

St. John Maximovich of Shanghai and San Francisco

In this morning's Gospel, we heard the story about a centurion's faith. A centurion was a Roman officer and would be the equivalent to a captain in today's military. He would command approximately 100 soldiers. We know that he would have had to have been a pagan gentile, since he was a Roman soldier. In the Gospel of Luke, the centurion was said to have been a great friend of the Jews. That he had even built a Synagogue for them. In coming to Jesus and asking him to heal his sick servant he was taking a risk. Jesus might reject him causing him great embarrassment. We do not know why, but he did have great faith in Jesus. He showed this faith by telling Jesus that he understood authority and that Jesus did not have to go to his house, but only issue a command and his servant would be healed. In response to this request, Jesus said "Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." We are all called to be like this man. Having great faith and trust in Jesus.

Today I would like to talk about an Archbishop named John Maximovich. We commemorate him today as St. John of Shanghai and San Francisco. He is considered to be one of the greatest Saints of the 20th century.

He was born on June 4, 1896, in a village in southern Russia and was given the name Michael. It was a sickly child and ate very little.

During his lifetime, Michael was known 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.

While attending Kharkov University, Michael was known to spend more time reading the lives of the saints than attending classes; nonetheless he was an excellent student. Evidently his emulation of saints was apparent even at that age. Archbishop Anthony of Kharkov took special pains to become acquainted with him, and then kept the youth close to him and guided his spiritual formation.

In 1921, during the Civil War in Russia, Michael and his family were evacuated to Belgrade, where he entered the University of Belgrade. Michael graduated in 1925 in the faculty of theology. While he was a student he made his living by selling newspapers.

In 1924, Michael was ordained a reader in the Russian church in Belgrade by

Metropolitan Anthony. He 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, 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 Fr. John was ordained a hieromonk.

A hierodeacon is a deacon who is also a monk. A hieromonk is a priest who is also a monk.

It was becoming evident that the young hieromonk was an entirely extraordinary man. His own students were first to discover what was perhaps Fr. John's greatest feat of asceticism. 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 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 icons. Years afterwards he himself admitted that since taking the monastic vows he had not slept lying in a bed.

In 1934 it was decided to raise the Hieromonk John to the rank of bishop. The consecration occurred on May 28, 1934. Bishop John was assigned to the Diocese of Shanghai, China. Bishop John arrived in Shanghai in late November, 1934, on the Feast of the Entrance of the Mother of God into the Temple.

He at once became a protector of various charitable and philanthropic societies and actively participated in their work. He was especially concerned with the refugees from the Soviet Union. He organized a home for orphans and the children of needy parents. Bishop John, 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. When the Communists came, Bishop John evacuated the whole orphanage, first to an island in the Philippines, and then to America.

The following incident, happened when he was in Shanghai, illustrates his daring, unshakable faith in Christ. "Mrs. Menshikova was bitten by a mad dog and came down with rabies. Bishop John found out about it and came to the dying woman.

He gave her Holy Communion, but just then she began having one of the fits of this disease; she began to foam at the mouth, and at the same time she spit out the Holy Gifts which she had just received. The Holy Sacrament cannot be thrown out. So, the bishop picked up and put in his mouth the Holy Gifts vomited by the sick woman. Those who were with him exclaimed: 'What are you doing! Rabies is terribly contagious!' But Bishop John peacefully answered: 'Nothing will happen; these are the Holy Gifts.' And indeed, nothing did happen."

By now it had become known that the Bishop was not only a righteous man and an ascetic, but was also so close to God that he was endowed with the gift of clairvoyance, and there were healings by his prayers. A striking account told by an eyewitness, Lidia Liu, testifies to the Bishop's spiritual height. "The Bishop came to Hong Kong twice. It's strange, but I, not knowing the Bishop then, wrote him a letter asking him to help a widow with children, and I also asked him about some personal spiritual matter, but I never received an answer. A year passed. The Bishop came to Hong Kong and I was in a crowd that went to meet him in church. The Bishop turned to me and said, 'It is you who wrote me the letter!' I was astonished, since the Bishop had never seen me before."

Another time a woman tells that "A supplicatory prayer service was being sung, after which the Bishop, standing before a lectern, was delivering a sermon. I was standing next to my mother, and we both saw a light surrounding the Bishop down to the lectern — a radiance around him a foot wide. This lasted a rather long time. When the sermon was over, I, struck by such an unusual phenomenon, told what we had seen to our friend, who replied to us: 'Yes, many faithful saw it.' My husband, who was standing a little way off, also saw this light."

Bishop John visited prisons and celebrated the Divine Liturgy for the convicts. On one occasion in Shanghai, Bishop John was asked to give communion to a dying man in a Russian hospital. This time he took another priest with him. On his arrival he spotted a gregarious young man in his twenties, playing a harmonica. This lad was to be discharged the next day. Bishop John called to him and said: "I want to give you communion right now." The young man immediately confessed his sins and received communion. The astonished priest asked Bishop John why he did not go to the one dying, but tarried instead with an obviously healthy young man. The Bishop answered: "He will die tonight, and the other, who is seriously ill, will live many years." It happened just as he foretold.

Bishop John loved to visit the sick and did it every single day, hearing confessions and giving Holy Communion. If the condition of a patient should become critical, Bishop John would go to him at any hour of the day or night to pray at his bedside. Here is one undoubted miracle among the many worked by Bishop John's prayers. A woman was very much taken by the sport of horse racing. Once she was thrown off her horse; she hit her head on a rock and lost consciousness. She was brought to the hospital unconscious. The doctors all agreed that her condition was hopeless and it was not likely that she would live until morning. The pulse was almost gone; the skull was fractured in places so that small pieces of the skull were pressing on the brain. In such a condition, she would die on the operating table. Even if her heart would tolerate surgery and the result were successful, she would still remain deaf, dumb, and blind.

Her sister, after hearing all this, rushed to Bishop John in despair and begged him to save her sister. Bishop John agreed. He came to the hospital and asked everyone to leave the room and prayed there for about two hours. Then he called the chief doctor and asked him to examine her again. How surprised the doctor was to discover that her pulse was normal! He agreed to perform the operation immediately, but only in the presence of Bishop John. The operation was successful, and the doctors were amazed when, after the operation, the patient regained consciousness and asked to drink. Soon she was released from the hospital and lived for many years a normal life.

Bishop John also possessed great courage. During the Japanese occupation, the Japanese authorities tried in every way possible to bend the Russian colony to their will. Pressure was directed through the heads of the Russian Emigrant Committee. Two presidents of this Committee strove to maintain its independence, and as a result both were killed. Confusion and terror seized the Russian colony, and at that moment Bishop John, in spite of warnings from the Russians who were collaborating with the Japanese, declared himself the temporary head of the Russian colony.

With the coming of the Communists, the Russians in China were forced once again to flee, most of them went to the Philippine Islands. In 1949 approximately 5,000 refugees from the Chinese mainland were living in an International Refugee Organization camp in the Philippines. After the evacuation of the Russians to the Philippines Bishop John went to Washington, D. C., to get his people to America. Legislation was changed and almost the whole camp came to the United States,

thanks to Bishop John. By now Bishop John had been elevated to the dignity of Archbishop. With the exodus of his flock from China accomplished, Archbishop John was given a new field for his pastoral endeavor. In 1951, he was sent by the Synod of Bishops to the Archdiocese of Western Europe, with his see first in Paris, and later in Brussels. He was now one of the leading hierarchs of the Russian Church, and his attendance was frequently required at the sessions of the Synod in New York City.

In San Francisco Archbishop Tikhon, retired due to ill-health, and at the urgent request of thousands of Russians in San Francisco who had known Archbishop John in Shanghai, he was sent there by the Synod in 1962. A bitter dispute had paralyzed the Russian community in San Francisco. Under Archbishop John's guidance a measure of peace was restored, the paralysis of the community was ended. Yet, even in the role of peacemaker, Archbishop John was attacked, and accusations and slanders were heaped upon his head. He was forced to appear in public court. This was a flagrant violation of church canons. He had to answer to charges of concealing financial dishonesty by the Parish Council. All involved were completely exonerated; but this filled Archbishop John's last years with the bitterness of slander and persecution, to which he unflinchingly replied without complaint, without judging anyone, and with undisturbed peacefulness.

He foreknew the day and the hour of his own death. Archbishop John was prepared for this reality. God had given him knowledge as to when he was to die. One time, in 1966, he said to the manager of the orphanage where he lived, that he would not be at a diocesan meeting to be held three years later which they had been discussing. In May 1966, a woman who had known Archbishop John for twelve years was amazed to hear him say, "I will die soon, at the end of June, not in San Francisco, but in Seattle."

Again, on the evening before his departure for Seattle, four days before his death, Archbishop John astonished a man for whom he had just served a supplicatory prayer service with the words, "You will not kiss my hand again." And on the day of his death, at the conclusion of the Divine Liturgy which he celebrated, he spent three hours in the altar praying, emerging not long before his death, which occurred on July 2, 1966. He died in his room in the parish building next to the church. He was heard to fall and, having been placed in a chair by those who ran to help him, breathed his last peacefully and with little evident pain.

Blessed Archbishop John of Shanghai and San Francisco was canonized as a Saint by the Russian Church on July 2, 1994.

Archbishop John's abundant miracles both before and after his death testify to his love for the people. People in America, Europe, and the other places of his pastoral labors have long known of the power of his heavenly intercessions. Here are a few of the miracles that have been answered after asking St. John for healing.

Victor Boyton, who witnessed the healing of his friend by St. John, recounts: "I had a friend, a Moslem from Russia, who was suffering from leukemia and was losing his sight. The doctors concurred that in three months time he would be blind. Placing the picture of St. John by my vigil light, I began to pray daily for my friend. After a short period of time my friend was healed from the leukemia and began to see normally. The eye doctors were amazed at this occurrence. From then on, my friend has lead a normal life and reads without impediment."

And another miracle occurred when Valentina came to her priest after church services and asked for oil from the lamp in the sepulchre of Archbishop John, as her daughter was seriously sick. Valentina recounted that her daughter had a swelling in her breast. It grew and the daughter turned to a doctor for help. The diagnosis was a frightful one, cancer of the breast. The priest had an Unction service prayed over the daughter and later gave her cotton saturated with oil from Archbishop John's lampada. She anointed the ailing spot several times by making the Sign of the Cross. The doctors insisted on surgery, but when she came to the hospital for observation, the doctors and the sick woman herself were amazed: the swelling had disappeared and there remained only a scar.

We too must trust God as St. John did throughout his entire life.

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