

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Characters in Dostoevsky

Father Zossima (Open)

Overview Father Zossima features prominently from the beginning of the novel, when the Karamazov clan gathers for a discussion of personal family matters, to the Father's death, which lives on in the memories of many and in the reports of his life assembled by Alyosha., in the form of a fictive documentation, that throws vivid light on the cleric's personal history. Zossima is a potent element in the lives of the Karamazov family, as well as in the identity-sense of the whole community. The older and more traditional members of the community value the historical richness of Zossima's liturgy, while for the young novice Alyosha, Father Zossima is the foundation of his own thinking and values.

Character After the death of Father Zossima we are given a text written by Alyosha, the youngest son of the Karamazov family, In that text the ardent disciple of Father Zossima writes a penetrating biography of the spirituality eventually created in this child of privilege and wealth, who, like the Buddha, has to retire into himself before he can find a version of The Way. Faith such as Father Zossima's is rarely joined with such practical good sense, as he counsels the flock of believers who gather regularly at the Monastery, in order to ask him their deepest questions. For brilliant followers like Alyosha, Father Zossima is a model of religious care seeing the human world through the lens of our practical being in the world.

Confessor On several occasions we see Father Zossima, superior of the local monastery, in interactions with his adoring parishioners, who come great distances for his advice and blessing. An instance will illustrate the way he deals with such matters. A lady comes to him whose husband, who has passed away three years prior, had been guilty of beating and otherwise abusing her for many years. She whispers in Father's ear the sin she would like him to absolve, clearly a mortal sin of helping the old guy to die, in the course of illness. Zossima's response to her: 'there is no sin, and there can be no sin on all the earth, which the Lord will not forgive for the truly repentant.'

Discerning On the threshold of his own death, Father Zossima welcomes Alyosha to him, and conveys his love. Then he turns to the issue of Alyosha's brother, Dmitri, whom Father Zossima had met the previous day at the monastery, in the presence of the Karamazov family. 'I was instantly horror-stricken at what that man is preparing for himself,' says Zossima, characterizing his first meeting with Dimitri, and accurately predicting the wild dangers into which this unbalanced brother is heading. The reader will note, in Father Zossima, a wide ranging intelligence, and surpassing love, but no mysticism.

Existential A sizeable text is devoted to what, the narrator purports, is Alyosha's writing down of what Father Zossima has directly told him about his, Father's, own life. We thus learn, circuitously, that Father stemmed from an upper class life of privilege, and had taken a long path to religious humility. Of particular interest is Father Zossima's interest, expressed already in childhood, in the responsibility of each of us for all men. In the same spirit the man remarked that 'one day is enough for a man to know all happiness.' He was forever concerned with the absolute incumbency of global meaning in every moment we live.

Irony Father Zossima was destined to suffer the ironic fate of many who are 'saintly.' (Saintly he was, we learn, but more through love than through miracles.) The irony of his death involves the rapid decomposition of his body, which was taken, by those (largely monks) who were jealous, to be a sign that his saintliness was fake. 'Many people were extremely delighted at the smell of decomposition which came so quickly, for not a day had passed since his death.' It is thus of importance, as we remark elsewhere, that Alyosha came to deep peace in the presence of the purely human smell of the Father.

Parallels Chaucer's Friar, to begin with, is almost an anti type to the humane and faithful Zossima. His recklessness with women is at the opposite end of the scale from the particular sensitivity of Father Zossima to all the women he meets. One might have to outreach to mediaeval saintly literary persons,

like Meister Eckhard (1260-1328) or Sor Juana de la Cruz (1651-1695); both were profoundly passionate believers and masters of the imagination, like Father Zossima, as Dostoyevsky creates him. For that mystic shudder brought to us in the eery presence of seers, of whom Father Zossima is one, we might have to turn to a figures like Teiresias, in ancient Greek imagination, a bisexual prophet, who has forekown all and foredone all, and in whose presence one feels the sharp limits of one's own understanding of the human situation.

Discussion questions

What is the significance of the odor of Father Zossima' cadaver, and why is it of such importance to Alyosha?

How does Father Zossima respond to the many spiritual seekers who come to him with urgent prayer requests?

As a theologian, Zossima seems to come down heavily on the importance of active love for others. Why does he see love a principle of salvation? Is he himself subject to carnal temptations?