

SERMON On the Two Fishes and Five Loaves, August 11, 2019, Matt. 14:14-22

In the late 1800's and early 1900's there lived in Russia a priest known as Fr. John of Kronstadt. He was a married priest, but he and his wife lived as brother and sister. St. John was in the habit of going out in the streets and giving his money away to the poor and needy. Sometimes he even gave away his shoes and came home barefoot. Fr. John's Matushka was very upset with him and told him that they would starve if he kept giving away their meager priest's salary. She told him that from now on when he got paid he should give his salary to her. St. John, however, continued to give what he could to the poor and tried to help them in any way that he could. Eventually St. John became very famous, not only because of his generosity, but because he became known as a great saint and miracle-worker, a man of great spiritual heights to whom thousand and thousands of people flocked to wherever he went, seeking spiritual advice and confessing their sins to him. He would arise at 4:00 am and begin commemorating all the names of people he prayed for in the proskomedia. He served the Divine Liturgy every day. Then he would travel to St. Petersburg and spend the rest of the day distributing money and help to the needy and the poor. He would return home around 11:00 pm, and then the next day he began all over again. He struggled in this blessed life his entire life until his blessed end when it was his time to go to the Lord. I had the privilege of serving in his favorite church in St. Petersburg. Behind the altar is a hidden staircase. He was more famous than a rock star. The people would all be on the rooftops and crowds would overflow from the church just to get a glimpse of him. The only way he could leave was to escape out the back using a hidden staircase that was built just for him. Wealthy people gave him donations, and it is said that in today's monetary standard billions of dollars passed through his hand to the poor and the needy. It is recorded in the Holy Gospel that when we die face the Lord on Judgement Day, the Lord will judge us by asking what we did for the poor, the needy, the hungry, the naked, the imprisoned, the orphan and the widow. If you did it to the least of these, says the Lord, it is the same as if you did it to Me. And if you did not do it for the least of these, it is the same as if you did not do it for Me. It is not only our individual responsibility as Christians in any way that we can, even if it is only to offer them five loaves of bread and two fish. It is the responsibility of the church, of every parish to serve the needy, the hungry, the homeless, in any way that we can. While I was in Russia I served in a church that was five minutes away by foot from where I was staying. Before the revolution, attached to the church, was a House of Mercy. It was a school and shelter for poor underprivileged girls. The girls were given a clean safe place to live, were well fed, and they were taught a profession by which they could eventually support themselves. The Bolsheviks destroyed this school when they came into power. St. John was instrumental in the building of such a House of Mercy, and often, when donations did not come in to sustain the facility, St. John supported it himself with his own money. In Russia many of the people no longer go to church or have a strong faith. In America we would like to see new people convert to the Orthodox faith and we would like to see our churches grow. I believe that there is only one way that will happen. When people see that we truly love and care for others and devote much of our time serving and helping those in need, when that becomes our reputation, then their hearts will burn with God's grace. They will see the Lord working through us to help others and they will be attracted to Orthodoxy. Indeed, that is how Christianity conquered the mighty Roman Empire. Not one arrow was shot, not one spear was thrown. It was the Christians who showed love and care for those who were otherwise ignored and scorned by everyone else that toppled down the mighty Roman Eagle and replaced it with the Cross of Christ. May God help us and give us the zeal, love and strength to serve others our main task in life. Amen!