



Saint John of Kronstadt - One of the Most Unique Russian Elders

His Life

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.”

The Miser is an Enemy of the Lord

“THE LORD is the cause and everlasting support (strength) of my organic, physical life through the activity of my lungs, my stomach, heart, veins, muscles; and my spiritual-organic life through my mind, and thought, and through the enlightenment of my heart by His Light.”

And here again in the midst of ideas dealing with the fullness of life, the bountifulness, and wisdom of God, Father John gives a corresponding moral lesson.

“The Lord has complete consideration for nature created by Him, and for its laws, which are the product of His infinite, most perfect wisdom; and therefore He usually realizes His will through the means of nature and her laws, as, for example, when He punishes people, or blesses them.” If the Lord is so generous a creator, if there is no end to His goodness, if the earth by His will furnishes food and clothing in abundance for man, then “each Christian, especially a priest, should **follow in example the goodness of the Lord**, that **everyone should be invited** to partake of the Lord’s food at your table. **The miser is an enemy of the Lord.**”

From here comes the call to the fullness of pastoral activity; from here comes the fullness of his personal pastoral work. As a pastor, he warns himself and his co-pastors of being one-sided in Christian effort. “It is not necessary to ask whether you should spread God’s glory by writing, speaking, or by good deeds. That is obvious. We are obliged to do these things according to our strength and our ability. Talents must be used in action. If you should stop to think of this simple matter, then the devil will try to suggest an absurdity ... that you need only inner work.” “A priest must also remain in the spiritual world, in the sphere of his flock, as the Sun in nature; he must be a light for all, the living, kind hearted soul of all.” “My sweetest Savior! Thou didst come to serve mankind; not in the temple only didst Thou preach the Word of Heavenly Truth, but wandering through cities, towns, Thou didst not shun anyone; Thou didst go into the homes of all, especially those in whom Thou didst foresee full repentance with Thy divine glance. Thou didst not sit at home, but had love for all. Grant us that we may show that love toward Thy people, that we pastors may not exclude ourselves from Thy sheep, in our homes, as in castles, or prisons, coming out only for service in the church, or for urgent call in their homes because of duty, mechanically repeating the same prayers. May our lips be opened in the spirit of faith and love in free conversation with our parishioners. May our Christian love spread and be strengthened toward spiritual children through attentive, free, fatherly discourse with them.”

Father John had recourse to the spirit of the ancient Fathers in looking for dissimilarity in the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity. He sees God the Father as Mind or Thought, God the Son as the Word of the Father, and God the Holy Spirit as the Divine Deed. “God is a Spirit... In what way does a spirit manifest itself? By thought, word, and deed. For this reason, God as a simple being does not consist of a series or multiplicity of thoughts or multiplicity of words or creations, but He is all completely in one simple thought – God the Trinity, or in one simple word – Trinity..., but He is all, and all-existent, all-permeating, and all encompassing...”

In the unity of the Holy Trinity, an image is also given to us. As the Trinity, our God is one in being – “so



should we be one. As God is simple, so should we be simple, so simple as though we all were one person, one mind, one will, one heart, one goodness, without the slightest admixture of malice; in a word, one pure love, as God is Love.”

God the Father is All-Good

LET US CONCENTRATE our attention on how Father John expresses his Christian teaching about God the Father. How often God the Father is presented as distant from the world! In philosophical religious teachings about God the Word, or Logos, it is explained in another sense, that God the Father, as the Absolute, is not equal with the relative world, and therefore cannot have direct contact with it, and consequently, is in need of an intercessor between Himself and the world, and that such an intercessor is God the Word, God the Son (Son of God). Such an outlook, incidentally, was expressed in the philosophical system of Vladimir Soloviev. This view penetrates often also into our common religious ideas: God the Father, living in unapproachable Light, has reserved the right for this same reason to be remote from this earthly world and from us people. In a similar manner, the thought of the remoteness of God the Father from people is felt in the Roman Catholic teaching about atonement (redemption) where the redemption of mankind with the Blood of the Son of God, is explained by the necessity of appeasing and satisfying God the Father for His being insulted through the sin of man.

Father John teaches an entirely different idea:

God, Father of the Word, is also our benevolent and loving Father. When saying “The Lord’s Prayer,” we must believe and remember that the Father in heaven never forgets and will never forget us, for what earthly father forgets or does not care for his children? Remember that our Heavenly Father constantly surrounds us with love and care, and not in vain is He called our Father – this is not a name without meaning and force, but a name with great significance and power.” “Should we not recognize Him as all the more

benevolent, because He gave ... the greatest gift of His benevolence, wisdom, and omnipotence – by this is meant freedom.... not being shaken by the ingratitude of those who received the gift, in order that His goodness could shine brighter than the sun before everyone? And has He not shown by His deeds His boundless love and unlimited wisdom by bestowing upon us freedom, when, after our fall into sinfulness, and our withdrawal from Him, and spiritual ruin, He sent into the world His Son, the Only-Begotten One, in the likeness of perishable man, and gave Him to suffer and die for us?”

“Christian! Remember and constantly bear in mind and in your heart the great words of the Lord’s Prayer: ‘Our Father, Who art in the Heavens.’ Remember Who our Father is. God is our Father, our Love: who are we? We are His children, and among ourselves, brothers; in what manner of love ought children to live among themselves, having such a Father? If you were children of Abraham you would have done the deeds of Abraham; what kinds of deeds must we do?” “Our life is that of love – yes, love. And **where there is love, there is God, and where there is God, there is all-good...** And so with joy feed and delight everyone, please all and depend in all things upon the heavenly Father, the Father of mercies, and God of all consolation. Bring to your neighbor in sacrifice that which is dear to you...” And so, we see Father John converts the fundamental dogmas into immediate moral admonitions; he shows that every truth of Faith contains in itself a moral purpose.

Father John, in his theology about the Father teaches, first of all, about divine thought. “From God’s mind,



from God's thought, proceeds every thought in the world. In general, everywhere in the world we see the kingdom of thought, as in all the structure of the visible world, so also, in particular, on earth, in the rotation and life of the earthly planet, in the distribution of the elements of the world: air, water, fire, whereas other phenomena are distributed in all animals, in birds, fish, snakes, beasts, and in man, in their wise and purposeful formation, and in their capabilities, morals, habits; in plants, in their adaptation, in nutrition, and so on; everywhere we see the kingdom of thought, even in the inanimate stone and sand."

All of Our God Pleasing

Consists of Thoughts



GOD'S THOUGHT has its reflection in man's thought. "We are able to think on account of this, because there exists the Infinite Thought. We are able to breathe because there is boundless space with air. That is why pure thoughts dealing with any subject are called inspired. Our thoughts constantly flow under the condition of an Infinite Spirit's existence. That is why the Savior says: – Take no thought how or what ye shall speak: for it shall be given you ... what ye shall speak. You see, thought and even word (inspiration) comes to us from an outside source; this takes place in a grace-filled state and in case of need."

What kind of lesson does Father John draw from his thinking on God's thought? The reminder that we must avoid all kinds of thought that is not true. It is bad or false thoughts that we should avoid, because **false thoughts draw us away from God**, and incline us to surrender to the devil's power. Sins of thought in a Christian are not to be considered a small matter, because, according to St. Macarius of Egypt, **all of our God pleasing consists of thoughts**; for thoughts are the beginning: from them arise words and actions, words, because they give grace to listeners, or are corrupted words that serve as a temptation to others, corrupting their thoughts and hearts.



The Wisdom of God

THE SECOND person of the Holy Trinity, God the Son, is the Hypostatic Word of the Father. This dogma gave Father John the inspiration often to express in his writings the power and action of every word, not only God's word but also man's.

“The Word is the Creator and our God; every word of His is truth and action. Such should our word also be, (for we are created in the image of God).” “The Word is the expression of truth, the very truth, the life, and the deed. The Word precedes every creature, everything, as the cause of existence, in the past, present, and future.” “How much then must one cherish especially all that which comes forth from the Very Hypostatic Word, the Gospel words, the writings of the Church Fathers, and the prayers.” “Christian! Cherish every word, be attentive to every word; be firm in word; be trusting toward every word of God, and the words of saintly persons, the words of life. Remember that **the word is the beginning of life.**” “The word must be revered strongly because in one word there is the omnipresent One, the One that fulfills all, one and undivided Lord.... in one name is He Himself, the Lord...” “Remember that in the very word is contained the possibility of action; only one must have strong faith in the power of the word, in its creative capacity. **With the Lord the word and deed are inseparable.** So ought it to be with us also, for we are images of the Word, in its creative capacity. With the Lord the word and deed are inseparable. So ought it to be with us also, for we are images of the Word...” “The word is power... And of people it is said: he has an extraordinary power of words. So you see, the word is power, spirit, life.” “Every word, every kernel will bring you spiritual benefit. Who from among those who pray has not experienced this? Not in vain did the Savior compare the seed with the word, and the heart of man with the earth.” “We must believe that as the shadow follows the body, so action follows the word; as with the Lord, word and action are inseparable; for He speaks and it is; He orders and it is done... The trouble is that we are of little faith, and separate words from deeds, as body from soul, as form from content, as shadow from body.” It is evident that in the majority of thoughts expressed, Father John speaks about prayer, about the power of prayerful words spoken with faith.

Not every word retains its power in action. Father John observes: “The word on the lips of some is spirit and life, and on the lips of others, dead alphabet (for example during prayer or sermon).” Finally, the word can be a negative force. “With the devil, who fell away from God, there remained only the shadow of a thought and word without truth, without the essence of a deed, a lie, a shadow; and as the true word being the image of God the Word, and proceeding from Him, is Life, so a false word from. The devil, being his image, is death; **a lie is inevitable death**, for, naturally, that brings death to the soul which itself had fallen from life into death.”

The Second Person of the Holy Trinity is also called Hypostatic, i.e., Personal Wisdom of God. Why do we believe that the Wisdom of God has a personal attribute? Father John answers: “How could God be without wisdom, and not be personal, how could God not be the Creator, how could He be without His own living self-existent Wisdom? Look at all in this world, how wonderful it all is! Can you imagine how God, having created innumerable reasonable, personal, wise, living creatures, could not Himself generate from within Himself Personal Wisdom? Is this wise? Is this possible? Is this in conformity with the perfection of God? In God there must be the Hypostatic Wisdom, or the Hypostatic Word of the Father, equal as the Life-Giving Spirit, Who proceeds from the Father and rests in the Son.”



The Holy Spirit is

the Breath of Life

THE HOLY SPIRIT is the third person of the Holy Trinity, indivisible, “Within you, there is breath, and material impersonal in nature, but in God as life itself, breath is a personal spirit, indivisible, simple, that gives Life to everything.” “We may ask, why is the third Person called Spirit, and why is He a separate Person, when God, even without Him, is Spirit? I answer: The Holy Spirit is called Spirit in relation to creatures: the Lord breathed with His Hypostatic Spirit, and there appeared, by the power of His Life-Giving Spirit, an innumerable host of spirits: In the power of His Spirit lies their strength; He breathed with His Spirit into man’s body: and now man became a living soul, and from this Breath, until now, people are born, and will be born until the end according to the commandment: increase and multiply. If the Lord created by His Spirit so many personal separate beings, then why is it impossible for the Holy Spirit Himself to be a Person, or a personal creative Being? If there are countless numbers of created personal spirits, then is God Himself to remain without Spirit, without His independent, Hypostatic Personality?”

“The Holy Spirit, like air, ‘is present everywhere and fillest [penetrates] all things.’” “The Lord Jesus Christ Himself likens the Holy Spirit in His action to the substance of water (John 7:38-39), air, or wind (John 3:8).” “As the air in the room is identical with the outer air and comes from it, and necessarily presupposes the air spread out everywhere, so in like manner, our soul, the breath of the Spirit of God, presupposes the existence of the omnipresent, transcendent Spirit of God.”

“It is the Spirit that quickeneth” (John 6:63). “The life in creatures belongs to God, from the time of their creation, and to God

the Son, their creator, bringing them from non-existence to existence... The Holy Spirit creates us in the womb of our mother; our spiritual wealth belongs to the Holy Spirit.”

Our soul lives by the Holy Spirit, through Him we pray, through Him we become purified, through Him we save ourselves. “As breath is necessary for the body, and without breathing man cannot live, so without the Breath of the Holy Spirit the soul cannot live the true life. **What the air is for the body, the Holy Spirit is for the soul.** Air is likened to the Spirit of God. The Spirit breathes wherever It wishes.” “He who prays by the Holy Spirit.” “Prayer is the breath of the soul, as air is the breath of the natural body. We breathe by the Holy Spirit. You cannot say a single word of prayer from your heart without the Holy Spirit.”

“As in a conversation with people the sound-conveying medium between our words and the words of another is air, which is everywhere and fills all space, and through air the words reach the ear of another, and without air it would be impossible to speak and hear: so in a spiritual manner, in communication with spiritual beings the mediator is the Holy Spirit, omnipresent and transcendent.”

“We are filled with One Spirit: Do you see how the Holy Spirit surrounds us like water and air on all sides?”

“For a long time I did not know with full clarity how necessary was the strengthening of our soul by the Holy Spirit. And now the Most Merciful One gave me the opportunity to find out how indispensable it is.



Yes, it is necessary every minute, as is breathing, necessary at prayer, and throughout life. It is necessary that our heart rest on a rock. And that rock is the Holy Spirit.”

“All upright people are filled by the One Divine Spirit, similarly as a sponge is saturated with water. The comforting Holy Spirit,

filling the universe, penetrates through all the believing, humble, good, and simple souls of men; living in them, reviving them and strengthening them; He becomes all for them: light, power, peace, joy, success in deeds – especially in an upright life. The Holy Spirit is all goodness.”

Thus we see what the dogma of the Holy Spirit in the thought of Father John and how closely it is connected with life. The teaching about the Holy Spirit is at the same time teaching about the life of the world, about the source and nourishment of all uprightness and holiness.

The Holy Trinity

Such is the teaching of Father John about the Holy Trinity. In the Triune Unity of God is found all the fullness of life and the life of the world. The reflection of the attributes of God is represented by the universe, the material world and in man in particular. From here, we will make a general deduction from the words of Father John: “In order to become pure images of the Holy Trinity, **we must try to attain holiness in our thoughts, words, and deeds.** Thought corresponds to God the Father, the word to the Son, and deeds to the Holy Spirit, the all active Creator.”

“Your Lord is Love: love Him and in Him all people, as His children in Christ. Your Lord is Fire: do not be cold at heart, but burn with fire and love. Your Lord is Light: do not walk in the darkness of your mind without reason and understanding or without faith. Your Lord is a God of mercy and kindness: you should also be a source of mercy and kindness to your neighbors. If you will be so, you will attain salvation with eternal glory.”

Such should our life be, for we carry within ourselves the image of God.

But actually most of the time we live in doubt, with lack of faith; in unbelief, having eyes and seeing not, having ears and hearing not, having a hardened heart. “We notice within ourselves the struggle of faith and disbelief, of good and evil, the spirit of the Church against the spirit of the world. Do you know where this comes from?” asks Father John, and he answers: “From the struggle of two opposing forces: the power of God, and the power of the devil. And I also feel within myself this struggle of two opposing forces. When I begin to pray, at times an evil force painfully depresses me and casts my heart down, that it may not be able to look up to God,” writes Father John, in one of his comparatively early writings. The radiation of the evil forces of the devil is similar to poison that enters the body. The kingdom of life and the kingdom of death go together. And involuntarily the question arises: Why does the Lord allow the devil to exist, and even to act on good souls?

Father John sees in this the providential plans of God. “If you do not experience in yourself the influence of the evil spirit, you will not know and you will not value as you should the goodness shown to you by the benevolence of the Holy Spirit; not having known the spirit that destroys, you also will not know the Life-Giving Spirit. Only because of the opposites of good and evil, of life and death, can we understand the one and the other... Glory to God, the Wise and All-Good that He permits the spirit of evil and death to tempt



us and cause us suffering. Otherwise, how could we begin to value the consolation of grace, the consolation of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter and Life-Giver!”

For this reason we have been given the Holy Church, Her Mysteries, and all of Her ordinances, so that we might have the opportunity to remain under the constant influence of the all-conquering grace of God.

Ocean of Spiritual Waters

WE SEE the grace of God openly working in life. If a man was proud, a lover of self, and unkind, but became humble and gracious, he became so by the power of grace. By the power of grace the unbeliever becomes a believer; the lover of money, no longer greedy, but honest and generous by the power of grace. The glutton becomes moderate in eating from the conscious knowledge of high moral purpose, by the grace of God; he who hated and was full of malice, a lover of his fellow man by the power of grace; he who was cold toward God and toward the Church is transformed, he becomes a fervent believer in God, by the act of grace. “From this it is evident that many live without grace, not knowing its importance and its need for themselves, and do not seek it... Many live in all kinds of abundance, and pleasure, but they have no grace in their hearts, this most valuable treasure for the Christian, without which the Christian cannot be a true Christian and inherit the kingdom of God.”

“The sign of God’s mercy and that of His Most Holy Mother of God toward us, after or during prayer, is peace within the heart, especially after the affect of some passion, which is the absence of peace of soul. By peace of soul and a certain holy inclination of the heart we can easily ascertain that our prayer is heard and the grace asked for is received.”

Take advantage then, Christian, of God’s treasure of grace! “When you pray to the Father and the Holy Spirit in the Trinity, the One God, do not seek Him outside yourself, but perceive Him within yourself as living in you, completely penetrating within you and knowing you. Know ye not that ye are temples of God, and the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?”

Remember “that your soul is like some imprint of godliness and all the riches of the soul consist of God, as within a treasure (the treasure of grace) from which we can draw every spiritual good, by the prayer of faith, and by patience, and by purifying ourselves from all iniquity.”

“As there is an overabundance of sources of water on earth, and all drink from them, come and draw freely, for the Lord is an ocean of spiritual waters; come and draw all the spiritual good with the dipper of true, firm, and unashamed faith. Only extend this hearty dipper and you will inevitably draw abundantly the water of life, the forgiveness of sins, and peace of conscience. But fear doubt; it deprives you of the means of drawing forth every mercy of God.”

The waters from this source you will also find in communion with the saints during prayer; they are in the graceful life of the Church. “The priesthood and in general, all the saints, are blessed water containers, from which the water of grace is transmitted to other believers. Living waters will flow from the depths of rivers.”

In such a manner Father John teaches us the fundamental truths of the Christian faith and life founded on these truths. The value of his theological teaching for us consists in the close connection between his



theological thought, his words, his life, and all his sanctified activity. The value is in this, that his personal life is justified, proved, and realized by his faith in action. “Experience!” – “Based on experience!” with this exclamation Father John often finishes his separate writings. **“No matter how many times I prayed with faith, God always heard me and answered my prayers.”** What can be said stronger than these words?