

St. John of Kronstadt His Life and Worldview

by St. John of Kronstadt

This sermon explores the life and worldview of Father John of Kronstadt, highlighting his ministry, challenges, and lasting impact on the Orthodox faith in Russia.

Scripture: Psalm 104:24, Matthew 18:3, John 14:6, Acts 17:28, 1 Corinthians 8:6

Topics: "Christian Leadership", "Spiritual Revival"

Description

St. John of Kronstadt, a married parish priest in imperial Russia, was a remarkable spiritual leader during a time of religious revival. His practical and demanding teachings reflected his circumstances, emphasizing the need to find Christ in the midst of life's challenges. Despite facing squalor and misery in a seaport, he tirelessly ministered to the poor, attracting crowds with his powerful intercession and healing. Father John's conservative views and predictions of Russia's future trials were met with opposition, yet his theology, deeply rooted in Scripture and the lives of saints, emphasized simplicity, love, and the fullness of life in the Trinity.

Transcript

The Man, the Times, the Beginnings

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY in Russia was a time of considerable religious revival, and one of the most notable features of this revival was the way in which many thousands of ordinary people, of all classes and callings, flocked for spiritual advice - and, indeed, for temporal advice as well - to elders or startsi, who exercised in this way a remarkable ministry. But while all the startsi were monks - among whom special mention must be made of the greatest of them all, Saint Seraphim of Sarov (born 1759, died 1833, canonized 1903), and the several great spiritual directors of the monastery of Optino, the last of the famous spiritual teachers of imperial Russia was a married parish priest. On the eve of the revolutionary upheaval, in which the Russian Church was to be tried in the fires of a persecution unequalled in extent or fury by anything the church had suffered in sixteen centuries, it was no monk, but an ordinary priest of an ordinary parish, no elder in some sheltered conventional retreat, but a man who had to find Christ in the hustle and bustle, - squalor and misery - of a great seaport, whom God sent as a sign to his children, to strengthen them for the horrors to come. The teaching of this man reflects him and his circumstances - it is as down to earth, yet as caught up to heaven, as the man himself: intensely practical, intensely demanding - and, inescapably, possible for all.

John Ilyitch Sergieff, the son of poor peasant folk, was born on the 19th of October 1829 in the little village of Soura, in the province of Arkhangelsk in the far north of Russia (typically, in the midst of his amazingly full life, Father John never forgot Soura: he visited it every year, and bestowed many gifts upon it, among them a new church and a school). The beauty of the natural environment of his early life - for Soura was situated amid majestic scenery - greatly impressed the boy, and throughout his life he was acutely aware of the spiritual witness of the material world to its Creator.

His parents, poor and simple though they were, took great pains with his education, both spiritual and temporal. From the first he displayed understanding of, and love for, the services of the church; but his intellectual development was delayed, for he had great difficulty in learning to read - he himself tells us that he could still read only block capitals when, at the age of nine, he was sent to school in Arkhangelsk. Still making little headway, and grieving bitterly over it, for he knew how difficult it was for his parents to find the money for his education, he prayed earnestly for divine enlightenment, and one morning, after he had risen during the night and prayed while his companions slept, he found himself able to read easily, and to understand what he had read.

From school, where he had gone to the top of his class, he went to the seminary. From there, once more at the top of his class, he was sent in 1851, at government expense, to the Theological Academy of Saint Petersburg. While he was there his father died, and it was with great thankfulness to God that he accepted the post of registrar - offered to him on account of his perfect handwriting - and was able to send his little honorarium of ten rubles a month to his mother.

Having considered becoming a monk, and going to eastern Siberia as a missionary, he came to the conclusion that there were many people around him as unenlightened as any pagan, and he decided to work for their salvation, after a dream in answer to prayer, in which he saw himself officiating in some unknown cathedral.

His Ministry Begins

SOON AFTER completing his studies he married Elisabeth, daughter of the Archpriest K. P. Nevitzki, and he was ordained priest on the 12th of December 1855. Appointed as assistant priest at Saint Andrew's Cathedral, Kronstadt, when he entered it for the first time he recognized it as the church he had seen in his dream; and there, first as curate, and afterwards as rector, he served throughout the fifty-three years of his ministry. Cherishing a lofty ideal of the priestly vocation, he continued nightly to study and pray that he might perfect himself in it, while during the day he devoted himself to the many poor of his parish.

The inhabitants of Kronstadt, a naval base situated on an island at the mouth of the Neva, not far from Saint Petersburg, were in 1855 drawn largely from the very worst elements of the population of the capital, and much of the place was a festering sore of sin and filth, of poverty and misery, of disease and starvation. Father John, whose predecessors, apparently, had hardly even dared to penetrate the worst parts of the town, spent much of his time there, striving to heal bodies and souls alike, attracting to himself first the children, and then, through them, their parents. Often he found no time to eat until the late evening, and even then he would sometimes be summoned out again, and not return before the small hours; he gave away his own shoes, he gave away the housekeeping money: his wife gradually accustomed herself to it, and finally became something like his keeper.

His Fame Spreads

HE LIVED in a sparsely furnished cottage on the seaboard. Soon he found he was unable to go out of his house without being attended by a crowd, which would wait at his door or the door of the cathedral, and would follow him through the streets. Early each morning, after a period of intense prayer before an icon at home, he would go to church - as usual, through a crowd - and there sing the liturgy in a deep, clear, and powerful voice. He usually celebrated the Eucharist or at least communicated every day. Afterwards he would make twelve or fifteen sick calls, fulfill teaching engagements, and often go into Saint Petersburg for more of the same. His renown as a powerful intercessor and healer grew very rapidly, and spread throughout the country. He continually received appeals for spiritual and material assistance, none of which went unanswered. He received scores of visitors daily, and hundreds of letters, while the crowds pressed round him wherever he appeared - in the streets of Kronstadt or Saint Petersburg, at the railway stations, everywhere. In summer he would talk with the poor in the fields outside the town, sitting on the grass, with the children by him, and the adults standing or sitting around. Rich and poor, he was ready to help all, and he treated all alike - often some important personage, with whom he had an appointment, had to wait for Father John who was delayed by answering the urgent appeals of the crowds of poor people. It is not surprising to learn that he habitually walked fast!

In 1857 he was invited to teach the scripture in the municipal school at Kronstadt, and he accepted with joy, for he loved children, and always took great pains with them. He was much loved in return by his pupils - some delightful anecdotes survive on this score, which unfortunately we have not the space to recount - and on this he based his authority; he never needed to use either severity or mockery. The bible, he held, should not be taught just like any other subject, but with faith and love, to awaken faith and love in others, and the measure of his own success may be estimated from the fact that, while he never insisted that his pupils must go to church, they all went when he celebrated. When his fame had spread and he was constantly visiting Saint Petersburg, then to his own, his colleagues and pupils great regret, he was forced to abandon his teaching post. Another object of Father John's concern and labor was the removal of the widespread poverty that afflicted Kronstadt. At first he gave these beggars money for food and shelter, but he soon came to see that this was not merely useless, but positively harmful. In 1868 he conceived the idea of founding a House of Industry, comprising a number of workshops, a dormitory, a refectory, a dispensary, and a primary school. He formed a committee, and appealed for funds. His appeal was answered by rich and poor from all over Russia, and the House of Industry was founded in 1873. Father John administered a total of over \$25,000 a year in numerous charities, half of it in Kronstadt.

How did he manage to do it all? He had the ability - acquired, no doubt, by prayer and patience - to snatch a short period of deep sleep wherever and whenever he got the chance; and he had a great love of the early morning hours for prayer and meditation, but his early morning walks in his garden were soon discovered, and then - farewell to solitude! Often, indeed, he could barely save half-an-hour for his own prayers. On the rare occasions when he was able to pass a whole day in Kronstadt he liked to walk in the streets toward midnight, praying and meditating: if he saw a light, however, he would knock - often to comfort someone ill or dying, but just as ready to join in laughter and cheerful conversation, if that should be what he found. It is not surprising that he had moments of depression through sheer fatigue; he had been beset in the same way in his student days, then later he overcame them, as he overcame all, as he achieved all, by prayer and, above all, by devout reception of the holy communion.

He himself declared that only by partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ every day was he able to accomplish tasks, otherwise beyond human powers. When he came to partake of the Blessed Mysteries he would be utterly transfigured: all weariness, all burden of trouble and sorrow gone, and every line of his

face reflecting an extraordinary spiritual joy, heavenly peace, and a great feeling of strength and power. Is it any wonder that his church was packed to the doors, Sundays and weekdays alike? The great cathedral of Saint Andrew at Kronstadt could hold seven thousand people, and when Father John celebrated the liturgy it was so crowded that, as the Russian saying has it, "even an apple could not have found room to fall to the ground".

Not Everyone Loved His Conservatism

LOVED ALIKE by rich and poor, by nobleman and beggar, Father John was not, however, universally popular. There were those who looked upon him and his works with jealousy and ill will, particularly among clergy and civil servants there were many who disliked him. On the other hand, towards the end of his life, his conservatism, authoritative and outspoken, on matters of principle, both theological and political, aroused the bitter enmity of the liberal pseudo-intellectuals who were zealously preparing the way for the overthrow of both church and monarchy, and with them of every public and private virtue, and the establishment of an ungodly and inhuman tyranny. They could not but hate one who saw them for what they were, who preached Christianity so powerfully and persuasively, and whose own life was an example of it far more persuasive than any preaching.

For his part, Father John during his last years constantly predicted the approach of terrible events in Russia, and openly denounced those who with increasing success were leading people astray, above all those in positions of authority. In all his sermons of 1907 he spoke of the terrible judgment of God, and urged the need of repentance and a return to common sense, declaring that if Russia ceased to be Holy Russia, she would become nothing more than a mere horde of tribal savages, intent upon destroying each other.

Father John's health began to decline in 1906, and towards the end of 1908 he became very ill, and was unable to get any rest from his sufferings, except during his daily liturgy, which he continued to celebrate as long as possible, doing so for the last time on 10 December. He still communicated daily, but on 18 December he fell into a coma, from which, however, he awoke the following evening, much afflicted in his soul. Having with great difficulty received communion for the last time, he died at twenty minutes to seven on the morning of the 20th of December.

His body was taken solemnly to Saint Petersburg, and there interred in the great church of the convent of Saint John, which he had founded. The whole route of the procession, from Kronstadt to Oranienbaum, and again from the Baltic station to the convent, was lined by weeping crowds, mourning the loss of their father and intercessor; even the choir of the imperial guard, who sang the requiem, were unable to restrain their tears. At least sixty thousand people attended the funeral.

He who in this life cared so much for his children, and interceded for them so powerfully, has not abandoned them: the stream of healing, both bodily and spiritual, through his prayers, has not ceased to flow. During the few years between his death and the catastrophe of the Communist revolution, which he foretold, pilgrims journeyed to his tomb. Now the pilgrims come in even greater numbers.

His Worldview

By Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky

The Attraction of the Man

THERE IS AN UNUSUALLY attractive power, particularly for the pastor, in the personality of Father John of Kronstadt, in his portrait, the magnetism of his writings, and in his diary *My Life in Christ*. There is a peaceful and consoling quality in the notes of his diary, not to mention the very subjects of his talks, which spiritually exalt, uplift, and strengthen. Once you have opened the book, the eye is drawn only with great difficulty, and the hand seems by itself to turn one page after another. Where does this attraction of the hearts to Father John come from? Undoubtedly of great significance is the fact that Father John is our contemporary. He made his notes for himself and at the same time for us. He brought into his diaries his personal thoughts, answered the questions of his own soul, but to a certain degree these were also our questions, answers to our perplexing problems, here often is the found confirmation of our own conclusions. What he himself writes down in his diary is justified: "We often hear from others, or frequently read in their writings, that which God has placed in our own mind and heart, what we ourselves have wished, that is, often we find our most beloved thoughts in others." He then offers an explanation: "Is there not one Lord God of minds; is there not one Spirit of His in all those who seek Truth? Is there not one Enlightener, enlightening every person who comes into the world?" (*My Life in Christ*). Here you have the basic reason for the attraction toward Father John, as he himself indicates. He answers the questions of our own personal spirit. As a person of strong faith, of deep Orthodox religious thought, and of complete unity in word and deed, he answers in a most perfect manner, becoming our friend, our counselor, comforter, reviver, and spiritual teacher.

The theology of Father John, his world view, is deeply Orthodox. Can it therefore be the object of any special study? Is it not already given in the Orthodox catechism? What new thing can be revealed in it?

Of course, Father John's thinking concerning God, in its essence, is that which is transmitted from the Fathers of the Church, catholic, apostolic, and based on the Gospel. In him we do not find any sensational novelty, no modernism in faith. Nevertheless, it is precisely this tradition that attracts special attention; it attracts attention because it is the basis on which Father John expresses his broad world outlook, which which may be called a personal Christian philosophy.

Believers react differently to the truths of faith that they accept. Some accept them without any doubts as indisputable authority. Others strive to unite them with their own general world outlook, faith together with reason. But in either case each must unite his faith with his life, with his deeds. If the content of our faith does not affect the content of our deeds, their essential nature, if our conduct is unaffected by what we believe, then faith ceases to be alive. A synthesis of faith and life is needed, and better yet - of faith, reason, and life. The more completely a person lives the life of the Church, the more complete should this synthesis be. It is quite evident how much this is needed by the pastor. In the person of Father John we are given an example of harmony between theological knowledge and practical understanding of life, together with personal spiritual experience. Before us is the purposeful, deep, harmonious world outlook on which the foundation of the Christian personality of an ideal Christian pastor was formed.

The Influences

What influence shaped the world view of Father John? He himself speaks concerning this.

The basic structure of his world view was the Sacred Scriptures. "From the first days of my high service to the Church," writes Father John, "I began reading the Sacred Scripture of the Old and New Testaments, drawing from it all that is edifying for myself as a human being in general, and as a priest in particular" (Brief autobiography in the journal *North* for 1888). In his talk with pastors he relates: "When free from

personal service and duties, I read the Sacred Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and especially the New Testament - the invaluable good tidings of our salvation. While reading I try to ponder over every paragraph, every phrase, even separate words and expressions, and then through this careful attentive relation to the Sacred Book, there arises such a wealth of thoughts, such a wealth of themes for sermons, that no preacher can exhaust this vast depth of God" (A talk with clergymen at Sarapule in 1904). When reading the diary of Father John, we notice that all the books of Sacred Scriptures are presented in the diary by extracts, but in such a manner that nowhere can one feel intentional grouping of texts, there is no overstatement with texts; unusually natural is the union of the personal and divine elements. The usual method of Father John is to conclude his own personal talks with an extract from the Word of God, and close his writings in the same way that the word amen confirms the words of prayers taken from the service book.

The other part of the structure of Father John's world view was the reading of the lives of saints. "Having read the Bible, the Gospel, and many of the writings of St. John Chrysostom and other Ancient Fathers, and also of Philaret of Moscow - the Russian Chrysostom, and other Church writings; I felt a special attraction towards the calling to be a priest, and began to ask God that He might make me worthy of the grace of priesthood, and worthy of being a pastor to His sheep..." (A talk on the 25th anniversary of his priesthood). Father John rarely mentions the Fathers of the Church in his diary and one must at least be somewhat well acquainted with their writings in order to feel the power of their influence on the formation of Father John's thought, and on the very style of expression in the diary, in particular the influence of Sts. John Chrysostom, Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, and the writings of the great Ascetics. In his often-used conversational form of writing, one feels the spirit of St. John Chrysostom.

We know how highly Father John valued all the Church service books. He himself said: "I always read the canons at Matins myself. What riches are found here; what deep content, what wonderful examples of fervent faith in God, patience in sorrow, self-denying fidelity to conscience under conditions of merciless torture the Church daily presents to us! By reading the canons the soul gradually becomes filled with the inspired feelings and mental attitudes of those Saints whom the Church praises; it lives within a perpetual church environment, and thereby it becomes accustomed to church life. I was trained, it may be said, in the church life by this reading, and for this reason I advise all who sincerely desire to acquire spiritual riches to pay serious attention to the reading of the canons according to the church service books - the Octoechos, Menaion, and Triodion."

All these influences so affected the person of Father John that God, Faith, and Church became the foundation of his entire life, so that these contents united with his pure, healthy, harmonious development, and the full lively energy of his physical and spiritual being. These exalted contents filled a worthy vessel. One of the consequences of this was that for Father John the truths of Faith were presented not as abstract propositions, but as life forces, expressed in practical living. Father John thinks in terms of images, and he teaches us this manner of thought. He writes: "They say that we soon get tired of praying. Why? It is because you do not picture before yourself the Living God as being nearby, on your right side. Look upon Him always with the eyes of your heart, and then you will be able to stand all night in prayer, and you will not become tired. What am I saying - night! You will stand three days and three nights and not become tired. Recall those who stood in prayer on pillars for long periods of time." He writes elsewhere: "In praying, it is necessary to imagine all creation as nothing before God, and the one God as all, upholding all, omniscient, active, giving life to all." For this reason his thoughts are so rich in comparisons, likenesses, and symbols dealing with the most exalted objects of faith.

As a lens can burn wood when it has concentrated the rays of the sun at its focus, in like manner during prayer the heart is set afire when "the Sun of the Mind, God; images of the Blessed Virgin Mary; the saints; and the angels with fullness and power; are concentrated at the center of our soul, at the heart."

The spontaneous incarnation of faith in corresponding Christian activity, the moral application of each point of faith to life: these comprise the characteristic feature of Father John's understanding of the world and of life. In him man meets theology in thought and in practice.

His Theology

How then does Father John present his theology to us?

God is One, of one essence, self-existent. "For the true believer God is omnipresent and is All, and creatures are as though non-existent; every earthly substance and that of all visible worlds are as though nonexistent, and for him there is not even a single line of thought without God." God is unchanging and everlasting, angelic spirits and souls of men also. "Everything else is like a soap bubble. By these words I do not underestimate that which has been created, but I speak of it in comparison to the Creator and the blessed spirits." From this there proceeds a clear moral deduction for us: not to cling to material, temporal life.

"God is closer to us than any person, at all times; closer than my clothing, closer than air, closer than my wife, father, mother, daughter, son, or friend. I live by Him in soul and in body. I breathe by Him, I think by Him, I feel, imagine, plan, speak, undertake, and act by Him, For in Him we live, and move, and have our being (Acts 17:28). As in an ocean, every drop of water is connected with other drops of water and surrounded by them, or as in the air, every part is surrounded by others and united by them, so likewise we earthly inhabitants are surrounded by God from all sides, and the pure in heart among us or those who are being cleansed are united with Him, and are everywhere with Him." "The Omnipresence of God is spatial and mental, i.e., God is everywhere. Wherever I go in body or thought, everywhere meet God, and everywhere God meets us."

Throughout his entire diary, Father John constantly reminds us of God - that God is Self-Existent, of One Essence -, as do the Church Fathers (for example St. Gregory of Nyssa). God, as a pure being, is omnipresent, omniscient; He is "everywhere present and fillest all things" ("O Heavenly King" - prayer to the Holy Spirit). For this reason God is so near to the world and to people. "God is simply love." "The Lord in His infinite nature is by His simplicity such a being that all of Him is in the name Trinity or in the name, Lord, or in the name Jesus Christ."

God is Completely Simple

If that is so, then in order for man to be in union with God it is necessary by His grace to attain that perfect simplicity of goodness or holiness of love. And one "should believe simply, saying to oneself. I believe all this which is asked in simplicity of heart, and I ask all simply." "Love without reasoning: love is simple. Likewise believe and hope without reasoning. For faith and hope are also simple." "Truth is simple." Consequently from the thought about God there proceeds a general commandment of life, which is to be simple in everything and in particular in relation to people. "May simplicity go before you everywhere; especially be simple in your faith, hope, and love, for God is the essence of simplicity, a Unity that is worshipped everlastingly, and so, too, is our soul simple. The simplicity of our soul is hindered by our flesh, when we please it." "Endeavor to attain the simplicity of a child in your relation to people and in

prayer to God. Simplicity is the greatest good and dignity of a person. God is completely simple, because He is perfectly spiritual and completely good. And let not your soul be divided into good and evil."

God is a Trinity in Unity. "God the Father is life, God the Son is life, and God the Holy Spirit is life: the Holy Trinity is life." "What a fullness of infinite life!" exclaims Father John, when speaking about the relationship of the three Persons in God, and then again in the same notes he repeats: "What a fullness of life," and about their unity, for the third time: "What a fullness of life!"

The fullness of divine life is reflected in the richness, the variety of life and of the created world, in the kindness of God, spread throughout the whole world. The world as the product of a live, wise God is full of life: everywhere and in all there is life: as in the whole, so in all parts. This is a real book from which one can study God, although not as clearly as from revelation. Before the world was created, only the infinite God of Life existed; when the world was created out of nothing, God, of course, did not become limited; this complete fullness of life, and His infinity remained with Him. The fullness of life and infinity were expressed in creatures that are alive, limited, and possess life, of which there are innumerable many.

However, the world is limited, and in its limitation serves as a support for living creatures that they may not disappear into limitless space.

"Just as the soul supports the body, so does God uphold the whole universe, all the worlds, and yet is not bound by them; the soul is in all the body, and the Spirit of God is transcendent and fills all nature; only the soul is limited by the body, although not completely, because it is able to be everywhere; likewise the Spirit of God is not limited by the world, and is not contained by the world, as in a body."

In observing the world we are astounded by how generously, how bountifully the Creator has endowed His creations with capabilities, with art, delicate and beautiful forms, and gave them creative capacity. "Wondrous are Thy works, O Lord! At every step, at every moment in life." "You become involuntarily aroused to praise God when you see the infinite variety of everything created on earth in the animal kingdom, and in the plant and inorganic kingdoms. How wise is the arrangement in that which is great and small. You are stirred to praise God involuntarily and say: Wondrous are Thy works O Lord; in wisdom hast Thou made them all; glory to Thee, O Lord, Who hast made them all."

"Who is it that forms the flowers so wisely, so delicately, arranges so splendidly, and gives form to the disordered, i.e., the shapeless, formless substances of the earth? Who gives it such wonderful form? O Creator, grant us the opportunity through flowers to embrace Thy wisdom, Thy benevolence, and Thine almighty power."

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