

REPOSE OF ST. JOHN, ARCHBISHOP OF SHANGHAI AND SAN FRANCISCO

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The Luminary, St. John of Shanghai and San Francisco — a lantern to the world, a great wonder-worker, preacher of repentance and uncompromising Orthodoxy, protector of youth, a man of prayer, theologian, a severe ascetic, a true Russian patriot, missionary, a beloved archpastor — was born with the name Michael Maximovitch on June 4, 1896, in the province of Kharkov in southern Russia. He was a member of the Little Russian noble family of Maximovitch, to which St. John of Tobolsk also had belonged. Already as a child his penchant for monasticism was apparent. For example, he used to play “monastery.” His toy soldiers were his monks. In the Protection Monastery, in a frescoed grotto underneath the altar, lay the remains of the holy Archbishop Melety Leontovitch, who after his death in 1841 rendered miraculous help to those who served a panikhida for him at his sepulcher. Even during his lifetime Melety was venerated for his severe asceticism, especially for the ascetic feat of abstaining from sleep. He was known to spend nights on end standing motionless, with lifted arms, deep in prayer. The young Misha Maximovitch was known to have a veneration for this holy hierarch. He served as a role model for him in his later monastic struggles.

Michael thought that he would dedicate his life to either military or civil service. He received his secondary education in the Poltava Military School, which he attended from 1907 to 1914. His piety and his inclination towards monasticism continued. A Cadet Ball took place during Great Lent. He tried to avoid participating in the dance, but was ordered to dance just like all the other cadets. Upon completing military school he changed course and entered Kharkov Imperial University in the faculty of law, from which he graduated in 1918, before it was seized by the Soviets. During his years of study the great archpastor Metropolitan Anthony (Khrapovitsky) guided young Michael's spiritual formation.. Engaged in his favorite secular studies, more and more his heart grew closer to the spiritual and the monastic way of life. The tragedy of the Russian Revolution (1917-1918) finally convinced young Michael to renounce worldly life and to completely dedicate his life to the service of God.

In 1921, during the Civil War in Russia, the future archbishop, together with his parents, his brothers, and his sister, was evacuated to Serbia, where he and his brothers entered the University of Belgrade. Michael graduated in 1925 in the faculty of theology. Like many of the Russian families in exile, Michael's parents lived in poverty. While he was a student he worked for his living by selling newspapers and gave most of his earnings to his parents.

In 1924, Michael was ordained reader in the Russian church in Belgrade by Metropolitan Anthony, who continued to exert great influence over him; and Michael in his turn showed the utmost respect and devotion to his superior. In 1926 Metropolitan Anthony tonsured him a monk and ordained him hierodeacon in the Milkov Monastery, giving him the name John, after the future archbishop's own distant relative, Saint John (Maximovitch) of Tobolsk. On November 21 of the same year, on the Feast of the Entrance of the Mother of God into the Temple, Fr. John was ordained hieromonk. The city of Bitol was in the diocese of Okhrid. At that time the ruling bishop of this diocese

was St. Nicholas (Velimirovich) of Ziča—a noted preacher, poet, writer, and future professor at St. Tikhon's Seminary in Pennsylvania. He, as much as Metropolitan Anthony, valued and loved the young Hieromonk John, and himself exerted a beneficial influence upon him. More than once he was heard to say, "If you wish to see a living saint, go to Bitol to Father John."

St. John was assigned to teach in the seminary located in Bitol. His own students were first to discover that Fr. John was a great ascetic. They noticed at first that he stayed up long after everyone else had gone to bed; he would go through the dormitories at night and pick up blankets that had fallen down and cover the unsuspecting sleepers, making the Sign of the Cross over them. Finally it was discovered that like his role model Archbishop Melety, he scarcely slept at all, and never in a bed, allowing himself only an hour or two each night of uncomfortable rest in a sitting position, or bent over on the floor praying before the icons. He ate once a day at 11 p.m. If he was at a formal dinner or banquet because of his later duties as a bishop, he would just put a very small amount of food on his plate. He never drank strong drink, but would just touch it to his lips out of respect for the celebration and for everyone present. During the first and last weeks of Lent he did not eat at all, and for the rest of this and the Nativity fast he ate only bread from the altar. Vladika would either go barefoot or wear sandals. He never accepted personal gifts, but only gifts that he could use for others or for service to the church. Vladika did not try to be pretentious or extraordinary. He did not try to be special or create special feats of spiritual struggles. He merely tried to follow the strictness of the already established ordinary and prescribed way of monastic life.

In 1934 it was decided to raise Hieromonk John to the rank of bishop, although nothing was farther from his mind. A lady who knew him relates how she met him at this time on a streetcar in Belgrade. He told her that he was in town by mistake, having been sent for in place of some other Hieromonk John who was to be consecrated bishop. When she saw him the next day he informed her that the situation was worse than he had thought: it was him they wished to make bishop! When he protested that this was out of the question, since he had a speech defect and could not enunciate clearly, he was only told that the Prophet Moses had the same difficulty.

The consecration occurred on May 28, 1934. Vladyka was the last bishop of the very many to be consecrated by Metropolitan Anthony, and the extraordinarily high esteem in which that venerable hierarch held the new bishop is indicated in a letter which he sent to Archbishop Dimitry in the Far East. Himself declining an invitation to retire to China, he wrote: "Dear friend! I am very old and unable to travel ... But in place of myself, as my soul, as my heart, I am sending you Bishop John. This little, frail man, looking almost like a child, is in actuality a miracle of ascetic firmness and strictness in our time of total spiritual enfeeblement." Vladyka was assigned to the Diocese of Shanghai, China.

Vladyka arrived in Shanghai in late November, on the Feast of the Entrance of the Mother of God into the Temple, and found a large cathedral uncompleted and a jurisdictional conflict to resolve. The first thing he did was to restore Church unity. He established contact with Serbs, Greeks and Ukrainians. He paid special attention to religious education and made it a rule to be present at the oral examinations of the catechism classes in all the Orthodox schools in Shanghai. He at once became a protector of various charitable and philanthropic societies and actively participated in

their work, especially after seeing the needy circumstances in which the majority of his flock, refugees from the Soviet Union, were placed. He organized a home for orphans and the children of needy parents, entrusting it to the heavenly protection of a saint he highly venerated, St. Tikhon of Zadonsk, who loved children. Vladyka himself gathered sick and starving children off the streets and dark alleys of Shanghai's slums. Beginning with eight children, the orphanage later housed up to a hundred children at one time, and some 1500 in all. Vladyka officiated in the cathedral every morning and evening, even when sick. He celebrated the Divine Liturgy daily, as he was to do for the rest of his life, and if for some reason he could not serve, he would still receive Holy Communion. No matter where he was, he would not miss a service. After Divine Liturgy it was Vladyka's custom to visit the ill and those in prison. He would also visit the cemetery and pray for the departed who no longer had relatives left to pray for them.

With the coming of the Communists, the Russians in China were forced once again to flee, most of them through the Philippine Islands. In 1949 approximately 5,000 refugees from the Chinese mainland were living in an International Refugee Organization camp on the island of Tubabao in the Philippines. This island is located in the path of the seasonal typhoons which sweep through that part of the Pacific. During the 27-month period of the camp's occupancy, the island was threatened only once by a typhoon, and it changed course and bypassed the island. When the fear of typhoons was mentioned by one Russian to the Filipinos, they replied that there was no reason to worry, because "your holy man blesses your camp from four directions every night." They referred to Vladyka John; for no typhoon struck the island while he was there. After the camp had been almost totally evacuated and the people resettled elsewhere (mainly in the USA and Australia), it was struck by a terrible typhoon that totally destroyed the camp. In 1951 Vladyka was assigned to the Western European Archdiocese.

In San Francisco, where the cathedral parish is the largest in the Russian Church Abroad, Vladyka's life-long friend, Archbishop Tikhon, retired due to ill-health, and in his absence the construction of a great new cathedral came to a halt as a bitter dispute paralyzed the Russian community. In response to the urgent request of thousands of Russians in San Francisco who had known him in Shanghai, Archbishop John was sent by the Synod in 1962 as the only hierarch likely to restore peace in the divided community. He arrived at his last assignment as bishop twenty-eight years to the day after his first arrival in Shanghai—on the feast of the Entrance of the Mother of God into the Temple, November 21, 1962.

Under Vladyka's guidance a modicum of peace was restored, the paralysis of the community was ended, and the cathedral finished. Yet, even in the role of peacemaker, Vladyka was attacked, and accusations and slanders were heaped upon his head. He was forced to appear in public court—in flagrant violation of church canons—to answer to preposterous charges of concealing financial dishonesty by the Parish Council. All involved were completely exonerated; but this filled Vladyka's last years with the bitterness of slander and persecution, to which he unflinchingly replied without complaint, without judging anyone, with undisturbed peacefulness, with love and patience.

Yet Vladyka is not best remembered by his flock for his sternness, but rather for his gentleness, his joyfulness, even for what is known as "foolishness for Christ's sake." The most popular photograph of him captures something of this aspect of his character. It was especially noticeable in his conduct with children. After services he would smile and joke with the boys who served with him, playfully knocking the mischievous ones on the head with his staff. Occasionally the Cathedral clergy would be disconcerted to see Vladyka, in the middle of a service (though never in the altar), bend over to play with a small child! And on feast days when blessing with holy water was performed, he would sprinkle the faithful—not on the top of the head as is usual, but right in the face (which once led a small girl to exclaim, "He squirts you"), with a noticeable glint in his eye and total unconcern at the discomfiture of some of the more dignified. Children were absolutely devoted to him, despite his usual strictness with them.

On July 2, 1966, 71 years of age, while on a pastoral visit to Seattle with the Kursk Icon of the Mother of God, Vladika fell asleep in the Lord. Vladika's body was not embalmed and remained incorrupt until his funeral on July 7, five days later. He was buried in a crypt in the undercroft of his cathedral in San Francisco. In October of 1993 Vladika's tomb was opened and his relics were found to be incorrupt. Vladika John was glorified by the ROCOR on July 2, 1994 and his relics were enshrined in a reliquary in the main church of the cathedral.

The importance of St. John for the people of the twentieth century cannot be underestimated. Those who knew him personally or have read about his life and miracles have learned of the tremendous spiritual power embodied in this frail little man. God was drawn to the burning, loving heart of Vladyka John, which became a vessel of His grace. He entrusted the saint with heavenly secrets and the ability to transcend physical laws, making him a point of contact between Himself, the Creator, and us, His creatures.

There can be no doubt that Vladyka John has been sent by God as a gift of holiness to the people of the last days. At a time when imitation has become the norm in all aspects of life, when the authentic spirit of the Christian Faith has been so hidden that most are oblivious of its very existence, he can be seen as a model of genuineness. Vladyka John has set the right "tone" of true apostleship in the modern world. As more people are drawn into the Orthodox Church of Christ before the final unleashing of evil, may they look to him as their loving guide and a pastor who knows no death. He is a kind of "measuring stick" that indicates who and what is real in our confusing times. The unit of measure is nothing other than pure Christian love, which he possessed and distributed in abundance. With this love, the intense struggle of spiritual life becomes worth the effort.

By the prayers of Saint John may God bless and save us. Amen!

See "A Lantern of Grace" by Protopresbyter Valery Lukianov