

The Life of St John the Romanian of Chozeva (1913-1960)



St. John the Romanian of Chozeba (1913-1960)

*The Life of Father John (Iacob) the Romanian
of the Monastery of St. George the Chozevite in the Desert of Jordan
by the Monk Ioasaph*

Our holy father John, who is a miracle for all true Orthodox Christians of today, urges us, for the benefit of the many, to put into writing what we have seen and heard about his holy life.

Hieroschemamonk John (Iacob) was born in Romania in 1913 in the county of Dorohoi (today, the county of Botosani, in the northeastern part of Romania) and the village of Horodistea. His parents, Maxim and Ecaterina, were poor but very pious Orthodox Christians. In baptism, he was given the name Elias, but no one suspected then that the little Elias would one day live where the holy Prophet Elias once lived.

The mother of little Elias died when he was six months old, and three years later, his father also died in the First World War. The orphan was then taken by his aunt Maria. She desired very much to spend the rest of her life in a monastery, but she had to renounce this plan because of having to look after Elias. The small baby had to be fed tea; and, only from time to time, a neighbor gave him milk, so that the future monk was used to fasting from infancy.

Aunt Maria wept constantly, as much because she could not go to a monastery as because of pity for the child. When the boy grew a little older, he used to read to his aunt about the Passions of the Saviour, the Mother of the Lord, and the saints; and, all the time that he read, she cried.

One evening, Elias was reading as usual and, seeing her crying so profusely, the boy became very sad and asked her, "Mama, why do

you cry so hard when I am reading, especially about the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ?" "O, my child," she said, "you do not know the sorrow of our house? I am not your mother. Your mother has died." And she told him everything in detail, including her sorrow that she could not go to a monastery. She told him to pray to God, so that she could obtain salvation through him. After this confession, every time the boy read from the holy books, he cried, too, knowing that he was alone in the world. When he reached the age of ten, the woman, who was for him both mother and aunt, died, entrusting him to an uncle, who was married a second time to a woman with many children.

Since Elias was a clever boy in school, unlike his uncle's children, he was constantly envied and unjustly treated. He felt as a stranger at the table with the other children. He ate very little and left the table almost hungry. So often he wept and fasted and, in consequence, acquired the virtues of an accomplished monk -- humility, fasting, prayer, poverty and, finally, homelessness.

He went to grade school in his native village. After graduating, the teacher urged Elias's uncle Alecu to send the boy for further study, saying, "Uncle Alecu, it is a pity for this clever boy not to continue his studies." Taking his advice, Uncle Alecu sent Elias to the *gymnasium* of Cotsmani in Bukovina, where he studied for three years, and another four years at the Cantemir College in Cernauti, where he received his baccalaureate in 1932, as first of his class.

At school, Elias had much to endure. As an orphan, he did not have to pay school fees. However, Uncle Alecu never sent him a penny for books, school uniforms, and other expenses. He slept and ate at

the college *gymnasium*. For seven years, Elias would borrow a professor's book, read it through the night and return it the next day. He did not participate in school excursions and festivities, for he did not have a school uniform. He had only the clothes which he was wearing. He did not have any pocket money to spend on food when he went to town with the other boys. Naturally, he was sad when the other classmates went on school trips and he remained alone at the school. Yet, he did not waste time; he studied, thought, prayed continually.

During summer vacation, Elias went to his uncle and helped him in the field with tilling, haying, and other farm chores. No one saw him just visiting with the village priest and the professors, or chatting with people.

After receiving his baccalaureate at Cernauti, Elias went to confession to an archimandrite, who advised him to continue his studies at the university for a degree of theology. But, after a short time, because of misunderstandings between the archimandrite and other priests, the archimandrite had to leave, and he advised Elias not to remain either, but to go to the Neamts Monastery, and he even gave him a letter of recommendation to the abbot, Bishop Nicodem Munteanu (later Metropolitan of Moldavia at Iassi and Patriarch of Romania).

The young Elias thought long about what he should do. His colleagues went off to the university -- but, after long prayers, one day he heard a voice saying, "Monastery." Feeling in his soul a special call from God for a pure life in monasticism, he went straight to the Neamts Monastery and was received by Bishop

Nicodem. He remained here during 1933, fulfilling different obediences, among them assistant to the pharmacist, schemamonk Iob, then as librarian of the monastery. Sorting damp and mouldy books and exposed to draft from windows and the cracks in the floor, he caught rheumatism from which he was to suffer all the rest of his life.

At the monastery, he befriended the oldest and most learned fathers, with whom he discussed the salvation of the soul and, also, the calendar change which then constituted a major topic. He befriended a brother from Bukovina, which for many years was an Austrian-occupied territory where the Orthodox suffered violent persecution from the Latins. This brother, whom the abbot wanted to enter the monastic order, desired first that he should be truly baptized by immersion, as the Holy Apostles directed, and not by sprinkling with water, as it was then the custom in Bukovina.

After the baptism, Elias was tonsured a monk. He decided to go to Mount Athos where the true Orthodox Calendar was observed. He was not, however, able to obtain a passport since he was told he must first do military service. Believing that he might better be able to obtain a passport as a civilian, Elias shaved off his beard, but it was in vain. Ashamed, he did not return to Neamts Monastery.

After that, he visited Petrache Lupu at Maglavit (South Romania), a Romanian peasant who had a miraculous vision of God. Returning from Maglavit, he passed by the Turnu Monastery in the Olt Valley. Only a few days earlier, the church there had burned. When the monastery fathers saw him (there were only six of them), they asked him to remain with them since there was no young man to help

them. Elias was overjoyed and remained there a year. The monastery had an orchard with fruit trees from which Elias could eat, and his health improved. The fathers of the monastery wanted to rebuild the burnt church and counseled Elias to go through the villages with a nun from another monastery for donations, but Elias could not accept this obedience.

The time for his induction into the military service was approaching, and the fathers advised him to become a deacon in order to avoid the army. Elias, however, preferred to go into the army. During his military service he did not shave his beard.

After his discharge, he became a monk and received the name of John. It was around Pascha of 1936 that he dedicated all his life to monasticism. Abbot Valerie (Moglan) of the Neamts Monastery was now head, and Father John became his assistant and taught Romanian to the monastery brothers.

It is a remarkable fact that as Brother Elias and as Monk John, he had the names of the two great prophets, St. Elias the Zealot and St. John the Baptist, and he became worthy of living in the places where these great prophets had lived, having them always as a mirror before him and as supporters in all his temptations and trials. Yet, there was a powerful fire burning in his heart, an unchanging desire to go to the Holy Land and to worship and tread in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ. His desire was realized, and he received the blessing of the Bishop Nicodem, now Metropolitan of Moldavia, who gave him also the first blessing when he entered the Neamts Monastery.

In the fall of 1936, he was on his way to the Holy Land, where they keep the Orthodox Calendar unchanged, as it was inherited from the Holy Fathers and the Eastern Church. In Jerusalem, he met with two other monks from the Neamts Monastery -- Claudie and Damaschin, who, after visiting the Holy Land, returned to Romania, but Father John was accepted, after some difficulty, into the Lavra of St. Sabbas, situated between Bethlehem and the Dead Sea. There he was elevated to the schema. The difficulty of his entering the Lavra of St. Sabbas came from the Abbot Nicholas for two reasons -- in 1862, Cuza-Voda, the prince of Romania, had expropriated the lands of the Romanian monasteries, and their monastery of the Holy Land had also suffered losses -- and, secondly, there was already in St. Sabbas a monk who spoke Romanian well, and another Romanian monk who could have formed a "party" with Father John (which, of course, did not happen). Nevertheless, the monastery badly needed younger personnel, and the Abbot Nicholas went to the Patriarch of Jerusalem and personally asked for help.

The Patriarch said to him, "Here you have a young one, and you don't want to accept him." Only after that was Father John accepted. Father John also used to speak a little Greek, which he learned in school. He read much, searched the famous monastery library and made many translations from Greek into Romanian for his own reading. He became sexton, assistant manager, and he cared for the sick (which took a lot of his time). As sexton, he had to light the lamps of two churches and at four chapels. He came back to his cell at ten in the evening for some rest; and as he was falling asleep, his neighbor, old and sick in body and mind, who already had slept enough, woke him up by singing troparia and kontakia. Father John had to get up at eleven to light the lamps and ring the bells to awaken the monks. He took great care of the lamps which were

always kept burning.

Once, Father John was making the four-hour journey returning from Jerusalem with an Arab and a donkey. Half way to the monastery, on a hill, he saw many Arabs who were lying in wait for the manager of the monastery, Hieromonk Paul, who was in Jerusalem. On his return, they wanted to kill him. They were angry because he had suspended them from bringing the food supplies to the monastery, replacing them with others.

When they saw Father John, a young Arab, thinking that he was the manager, raised a chunk of wood to hit him on the head -- but, as he was about to hit him, his father shouted, "Stop! It is not he!" Thus, Father John was saved from certain death. Since Father John also cared for the sick at the monastery, the Arabs found out that he was skilled and began to visit him, seeking his help; and, soon, all called him "the doctor of the monastery." When the Arabs revolted against the British, they brought their wounded to the monastery, and there was no more peace there.

Father John was very tired and weakened, since he had not had a moment's rest. He suffered from kidney disease, from improper diet, and the harsh climate -- so, he decided to retreat into the desert, both for rest and peace. He went to his confessor, Father Sabbas, who gave him his blessing to go. This was in 1939.

Father John went with a brother, newly-arrived from Romania (after three months, he would return to Romania on account of the rigors of the desert). On their departure from the monastery, an Arab accompanied them part of the way. The two went further through the

desert to Fesca. Today, it is called Qumran. There, fragments of the Old Testament were found, where the Essenes had lived. A long road lay ahead through the wilderness. Night was approaching, the water in their jug was gone, and they were very tired. The temperature was 40 degrees centigrade, and they did not know how to find water.

Sitting down, not far away, they saw many hornets flying to and from a deep gorge between the rocks. They looked more closely and saw water glimmering below. But how to get to it? They had a rope, and one tied it around his waist, while the other held on to the rope and descended to the bottom where there was a little water left from the winter rains. They drank, strengthened themselves, and also took water in their jug. The next day they reached the desired cave, where they spent only two weeks because the water was salty and, furthermore, Bedouins invaded the place with their flocks.

They moved on to the Cave of Calomena, which was one kilometer from the Monastery of St. Gerasimus, toward the Dead Sea and Jordan. They left during the night in order not to be seen from the Dead Sea, crossing the desert through valleys and hills. Suddenly, on a hill near them, they saw a beast as large as a donkey. It constantly stopped and looked at them. God protected them, and the beast did not attack. It was a hyena, very dangerous, but also cowardly. It attacks at midnight.

Calomena Cave was humid, and water was brought from the St. Gerasimos Monastery. Meanwhile, the brother from Romania had left, but another old monk of Romanian descent came -- Ioanichie, who remained with Father John until his death. They remained there

for a year and a half under very difficult circumstances. Father John translated the "Akathist of the Dormition of the Mother of God," and he finished it on August 5, the day on which Father John also died. Here, Father John contracted dysentery and suffered from this for eighteen months.

At that time, the Second World War was in full force. The Germans were approaching Alexandria -- and, since the Romanians were allied with the Germans, the British rounded up all Romanians into a camp with Germans and Italians. Father John, although ill, was kept in the camp for nine months, longer than all the others because of his knowledge of many languages. After liberation from the camp, he returned to the St. Sabbas Monastery. On the feast day of St. Theodosius (the founder of the coenobitic life), Father John went to his monastery. Father Ioanichie also went to the feast of St. Theodosius and fervently prayed at the holy relics of the founder of the community and felt great relief from his suffering and was healed by the gift of St. Theodosius.

When he returned to St. Sabbas Monastery, Father John resumed his previous obediences, although he was now much weakened and anemic. The climate was dragging him down. He was constantly thinking about how to find some rest. Yet, the monastery did not have another young monk to take over his obediences.

Then, the superior of the Romanian Church in Jerusalem, Archimandrite Victorin, who knew Father John from the Neamts Monastery -- without asking him -- wrote, asking Patriarch Nicodem to intervene with the Patriarch of Jerusalem and consecrate Father John as a hieromonk for the Romanian Skete of Jordan, dedicated to

St. John the Baptist. Twice before, Father John was urged to become a deacon -- once at Turnu and the second time at the Neamts Monastery, but he did not accept. Now, in order to get some rest, he accepted. The Patriarch of Jerusalem approved the ordination; and, on May 13, 1947, the feast day of the holy martyr Glicheria, he was ordained hierodeacon by Bishop Irinarch. On the 14th of September of the same year, he was consecrated hieromonk and appointed hegemonikos for the Romanian Church of Jordan. The ordination took place in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. After the ordination, the superior of the Romanian Church still delayed in sending him to Jordan, but Father John told him that he would not stay in the city of Jerusalem and would return to the Monastery of St. Sabbas. Realizing the new situation, Archimandrite Victorin let him go to Jordan, but without food or any kind of assistance. Father John went to Jordan together with his disciple, schemamonk Ioanichie.

It was December, 1948, when the war between Jews and Arabs was at its height. At the Skete of Jordan, the River Jordan and the brook which was flowing next to the Monastery of St. George the Chozevite had overflowed, and the whole garden was covered with dirt and sand. The house in which they were supposed to live consisted of two small rooms, full of mud. The church was covered with broken tiles, and it rained through to the flooring stones, where grass grew. They improvised a stove out of three casks with dirt on top, which served also as a bed! A Romanian brother from Jericho brought them bread from his own portion, and he also made them a small shack from wood found in the skete's garden.

After some time, the Patriarch Nicodem passed away and, according to tradition, all Orthodox patriarchs were to offer forty days of memorial services. When the Patriarch of Jerusalem also was to

offer a panikhida, Archimandrite Victorin called on Father John to take part in it. He did not go, however, because Patriarch Nicodem had persecuted those who continued to follow the truly Orthodox calendar. Father John had received his ordination in Jerusalem, where the true Orthodox calendar is celebrated; and for the zeal of keeping pure and undefiled his vows, he refused to serve or to communicate with other priests who did not follow the true calendar. Also, out of the same burning zeal and love for Christ -- all his life, he never gave the Holy Mysteries to unconfessed or unrepenting people. That attitude very much angered the archimandrite, and he did not want to go to Jordan anymore. He went to Lebanon because of the Israeli War; and, on his return, he sent to Jordan the father, who had been there before, to the Jordan Monastery.

Father John had great respect for the canons of the Eastern Orthodox Church, which is why he suffered very much. Once Archimandrite Victorin came to Jordan with a rich man from America, who wanted to see the skete and help it with some money. When they sat at the table, Archimandrite Victorin also invited the man's driver, who was a Moslem Arab, to the table. Father John left the table. The rich American got angry and did not give anything for the church. Father John thought that it was "better poor, but clean."

When the previous abbot came to Jordan, Father John and his disciple moved to St. Anna's Skete to calm themselves in the caves there. He had good relations with the abbot of the Monastery of St. George the Chozevite, who had approved of him and provided food. He came to that monastery in November, 1952. He remained there one year, until a monk from Cyprus, named Paul, arrived, and both monks agreed to go to the caves of St. Anna's Skete. Monk Paul

helped him install a door and windows in the small cell, where he spent the next seven years without going to the monastery or to Jericho, suffering the heat of the day. During summer, the heat reached 40 degrees centigrade. He suffered greatly from rheumatism. Day and night, he was tormented by wet flannel shirts, which were full of sweat. His food was "posmag" and, rarely, bread, brought to him by the Roman brother from Jericho. All his life, Father John lived in poverty in order to be enriched by God after passing from this life.

Father John's cell was in the Chozeva Valley, further down from the St. George the Cozevite's Monastery, perched on a slip of the valley some fifty meters from the monastery, among the cliffs, like a swallow's nest. The cell of Monk Paul, the friend of Father John, was in the vicinity and had a small chapel where the holy liturgy was celebrated.

Father John suffered also from the Bedouin Arabs, who threw stones at him to chase him away, but he endured everything with joy and humility. Access to Father John's cave was difficult. Beyond a certain spot, the climb was almost vertical. There, he placed a five-meter ladder which he pulled up so that he received only whom he wished. As long as he lived in the cave, he never received a woman.

Father John busied himself in his cell with writing and translation from Greek into Romanian. He translated the most beneficial books in order to make them useful and beneficial to all Christians who would read them. He wrote both in verse and prose. Everything that he wrote was imbued with such a spirit of humility and meekness that all who read shed tears, however hard their hearts may have

been. Part of his works was published under the title of "Spiritual Food." From his writings, one may learn that his life was full of want and that his mind and heart were always turned to the One Crucified on Golgotha for the salvation of the world. Thus he thought, day and night, until the end.

Two weeks before he gave up his soul in the hands of the Lord, at noon, in the clear sky to the right, he had seen a crown of palm leaves and written, "Blessed" and other words; and, on the left, "Accursed" and other words, as well as lightning and thunder. He told his vision to his disciple, schemamonk Ioanichie, who was constantly taking care of him. He would not say that the writing "Blessed" was for him, so that he would not appear to be praising himself. Knowing that his end was approaching, he took Holy Communion alone on Wednesday morning, having the Holy Gifts with him. However, his temperature rose constantly, and he was visibly weakening and did not say the other words from his vision. It was August, and the temperature outside was 40 degrees centigrade.

In the night, Father John rose up a little, as if he wanted to say something, but he could not do so and fell back again in bed. After an hour, he raised his right hand and gave a blessing to all directions in the sign of the Cross, probably the benediction of the Holy Fathers whom he praised in his writings. After that, at dawn of Thursday, August 5, 1960, he was called to eternity. The only Romanian father who remained in the Holy Land of Jordan Valley had been Hieroschemamonk John.

Enduring illness with great fortitude during his lifetime and a

rigorous regime of food and drink, Father John had his mind constantly fixed on the suffering of the One Crucified on Golgotha. He passed beyond his material body and united with God in prayer. He knew that he was going to the Lord fairly young, but he was not sad and prepared himself in the evening of August 4. His disciple, schemamonk Ioanichie, says that he laid a wet cloth on his father's body to cool it because he was burning with fever and outside the temperature reached 40 degrees centigrade; yet, he never uttered a sound of pain, but only thanked him in a pleasant way.

Father John tried all his life to respect the canons of the Orthodox Church from the most minute things to the greatest. When he was celebrating the holy liturgy at the Monastery of St. George the Chozevite on the day of St. John the Baptist, he refused to give the Holy Communion to a priest's wife from the village Taibe because she had eaten meat one day before, i.e., on Epiphany, and did not keep the fast at least three days. Then the abbot, who may have been her confessor and knew her situation, had donned the epitachelion and communicated her. From the moment he was consecrated to the end of his life, Father John had not concelebrated with another priest. When he was celebrating the holy liturgy, he did not mention at Proskomide the names of certain priests who, he heard, were Masons. After his death, Father John was buried in an old grave which was in his cave, and where many hermits were buried in the past. It was covered with board and, on top, was placed a cement lid.

In 1968, his disciple, schemamonk Ioanichie, succeeded in publishing part of Father's writings in two volumes, under the title "Spiritual Food," a work with the most wonderful and humble reflections that take the human soul to heaven. They were written in verse and reflect the life of Father John, which was one of profound

spritual feeling.

After a long time, Father John showed Father Ioanichie, in a dream, that his grave must be opened. The abbot and the fathers decided to leave it as it was forever. A year passed, and the abbot finally agreed to open it, but to leave the remains in the same place. This was in 1980, twenty years after he was buried. When they opened the grave, there was a miracle. The body of Father John was found to be incorrupt, and complete, with a pleasant fragrance. His vestments were intact, the epitrachelion and schema also were not decomposed, and the skin was dried up on the bones, so that he appeared to be sleeping. His face was clean with his black beard complete. His face was pleasant, as if he was about to speak.

The abbot, having seen this miracle, decided to bring him to the monastery in a temporary coffin of poor quality, which could not be displayed to worshippers. Yet, there was no money to buy another. During the time the coffin was at the monastery, a woman from Australia, the mother of the priest Haralampus, had a dream. An unknown person appeared to her in monk's garb, and told her to collect money and make a reliquary for a saint with an incorrupt body. Yet, she was not told who he was and in what place. She told her vision to others, but nobody know what that meant. Not long thereafter, a person came to worship and, seeing Father John, said that now he knows for whom this reliquary was supposed to be. It was to be for the new saint John of the Chozeva Monastery. With the money collected in Australia, a beautiful reliquary was made and placed in the small church of St. Stephen, near the grave of St. George the Chozevite. Worshippers now come here to bow with much devotion and faith, kissing the coffin and being very impressed with the miracle.

After the relics were brought to the church, the abbot departed to Greece to get some donations to repair the road that leads to the monastery, since it was in very dangerous condition. After his departure, some priests from the Patriarchate decided that it is not fitting for the relics of a new saint and, at that, from a different nation, to remain there. They consulted with the Patriarch and decided that a commission should come to the place and take the relics to another spot. The local bishop, however, did not want to move it in the absence of the abbot and waited for his return from Greece. Meanwhile, the Patriarch died, the bishop had to undergo a kidney operation, another suffered a heart attack. All the members of the commission were being punished.

After these occurrences, the abbot was afraid of punishment from the saint, and nobody came anymore. The holy relics rest in peace in the monastery of St. George the Chozevite, without being disturbed.

During Father John's lifetime, a priest by the name of Mitrophan came to the cave. He was a painter and, seeing and appreciating the solitude of the site of St. Anne's Skete, he decided to leave Mount Athos and to come and live there, telling Father John that he would go home to arrange something and then return. Father John said to him, "If you come, come now as you are -- but, if you want to put your home in order, do not come at all." It was as he had said. Going back to Mount Athos, Father Mitrophan began to work with his painting. Two years passed. A disciple who had an inclination for stealing, had taken some valuable brushes from him. Father Mitrophan had scolded him. The disciple got angry, and one evening, he killed him. The words of Father John, that if he did not

remain now, he would not come at all, proved true.

A pious woman from Greece, who had come to the Chozeva Monastery, having seen the holy relics of Father John, was impressed and saddened; and then she was sorry that she had come, saying, "It would have been better if I had not seen them." She had come with a group of visitors. Returning to the inn where she stayed, she fell asleep, and the blessed John appeared to her, saying, "Ileana, why were you frightened of me? I am John. What evil did I do to you?" After this dream, Ileana wanted to go back to the monastery and ask forgiveness from the blessed one, but she had to return home with the group. After a year, she returned especially to ask forgiveness and to get a picture of the saintly John to put in a place of honor.

The locations where Blessed John the Romanian had lived as a hermit, in the desert, on the mount, and in the Chozeva Valley, have played an important role since antiquity. The Prophet Joshua, the successor to the Prophet Moses, after the fall of Jericho, took the road winding along the valley of the Wadi Kelt, or -- as it is called today -- the Chozeva Valley, and arrived at the spot where Jerusalem is today.

Sts. Joachim and Anna had a flock to tend in the Chozeva Valley. Being very sad that they had no children, they left home. St. Joachim came to the Chozeva Valley, and he climbed to the cave in which St. Elias once lived, and there he prayed for forty days to ask the Lord to take pity on him and grant him a child. St. Anna remained home in Jerusalem, in the neighborhood of the Lion's Gates (or of St. Stephen) where there was also a cave, and prayed

much to the Lord. After those forty days of fasting and prayer, both were told by the Archangel Gabriel that they would have a child, which was St. Mary, the Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ. After her parents brought the infant Mary, when she was three years old, to the Temple (where now stands the mosque of Omar), St. Anna returned to the Chozeva Valley to a cave situated about one kilometer from the cave of St. Elias in the direction of Jericho. She retired there with a group of women -- and, from that time, this cave has been called in Arabic "Der Benat," the Monastery of Women, or St. Anna's Skete.

Tradition says that the right foot of St. Anna was preserved at the skete until the fifteenth century, when the monks fled from there to Mount Athos because of fear of persecution, and they took with them St. Anna's foot, establishing a St. Anna's Skete on Mount Athos on the southern slope.

The holy Prophet Elias, who was persecuted by Jezebel, found shelter here and stayed for three and a half years, being fed by a raven, who brought him meat in the morning and bread in the evening. This cave remained intact from the time of St. Elias until that of St. Joachim, and even until today, despite the destruction of the monastery in 614 by the Persian emperor.

Father John took great care for his own soul and for that of others, as can be seen from his book, *Readings and Meditations on the Divine Scripture*. He says:

Many times I have written words for the benefit of my own soul, and I believed that those words would also benefit other persons

who do not have time to open books and, perhaps, do not even have the books at hand. I know that today all are in a hurry, and the thick books of the Holy Fathers remain forgotten, and rarely does someone read them. Such is the spirit of the times, such are the occupations of men, such is the invisible war, that the spiritual work and especially the reading of the holy books have little place in the life of laymen, but even the monks have begun to adjust their lives to the new fashion. The care for earthly things keeps them shackled, and they do not find time for reading and meditation upon the Divine Scripture.

They hardly have time to listen to Vespers and Matines in the Church; and, even then, their minds are burdened with care for the body and with the vexations of life. It is difficult to find time in this century for the sweetening of the soul. But this harms us more than anything else. Having no respite to look toward those heavenly things, we forget the meaning of life, we weaken spiritually, and many times we begin to despair when we see that our life has been spent in a useless manner, in spite of the promise we made to God.

This is how the pious Nicodemus the Haghiorite advises us in this respect: "All literate Christians have the obligation to read the Holy Scripture because, as St. John Chrysostom says, without reading the Holy Scripture, one cannot be saved." In his sermon about St. Lazarus, St. John Chrysostom says: "It is impossible for someone to be saved without often sweetening himself with spiritual reading." Then, St. John of the Ladder instructs us that reading enlightens and collects the mind, and diminishes the habits and vices. And St. Ephraim the Syrian says: "Just as the sound of the trumpet in time of war arouses the zeal of the brave fighters against the enemy, so the Holy Scripture encourages you to fight against the passions."

Thus, my brother, be full of strength and strive always to apply yourself to reading the Holy Scripture in order to learn well how to avoid the snares of the enemy and so achieve eternal life. But there are some who read and do not strive to understand the written things.

The holy Apostle Paul writes to his disciple Timothy: "Pay attention to what you read." And of St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory the Theologian, the historian Rufinus says that they remained in the desert for thirteen years, meditating upon the Scriptures. Now, let us think of ourselves who live in this century and ask: "If there was an absolute need for reading the Scriptures in olden times, how much more so today when the evils in the world have increased, and the good pastors have decreased, when you hardly find an example of clean life or spiritual advice; how much more we should strive to read the Holy Scripture, since only in them shall we find consolation and enlightenment."

Father John has selected the following from Homily 36 of St. Isaac the Syrian, which will greatly benefit all:

This is the will of the Holy Spirit, to be His beloved in continual reality. The Spirit of God does not dwell in those who live in rest because the Most-Good God wished that His beloved servants should not have rest in this life, but rather live in suffering, difficulties, worries, poverty, and nakedness, in solitude and debts, in sicknesses and defamations, in battles and crushing of heart, with sickly body and image detested by others, in a state which does not compare to other people's, and a lonely, peaceful, and quiet

dwelling, completely invisible to men and free of anything that produces earthly consolation. Therefore, these people weep, and the world laughs; these sigh, but the world enjoys; these fast, but the world amuses itself. During the day, they wear themselves out; and, during the night, they prepare for deprivation. There are some who offer themselves to weariness voluntarily and also submit to afflictions; some are persecuted, while others were killed, and some hid in cellars. In them was fulfilled the word that says, "You will have afflictions, but in Me you will have joy," because the Lord knows that the ones who live in rest cannot remain in His love. Therefore, Christ the Saviour has prevented these from rest and satisfaction. He Whose love is more powerful than death of the body wanted to show also in us the power of His love. Amen.

Among the writings of Blessed John is to be found this very important thought concerning the salvation of souls:

Not to make ourselves judges of the servants of God, according to the words of the Gospel -- "Judge not, that ye be not judged" (Matt. 7:1).

In the *History of the Church* by the most-wise hierarch Meletius, it says that when the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea ended, the Emperor St. Constantine the Great rejoiced greatly at the victory of the the Church against the slanderers. The emperor was present at the Council and honored the Holy Fathers with rich gifts, according to their merit, piously kissing the plucked eyes of the devoted Paphnutius with zeal, as well as the hands maimed by the tyrants. He also devoutly kissed all the other confessors, in order to sanctify himself through their wounds, which they suffered in the time of the

persecution.

Some of the Council's fathers handed the emperor some complaints against a number of bishops of bad conduct. But the great Emperor Constantine did not even read their papers, nor was he interested in the identity of the accused clerics, but burned the papers in the presence of all, saying: "If with my own eyes I were to see a cleric sin, I would cover him with my mantle, that is with the mantle of the emperor."

The emperor-saint tried to give an example to all in not denouncing the hidden sins and wickedness of the clerics. Those who divulge the sins or shortcomings of clerics become defamers of the law, since all clerics are servants of the Law of God.

There are some Christians who do not judge or divulge the wickedness of clerics, but instead avoid taking a blessing from those whom they know to have human shortcomings or passions. If, however, some happen to pay for the celebration of a liturgy or take Holy Communion from such clerics and afterwards find out that they smoke tobacco or drink or are given to other passions, then these Christians repent because they have asked sanctification of such sinners. Some, like these, although they do not judge with words, become judges by their behavior. Brothers, if the priest or bishop is Orthodox, then let us be assured that the gift of the Holy Spirit works through him in every Church mystery, regardless of how sinful he is. Only when he is under interdiction by the Council or by the bishop of the diocese, or when he preaches a wrong faith, then indeed the gift of the Holy Spirit does not work through him. Then you should avoid such clerics.

In the *Patericon* there is an example of not judging the servants of God. Abba Mark the Egyptian spent thirty years in his cell. He used to ask the priest of the Skete to come to his cell on certain days and celebrate the holy liturgy. The devil, seeing the increased patience of the abbot, devised a way to tempt him by judging. Thus, the sly devil urged a possessed brother to go to the abbot to ask a blessing. Arriving at the hermit's, without saying another word, he yelled, "Your priest stinks of sin -- do not let him come to you!" The abbot, inspired by God, answered, "Son, all people leave their filth outside, but you have brought it inside to me!" It is written, "Judge not that ye be not judged." Even though the priest is sinful, the Lord will save him, since it is written, "And pray for one another that ye may be healed" (James 5:16).

After pronouncing these words, the saintly man prayed and chased the demon out of the possessed and healed him. And the good God, seeing the goodness of the old man, revealed to him a miraculous sign. And here is his own testimony: "When the priest wanted to begin the holy liturgy, I saw an angel of God descending from heaven and placing his hand on the priest's head. In that moment, the priest became like a fire-column. But I, being amazed at this sight, heard a voice saying to me, 'Why are you astonished at this?' For if the earthly emperors does not let his noblemen stand soiled before him, but all are dressed in great glory, how much more does the Divine Power cleanse the servants of the holy Mysteries, when they stand before the heavenly glory? Hearing such words, the poor hero Mark strove much more to honor the holy persons. Behold, what wonderful gifts do those who do not judge clerics receive!"

The life of Father John is a living example of a steady climb to perfection and mystical union of the soul with God. By rigorous asceticism, he freed himself of passions and strengthened his nature with the most distinguished virtues, which carried him to the highest life possible for the human powers of knowledge and love. He made a titanic effort to extract from the writings of the Holy Fathers the most essential teachings, beneficial to all those who will read them, and, in order to be most attractive, he wrote them in verse -- some of which are already published in the book *Spiritual Food*. All the instructions in the writings of Father John are meant for the salvation of those who will read them and apply them in their lives, but especially for the believing Romanians everywhere. In the poem "Care of the Soul" is evident the role of repentance, confession, and the thought of death. In the poem "The Voice of the Good Pastor" are described the Incarnation and Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who calls all of us to Him, so that finally He will give us rest. In the poem "The Longing of the Grandmother" we see Blessed John's own life when he was little and was being raised by his Aunt Maria, to whom he used to read concerning the Passion of the Lord.

Father John stood at the foot of the Cross since the time he was a little boy, with his mind fixed upon the One Crucified, Who always helped him until he reached the peak of divine transformation of his nature, purified and illuminated by the Holy Spirit.

Source: *Orthodox Life*, Vol. 34, No. 5 (September-October 1984), pages 16-30.

Translated from the Romanian by Borislav P. Svrakov.

Text edited and corrected with the assistance of Fr. Dimitrie I. Tatulescu and John Shaw.

Source: http://www.orthodoxphotos.com/Holy_Relics/St._John_Iacob_the_Hozevite/