

The Place of Lives of Saints in the Spiritual Life

by Hieromonk Damascene

1. The Significance of the Lives of the Saints

In order to begin to understand the importance of the Lives of the Saints for our spiritual lives, I believe we can turn to no better or more thorough source than St. Justin Popovich's Introduction to his own compilation of the Lives of the Saints. A theologian, St. Justin saw no dichotomy between the Lives of the Saints and the theological writings of the Church. For him, as for the Church, theology and the Lives of the Saints form one whole. He called the Lives of the Saints "experiential theology" or "applied dogmatic theology," and he viewed them and wrote about them in a theological manner. Likewise, he viewed theological writings as an expression of the experience of the life of Grace in the Church, and not just an intellectual, abstract or polemical exercise.

How does St. Justin view the Lives of the Saints theologically? At the center of all of St. Justin's thought is the Theanthropic vision: the fact that God became man in Jesus Christ, uniting human nature with Divine Nature. The fact of the God-man, the Theanthropos, is the axis of the universe: it is the reality according to which everything else must be viewed, whether it be the nature of the Church or the problems and issues of everyday life.

Thus, when St. Justin looks at the Lives of the Saints, he does so in the light of the God-man. Real and true life—eternal life in God—became possible only with the Incarnation, death and Resurrection of the Saviour, and this life is the Life of the Saints. St. Justin saw the Lives of the Saints as bearing witness to one life: the Life in Christ.

St. Justin wrote: "What are Christians? Christians are Christ-bearers, and, by virtue of this, they are bearers and possessors of eternal life.... The Saints are the most perfect Christians, for they have been sanctified to the highest degree with the podvigs of holy faith in the risen and eternally living Christ, and no death has power over them. Their life is entirely Christ's life; and their thought is entirely Christ's thought; and their perception is Christ's perception. All that they have is first Christ's and then theirs.... In them is nothing of themselves but rather wholly and in everything the Lord Christ." [1]

The Saints live in Christ, but Christ also lives in them through His Divine Energies, His Grace. And where Christ is, there is the Father and the Holy Spirit also. Christ says, Abide in Me, and I in you; and elsewhere He says, If a man love Me, he will keep My words: and My Father will love him, and We will come unto him, and make Our abode with him (John 15:4; 14:23).

Thus, St. Justin makes bold to say that the Lives of the Saints not only bear witness to the Life in Christ: they may even be said to be the continuation of the Life of Christ on earth. "The Lives of the Saints," says St. Justin, "are nothing else but the life of the Lord Christ, repeated in every Saint to a greater or lesser degree in this or that form. More precisely, it is the life of the Lord Christ continued through the Saints, the life of the incarnate God the Logos, the God-man Jesus Christ Who became man." [2]

This is an amazing thing that St. Justin is saying: when we read the Lives of the Saints, we are reading the Life of our Lord Jesus Christ. This in itself should be enough to convince us of the importance of filling our souls with the Lives of the Saints.

St. Justin also says that the Lives of the Saints are a continuation of the Acts of the Apostles. "What are the 'Acts of the Apostles'?" he asks. "They are the acts of Christ, which the Holy Apostles do by the power of Christ, or better still: they do them by Christ Who is in them and acts through them. "And what are the 'Lives of the Saints'? They are nothing else but a certain kind of continuation of the 'Acts of the Apostles.' In them is found the same Gospel, the same life, the same truth, the same righteousness, the same love, the same faith, the same eternity, the same 'power from on high,' the same God and Lord. For the Lord Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever (Heb. 13:8): the same for all peoples of all times, distributing the same gifts and the same Divine Energies to all who believe in Him." [3]

With these words of St. Justin before us, we might well ask ourselves if Orthodox spiritual life is even possible without the testimony of the Lives of the Saints. The answer to this, I believe, must be "no." True spiritual life begins when we live in Christ and Christ lives in us, right here on this earth. And the Lives of the Saints bear witness to us that the Life of Christ on earth did not end with His Ascension into Heaven, nor with the martyrdom of His Apostles. His Life continues to this day in His Church, and is seen most brilliantly in His Saints. And we, too, in our own spiritual lives, are to enter into that continuing, never-ending Life.

I spoke recently to an Orthodox priest who had converted to Orthodoxy from Protestantism. He told me that, when he was received into the Church, the officiating priest told him: "You will never be truly Orthodox without reading the Lives of the Saints." Later, when he himself became a priest, he found that the most pious people in the churches are those who read the Lives of the Saints, and that those who make the most progress in the spiritual life are those who read the Saints' Lives.

The Orthodox Faith is not, first of all, of the head. First of all, it is of the heart: it is felt and believed by the heart. Through the Lives of the Saints, we develop an Orthodox heart. Our monastery's co-founder, Fr. Seraphim Rose, emphasized constantly this "Orthodoxy of the heart," especially in his writings and talks at the end of his life; and he frequently referred to Lives of the Saints as a means of developing this.

2. How to Make Use of the Lives of the Saints

Having looked at the importance and meaning of the Lives of the Saints, let us look now at the various ways we can make use of them in our spiritual lives.

First, we look to the Saints as our examples. Be ye imitators of me, even as I also am of Christ (I Cor. 11:1), the Saints say to us along with the Holy Apostle Paul. As Christians, we want to grow in the likeness of Christ, to have that likeness shine in us. For this to occur, we need to look often to the Saints to see that shining likeness: we must look to them for real, practical examples of how to live. St. Basil the Great gives this analogy:

"Just as painters, in working from models, constantly gaze at their exemplar and thus strive to transfer the expression of the original to their own artistry, so too he who is eager to make himself perfect in all kinds of virtue must gaze upon the Lives of the Saints as upon statues, so to speak, that move and act, and must make their excellence his own by imitation." [4]

Secondly, we must look to the Saints as our heavenly friends, as our brothers and sisters in the Faith, and as our preceptors. We read about them not as people who are dead, but as people who are living. And this is even more immediate than just reading a biography about someone who is still alive. Let's say we are reading the biography of some famous living person. As we read it, we may dream of perhaps one day meeting this person, or perhaps of writing him a letter and having it actually reach him, and even of receiving a reply from him, despite the fact that he is so famous that thousands of people are probably writing to him. Reading the Lives of the Saints offers us much more than this, because the Saints are alive in God, and are not bound by time and space in the same way we are. We can address them in prayer immediately and at any time, even right in the middle of reading their Lives. And they will hear us. Besides our private prayers to them, the Church offers us many other ways of communing with them as our friends and honoring them as our preceptors. We sing their troparia, we venerate their icons, we perform services to them, and with a blessing from our Bishop we can even compose services in their honor.

As we read the Lives of the Saints each day, we will discover little by little those Saints whom our hearts go out to. They will become our close friends, those whom we pray to most of all, those in whom we confide our joys and sorrows. As Archimandrite Aimilianos, the present Abbot of the Holy Monastery of Simonos Petras on Mount Athos, writes: "These close friends will be the guides of our choice and a great comfort to us along the strait and narrow way that leads to Christ. We are not alone on the road or in the struggle. We have with us our Mother, the All-Holy Mother of God, our Guardian Angel, the Saint whose name we bear, and those close friends we have chosen out of the Great Multitude of Saints who stand before the Lamb (Rev. 7:9). When we stumble through sin, they will raise us up again; when we are tempted to give up hope, they will remind us that they have suffered for Christ before us, and more than us; and that they are now the possessors of unending joy. So, upon the stony road of the present life, these holy companions will enable us to glimpse the light of the Resurrection. Let us search, then, in the Lives of the Saints, for these close friends, and with all the Saints let us make our way to Christ." [5] St. Justin Popovich, as we have said, called the Lives of the Saints "applied dogmatic theology." The Saints are proofs and illustrations of the reality of Christ, of His saving work of redemption. The Saints are transformed human beings, proof positive that people are redeemed, purified, illumined, transformed and recreated by Jesus Christ.

St. Justin also calls the Lives of the Saints "applied ethics." They are embodiments of the life of Divine virtue that is possible only in Jesus Christ. They are embodiments of the life of Grace in the Church, through the Holy Sacraments, through the life-giving Body and Blood of the Lord.

Fr. Seraphim Rose once counseled a budding Orthodox writer to make use of the Lives of the Saints as "applied dogmatic theology" and as "applied ethics." Fr. Seraphim said that, when one is writing on a spiritual subject, one should try to not only discuss it in the abstract, but to give living examples from the Lives of the Saints. Fr. Seraphim wrote to his fellow Orthodox writer: "If I have any suggestion for your future articles, it would simply be to keep in mind the Lives of the Saints. In your article, there is a point that would be more forceful by references to the life of the author of the citations, who is a Saint. You quote St. John of Kronstadt on 'love'—but he is not merely a great Orthodox Saint of this century, he is a very incarnation of the love he talks about, and there is scarcely to be found a parallel in the Lives of

other Saints to his absolute self-crucifying love and service to others, blessed by God in the manifestation of an abundance of miracles that can only be compared to those of St. Nicholas." [6]

3. An Example of How to Make Use of the Lives of the Saints

I will now attempt to implement Fr. Seraphim's advice here. In speaking about how to make use of the Lives of the Saints, I will give the example of a Saint who made use of them to an astounding degree. This is Fr. Seraphim's mentor, and the Bishop who blessed the establishment of our Brotherhood: St. John Maximovitch, Archbishop of Shanghai and San Francisco.

Archbishop John was born Michael Maximovitch in the city of Kharkov in southern Russia in 1896. As a boy he collected religious and historical books, and loved above all to read the Lives of the Saints. Being the oldest child, he had a great influence on his four brothers and one sister, who knew the Lives of the Saints through him.

When he was eleven years old Michael was sent to the Poltava Cadet Corps (military academy). When he graduated in 1914, he wished to attend the Kiev Theological Academy. His parents insisted, however, that he attend Law School in Kharkov, and out of obedience to them he put away his own desire and began to prepare for a career in law.

It was during his university years that the Orthodox education and outlook which Michael had received in his childhood came to maturity. Young Michael saw the point of this upbringing. He saw that the Lives of the Saints, in particular, contain a profound wisdom which is not seen by those who read them superficially, and that the proper knowledge of the Lives of the Saints is more important than any university course. And so it was, as his classmates noticed, that Michael spent more time reading the Lives of the Saints than attending academic lectures, although he did very well in his university studies also. One could say that he studied the Orthodox Saints precisely "on the university level": he assimilated their world-outlook and their orientation toward life, and studied the variety of their activity and ascetic labors and practice of prayer. He came to love them with all his heart, was thoroughly penetrated by their spirit—and began to live like them. Many years later, during the sermon he gave when he was consecrated a Bishop, he said: "While studying the worldly sciences, I went all the more deeply into the study of the science of sciences, into the study of the spiritual life."

In 1921, as the Russian Civil War was raging, Michael—then twenty-four years old—was evacuated with his entire family to Belgrade. There he entered the University of Belgrade, from which he graduated in 1925 in the faculty of theology. A year later he was tonsured a monk in Serbia and was given the name John, after his own distant relative, St. John Maximovitch of Tobolsk. During the same year he was ordained a hieromonk.

For five years Hieromonk John was a teacher and tutor at the Seminary of St. John the Theologian in Bitol, Serbia. The city of Bitol was in the diocese of Ohrid, and at that time the ruling bishop of this diocese was another future Saint: St. Nikolai Velimirovich. St. Nikolai valued and loved the young Hieromonk John, and exerted a beneficial influence on him. More than once he was heard to say, "If you wish to see a living Saint, go to Bitol to Father John."

One of the seminarians who was at the Bitol Seminary at that time recalls: "Bishop Nikolai often visited the seminary and spoke with the teachers and students. For us his meeting with Fr. John was unusual. After mutual prostrations, there was an unusually cordial, loving conversation. Once, before parting, Bishop Nikolai turned to a small group of students (of whom I was one) with these words: 'Children, listen to Fr. John; he is an angel of God in human form.' We ourselves became convinced that this was the correct characterization of him. His life was angelic. One can rightly say that he belonged more to Heaven than to earth. His meekness and humility were like that recorded in the Lives of the greatest ascetics and desert-dwellers."

By this time, it had indeed become evident that Fr. John was an entirely extraordinary man. It was his own students who first discovered what was perhaps his 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 afterward he himself admitted that since taking the monastic vows he had not slept lying in a bed. Such an ascetic practice is a very rare one; yet it is not unknown in the Orthodox tradition of the Lives of the Saints. In the fourth century, St. Pachomius the Great of Egypt was told by an angel to have his monks follow this practice.

In 1934, Fr. John was consecrated a Bishop in the Russian Church in Belgrade, and he was assigned to the diocese of Shanghai in China. The first thing he did in Shanghai was to restore Church unity, establishing contact with the Serbs, Greeks, and Ukrainians. He paid special attention to religious education. He actively participated in charitable activities, especially after seeing the needy circumstances in which the majority of his flock, refugees from the Soviet Union, were placed. He organized a home for orphans and the children of needy parents. He himself gathered sick and starving children off the streets and dark alleys of Shanghai's slums: Russian children, Chinese children, and others. The orphanage housed up to a hundred children at a time, and some 3,500 in all.

It soon became apparent to his new flock that Archbishop John was a great ascetic. The core of his asceticism was prayer and fasting. He ate once a day at 11 p.m. During the first and last weeks of Great Lent he did not eat at all, and for the rest of this and the Christmas Lent he ate only bread from the altar. His nights he spent usually in prayer, and when he finally became exhausted he would put his head on the floor and steal a few hours of sleep near dawn.

Then it became known that Archbishop John not only was a righteous man and an ascetic, but was also so close to God that he was endowed with the gift of clairvoyance, and was a great miracle-worker. There are many, many firsthand accounts of both his clairvoyance and his miracle-working, which show him to be equal to the great Saints of ancient times. On more than one occasion, he was seen surrounded in the Uncreated Light of deification while praying.

In 1949, the Communists took over China. Archbishop John was forced to evacuate his flock, including his entire orphanage. He brought 5,000 refugees to camps in the Philippines. He himself went to Washington, D.C. to get his people to America. Legislation was changed and almost the whole camp

came to the New World—thanks to St. John. Later he was assigned to Western Europe, and then to San Francisco, where reposed in 1966. [7]

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about St. John's life is that he manifested in himself so many different kinds of sanctity. It was as if, through the intense study of the Lives of the Saints that he had undertaken in his early years, he had internalized and made his own the whole realm of Orthodox sanctity, in all its varied forms. He was a true student of the Saints, one who sought to follow in their footsteps, and thus to follow in the footsteps of Christ. By living like the Saints, he became one of them. Let's look at some of the varied forms of sanctity that could be seen in Archbishop John: He was first of all a great ascetic in the tradition of the ascetic, monastic Saints of old, such as St. Macarius the Great, St. Pachomius the Great, and others.

He was a clairvoyant reader of hearts, and one who could identify and name people he had never seen before. Enlightened by the Grace of God, he could hear and answer people's thoughts before they would express them. He also foretold the future, including the time of his own death. In this way, he was very much in the tradition of the great monastic elders of the past, especially the clairvoyant Russian elders such as those of Optina Monastery.

He was an almsgiver in the tradition of St. Philaret the Almsgiver, St. John the Almsgiver, etc. We have seen how he sacrificed himself for orphaned children, going himself into dangerous slums and houses of prostitution in order to rescue children from starvation or unhealthy environments. He was constantly giving to and working to help the needy. He himself wore clothing of the cheapest Chinese fabric. He often went barefoot, sometimes after having given away his sandals to some poor man. He was a hierarch and theologian, a Church writer and apologist who defended the Church against error, much in the tradition of St. Athanasius the Great, St. Gregory the Theologian, and others. Besides his many published sermons, rich in theological content, he wrote valuable theological treatises in order to defend traditional Orthodox teachings which were being undermined in modern times. One of these works, in which he presents the Orthodox teaching on the Mother of God in contrast to Protestant and Roman Catholic distortions, has been published in English. [8] He also wrote an extensive essay pointing out the fallacies of the modern teaching of Sophiology.

He was an apostle, evangelist and missionary to new lands, in the tradition of Sts. Cyril and Methodius, St. Nahum of Ohrid and others. When he was in Western Europe, he worked hard to establish indigenous Orthodox Churches in France and the Netherlands: churches made up of the native peoples of these lands who had converted to the Orthodox Faith. He understood that the Orthodox Church is universal, and he said that the Orthodox Gospel of Christ must be spread throughout the world. Later, when he came to America, he instituted English Liturgies in addition to Slavonic Liturgies, in a Cathedral that had only known Slavonic Liturgies. He helped and supported our newly begun St. Herman Brotherhood, which was dedicated to bringing Orthodoxy to the English-speaking world. He was a healer and miracle-worker, in the tradition of St. Martin of Tours, St. Nicholas of Myra in Lycia, and others. Through his prayers, he healed people of almost every imaginable malady; and he continues to do so after his repose.

He was a loving and self-sacrificing pastor, in the tradition of St. John of Kronstadt and all the other hierarch and priest Saints of ages past. So great was his love that everyone felt that he or she was his

"favorite." He was overflowing with self-sacrificing love for his flock, and for those outside of his flock as well, such as a dying Jewish woman whom he suddenly healed with the words "Christ is Risen." He was a deliverer of his people from captivity, in the tradition of St. Moses the God-seer. As we have seen, he brought 5,000 Orthodox believers out of Communist China and into freedom in America. Finally, he was to a limited degree a fool-for-Christ in the tradition of St. Andrew the fool-for-Christ and others. He could not be a fool-for-Christ in the full sense of the term, since this would compromise the dignity of his hierarchical office. And yet at many times he did things which were at odds with the ideas of the world, and thus he evoked censure from people who did not see him for what he was: a man of God. He was criticized, for example, for serving barefoot, and for wearing a collapsible cardboard mitre that had been lovingly made for him by his orphans.

We have now looked at nine different types of sanctity manifested in this one Saint, St. John of Shanghai and San Francisco. Nine types which he had learned about through his study of the Lives of the Saints. What the contemporary hagiographer Constantine Cavarnos says of modern Saints in general applies perfectly to St. John: "Modern Saints admire and imitate the older ones: they follow closely their example, study their teaching carefully, and—what is extremely significant—they confirm it. Those of the modern Saints who write or preach amplify and illustrate the teaching of the older Saints, and relate it to modern realities." [9]

4. "Remember the Saints of God"

It should not be thought that, after his formative years at the Cadet Corps and at the University of Belgrade, St. John finished his profound study of the Lives of the Saints. Quite the contrary: he continued to learn about the Saints right up until the time of his repose.

St. John believed that, in whatever land an Orthodox Christian found himself, it was his responsibility to venerate and pray to its national and local Saints. Wherever St. John went—Russia, Serbia, China, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, Tunisia, America—he researched the Lives of the local Orthodox Saints. He went to the churches housing their relics, performed services in their honor, and asked the Orthodox priests there to do likewise. By the end of his life, his knowledge of Orthodox Saints, both Western and Eastern, was seemingly limitless.

Here is a story which illustrates St. John's love for the Saints, and how he went out of his way to learn about them and venerate them:

One of St. John's spiritual children was Archimandrite Spyridon, who later became the father confessor of our monastery in the 1970s. Like St. John, Fr. Spyridon was born in Russia, but went to Serbia following the Russian Revolution. He knew St. John from a young age, when St. John was still studying at the University of Belgrade.

When Serbia fell to the Communists, Fr. Spyridon and many of his fellow Russians settled on the border of Italy and Serbia, in a refugee camp in the Italian city of Trieste. Fr. Spyridon was ordained to the priesthood in 1951 and was assigned as a pastor of the camp church in Trieste.

At this time, St. John had just been assigned as the Bishop of Western Europe, and so he would visit Fr. Spyridon and his flock in the refugee camp in Trieste. When St. John came to the place where Fr.

Spyridon served, he was already fully informed about the early Western Saints of Trieste—such as Justus the Martyr, after whom the city had originally been called Justinopolis, St. Sergio the Martyr, and St. Frugifer, the first bishop of Trieste. Finding that nothing had been done to venerate the local Saints, Archbishop John was disappointed. Fr. Spyridon later said how he regretted not having thought of it before. No one had done such a thing: the Saints of Trieste had largely been forgotten, and it was St. John who restored their local veneration. Before doing anything else in Trieste, he took Fr. Spyridon to the relics of the Saints, vested in an epitachelion and a small omophorion. With a censer and a cross in his hand he would descend into the crypts under cathedrals where, according to his long lists of information, the Saints had been buried. He would sing troparia and kontakia written on pieces of paper which he would pull out his pockets, imploring the Saints to intercede for the city. And only then would he go to celebrate the services in Fr. Spyridon's camp church.

As Fr. Spyridon recalled, St. John acted as if the ancient local Saints were present wherever he walked. Before leaving Trieste, he contacted local Roman Catholic clergy, acquiring from them various permits so that the Orthodox church in Trieste would have free access to the relics and sites of the Saints. Then he gave Fr. Spyridon strict instructions on how to commemorate the Saints, how he should take his parishioners to the shrines of all local Saints on their feast-days, venerate them, sing services to them, and so on. St. John said that no services should be conducted without first addressing these local Saints, and no Liturgies performed without first commemorating them at the proskomedia. [10]

While in Western Europe, St. John collected the Lives and icons of Orthodox Saints from many different Western European countries, who lived before the time of the schism of the Latin Church. Since most of these Saints were included in no Orthodox Calendar of Saints, St. John compiled a list of these Saints with information about their lives, and submitted this to his Synod of Bishops for inclusion in the Orthodox Calendar.

Since he was an Apostle of Christ, St. John called upon each local Saint he learned about to provide heavenly help in evangelizing new lands. As Archbishop of San Francisco, he called upon all the Saints of America, including the most local of all Saints, the Native American St. Peter the Aleut, who was martyred in California.

Archbishop John had an especially great devotion to St. Herman of Alaska as a patron of the American Orthodox mission. He sought to have St. Herman canonized, and this occurred four years after St. John's repose, in 1970.

On June 28, 1966, St. John came to the Orthodox bookshop in San Francisco that had been started with his blessing by our St. Herman Brotherhood. After he had blessed the shop and printing room with the icon, he proceeded to talk to the brothers about Saints of various lands. As Fr. Seraphim Rose later recalled: "He promised to give us a list of canonized Romanian Saints and disciples of Paisius VelichkovskyPaisius Velichkovsky, Elder. He mentioned having compiled (when in FrancFrancee) a list of Western pre-schism Saints, which he presented to the Holy Synod." [11]

In particular, St. John Maximovitch, Archbp talked to the brothers in the shop about St. Alban, St.n, the first martyr of Britain. Out of his little portfolio he pulled a short life of the Saint, together with a picture postcard of a Gothic cathedral in the town of St. Albans, England. St. Albans near, London in which he had been buried. St. John looked into the brothers' eyes to see if they got the point. St. Alban, like most

of the Saints of Western Europe, was not in the Orthodox Calendar; and St. John was letting them know that he should be venerated by Orthodox Christians, especially in English-speaking lands. This turned out to be St. John's last contact with the shop and our Brotherhood while he was alive on this earth. Four days later he reposed in Seattle.

Right after St. John's repose, Fr. Seraphim Rose wrote in his Chronicle of our Brotherhood: "Amid the talk of the 'testament of Vladika John,' what has our Brotherhood to offer? This seems to be clearly indicated both by our very nature and by Vladika John Maximovitch, Archbp's instructions to us. On his last visit to us especially, he talked of nothing but Saints—Romanian, English, French, Russian. Is it not therefore our duty to remember the Saints of God, following as closely as possible Vladika's example? I.e., to know their lives, nourish our spiritual lives by constantly reading of them, making them known to others by speaking of them and printing them—and by praying to the Saints." [12]
This, then, is St. John's testament to our Brotherhood, and I believe to all Orthodox Christians: To remember the Saints of God.

St. John himself wrote beautiful words about the Saints. These words well express what he saw as the essence of sanctity, as well as the blueprint of his own life. "Holiness is not simply righteousness," St. John wrote, "for which the righteous merit the enjoyment of blessedness in the Kingdom of God, but rather it is such a height of righteousness that men are filled with the Grace of God to the extent that it flows from them upon those who associate with them. Great is their blessedness; it proceeds from personal experience of the Glory of God. Being filled also with love for men, which proceeds from the love of God, they are responsive to men's needs, and upon their supplication they appear also as intercessors and defenders for them before God." [13]

5. The Call to Sanctity

In remembering the Saints of God according to the testament of St. John, we must always remember, as he did, that each one of us is called to be a Saint.

The Saints, says St. Justin Popovich, are the most perfect Christians, who have been sanctified to the highest degree. The Saints, says St. John Maximovitch, are those who show forth in themselves a height of righteousness and are filled with the Grace of God to such an extent that it flows from them upon those around them. Both St. Justin and St. John are saying the same thing. The Saints are deified human beings, who are filled with the Grace, the Uncreated Energies of God, and who live the Divine-human life of Christ in the Church.

Every Orthodox Christian partakes to some extent of this Divine-human life. St. Justin Popovich writes: "Christ's life is continued through all the ages; every Christian is of the same body with Christ, and he is a Christian because he lives the Divine-human life of this Body of Christ as Its organic cell. "Life according to the Gospel, holy life, Divine life, that is the natural and normal life for Christians. For Christians, according to their vocation, are holy." To become completely holy, both in soul and in body—that is our vocation. This is not a miracle, but rather the norm, the rule of faith. "Having united themselves spiritually and by Grace to the Holy One—the Lord Christ—with the help of faith, Christians themselves receive from Him the Holy Energies that they may lead a holy life." [14]

It is our task as Christians, then, to acquire more and more of this Divine-human life, to go deeper and deeper into it, to grow more and more in the likeness of Christ, to be filled with more and more of his Grace. Perhaps we will never acquire such Grace as was seen in St. Nicholas the of Myra in Lycia, St. Sava of Serbia, St. Seraphim of Sarov, St. Nektarios of Pentapolis, or St. John of Shanghai and San Francisco, but we are called to be growing toward such an overflowing measure of Grace.

If we have much further to go in the spiritual life, we are not alone: even the greatest Saints had further to go. "Sanctification admits of degrees," explains Constantine Cavarinos. "The sanctification or perfection of a human being attained even in theosis [deification] is not complete during this life. It is an 'unfinished perfection,' as it is called in the Ladder of Divine Ascent by St. John Climacus." [15] Furthermore, spiritual perfection or holiness is not even complete in the other world; it grows endlessly in the life to come. St. Symeon the New Theologian, himself a deified human being, writes concerning this: "Through a clear revelation from Above, the Saints know that in fact their perfection is endless, that their progress in glory will be eternal, that in them there will be a continual increase in Divine radiance, and that an end to their progress will never occur." [16]

6. Overcoming Doubt and Discouragement

The Saints of God—the martyrs and ascetics, miracle-workers and apostles—truly did accomplish those great feats which we read about in their Lives. If we have underlying doubts regarding the veracity of these accounts, we should acquaint ourselves more thoroughly with the Lives of Saints who lived in times close to our own—Saints like Archbishop John of Shanghai and San Francisco—so that by seeing what is possible in our own times through the power of Christ, we may believe in what occurred through that same power in the remote past. St. Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain, in his Introduction to The New Martyrologion, discusses this in connection with the New Martyrs of the Church: "The antiquity of the period during which the early Saints lived, the long time that has intervened from then to the present, can cause in some, if not unbelief, at least some doubt and hesitation. One may, that is, wonder how humans, who by nature are weak and timid, endured so many and frightful tortures. But these New Martyrs of Christ, having acted boldly on the recent scene of the world, uproot from the hearts of Christians all doubt and hesitation, and implant or renew in them unhesitating faith in the old Martyrs. Just as new food strengthens all those bodies that are weak from starvation, and just as new rain causes trees that are dried from drought to bloom again, so these New Martyrs strengthen and renew the weak, the withered, the old faith of present-day Christians." [17]

What St. Nicodemus says about the relevance of the New Martyrs to contemporary Orthodox Christians can, of course, be applied to all the other orders of modern Saints: hierarchs, missionaries, monastics, etc.

Even if we do not have doubts concerning the veracity of the Lives of the Saints, we may come up against another stumbling block: discouragement that their feats of asceticism and faith are beyond us. If we ever experience this, we must pray for more humility. As Archimandrite Aimilianos of Simonos Petras says, "Reading about the exploits of the Saints discourages only the proud who rely on their own strength. For the humble it is a chance to see their own weaknesses, to weep over their insufficiency and to implore God's help." [18]

St. John Climacus tells us: "The man who despairs of himself when he hears of the supernatural virtues of the Saints is most unreasonable. On the contrary, the Saints teach you supremely one of two things: Either they arouse you to emulation by their holy courage, or they lead you by way of thrice-holy humility to deep self-contempt and the realization of your inherent weakness." [19]

As we study the Lives of the Saints, humility must be our safeguard. We need to soberly apply what we read to our own conditions and circumstances, realizing our own infirmity, not thinking too much of ourselves, not dreaming of ascetic feats that truly are beyond us. As Fr. Seraphim Rose used to say, we must take spiritual life step by step, and not expect to make one great leap into sanctity.

At the same time, however, we must not make excuses for ourselves, as if we are somehow separated from the Saints by some eternally unbridgeable gulf. The Saints are our fellow Orthodox Christians. The Saints have lived, and still live, the same life in the Church that we live. They are sinners like we are, but they have borne the fruits of repentance and have been transfigured by Christ. They are more perfect than we are, but we are called to seek their "unfinished perfection" as God gives us strength.

May St. Justin Popovich be a guide to us in understanding the theological significance of the Lives of the Saints, and may St. John Maximovitch be an example to us of how to make us of the Lives of the Saints in our own spiritual lives. The Saints are called stars in the spiritual firmament. May we, by remembering the Saints of God, also begin shine in that firmament. And by making the Saints our friends and preceptors now, may we have them as our heavenly companions in the never-ending Kingdom of Light.

Amen.

Endnotes

1. St. Justin Popovich, *Orthodox Faith and Life in Christ* (Belmont, Mass.: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 1994), pp. 35-36.
2. St. Justin Popovich, *Orthodox Faith and Life in Christ*, p. 36.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
4. Quoted in Constantine Cavarinos, *Holiness: Man's Supreme Destiny* (Belmont, Mass.: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 2001), p. 35.
5. *The Synaxarion*, vol. 1 (Ormylia: Holy Convent of the Annunciation of Our Lady, 1998), pp. xiii-xiv.
6. Fr. Alexey Young, *Letters from Father Seraphim* (Richfield Springs, N. Y.: Nikodemos Orthodox Publication Society, 2001), p. 23.
7. See *Blessed John the Wonderworker* (Platina, Calif: St. Herman Brotherhood, 1987), pp. 39-73.
8. St. John Maximovitch, *The Orthodox Veneration of Mary the Birthgiver of God* (Platina, Calif: St. Herman Brotherhood, 1996).
9. Constantine Cavarinos, *Holiness: Man's Supreme Destiny*, p. 24.
10. See "Father Spyridon, Sotainnik of Blessed John," *The Orthodox Word* no. 141 (1988), pp. 211-13.
11. *Chronicle of the St. Herman Brotherhood*, June 28, 1966.
12. *Ibid.*, July 3, 1966.
13. *Blessed John*, first edition (Platina, Ca.: St. Herman Brotherhood, 1979), p. 11.
14. St. Justin Popovich, *Orthodox Faith and Life in Christ*, pp. 37-38.
15. Constantine Cavarinos, *Holiness: Man's Supreme Destiny*, pp. 18-19.
16. *The Extant Works of St. Symeon the New Theologian, Part Two (in Greek)* (Syros, 1886), p. 41.
17. Quoted in Constantine Cavarinos, *Holiness: Man's Supreme Destiny*, p. 23.
18. *Synaxarion*, vol. 1, p. xiii.

19. St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 26:126 (translated by Archimandrite Lazarus Moore, London, 1959).

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