood, Archbishop Pietro Sambì, and Dr. Geraldine M. Rohling at the opening of *Redeeming Beauty*.



in this exhibit with the bullet riddled 19th-century copy of the famous 16th-century Icon of Kazan. In 1920, at the laying of the Shrine cornerstone, Bishop John T. McNicholas, OP, of Duluth, spoke of the political and civil turmoil in the world and mentioned in particular the revolution that occurred in Russia. A relic of that period in Russian history, this bullet-riddled copy of the Icon of Kazan served as a reminder of that seal upon which we must set our hearts, the shared gift of faith and the example of Mary of Nazareth.

Father Victor Potapov, Archpriest of the Russian Orthodox Church of St. John the Baptist in Washington, D.C., stated, "Before the Russian Revolution in 1917, there were more icons and churches dedicated to Mary in Russia than in any other country in the world. Russia in those years, for that reason, was sometimes called 'The House of Mary'."

The closing ceremonies, held on December 17, included his Excellency Ambassador Yushakov of The Russian Federation to the USA, Metropolitan Laurius Lavr of the Russian Church Abroad, which is based in New York; His Eminence Mercury, Bishop of Zarsk, Administrator of the Patriarchal Parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church in the USA;

Archpriest Vladimir Silovyev, Chairman, Moscow Patriarchate Publishing Board; Mr. Yuri Kaplun, the Director of the Moscow House of Compatriots, on behalf of the Mayor of Moscow; Archpriest Victor Potapov and Rev. Joseph T. Holcomb, Director of Pilgrimages of the National Shrine.

The highlight of the exhibit closing was the world premiere of *Christmas Oratorio*, composed by Russian Orthodox Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev, of Vienna and Austria, and performed by The Russian Defense Ministry Symphony Orchestra, the Choir of the Tretyakov Gallery, the Youth Choir of the Musical College of the Moscow Conservatory and a cameo appearance by the Washington DC Boys Choir. The conductor was Valery Khalilov. Msgr. Walter R. Rossi and Mr. Alexander S. Sokoloff, Minister of Culture of the Russian Federation, addressed the audience.

The exhibit and concert were sponsored by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, the Ministry of Culture and Mass Communications of Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Urbi et Orbi Communications, the publisher of *Inside the Vatican* magazine. ✠



Conductor Valery Khalilov and Composer Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev receive flowers and a standing ovation at the world premiere of *Christmas Oratorio* at the National Shrine.