



On the occasion of his commemoration (June 10)

The Life of Saint John (Maximovitch), Metropolitan of Tobolsk, Siberia

(† June 10, 1715)¹



An important personality in the Church, outstanding Hierarch, great ascetic, God-inspired poet, educator, missionary, friend of the poor, the last Saint to be glorified in Imperial Russia, St. John of Tobolsk was the distant ancestor, heavenly patron, model, and guide of the newly-revealed Saint John (Maximovitch), Archbishop of Shanghai and San Francisco, the Wonder-worker.

¹ Source: *The Orthodox Word*, Vol. II, No. 5 (II) (November-December 1966), pp. 158-165.

The great Caves Monastery of Kiev was, from the earliest years of Orthodox Christianity in Russia, a fount of sanctity for the whole of the Russian land. The Monastery was destroyed in the Tartar invasion of the 13th century; but it was later restored, and again in the 17th century it entered upon a period of spiritual blossoming that produced a whole series of holy hierarchs. Among them, to name only the closest contemporaries and associates of St. John, were St. Dimitry of Rostov (1651-1709), St. Theodosius of Chernigov (1630-1696), and Blessed Philotheus of Tobolsk (d. 1727); slightly later there were such holy men as St. Innocent of Irkutsk (1680-1731), St. Ioasaph of Belgorod (1705-1754), and St. Paul of Tobolsk (1705-1770). In this company of hierarch-saints, St. John of Tobolsk occupies his own significant place.

A member of the noble family of Maximovitch, which enjoyed high favor with the Russian Tsars, St. John was born, one of six brothers, in the year 1651 in the city of Nezhin in central Russia. Already in his childhood he was particularly fond of reading the word of God and the writings of the Holy Fathers, and he loved to attend the services of the Church. This strong religious inclination in his early youth determined the whole of his later life.

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The future hierarch was educated in the Kievan College of Metropolitan Peter Mogila, which was later transformed into a Theological Academy. There he learned to love theological studies, to which he gave himself with all the ardor of youth, and he finished the course brilliantly. He remained to teach there for eight years, showing himself an industrious scholar and a deeply religious man. At the same time, from his visits to the Caves Monastery in Kiev, there was planted in him a burning desire for the monastic life, and it was there that he became a monk. In the Lavra the young ascetic revealed himself as highly gifted in letters and in the art of oratory. When in 1677 the Turks were threatening to attack the Ukraine, the then Hieromonk John was chosen by the monks, despite his youth, as their envoy to Tsar Feodor Alexeyevich to ask for help in the face

of the threatened destruction of the Lavra. The Tsar sent a strong detachment and designated Svensky Monastery near Bryansk to be the place of refuge for the monks of the Lavra in case of attack, and Hieromonk John was appointed its abbot. This brought out the humble ascetic from the holy caves of Kiev and placed him high on the Church candlestick to shine before men.

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For the next twenty years Fr. John was placed at the head of various monasteries in southern Russia, inspiring the monks by his personal example and great ascetic endeavor. The holy life and great talents of Abbot John soon came to the attention of St. Theodosius, Archbishop of Chernigov. St. Theodosius (Ouglitsky) was a model hierarch and Orthodox enlightener full of flaming love and devotion to his flock. After his death he manifested his greatness before God with an abundance of miraculous intercessions coming from his incorruptible relics. He called St. John with the idea of making him his successor in Chernigov. In 1695 he made him Archimandrite of Eletsy Monastery, of which he had himself once been the head.

In the next year, 1696, St. Theodosius died, but his closeness to his chosen successor did not end with his death; for St. John himself received the first miraculous healing by the prayers of St. Theodosius. To St. John, who was seriously ill with influenza and apparently on his deathbed, St. Theodosius appeared and said:

Do not sorrow, brother; the Lord has heard your prayers, and you will be well. Rise from your bed and prepare to serve the Divine Liturgy; this will be a sign to you.

Awakening after the vision, the Saint had his vicar informed that he would serve on the following day. Because of his condition, these words were ascribed to delirium. But in fact, on the following day the Saint, already well, served the Liturgy. After this healing St. John ordered the cave opened where St. Theodosius was buried, and he hung there a large portrait of his healer, himself composing some verses for an inscription.

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St. John being the logical successor to St. Theodosius, he was unanimously elected Archbishop of Chernigov by the local clergy and officials, and sent to Moscow with a request of the Tsar and Patriarch to consecrate him for Chernigov. The consecration took place on January 10, 1697.

Chernigov was a flourishing city not far from Kiev. St. Theodosius had seen well to the Orthodox enlightenment and education of his diocese, and St. John, his worthy successor, took up this task where that great Saint had left off. St. John understood well that for fruitful results in Church life more was needed than his own personal efforts, and so he worked to educate the clergy. For this purpose he established a diocesan college, similar to the Kievan Academy, which was to become, according to the Saint's idea, a "Chernigovan Athens" of enlightened piety. The high level of its theological education and its instruction in the rules of Christian living made this school widely known. It became a pattern, in imitation of which seminaries began to be opened in other dioceses.

St. John strove always to live the life of his flock. He taught the truths of Christian faith and life in a form accessible to the simplest of his listeners, and he pointed to the grace-bestowing powers of the Holy Church, which aid one to stand firmly on the path of salvation.

The high virtues with which the life of St. John was radiant were reflected also in his many writings, a list of which follows:

1. *The Mirror of Moral Instruction*, 1703 and 1707;
2. *Alphabet of Saints* (in verse), 1705;
3. *O Mother of God, Virgin* (also in verse), 1707;
4. *Commentary on the 50th Psalm*, 1708;
5. *A Meditation on the Prayer "Our Father"* (in verse), 1709;



6. *The Eight Beatitudes of the Gospel* (in verse), 1709;
 7. *The Royal Way of the Cross*, 1709;
 8. *Religious Reflections*, 1710-11;
 9. *Iliotropion*, 1714
- (all published in Chernigov).

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His most important work, *Iliotropion*, was begun by St John while he was still a teacher in the Academy of Peter Mogila. He published it in Latin, and only later, in Tobolsk, when he had completed it in its final form, did he publish it in Slavonic. The title is the Greek word for helianthus (sunflower). The image of the sunflower, dear to the Saint even from his youth, was for him an analogy which helps to explain the agreement of the human will with the will of God. The sunflower has the particular characteristic of daily turning its face from one side to the other following the movement of the sun. Sunflowers are a common sight in the rural landscape of southern Russia, and St. John could not but be attracted by the natural symbolism they afford. The book *Iliotropion*, in fact, treats of the Divine and human wills:

The only true means for attaining our happiness in this life and in the next is the constant turning of our attention within ourselves, to our own conscience, to our thoughts, words, and deeds, so as to raise them to passionlessness: this will reveal to us our mistakes in life and indicate the only path to salvation. This path is the entire devotion of our whole being, of our whole self with all the circumstances of our life, to the will of God. As a symbol of this our turning to God we may take the growth of the sunflower; let it be ever before our eyes.

Christian! Observe once and for all how the sunflower even on gloomy days pursues its circular course, following the sun with the unchanging love and attraction natural to it. Our sun, illuminating our path through this world, is the will of God; it does not always illuminate our path in life without clouds; often clear days are followed by gloomy ones: rain, wind, storms arise... But let our love for our Sun, the will of God, be so strong that we may continue, inseparably from it, even in days of misfortune and sorrow, like the sunflower on gloomy days, to navigate faultlessly on the sea of life, following the

indications of the 'barometer' and 'compass' of the will of God, which leads us into the safe harbor of eternity.

In the words of this ascetic of faith there is placed before us the spiritually transfigured man, filled with the determination to accept in all things the will, good and perfect, of the Heavenly Father.

It will seem to us that we are deprived of everything; even if we have a great abundance in everything, we will always be in fear, despondent, agitated, faint-hearted, every hour full of cares and various anxieties, sorrow and vain sighing, until we sincerely return to God and devote ourselves and each other completely to the will of God, as the sunflower strives toward the sun. Let us begin diligently to examine the visible signs of God's will in events and conform our will to them. Let the will of God be for us the guiding star in life, and let each of us engrave and hold forever in his heart this one thing: *Blessed be the Name of the Lord!* (Job, ch. 1.)

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In 1700 Tsar Peter I ordered the Metropolitan of Kiev to select a suitable candidate for the mission of preaching the Gospel to the pagan peoples of the vast Siberian lands. Two of St. John's close schoolmates were chosen for this task, being assigned to the rapidly-growing Siberian diocese of Tobolsk. The first choice was St. Dimitry Tuptulo, who, however, due to his frail health was never sent to Tobolsk but to Rostov; in his place Blessed Philotheus Leschinsky was made Metropolitan and sent to Tobolsk, and his zeal, his ascetic life, and his love for the natives earned for him recognition as one of Russia's greatest missionaries. In 1709 Metropolitan Philotheus became sick and, thinking his end near, took the skhima and retired to private ascetic labors. His friend St. John was called to succeed him in the Tobolsk cathedra.

In Chernigov St. John had by this time earned the unquestioning respect and love of his flock, being known as a great man of prayer and an outstanding prince of the Church. He was adorned also with supernatural gifts, such as the ability to see the future; he predicted Tsar Peter's victory over the Swedes, and in the Tobolsk Chronicles it is recorded that he foresaw the Napoleonic invasion a century in advance.

In the middle of the year 1711 St. John left Chernigov with its culture to bring the light of Christianity to the cold and primitive Siberian frontier. For his protection he took with him a copy of a miraculous Chernigov Icon of the Mother of God, that of Ilyin, which only several decades before had manifested the rare miracle of tears, and had granted since then numerous miraculous healings. He arrived in the middle of August in the same year with a great suite: church singers, educated clergymen, episcopal vestments, service books, together with many trunks. He at once gained the respect and admiration of all and was able without difficulties to apply himself to missionary endeavors.

Always a friend of education, St. John took loving care of the Slavano-Latin [*sic*] School established by his predecessor. He established courses in icon painting. He took charge of local missionary work, freeing the Skhima-Metropolitan Philotheus to preach Christ to the wild tribes farther away. He sent a well-equipped mission to Peking.²

St. John loved to do good in secret; he sent money and various objects through trustworthy persons to poorhouses and the homes of poor people, especially widows. He would go to a window, knock, and say: "Accept this in the Name of Jesus Christ"—and quickly leave. He grieved especially over impoverished clergymen. He was drawn with his whole soul to wherever there were sorrow and need. He loved to go to prisons; he comforted, taught, and likewise diverted the prisoners with gifts. He never went out just to visit, and he never stepped into the houses of the rich.

Even while occupied with his many pastoral cares, St. John managed to lead also a life of the strictest asceticism. In his personal life he was quiet, humble, compassionate, and very strict with himself. Possessing a great capacity for work, he was never idle; he was always reading or writing, teaching or thinking. Above all he prayed; shutting himself up in his cell, he would pray for hours on his knees.

² Interestingly enough, the largest and most active center of Orthodoxy in China two centuries later was headed by the Saint's relative, [St.] John Maximovitch, Bishop of Shanghai, whose life and activity strikingly resemble St. John's.

For his God-pleasing deeds, St. John was granted a righteous death that revealed the sanctity of his earthly life. Foreseeing his approaching death, he prepared for it: the evening before, he went to confession, and the next day, June 10, 1715, he solemnly celebrated the Divine Liturgy. Afterwards, as was his custom on major feast days, he held a dinner in his quarters for the city clergymen and the poor. He himself waited on the latter, thus literally obeying the Gospel injunction: “When thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: and thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just” (St. Luke 14:13-14).

After the dinner the Saint touchingly bade farewell to his clergy, and then detained for a short time two of his best-loved priests. What he said to them was never divulged. Having dismissed them, he closed himself into his inner quarters. Before vespers, when it was customary to ask the Metropolitan’s blessing for the ringing of the bells, his house servants came many times to his quarters, knocked and called him; but the door was not opened, and they heard no voice. The residents of Tobolsk, who deeply revered and loved the Metropolitan, did not hear the vesper bells at the usual time; and having been thrown into perplexity by the tales that quickly spread through the city about the entirely extraordinary farewell of St. John with his clergy, they gathered in large numbers in the enclosure before the bishop’s house. Finally the Siberian governor, Prince Gagarin, arrived and, after renewed vain attempts to call the Metropolitan, he took the responsibility upon himself and ordered the door broken in. And they beheld: Metropolitan John, in an attitude of prayer, was on his knees before the holy Icon of the Chernigov Mother of God—already long dead.

His death was supernaturally revealed to his beloved brother in Christ. On the same day Blessed Philotheus, being miles away in the wild regions of the Konda River, said to those who surrounded him: “Our brother John has passed away. Let us go from here”; and he at once returned to Tobolsk.



The Saint was buried in his cathedral to the great lamentation of his flock. But immediately a series of visions and miraculous intercessions followed, so that there was no doubt of his sanctity; and Tobolsk patiently waited for the day of his canonization. This took, however, 200 years, and even then it was almost postponed because of the First World War. It took the ardent intercession of the local Bishop Varnava, the future Patriarch Tikhon, and the Martyr-Tsar Nicholas II to bring

about the long expected canonization, which took place on June 10, 1916, in the presence of all the Siberian hierarchs and tens of thousands of Orthodox believers from all over Holy Russia. It was the last canonization before the Satanic Revolutionary storm broke.

The incorruptible relics of St. John are said to be still preserved in Tobolsk today.

By the holy intercessions of the Holy Hierarch John, O Christ our God, have mercy on us and save us!

Apolytikion. Fourth Tone.

Guide of piety, provider for orphans, helper of the afflicted, and unmercenary physician of the sick, swift succor of suffering souls and fervent intercessor with the Lord for all: O Father and Hierarch John, intercede with Christ God that He save our souls.

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From the Divinely-inspired teachings of St. John, Metropolitan of Tobolsk

*The grateful man and the ungrateful man in the sight of God*³

Thankfulness during grief distinguishes the good from the evil and clearly shows who is who. Bells, prior to being lifted to their height, are tested by blows from a hammer and when they give out an unpleasant sound they are discarded. Such is the will of God: He does not lift His chosen ones to the heights prior to testing them with frequent crosses and grief in order to see the fulfillment of their endurance and what kind of and how pleasant a sound they emit. At one time God tested His great “bell” Job. The hand of God touched him. Would you like to know the tool He used? The hammer of the world, that is, the devil. But what sound did this “bell” emit? *The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord!* (Job 1:21). What a pleasant sound! But Job was still further subjected to beating. He came under the power of the devil, and his whole body was struck down; from head to toe pus and worms covered him, and he sat in his discharge. Do you hear what blows he received? But now hear what his voice gave forth: *Shall we not receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?* (Job 2:10). Oh, what a strong voice! Oh, what a sweet sound! Who, being asleep, is not awakened by it? (Blessed Augustine, *Discussion on Psalm 97*). Blessed be this “bell” emitting such a blessed sound! This is the indication of a good man, a man grateful to God. And here is the sign of an ungrateful man: if some misfortune comes upon him, he complains, laments, opposes, grieves excessively, praises his own deeds and proves his innocence (St. Antioch, *Discussion 117*). What more is there to say? The good and the evil are like two full dishes, one filled with precious aromas, the other with evil-smelling matter (Blessed Augustine, *Letter III, To Theodorus*). Thus the good and the evil are being frequented by misfortune without distinction, but by this affliction itself, one is being separated from the other by the all-wise providence of God. The good, when any misfortune befalls them, offer their thanks to God Who deigns to punish them; but the arrogant, sensual and money-loving blaspheme and grumble at God saying, “O God, what evil did we do that we are suffering so?” ◻

³ Source: *The Royal Way of the Cross of Our Lord Leading to Eternal Life*, trans. Vera Kencis (Wildwood, AB: Monastery Press, 2002), pp. 149-150.