

Life and Testament of St. John of Rila (celebrated August 18)



St. John of Rila (AD 876-946) wonderworking Bulgarian monastic saint.

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The Life of Saint John of Rila

From the web site of The Bulgarian Orthodox Church

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We would be rightly reproached if we neglected the life of the blessed John and failed to present his true image to ardent lovers of virtue. This biography will serve as an inspiration for those who wish to follow in the footsteps and imitate the life of this spiritual giant, and will be of great benefit even to its casual readers.

It is our hope that the life of this holy father will encourage its readers and that these God-loving souls will be moved to greater piety. Therefore, despite our attempt to narrate this biography as tastefully as possible, we beg the indulgence and patience of the reader for that which has been unskillfully artlessly written about him.

Now, as we begin our narrative, let us invoke the blessing of the saint, who himself was so abundantly blessed by God, that we not err out ignorance and thus deprive our readers of greater benefit.

THE PARENTS of blessed John were pious Bulgarians, born and raised in the village of Skrino, within the city limits of Sardica.[*Note: Sardica is an ancient name for Sophia, Bulgaria] While they lived and worked with devotion and charity, two sons were born to them, one of them being John. He obeyed his parents in everything, showed them great respect, constantly lived in the fear of God, loved the church, listened attentively to divine words and pleased the Lord with fasting and prayer. He was completely captivated by the love of God; like a true seraphim, his soul blazed in the Lord and "brought forth

fruit a hundredfold" like a tree planted by springs of water.

Long after his parents had died, some jealous and indolent people reproved him as a hypocrite utterly unfit for worldly life. Wearied and disturbed, John resolved to give all his possessions to the poor and "render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's" so that he might unhindered "render unto God that which its God's." And God "who called light to shine out of darkness" and "Who ordered Abraham: 'Get out of thy country and from thy kindred and go to the land that I will show thee,'" appeared to John in a dream speaking the very same words and pointed out the place where John might please Him. Awakening, he reflected upon the meaning of the vision and his heart burned with zeal "like a stag for the water springs." Like another David, he armed himself against the spiritual Goliath, and taking tree stones - faith, hope and love-he put on the armor of righteousness and over his head the divine cover as a helmet of salvation. He entered the monastery of St. Dimitry, near Skrino, and was tonsured a monk, casting off with his hair all lust and carnal desire. Here he received his education, learned to read and write, and grew spiritually by studying the Holy Gospel.

After he had been trained in asceticism, leaving what is of the earth to the earth and to this world, together with its lord, he took with him only a leather garment and came to the mountain God had shown him. Here he built a little hut of twigs and restrained his body with fasting and vigil, singing with David: "I hastened to settle in the

wilderness and waited for God to save me from the wind and tempest." He lifted his hands in prayer without anger or doubt. His food was nothing but herbs and grass which by nature grow for the cattle, and he cried: "I was as a beast before Thee, but am continually with Thee." Only after sunset did he eat a little of the herbs, but not even enough to satisfy himself completely and drank only enough of the water which ran down the mountain springs to cool his thirst.

Who can describe the works which he did at that time? Who could number his tears or adequately describe his all-night vigils and his kneeling? Often demons, transformed into wild animals, came to frighten him and chase him away. But he remained adamant, a hero unflinching from their treacherously assaulting waves, or rather, a diamond upon which pounding iron can leave no scar.



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A LONG TIME passed before John decided to move to another place. He found a dark, obscure cave and settled in it. There he increased his works and kindled his longing to serve God. Like a bee, he gathered honey into the shelters of his heart.

While he was in this state of life, his brother's son Luke came secretly from his father and mother to the wild forest where the holy man lived and with great effort succeeded in finding him. The blessed one, seeing him from afar, at first thought him to be a vision, and so he prayed. As Luke approached, he prostrated himself and asked for John's blessing. The holy one was then convinced that he beheld flesh and blood and not a vision. He blessed Luke and asked why he had come. Luke told everything about himself and was immediately accepted by the saint. With Luke, seeing himself multiplied like the cedars of Lebanon, the blessed one lifted up songs of thanksgiving to God and repeated what was written in the Psalms: "The forgiving and the righteous adhered to me." And Luke was with him in the wilderness like a gentle lamb which was grazed by the true Shepherd, like Abel and Isaac, and in all things he imitated the Forerunner John the Baptist, the one brought up in the wilderness since childhood.

But Satan, the proud heir of darkness, the arrogant enemy, had no patience with the works and virtue of holy one. Filled with jealousy, he conceived injustice and gave birth to lawlessness. An acquaintance of Luke's father found him overwhelmed by grief and bewildered about

the boy, and, motivated by Satan told him: "Your brother John deprived you of the support of your old age and the heir of your household. He came here in the night, took your son and has him even now. Unless you rescue the boy, he will become food for the wild beasts. Come and I will show you the place, and then you can go and take your child." When Luke's father heard that, he clothed himself in hatred, as in a garment covering him like a cloud of fury. He flew into a rage and hurled accusations against his innocent brother. Satan inflamed his anger and goaded him into insulting the holy one.

When they came close to the place, the acquaintance, guided by the devil, showed him John's cave from afar and immediately departed. The brother went on and found the holy man. He harassed him with reproaches, called him a vicious old man, a betrayer, completely unfit for earthly life. With a heavy stick and stones he tried to kill him. But what did John do? Like his gentle Lord, he stood there saying nothing, and in his mind repeated: "And I was as a deaf man, not hearing, and like a mute who opened not his mouth!" Enraged, the father grabbed the boy, snatched him from God's mountain, God's holy mountain, where God had deigned to let him live, and proceeded to bring him back into the world. The blessed man, seeing and understanding the treachery of Satan, was overcome by sorrow and, with tears, he fell to his knees and prayed: "Lord, Thou has said: 'Call Me in the day of sadness and I will save you'; rescue me now, O Heavenly King! Look on me with compassion and drive away the sorrow of my heart! Show me a sign of Thy mercy, for Thou art blessed forever and ever. Amen!"

After his prayer he remained distressed, being deprived of Luke and fearing that the boy might involve himself in the snares of this world. But what did God do, Who ordered that the children be allowed to come to him? Here too He spoke to the boy's father, not by word but by action: "Let the child come to Me and do not stand in his way, because of such is the Kingdom of Heaven." As they walked on their way, a snake bit the boy and he immediately died a painless death. The father was bewildered as to what he should do. He returned to the holy one and, ashamed, in deep sorrow, told him what had happened on their way. John told him to bury the boy and return to his home. He followed John's instructions and the holy man glorified God for what had happened.

JOHN LIVED in his cave for twelve years without any physical conveniences, while his works and trials increased. The devil watched and continued to attack him, sometimes afflicting him with despondency, and other time with laziness and on numerous other occasions with fear and apparitions. But his radiant soul could not be caught by Satan's intrigues. He constantly sang: "They compassed me about like a hornets' nest; they are quenched as a fire of thorns; for the name of the Lord, I opposed them!"



One day, by the devil's suggestion, bandits fell upon the holy man, beat him mercilessly, knocked him down, dragged him, drove him away and forbade him to remain in that place. In this, too, he submitted himself to the Lord, Who said: "When they persecute you in this city, flee into another." Not from city to city, but from forest to forest the holy man walked and found another place far away where he settled in an enormous oak tree, following the example of the ancient Abraham. But while Abraham, under the oak of Mamre, joyfully entertained the Holy Trinity and sent them away in peace, the holy man John, carrying on his work as before, kindled in his heart an unmaning love for God dwelling therein, Who in Himself is the Trinity. And what did God do, Who directs

everything for the good of man? In the desert He provided manna for the people of Israel and "He satisfied the hungry with good things"; here, He did the same: He ordered the earth to grow chick peas as food for the holy one. With these, John eased his hunger while tears poured out like gushing springs to irrigate the furrows of his soul and the fruitful boughs of his virtue blossomed forth.

But God, Who commanded light to rise out of darkness and Who brings to light the secrets of darkness, did not wish the city on top of the mountain to remain hidden any longer and graciously deigned to make known John virtue. Shepherds were grazing their flocks nearby, like those at the time of Christ's birth. While the sheep quietly grazed, all at once they began running down, not on an ordinary path, but rough desolate, steep, impassable places until they reached the holy man's dwelling. The shepherds ran after them but were amazed that they could not stop them. When they finally caught up with the sheep, arriving at John's wilderness refuge, they questioned him: "Who are you? Where are you from? How did you come here? How do you live here?" He answered them: "According to the Apostle, my life is in heaven, whence I expect the Savior. My fatherland is the New Jerusalem, the city of God. My native country and the city in which I was raised you need not know. But since you are here, let me feed you with the food of the wilderness." Then he let them help themselves to some of the chick peas that grew there, and they ate to their hearts' content.

After the shepherds departed, one of them, without the saint's blessing, secretly pulled out some of the plant for the journey and happily ran after his friends. Overtaking them, he revealed his deed. They snatched the plant from his hands, and opening the pods to get the peas, they found them empty. Full of remorse, they returned to the holy man, confessed what they had done and asked his forgiveness. He granted them forgiveness and said: "The Almighty God has the good grace, my children, to let the chick peas grow here and be eaten here." Astonished, the shepherds departed, praising and glorifying God for all they had seen and heard, and spread news of the saint throughout the surrounding villages.

Some Christ-loving people wished to go to the holy man to receive his blessing. A man greatly disturbed by an unclean spirit, seeing them going, started out with them because he wished to be freed from his infirmity. When they were a short distance away from the saint, the stricken man was shaken by the unclean spirit and fell to the ground rolling and crying: "I am burning in fire and cannot walk." Then the others tied and dragged him by force. Arriving at the holy man's dwelling, they fell to their knees and begged his blessing. He blessed them and asked why they had come. They told him about themselves and the madman. Saint John did not rely on himself at all, but trusted in God "Who quickens the dead and orders those things which are not as though they were." Thus he said: "This work is not for me, my children, because God alone can chase away demons. And I am human like you and am burdened with the

same frailty." Therefore, I say as the voice of the Lord commands: "When you shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say: 'We are unprofitable servants.'"

But they continued in their request that he heal the afflicted man. Seeing them so persistent and not changing their purpose, he fell on the ground, poured forth tears, sighed from the depths of his heart and said: "God, Whom we worship in the Holy Trinity, Who has created all that is visible and invisible, Whom all men fear and on Whose account all men tremble, have mercy on Your creature, O Lord. Not because of our righteousness, but because of Your kindness and generosity, do not allow this man to suffer any longer. I am not worthy, good Lord, to pronounce Your immaculate name with my unclean and foul lips; nevertheless, I call on You for help as I rely on Your goodness. For You Yourself have promised with a vow through the mouth of Your servants the prophets that You 'take no pleasure in the death of a sinner'; thus, we all kneel before You and pray: hear us from Your holy heaven, for You are blessed through all ages. Amen."

As he prayed, at once the demon left the man who regained his health and glorified and praised God. When his companions saw this, they were seized with the fear in God. Their love and regard for the holy one increased and they begged him to let them remain with him, but he refused. After he had instructed them, he satisfied their hunger with chick peas and directed them to return to their homes, forbidding them ever to come to him again. They returned with their companion, the man

relieved of his former madness.

St. John lived alone for sixteen years, but rumor of his spiritual feats and his sanctity spread among the local people. The humble John, fearing the praise of men, departed far away into an unknown place. And being steadfast in his faith and seeking the will of God, he sang: "I am well when I am bound to God, and in the Lord I set my trust and hope." Then he found a very high rock and climbed it, as Moses in the past had ascended the Mountain of Sinai into the cloud-obscured darkness to see God. Like him, John too received God-written laws, not on stone tablets, but on the flesh tablets of his heart, and he bedewed the rock with his tears. During his all-night vigils he conversed with God. Like an angel, he endured the earthly cold of the night and the heat of the day. The Unseen Eye, as it watched his heroic patience, unseeingly endowed him with the strength to endure.

But the devil, who abhors goodness, no longer had patience with the heroism of the holy one. He took a legion of demons and attacked him cruelly: beat, whipped, dragged him, threw him down from the rock and departed, as they supposed him dead. The heroic John lay there for quite a while. Regaining consciousness, moaning, exhausted and grieved, he said to himself: "Why are you cast down, O my soul and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God for I shall praise Him, my Savior and my God!" He got up, climbed the rock once again, and continued to follow his previous rule, for he made the Lord his refuge. And He Who looks over the earth and makes it tremble looked with a merciful eye on

His righteous man and commanded His angels to take food to him every day. Thus with him too the scripture was fulfilled: "Man did eat bread from heaven."

THE REPUTATION of the holy one continued to spread. At that time pious King Peter held the scepter of the Bulgarian kingdom. Coming to the city of Sardica and hearing of the holy man, the king wished to see him. He dispatched nine experienced hunters and ordered them not to return until they had found John. Upon the king's order, they hastened to Rila Mountain where they searched for many days and found nothing. Although they were hungry, exhausted and perplexed, they dared not return to the king, but neither could they roam hungry around the wilderness of the mountain. As their fear was greater than their hunger, they continued to search.



Some time later they discovered the place where the holy man dwelt and finding him there, they begged for and received his blessing. He asked why they had come and they told him. With the eye of his soul, he realized that they had not eaten for the last five days, so he offered them a small loaf of bread which completely satisfied their hunger. The One Who fed the five thousand with five loaves of bread here, too, satisfied the hunger of nine men with one small loaf. And like that other time when many fragments were left, now, too, half of this loaf was left. The hunters were amazed, for in the beginning they had thought that one loaf would not suffice, yet here half a loaf remained.

At their return they reported everything to the king who became so ardent in his zeal and joy that hurrying like "a hart yearning after water brooks," he took with him his closest companions and quickly started toward the mountain. But when they came to the river Rila, they encountered a very high and inaccessible rock. Unable to pass, they turned back. They then climbed another high mountain which the inhabitants called Knishava. From there they were shown the mountain and the rock where the venerable man lived. The king could not reach the place, for it was steep and forbidding, but he sent two of his most trusted men to implore the holy man to come so that he might meet John personally and receive his blessing. The young men, obeying the king's command, quickly went to the saint and disclosed their master's request. He answered that he could not fulfill the king's request. "Nevertheless, my children, tell the king: Your effort and your daring are offerings to God which are accepted like the sweet fragrance of incense. But leave that place quickly for it is steep, lest you and your companions suffer. You cannot see God's humble servant at this time, but in the future, without fail, we will meet and then we shall delight in untold joy if we have brought forth 'fruits worthy of repentance.' But now pitch your tent on top of the mountain so that I can see it, and I will light a fire so that you can see the smoke; thus God has commanded: only in this way will we see each other." The holy father lit the fire like a pillar toward the sky. King Peter saw the smoke and the holy man saw the king's tent; both glorified God and bowed one to the other.

The king went away, but was saddened, as one who had

suffered a great loss. Upon his arrival at the palace, he send John a large amount of gold and various foods befitting a monk, accompanied with the following letter: "King Peter to the honorable hermit John: I heard of the God-loving nature of your soul, of your settling in the wilderness of the mountain, on your incorporeal, angelic life, of your abandonment of the world. I wished very much to meet you personally and delight in your honeyed words. I thought that I might have benefited greatly merely to have beheld your countenance. Because of our desire for wealth, empty glory and delights, we continually drift in the sea of vain life; but I wished to lift my eyes to your sinless and unworldly life. The eyes of my soul are dimmed by earthly sorrows and rebellions. But, awakened as from a deep sleep, I had wished to see you. However, since I, the pitiful one, was deprived of this grace for the multitude of my sins, I now bow before you and beg you to send me a comforting message that might alleviate my burning sorrow. For you know the worldly storms and mutinous clouds that trouble the hearts of kings."

The blessed John accepted the food in order to humble his pride, but he did not accept the gold. To the king's request he replied: "The poor John to the honorable autocrat of the Bulgarian Scepter, King Peter: To entirely accept your gift would not be fitting for me. But because of your faith and your zeal towards me, I accept the food. The gold, however, I must return to you, for it greatly harms a monk, especially a monk living in the wilderness and inaccessible places. Why does one need gold who is contend to eat bread, but not to full satisfaction, and

enough water only to moisten his parched tongue? To us 'Christ is life and dead is gain.' In your state of life, however, gold is a necessity. But even you, who are adorned with a diadem, must not delight in gold because it is said: 'When wealth is flowing, do not attach your heart to it.' In spite of what is written: 'Wealth is proper to a king's state,' it is to be used for his arms and his army, not for his own pleasure, but most of all it is for the disabled and the poor, for the naked and the homeless. Therefore, if you wish to inherit the kingdom of heaven, be generous as our heavenly Father is generous. Flee injustice and plundering. Be meek, calm and accessible, and let your eyes be opened for all. 'Let the oil of your mercy run over all, but let not your left hand know what your right hand is doing! Let the poor be happy when they leave your palace! Your princes curry praises on their lips! Your purple robe shine with the light of virtue! Your sighs and tears be your offspring! The remembrance of death be always on your mind! Your thoughts be unceasingly centered upon longing for the Kingdom! Prostrate yourself at the feet of your mother the church. Diligently kneel and bend your neck before those who rule her, so that the King of kings and Lord of lords, when He sees your diligence, will give you the reward which 'eye has not seen, nor ear heard neither has entered into the heart of man - that which God has prepared for those who love Him.'" The king read the message and held the saint's words in high esteem. Kissing the message with love, he carried it close to his heart like a precious treasure. He read it often, for it helped to drive away the spiritual darkness of worldly confusion.

THE BLESSED John lived at that place for seven years and four months. Many admired his pure life and wished to live with him. They built a church in a nearby cave, formed a monastery, and the holy man became their abbot and pastor. He was a good shepherd to his flock, brought many to the Lord Jesus Christ, and performed great and glorious miracles.



As he felt the approach of his departure to the Lord, he devoted himself to prayer. He often wept as he knelt on the ground, saying: "God Almighty, compassionate Lord, accept Your sinful and unworthy servant and by Your grace let me be with Your chosen ones, though I have done nothing good on earth. And because of this I beg You to send me a good angel that the wily spirits be not

able to hinder my ascent." He called his disciples together and taught them many things and commanded them to observe his precepts steadfastly. " After my death do not mourn inconsolably because I shall not leave you but will be invisibly with you." He directed them to be diligent in fasting, kissed them all one by one, and received communion. Then he lay on the ground, lifted his hands toward heaven, and as he said: "Lord, I rest my soul in Your hands," he surrendered his soul unto God. He died on August 18 at about the age of 70, in the 946th year since the Incarnation of God the Word, in the realm of the pious Bulgarian king Peter and the emperor of Byzantium Constantine Bagrianorodni, the son of the emperor Leo the Most Wise.

His disciples bathed his feet in many tears, wrapped his holy remains in a shroud, placed them in a wooden coffin and buried them near an old Skete a walk of an hour and a half to the northeast of the present-day Rila Monastery. People everywhere quickly learned of the death of the holy man and flocked to his grave. His body, without change, looked as though he were asleep and emitted an indescribable fragrance. The sick prayed, begged to be cured and rejoiced when they were freed from their infirmities.



ΠΑΝΤΑ ΠΟΙΟΥΣΑΙ ΔΟΥΛΟΙ ΠΑΤΡΙΚΙ ΕΛΕΗΜΕΝΟΙ ΚΟΣΜΩ

СВЯТЫЙ ИОАННИ
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Forty days after his death, the saint appeared in a dream to his eldest disciple and ordered that his body be buried in the earth. When the disciple awoke, he carried out the saint's order. From that time on, the tomb became a source of miracles for those who approached it with faith.

Some time later, inexplicably, a pleasant aroma arose from the tomb of the saint. He appeared again to his disciples in a dream and ordered them to move his remains to the city of Sardica. Then they opened the coffin and saw that the body was completely incorrupt, not touched by decay, and emitted a pleasant fragrance. About the year 980, after divine services were performed, the blessed relics were moved with honor to the city of Sardica and placed in the church of St. Luke the Evangelist.

Later, a pious man of the Pirin mountains, by the name of Groudas, built a church in the saint's honor; the relics were moved into it, and wondrous and most glorious miracles continued. George Skilitsa, a Greek by birth, was governor of the city of Serdica during the period when the entire Bulgarian state was under Byzantine rule. He wrote a biography of the holy man in which he stated that water from the blessed relics cured him of an unbearable disease which had greatly drained his strength. The Byzantine emperor Manuel Komnin suffered from the illness which had contracted his tendons and tortured him so that even during the night he could not sleep. When he spread on the afflicted area oil from the lamp in front of the saint's relics, he was completely

cured.

DURING THE rule of the Byzantine emperor Andronik Komnin, a Hungarian army led by their king Bella III subdued, as far as Sardica, the Bulgarian land which was still under Greek domination. The Hungarians stole the relics of the holy man and moved them to their native land. Because King Bella had heard of the miracles of the saint, he ordered the holy relics to be taken to the city of Ostrog. There they performed many miracles, curing people of their infirmities and diseases. These marvels became known everywhere in that land and people came to be healed.

But the devil, who hates every good deed and could not tolerate God's loved one being glorified, filled the heart of the bishop of that city with unbelief. He refused to venerate the holy one's relics, and he did not allow others to do so either, saying: "I know all the saints and I do not find this man among them!" At once the righteous God restrained his tongue and he lost his speech; he waved his hands instead and remained dumb, as had happened long ago to the High Priest Zachariah. When the bishop came to understand that he was suffering for rejecting God's chosen one, he went quickly to the tomb of the saint, and there, broken-hearted, he shed tears of repentance. Then the righteous John, in the likeness of the compassionate Christ, swiftly heard the bishop's plea and his tongue was freed. Those who witnessed and heard of this miracle were filled with joy and strengthened in faith, as their love and veneration of the saint increased. He performed even more miracles in the

Hungarian land.

When the king heard what had happened, he was stricken with terror. He embellished the coffin of the saint with gold and silver, venerated the holy relics and in the year 1187, returned them with great honor to Sardica and placed them once again in the saint's church.

DURING THE reign of the pious Bulgarian King Assen, who at his baptism was named John, God in His loving kindness reestablished the Bulgarian state and raised up anew the Bulgarian Church which had been laid waste by the Byzantine forces. Under this king, the Bulgarian banner was raised once again; the Bulgarian cities were rebuild; the ruined defenses were fortified anew. Next, he lifted arms against the Greek kingdom and subdued the surrounding countries, cities and villages. Even at Sardica he was not impeded in his campaign and successfully conquered the city.

Hearing of the glory of God's beloved saint, he went himself to the church where the holy one's body lay and there, he bowed down and venerated the relics. Realizing he had found a pearl of great value, he made the following proposal to the Patriarch, His Holiness Vassili, in Veliko Tirnovo: "To the most honorable Prelate of God, Vasili, the spiritual father of your Royal Majesty: By God's will, when I came to the city limits and entered Sardica, I found the honorable relics of the holy father John, inhabitant of the Rila wilderness, who performed many miracles of healing. I was beside myself with joy. For this reason I have asked you to come here, together with all your clergy, that with fitting honors you might take charge of translating the holy relics of our most reverend

father to our glorious capital of Veliko Tirnovo for the commendation of all the laity and for the affirmation of our God-fearing kingdom."

Having received the king's letter, the patriarch called together his clergy and related to them the king's proposal. With one accord, thanking God, they proceeded to carry out the king's request. The pious King Assen carefully attended to everything that was needed for the translation of the holy relics and delegated the responsibility to the patriarch, leaving at his disposal three hundred valiant soldiers. He himself hastened to return to his capital, Veliko Tirnovo, and on the location called Trapezitsa he began building a church which was to bear the name of the saint. The patriarch, together with the entire retinue of his clergy, the abbot Ioniki and the monks of the monastery which the saint had founded, transported the holy relics of the saint to Veliko Tirnovo. When the king learned of the approach of the patriarch, he came out to meet him at Krasetz, together with his entire council. The relics were kept there for seven days until the church building was completed, in the year 1195, after the church was consecrated with many honors, the relics were laid there, where they wrought many miracles.

In the year 1468, when the city of Veliko Tirnovo was conquered by the Turkish Hagarenes, Saint John's relics were translated to the Rila monastery where to this day they grand healing and comfort to those who approach them with faith: the blind receive their sight those who are bent are straightened, the mute have their speech

restored, those deformed from frailty are given strength, the insane are set free, and all in need of health are cured.

TO HIM MAY there be glory now and forever and into the ages of ages. Amen.

Testament of St. John of Rila (in Bulgarian)

Translation by Ilija Ilie

This testament of our holy father John, citizen of the Rila wilderness, which he delivered to his disciples before he died, was rewritten from a parchment with great preciseness by the most honorable and reverend among priests, lord Dometian, a man of erudition and intelligence, who was a disciple of the reverend hermit Varlaam, who lived nine years on the Cherna mountain, which is called now Tsrna¹ and at the Old Hermitage [founded by John of Rila himself] for twenty-eight years. After his "Old Man"² died, he [Dometian] became superior and tutor of the Great communal lavra of Rila. [The testament] was rewritten for easier reading and for commemoration [of Dometian] by all the monks in that monastery, because the parchment on which the testament was written originally was hidden carefully together with the other [precious] objects of the monastery because of the great fear which was reigning in that time from the impious sons of Agar [the Turks].³ In the year of the creation of the world 6893 and from the Nativity of Christ 1385, on the twelfth day of the

month of February, on the memorial day of St. Meletios of Antioch. From that copy, I made another copy, I Savatij, the humble holy monk and ecclesiarch, and everlasting disciple of the most honorable superior and tutor Dometian.⁴

Editors' note: The assistance of our translator, Ivan Iliev [II], is gratefully acknowledged for the notes to this document.

1. Both Cherna and Tsrna, dialectical variants, mean "Black." [II]
2. A play on words: Varlaam also means "Old Man," a title of dignity. [II]
3. An allusion to the fall of Srédetz (Sofia) to the Ottoman Turks in 1382. [II]
4. Neither the original text nor the copies mentioned above survive today. The text depends on nineteenth-century copies. [II]

[1.] I, John, the humble and sinful, who has never done anything good on earth, when I came into this wilderness of Rila, I found no man over here, but only wild animals and impenetrable thickets. I settled alone in it among the wild animals, without food nor shelter, but the sky was my shelter and the earth my bed and the herbs my food. But the good Lord, for the love of whom I disregarded everything and endured hunger and thirst, frost, the heat of the sun, and corporal nakedness, did not abandon me, but like a merciful and child-loving father he lavishly satisfied all my needs. What shall I contribute to the Lord for all he has given me? Many are his benefactions to me, for he looked from his holy height at my humbleness (cf. Luke 1:48) and lent his support to me to go through everything—not I, but the might of Christ, which is in me—because every good gift and every perfect gift is from him (James 1:17).

[2.] Seeing you today gathered together in the Lord here, where, as I told you, no man has dwelled until now, but only wild animals, and foreseeing that the end of my life here is soon coming on, because of this I made up my mind, before my departure (II Tim. 4:6) from life here, to leave you the present fatherly testament of mine, just as carnal fathers leave their children an earthly inheritance of silver and gold and other property, so that when you commemorate your father in the Holy Spirit, you do not forget his testament.

[3.] I know, my beloved children in God, I know you very well, that you, being beginners, are not confirmed yet in the monk's life, but fear not, for the Lord's "power is made perfect in weakness" (II Cor. 12:9). Just because of this I made up my mind to write for you this rough and ignorant testament of mine, so that you will keep it always in your minds to become stronger in body and soul, in the Lord, and go forward through the virtues in fear of God. Because I believe in my God, whom I have served since my youth and to whom I submitted zealously, after my departure, this wilderness, which until now was terrible and uninhabited, will be inhabited by a multitude of desert-citizens. What was written about it will be fulfilled: "The desolate hath many more children than she which hath a husband" (Is. 54:1; Gal. 4:27).



[4.] Because of this I beg you, my children, whom I have gathered in the Lord, I beg of you, my flesh and blood, do not neglect your father's admonition and together with the apostle I say: "I am in travail again until Christ be formed in you" (Gal. 4:19). I beg you and make you swear on the dread name of God not to violate or abandon anything after my death, but everything I have written let be carried out, as it is written and as you have promised before God. Whosoever oversteps or violates something of it, let him be damned and separated from the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, to have no share with the saints, who were pleasing to God ages ago, but let his share be with those who had crucified the Lord of Glory (Acts 7:2) and with his betrayer Judas, to be erased from "the book of life" (Phil. 4:3) and not to be inscribed [in it] with the righteous.

[5.] First of all, I bequeath to you the obligation to preserve the holy faith immaculate and unaffected by any false teaching, just as we received it from the holy fathers, without "being led away with diverse and strange teachings" (Heb. 13:9). Hold fast and keep the traditions you have heard and seen from me. Do not deviate either to the right, or to the left, but walk along the royal road. Keep yourselves carefully away from worldly fascinations and always remember why you have come out of the world, and why you have despised it and worldly things.

[6.] Now again, keep yourselves away from the avaricious snake, "for the love of money is the root of all evil" (I Tim. 6:10), according to the apostle, who calls it

a second idolatry. Because for the hermit wealth consists not in silver and gold,⁵ but in perfect poverty, in the

5. Compare to (3) Theodore Studites [21] prohibiting the storing up of cash assets in the monastery.

denial of his personal will, and in lofty humbleness. I am not telling you this as my commandments, but [I am] recalling for you the commandments of Christ. For he told his holy disciples and through them everybody who had renounced the world: "Take no gold, nor silver, nor a bag, nor copper in your belts" (Matt. 10:9) and so on. For gold and silver are great enemies of the monk and bite those who have them like a snake.

[7.] If we, however, have undoubted hope in God, he will not leave us deprived of anything, for he himself says: "A woman may forget her children, yet will I not forget thee" (Is. 49:15). Also in another place: "But seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be yours as well" (Matt. 6:33). For in the beginning, when I came to this wilderness, the sly enemy attempted to allure me, for the pious king sent to me a lot of gold.⁶ For the sake of God I refused to see

6. An allusion to John's rejection of the friendly overtures with implied offer of financial support made by the Bulgarian ruler Peter (927–969) as described in the various vitae; see Dujcev, "Réforme," p. 263, and Hristov et al., *Rila Monastery*, p. 12.

him, for I understood that it was a perfidy of the devil. I did not accept it, but returned it to those who sent it, for I thought to myself: "If I wished to have gold and silver, and suchlike things, why came I into this terrible and impenetrable wilderness, where I found no man, but wild

animals?" So I saved myself from the intrigues of the sly tempter, who endeavors to trip us up in those things, which we renounced willfully. That is why you are not to look for any of these things, "for your heavenly Father knows that you need them all" (Matt. 6:32) before your prayer [is offered].

[8.] Nor look to be recognized and beloved by earthly kings and princes, nor put your hope in them, leaving the heavenly King, with whom you enlisted to be soldiers and "wrestle not against flesh and blood," but "against the ruler of the darkness of this world" (Eph. 6:12). For the prophet Jeremiah also threatens us speaking so: "Cursed be the man that hopeth in man" and the rest. Enumerating the evils, he adds that "blessed is the man that hopeth in the Lord" (Jer. 17:5-8). Do not say: "What shall we eat, or drink, or in what shall we be dressed?" for the gentiles seek after these things. "Look at the birds of the air: for they neither sow nor reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" (Matt. 6:26). As soon as you have come out of the world, do not go back, neither with your body, nor with your mind, for, as it is said, "No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of Heaven" (Luke 9:62).

[9.] The Apostle [Paul] too, however, teaches us to "forget what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead" (Phil. 3:13). What does "forgetting those things which are behind" mean, my children? Nothing else except to deliver to oblivion all those things which, coming out of the world for God's sake, we have left and

despised, and to strive towards the feat which lies before us, to which we were called by our taskmaster, our most gracious God and Lord Jesus Christ, who has enabled us to endure his gentle yoke, "For his yoke is easy, and his burden is light" (Matt. 11:30).

[10.] As the grace of the Holy Spirit brought you together, so must you endeavor to live with one heart and one mind and one spirit, directing your eyes only towards the eternal reward, which God has prepared for those who have loved him. The communal life is in every way more useful for monks than the solitary one, for solitude is not suitable for the many, but only for a few who are perfect in all monastic virtues. The common life, on the other hand, is useful in general for everybody, about which the patristic books tell us and teach us sufficiently. The spirit-speaking prophet David glorified it saying: "See now what is so good and so pleasant as for brethren to dwell together in unity!" (Ps. 133:1). In addition to this, one spirit-moved ecclesiastical hymn writes in this way: "Because in this the Lord promised eternal life." But also our good Master Lord God Jesus Christ, does he not say to us himself, by his immaculate lips: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them"? (Matt. 18:20). Our God-bearing fathers say for the solitary life: "Woe to him that is alone when he falls; and there is not a second to lift him up" (Eccl. 4:10).

[11.] That is why, children, as the Holy Spirit through the mouth of the prophet glorifies the communal life, do you not neglect it either, but on the contrary, confirm it and

be like "one body in the Lord" (Rom. 12:5), which has different members. Some of them form, however, the head which governs, others the feet which toil and bear, so that there is formed from all a single spiritual body in the Lord, created with a single mind and logical spirit, and directed by spiritual reasoning, in no wise having divisions. When such a dwelling and life in God is arranged, then he himself will be in the midst of you, governing you invisibly.

[12.] Do not seek the first place and authority, but remember those who have said: "If one would be first, he must be last of all, and servant of all" (Mark 9:35). Elect for yourselves preceptors and appoint superiors, whom God will show you, that is, men "of good report" (Acts 10:22) among everybody in spiritual matters and surpassing everybody in intelligence and spiritual discernment, and able to pasture well and comfortably the flock entrusted to them down the meadows of piety and of the life-giving commands of Christ. For these men it is proper to seek confirmation more from God than from our opinion.

[13.] If, as our great father and monastic preceptor, the reverend Ephraem Syrus says,⁷ all of you begin to
7. According to Goshev, "Zavetât," pp. 449–61, this author's Parainesis had been available in a Slavonic translation since the reign of Symeon (893–927).

desire authority and presidencies, and all of you to be abbots, and all of you preceptors, and interpreters, and teachers, and among you spring up rivalries, quarrels,

disputes, zealousness, calumnies, haughtinesses, envy and other passions indecorous for monks, then certainly be aware that Christ is not among you, for Christ is not the teacher of discord and dissent, but of peace and unity. For he prays to God the father for his holy disciples to be united, that is, of one mind—they themselves and everybody who believes in him through them, and says as follows: "Holy Father, keep them in thy name that they may be one, as we are" (John 17:11). In another place: "I do not pray for them only but also for those who believe in me through their word that all may be one" (John 17:20–21). If you will be one, be at peace one with another. For he said to his disciples, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you." (John 14: 27) For such is this peace of Christ, children, that again he speaks, saying, "Not as the world gives, do I give to you" (John 14:27). But this peace of Christ surpasses every mind. This is the peace, about which the prophet talks: "And his peace has no bounds." But also the apostle teaches us saying: "Strive for peace with all men and for the holiness, without which no man shall see God" (Heb. 12:14). May you have such a peace, now, among you, and let you arrange everything for God with great unity of mind and heart, so as not to enrage your own God and master.

[14.] If somebody is found among you who sows weeds, discords and other temptations, you have to eliminate at once such a man from your assembly, so that this will not be transfigured into a devouring canker, according to the apostle, and not to spread the evil among the good ones, and "lest any root of bitterness spring up and cause

trouble by it, and the many be defiled" (Heb. 12:5); and the wicked wolf not trouble the peaceful flock of Christ, because this sort [of men] will appear. For of them Christ prophesies saying: "For it is necessary that temptations come; but woe to the world for temptations to sin!" (Matt. 16:7). For this and you, children, keep away from these things and do not allow them to live among you, but divert them away from yourselves as the shepherd chases away the scabby sheep from the pure flock.

[15.] Living together for the Lord's sake and bearing the burdens of one another, do not neglect those who live in solitude and "wandering over deserts and in mountains, and in dens, and in caves of the earth, of whom the world was not worthy" (Heb. 11:38), but supply them as much as you can, in order to hold them as your petitioners before God, for the prayer of the pious may achieve much.

8. For the translation of some of the late antique classics of ascetic literature into Slavonic, see Dujcev, "Réforme," p. 262.

[16.] Instruct yourselves in the Lord's law day and night (Ps. 1:2). Read often the patristic books and try to be imitators of our holy fathers Antony, Theodosios and the others, who shone like lamps in the world with their good deeds.⁸ Hold firmly to the church rule, leaving or neglecting nothing of this, which is established by the holy fathers.

[17.] Manual labor must not be neglected by you, however, but work must be in your hands, and the prayer "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner" must be permanently on your lips, as well as the memory of death in your mind. This was the practice of the ancient desert fathers. They did not eat their bread in vain, and they not only lived themselves by labor of their own hands, but they gave to the needy too, and so they were not disappointed in their hope. "For," says the apostle [Paul], "it is well that the heart be strengthened by grace; not with foods which have not benefited their adherents" (Heb. 13:9). He says too: "Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers; for thereby some have entertained angels unawares" (Heb. 13:1-2).

[18.] Establish the newly enlightened from your own race in the faith and instruct them to abandon the indecent pagan rites and the evil customs which they keep even after the acceptance of the holy faith. But they do this because of ignorance, and thus they need to be brought to their senses.

[19.] I had much more to say to you, my beloved children in the Lord, but it is impossible to write everything. I deliver you to him who is the source of all wisdom and reason, and the true Comforter— to the Holy and life-giving Spirit, in order that he himself gives you wisdom, to bring you to your senses, to enlighten you, to teach and instruct you in every good deed.

[20.] Now I leave you our beloved brother Gregory for

instructor and superior in place of me, about whom all of you testify that he is able to govern you well and according to God, and you elect him by consensus as superior, even though he does not want it, but because of obedience and humility he acquiesces to your request. After him, [choose] whomever God will show you. As for myself, I wish henceforth to live in quiet and silence, to repent my sins and to beg mercy of God. Have mercy on me, your sinful father, always in your prayers that I may receive mercy on judgment day, for I have done nothing good on earth and fear that judgment and torment prepared for sinners like me. So may the blessing of God be with you all, guarding and protecting you from all evils. Amen.

I have written this in the year from the creation of the world 6449 (= A.D. 941) on the twenty-fifth day of the month of March.

I, the humble and most sinful John, first inhabitant of the wilderness of Rila, sign with my own hand and confirm the above-written [testament].

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Other translations: Bulgarian, by Ivan Dujcev, Rilskiyat
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