

# **Saint John of Kronstadt**

**December 20**

**Russia: 19th and early 20th centuries**

Saint John was born in the province of Archangel, Russia, on October 18, 1829, into a very poor clerical family. Most of his ancestors for at least 350 years had been priests or chanters, or in some other capacity had served the Church. So John was blessed with a very pious upbringing. His father took him frequently to services at Church, and at home often spoke to him about Christ and the Saints. He says himself, “As long as I can remember, from very early childhood, since I was four or six years old, my parents instilled in me the habit of prayer and by their example made me a boy who was attuned to religion.”

When speaking in later years to one of his spiritual children, the Abbess Thaisia, Saint John told her: “Do you know what laid the foundations of my turning to God and what, already in my childhood, warmed my heart with love for Him? It was the Holy Gospels. My father had a New Testament in Slavonic-Russian and I loved to read this marvelous book when I came home for my school holidays; the style and simplicity of narration made it accessible to my childish reasoning. I read the Gospels, enjoyed them and found them an irreplaceable consolation. This New Testament was also with me at school. I may say that this New Testament was my childhood companion, my tutor, guide and comforter.”

He had great difficulty learning to read, and in his first years at school he struggled greatly to understand and retain his lessons. But at about the age of ten, after he had prayed ardently and long for God’s help, both of these disabilities were completely cured by God’s grace.

While Saint John was at the Academy, studying for the priesthood, he dreamed at first of becoming a missionary among the pagans — especially in Alaska. But when he realized that his own people were also in great need of instruction, he began to yearn to be a priest serving and teaching them. In a dream one night, he saw himself going into a cathedral. Later, when he visited the cathedral at Kronstadt, a major port city in northern Russia, he immediately recognized it as the one in his dream. He married Elizabeth, the daughter of the cathedral’s protopriest (who was retiring), and became the priest there in 1855.

His very first sermon indicates the source of his remarkable success as a priest, and what he said then about love is appropriate for all Christians in all times: “I feel my weakness and my unworthiness for the fulfillment of the most sublime service on earth, but I know what can make me more worthy of the rank of a priest ..... it is love for Christ and for all people. Love is a great force; it makes the weak strong and the small great. Such is the property of pure love, the love of the Gospels. May God, Who is wholly love, give me a spark of this love and kindle it into a flame through His Holy Spirit.”

Father John knew from the beginning that loving all people — not just those in his large parish, but all those, including the poor and the criminals, of his city — would mean for him extraordinary labors. He clearly felt the need for an unusual marriage arrangement. Thus, he told his wife at the very beginning of their marriage that he wanted to live with her as brother and sister so that they could better devote themselves to serving God and other people. Although at first his wife was unhappy with this idea, she came not only to accept it, but to be an invaluable

help and support to him in his extensive ministry. Surely it was difficult to have to “share” her beloved husband with so many people — to have him gone, serving others most of the time — but perhaps this difficult sacrifice was one of her greatest contributions. For she did succeed in accepting this extraordinary lifestyle with joy, regarding Saint John as a “common treasure” to be cherished and protected. Their niece, whom they later raised in their own home, gives clear testimony about this, and also about their great love for each other, as we see in her reminiscences given below.

To give a small Indication of Saint John’s “practical” ministry, we can list the main elements of the “Home for Constructive Labor” which he organized for the poor of the city. It included a free elementary school (Saint John especially loved children, saying that the image of God was clearer in them), a workshop where carpentry was taught, a drawing class, a women’s work shop for sewing, a workshop for shoemaking, a library for children, a zoological collection, a military gymnasium, and a bookshop for children and adults. He also organized here a Sunday School for teens and adults, lectures on many topics, a free public reading room for children, a paying library, a home for orphans, a summer cottage for the children, a shelter for drunkards, free medical care, and free dinners for the poor.

Father John typically began his day at 3:00 am., and often did not retire to sleep until midnight. In addition to organizing help for the poor by raising funds, and planning how they should be distributed, he personally spent many hours daily among the people — visiting, consoling, bringing food, getting medicine for the sick, and so on.

From the many donations he received, he also had a church, school, orphanage, sawmill, a cooperative store, and a convent built in the poor village where he was born. Among his many other works, mention should also be made of the beautiful Convent of Saint John of Rila which he founded. In the basement of the church there, he had a chapel built dedicated to the Prophet Elijah and Saint Theodora — the patron saints of his parents. This is where Father John asked to be buried.

Above all, Saint John was a great man of prayer, who loved the services of the Church. He served the Divine Liturgy every day and encouraged the people to receive Holy Communion frequently (there were typically five thousand communicants at Liturgy — thus each service took many hours). Saint Silouan the Athonite (September 24), a contemporary of Saint John, says of him:

*We remember how when his carriage was brought round after the Liturgy, and he stepped into it to take his seat people surged about him, seeking his blessing: and in all the hurly burly his soul remained rapt in God. His attention was not distracted in the midst of the crowd and he did not lose his peace of soul. How did he manage this? That is our question.*

*He achieved this and was not distracted because he loved the people and never ceased praying to the Lord for them.*

As mentioned, Saint John loved children and was deeply concerned for their education. He insisted on teaching the New Testament and other classes at the High School himself, as well as providing schooling for the poor. He also paid for his niece’s education out of his own small salary, and as she says, followed my progress with unwaning interest, weekly looking over my notebook with my grades and signing it.

He saw the value of secular education, but realized that the most important aspect of education was the “education of the heart” — an education that could only be provided fully by the Church. As he said:

“One can be a scientist, but alas, a very bad man. We have to educate people not only to be learned and useful members of society, but also — this is more important and necessary — to be kindly, God-fearing Christians. Pray God, that from the sum of all acquired knowledge a harmonious whole may develop in the children’s souls — that sound Christian system of knowledge, rules, and practice which represents the true Christian education. But if our pupils steal hours from the divine service in order to prepare lessons which deal, strictly speaking, with secular subjects; and if, while in church, they worry about their homework so that the divine service cannot nourish their minds and hearts; and if they are bored in church, then the pedagogic work will suffer. Because the best education is undeniably provided by the Church, with its marvelous, heavenly services, which penetrate right into one’s inner being.”

In addition to all his charitable works, and his glorious celebration of the Liturgy, Father John was especially well-known for his spiritual discernment as a confessor, and for his healing prayers. Many miracles have been worked through Father John’s prayers both during his lifetime and after his repose.

In the last three years of his life, Father John suffered great pain from illness. His Matushka Elizabeth was also very ill, and was distressed that she was unable to take care of him. Three days before his death, when he was told of her distress, he said: “Tell my wife that she is always with me, and I am always with her.” These words were a great consolation to her then, and after his death.

Foreknowing the day of his death, Saint John passed peacefully into the next world on December 20, 1908, at the age of 79. All of Russia mourned the loss of this most beloved pastor; twenty thousand people followed his coffin in procession. The Emperor himself, Tsar Nicholas II, commanded that a memorial service be celebrated on the day of his death.

Matushka Elizabeth mourned deeply over the departure of her beloved husband. She too carefully prepared herself for eternal life — repenting for all her sins, and receiving the Holy Eucharist daily during the last year of her life. She communed for the last time on May 21, 1909, and departed this life peacefully on the following morning, as the Canon for the departure of the soul was being read.

According to her niece, Matushka Elizabeth “never allowed herself to interfere in Batiushka’s affairs; she never tried to put herself forward or stand on a par with him; remaining always in the shadows, she shone with the reflection of his glory, his wondrous Christian deeds.” Although such a role is often not only avoided, but even despised in our times, we should realize that part of the great fruit which Saint John bore was only made possible through the self-sacrificing love of his wife — and that fruit was surely worth a great deal of sacrifice. In light of the fruit such sacrifice helped produce, certainly we can echo her niece’s “boundless” gratitude for Matushka Elizabeth’s important role in the ministry of her husband — even if this role has gone largely unnoticed.

Though this couple had an unusual married life, their clear focus on salvation — on this life as a preparation for the heavenly Kingdom — and their love and devotion to each other and to all those around them, can be an inspiration to all.

+ + + + +

Father John and Matushka Elizabeth gave special attention to the needs of her various family members — in fact, when they were first married, her father, her three brothers, and her two younger sisters lived in their home and were cared for by Matushka Elizabeth. They helped all of her siblings get established, and Father John even arranged dowries for his sisters-in-law through wealthy parishioners. In 1870, the youngest sister, as she was staying in their home on a visit, gave birth to a daughter. Two years later, this woman's husband died, leaving her with no financial means to raise the child. Upon hearing of her plight, Saint John suggested to his wife of seventeen years that they take their young niece and raise her as their own daughter (they were both forty-three years old at the time).

Years later, this girl — Ruth G. Shemyakina — wrote reminiscences of her childhood and youth living in the home of one of Russia's most popular Saints, and of his faithful Matushka. "And so it happened, by God's will," she wrote, "I came into the care of an uncle and aunt who were infinitely dear to me, and who tirelessly looked after my welfare as the most loving parents would care for a favorite child."

This woman's remembrances give a vivid and touching glimpse into the family life of Saint John and Matushka Elizabeth. They especially bring to light Elizabeth's pious and loving character, which is often overlooked in the biographies of her husband. Hence, we quote now from her niece at length:

"Just as Father John never had a life of his own, giving himself to the service of his neighbor, so also E. K. never lived for herself; the circle of her activity was circumscribed by service to her relatives and close ones; she rejoiced at their joys and grieved over their sorrows. I remember her at the age of forty- five. She had kind, noble features, and was very active, forever bustling about. She liked to fuss over people, to warm and feed them. I can see her now, in the kitchen, a white apron tied around her waist, making a sweet pie. She enjoyed cooking, going to market, looking after everyone and making sure that everything was clean and the food tasty. How many times did Uncle, tasting his favorite apple pie, remark, "You are my master pie baker!"

Elizabeth Konstantinovna was warm-hearted, always even-tempered, affectionate. She liked having people visit her; then she would provide an abundant spread, and Uncle, seeing her hospitality and sincerity, would say about the bustling mistress of the house: "She's a real matushka."

With all her housekeeping tasks. Aunt did not overlook me. She spent all her free time with me, slept in the same room with me, taught me to read in Russian and in French; later, when I entered school, she prepared my breakfast, daily accompanied me to school, picked me up and quizzed me on my lessons. I remember that before Aunt began teaching me, Uncle served a molieben (prayer service) in Saint Andrew's cathedral, to Saints Cosmas and Damian and Prophet Nahum. Uncle himself took me to the entrance examinations . . . and followed my progress with unwaning interest . . . Given such favorable conditions, it is hardly to be wondered that I became a top student. This brought great joy to my guardians, and Uncle hurried to inform many acquaintances of the good news: "Our niece and ward, Ruth, graduated with a gold medal."

From my earliest memory, I recall that Aunt always treated her great husband with reverent love and respect. When he came home tired from making calls on parishioners or serving, she hurried to take off his boots and help him undress, insisting that he lie down to rest. Then, dead silence reigned in the apartment; Aunt jealously guarded the brief rest periods of her hardworking pastor.

Uncle had a rather weak constitution and frequently fell ill. At those times Aunt turned into a tireless nurse; she spent whole nights at the patient's bedside. In 1879 Father John became dangerously ill with pneumonia. He lay for hours with closed eyes, in a state of semi consciousness. When he came around, he would often say, "My head aches unbearably, as though someone is hitting it with a hammer." Once, Aunt was sitting near Uncle's bed weeping. Opening his eyes, Batiushka looked at her and said, "Don't cry, Liza. God willing, I shall recover, but if not. God and kind people will not abandon you." Several days passed and one morning Aunt rushed into my room, trembling with excitement: "Uncle is better; the crisis is over!" We looked at one another, hugged each other tightly and both burst out crying; they were tears of happiness .....

When Batiushka undertook his frequent — and later, daily — trips to Petersburg, Aunt always waited up for him, even if this was very late, despite the fact that her health wasn't the best; she constantly suffered from headaches and for several years was troubled by insomnia. In time her physical weakness forced her to cut back on her ministrations; for her, poor dear, this was a severe deprivation!

The following incident comes to mind: Some years ago in winter, Uncle went outside after a bath wearing light shoes. Aunt became very upset and, no longer able to walk fast herself, sent me to tell Batiushka that he risked catching cold, going out dressed so lightly after a bath. Coming in from the outside hallway, Uncle went straight to Aunt in the sitting room and said, patting her shoulder, "Thank you, my dear, for your concern, but don't worry, my feet are warm."

Uncle deeply appreciated this attentiveness on her part, and reciprocated in the same manner. When he was too ill to go to Petersburg, and later even around Kronstadt, he never sat down to eat without going into the sitting room or into Aunt's room, depending where she was, and calling her to the table. "When I eat alone," he said, "I have no appetite." Not an evening went by that Uncle didn't go to Aunt and say good night and bless her before going to bed: "I wish you good night." "Sleep peacefully. "God be with you." "God protect you" — he used to say to her before retiring to his study to sleep.

Not long before Uncle died, Matushka came down with influenza., and at this time his care for her was especially evident. It was so moving to see how the dear sufferer, barely able to walk, would go in to bless her several times a day and in the evening before going to sleep, stroke her head and say, "Poor dear, poor dear, we are sufferers together". He would stand for a long time beside her chair, shaking his head and looking compassionately at his sick wife: sometimes he would turn his gaze towards the icon corner and for a long time silently pray for her. Usually, when someone asked Uncle about his health or Aunt's, he would answer, "We are both poorly," or "We are both preparing for death." Once, when he was told that Aunt was failing, he came to her and said, "Do not be despondent; the Lord is merciful; He will give you patience to endure this suffering and get well."

In November, dining together with Aunt and two guests, Uncle told them that his health was altogether bad. Aunt, wishing to encourage him, said, "You always feel better in the spring; when spring comes, you'll recover." "In spring, you say?" Uncle replied, "You'll live to see the spring, but I — will not." And he was right: he died in December, and she, in May.

When, from the sixth of December, Batlushka no longer had strength to serve Divine Liturgy but communed daily at home, he would come into the room of his sick matushka with the chalice and commune her, saying, "My Lord and my God!" "With fear of God and faith draw near," "Receive the Body and Blood of Christ," "Peace to you, my eldress, I congratulate you."

On the morning of the 17th he communed her for the last time. From the 18th he did not leave his study.

After Uncle's repose, Aunt's health began to deteriorate even more rapidly. She became very weak; her legs and hands barely functioned, her heart gradually began to fail. She sorely missed her ever-memorable husband and couldn't hear the mention of his name without shedding tears; she could not accept the thought that Uncle was no longer among the living and would tell people, "I keep thinking that Ivan Ilyitch has not died but has simply gone off on a trip somewhere, as he used to go to Moscow, and that he will return." Not long before she died Matushka saw a sketch of Batlushka at the home of an acquaintance and burst into uncontrollable tears: "Ivan Ilyitch, Ivan Ilyitch, and when they tried to console her with the thought that he was now blessedly happy, she replied, "its wonderful for him, but it's so hard for me; after all, we were together for fifty-three years.

Sensing her imminent death, Matushka, sitting in her chair, frequently lifted her gaze to the icons and said, "I must get ready, I must ask God to forgive all my sins." She often remembered and was consoled by the words of her ever-memorable Batlushka, our mutual intercessor before the Lord God, which he spoke on December 17 when he was told that his sick matushka was sorely grieved that she could not come into his study and take care of him: "Tell my wife that she is always with me, and I am always with her." These words greatly encouraged Aunt in her prolonged sufferings, consoling her with the hope that even after his death Batlushka would not leave her and would soon take her to be with him, that he would greet her in the heavenly mansion and through his intercession would lead her to the Throne of the Most High. At night, Aunt would usually put on Uncle's undercassock or she would cover herself with it.

Every time I went to the Saint John of Rila convent she would say to me, "Make a prostration for me before Uncle's tomb," and she would weep inconsolably. If her hands or legs began to ache badly, she would immediately ask to have the afflicted places anointed with oil from the vigil lamp burning over Batlushkas tomb.

Deeply religious, Matushka placed all her hope in God's mercy and devoted herself wholeheartedly towards the salvation of her soul. Ivan Ilyitch, bless me, pray for me, she would repeat several times a day, sorrowful that she had outlived her great husband-pastor. After his repose, she would pray sincerely with tears, but in her great humility, Aunt feared that her prayers would not soon be answered, and always asked others to pray for her. When I would go home for the night, after saying goodbye she would invariably say, "Pray for me." If went to Vigil or Liturgy, I always heard this same request, coming from the depths of her heart: "Pray for me," and I prayed for her, as best I knew how.

One day, before I arrived. Aunt took a bad turn and consoled herself with no other thought than the fact that “Today is Saturday; Ruth will go to the Vigil service and pray for me.” Such was her faith in the power of prayer that even through my weak prayer she trusted to receive an alleviation of her sufferings.

In concluding this brief sketch, dedicated to the memory of this unforgettable matushka, I cannot neglect mentioning two of her most remarkable characteristics: a profound humility and meekness: in these two virtues all the greatness of her soul was expressed. She was never angry at anyone, she never held a grudge against anyone. If someone offended her or was unpleasant, she bore this unmurmuringly, and forgave the person from the bottom of her heart. In answer to the question, “Have you any ill will towards anyone?” Matushka invariably answered, No, not towards anyone.” Being herself forgiving, she taught others to act likewise: she would say, “Don’t be angry: God Himself will show who is right, who is at fault, while we should forgive.”

Batlushka himself knew her soul, highly esteemed her purity, meekness, and humility, and said about her: “My wife is an angel.” Did many know that behind the great saint, Father John, stood a protectress, ready to lay down her life for him? If people did not know it then, may they know it now and may they sincerely pray for this pure eldress, this meek eldress, the servant of God, Elizabeth!

May a boundless gratitude to you — wonderful, self- sacrificing mother-educator — and memory eternal — dear virgin-wife, lamp of the Russian land — live in our hearts, and in those of our children and grandchildren!

#### Stikhera at Vespers. Tone 6

Having set aside all the things of this world, with one voice let us praise the wondrous beacon of the land of Russia and of the whole world, the good shepherd, the priest John, who has given us a splendid model of life in Christ who while on earth was aflame with the spirit of prayer, and who received from the Lord a two-fold gift of healing. Through his prayers may Christ strengthen us in piety and show us to be steadfast children of the Church, for the salvation of our souls.

Making room for all in your pastoral heart and constrained by the wounds inflicted upon the poor by poverty, you called all people by your words and by your writings, to build a house of industry, that the poor might find refuge therein. O teacher of good deeds worked through faith! O nurturer of the souls and bodies of the poor! O John, joy of those who before were in despair! Your care for such here on earth was a likeness of your intercession now in Heaven.