

**To the Very Heart**  
*A Review of Love to the End*  
By J.V. Howry

Cruelty and mercy. The reality of these two fills up human history. Yet it is mercy that helps mankind's recovery from every instance of cruelty. Mercy can thaw the winter that often envelops our souls. So, it is appropriate that in the heart of winter we should be presented with a film that does precisely this. *Love to the End*, the result of the labor of Anberin Pasha and Emanuel Sabau, is a representation of the mercy, the lovingkindness of God which we look for at the turning of the year, when mankind around the world celebrates the change of seasons and times.

*Love to the End*, at its core, follows the life and work of a modern day Orthodox Christian saint, Mother Maria Skobtsova. To give a brief summary of her life, the saint was born in pre-Revolutionary Russia into an aristocratic family and was a part of the events that rocked the world to its core. She was early on a part of the Bolshevik movement, but seeing that the new regime was as cruel, if not worse, than the one which preceded it, she fled with her children to France. On the way she had a conversion of the heart, in great part due to the loss of one of her children, and she returned to the Orthodox faith and was tonsured a nun. She lived out this vocation in the middle of Paris, devoting her life to the service of the poor. She met her end rescuing Jews from death in the concentration camps, giving up her life on Good Friday 1945. She embodied Christ's words, "no greater love hath a man than this, that he give his life for his friends." She is commemorated by the state of Israel as one of the "Righteous Among the Nations," and amongst the Orthodox as a saint and martyr.

Yet the beauty of Mrs. Pasha and Mr. Sabau's work is that they didn't merely tell the story of Mother Maria. Rather they wove throughout the film the lives of men, women, and children who have been deeply affected by the life and work of Mother Maria. This interplay between past and present makes the individual instances in Mother Maria's life all the more vibrant.

The film is a moving mosaic. Much of the film's narrative relies on the work of Jim Forest, the author of a children's book, *Silent as Stone*, that follows Mother Maria's rescue of several Jewish children from the Vel d'Hiv in the single largest arrest of Jewish people. The story, read by a father to his son and brought to life with beautiful animation, forms a nucleus to the entire work, a center from which the rest expands. The film also utilizes archival footage and nature shots as a means to illustrate the internal spiritual cohesion of the documentary. As mentioned above, interspersed within the film are the lives and experiences of three women, Presb. Maria Drossos, Holly Leclercq and Joy Wolfenbarger who found in Mother Maria an example of faith when they were struggling, one with the loss of a child, the other with abandonment by her husband. We see in them a process that mirrors Mother Maria's own conversion; that in the depths of sorrow there is found a light that overcomes the darkness.

That light is also given an outward expression; it longs to come out and embrace all with love. Mrs. Pasha and Mr. Sabau bring this into focus during the film by weaving in ministries inspired

by Mother Maria. The most prominent is the St. John the Compassionate Mission, a soup kitchen and homeless ministry in Toronto that works to elevate the poor and their servants to greater depths of humanity through their work together. This ministry, in the example of the saint, does not simply hand out food, but rather it incorporates the homeless and hungry into the work, gives them the experience of being loved and cared for in a family meal setting, and most of all involves the charitable workers in their lives. It is far more than a meal, it is a healing gathering that reinforces and strengthens all those who participate. Additionally, we get a chance to see one of the women, the one who lost her son, live out a ministry in hospice care, giving love and compassion to the dying. Those for whom the world despairs, she rejoices in and cares for, so that death becomes a moment full of light.

This light, or rather, the transition from darkness to light, is captured throughout the film. The multiple threads, human compassion and frailty, the cruelty of the world and the beauty of love, all of these are captured by the filmmakers in an undulating use of light. Throughout the film we are treated to a veritable festival of light and darkness. We follow Mother Maria and her modern-day successors up into the tremulous light of conversion, down into the darkness of human misery, and finally out into the radiant light of eternity. We see the journey of the soul embodied in the interplay of time, light, and the spoken word, all of which enable us to see beyond the bounds of the turning of times and seasons, the play of light and dark, out into the unknowable eternity where there is rest and joy.

In Russian the word for compassion is *Miloserdia*, the mercy of the heart. It is this quality which impresses the audience throughout this film. It is often raw, and even sometimes painful to watch and be brought along the road of sorrow and joy traveled in this film. But it is only by being pierced to the very heart, past the cold exterior with which we often guard our inner-selves, that we can feel this mercy and compassion, and through them emerge into a light which knows no setting. This film is a must see, especially at the dark moments in our lives, as a reminder of how to find our way in the midst of sorrows.

Love to the End can be viewed online at [www.lovetotheend.com](http://www.lovetotheend.com).