

Date: July 3, 2022
Subject: St John's Day

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Please accept my joyous congratulations with the holiday that we celebrate today, the memory of our great, contemporary saint, the holy Hierarch John of Shanghai and San Francisco. During the liturgy today at the monastery where I currently serve, a significant sermon was given. In this sermon, we were presented St. John's description of the condition of the Russian people prior to the Russian revolution. According to our Saint's understanding, this condition caused the revolution during which millions of people were slaughtered. The sermon makes a very sobering comparison that should serve as a most somber warning to us. Therefore, I decided to give you this sermon to read, and to give it some deep thought. It is attached to my email.

With Much Love in Christ,
Archpriest Serge Kotar

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

I congratulate you, dear brothers and sisters, on this feast of a saint so close and dear to us in time and in relationship. A saint who some of us knew personally, what a wonderful thing! A saint whose supplications, as we read in yesterday's Matins service, are like a pillar of fire reaching up to the heavens, guiding the New Israel amid life's wanderings.

The imagery of the wandering of Israel is, of course, not accidental. St John was concerned, among many other things, with the plight of his flock in the Russian diaspora. He ached for a return to a Russia reborn through its sufferings, and in the darkness of exile, like that of the Jews in the wilderness, he was a Moses to his people.

But, like Moses, he was not merely a guide, but a prophet of warning.

Much more intelligent people than I have begun in recent years to make striking comparisons between the historical and cultural development of 21st century America and early 20th century Russia. The Orthodox writer Rod Dreher has an entire book on the subject called *Live Not By Lies*, and some of his insights are chilling, because they show very convincingly how the social and spiritual apathy of the Russian elite right before the revolution is strikingly similar to what is going on in our country right now.

Another Orthodox cultural luminary of our time, Matushka Frederika Matthewes-Green, recently in conversation said something frightening to me. She said, "I'm afraid we can't "engage the culture" at this point. The "culture" (the elite) generally despises Christians, and as soon as they sniff that out about us, they turn away... To the culture I might as well be speaking Urdu, a culture that despises the lowly Christians struggling to make a living, who have to hide their beliefs not to get fired because their beliefs are considered "hateful."

Nothing so chillingly brings this home as the response to the utterly surprising and wonderful turn of events, recently, when the Supreme Court, after decades of anti-Christian decisions, in a single week overturned *Roe v Wade* and once again made it possible for some people to pray publicly without fear of

reprisals. The response should be a joyful one, but I have seen little joy in the mainstream culture. Worse than that, the number of good Orthodox people who have come out against the Supreme Court's decision simply boggles the mind.

Except it shouldn't boggle the mind. I will read you some of St John's remarks to the all-diaspora Council of 1938. They refer to a very specific historical moment of course, but it does not take much tweaking to realize how similar a situation we find ourselves in now.

"A significant part of the Russians who went abroad belonged to that intellectual class which in recent times has lived by the ideas of the West. While belonging to the Orthodox Church and confessing themselves to be Orthodox, the people of this class in their world outlook significantly departed from Orthodoxy. The chief sin of people of this class was that they did not build their convictions and way of life on the teaching of the Orthodox faith, but rather strove to make the rules and teaching of the Orthodox Church conform to their own habits and desires. Therefore, on the one hand they were but very little interested in the essence of Orthodox teaching, often even considering the dogmatic teaching of the Church as being completely unimportant; and on the other hand, they fulfilled the demands and rites of the Orthodox Church, but only in so far as this did not interfere with their more European than Russian way of life."

It is not difficult to apply this to our situation now. Many of our American and Russian Orthodox belong to the Church and confess themselves to be Orthodox, but many of these who belong to the intellectual class have a world outlook significantly departed from Orthodoxy. I need only mention some monastic members of ROCOR itself to make the point clear. I need only mention the calm response to the closing of churches during the pandemic. I need only point out the recent NPR article, written by a member of ROCOR, that calls people like us here fascists and hopes for an enlightened Orthodoxy that would be open to the enlightened viewpoint of the LGBT lobby.

I continue St John's words:

Their proud minds could not agree that up to now they had stood on a false path. There arose strivings to make Christian teaching agree with the spirit of the age. Of these currents, especially widespread was Sophiology. The psychology of Sophiology is the worship of man, who is no longer the humble slave of God, but is himself a small god, who has no need to be blindly submissive to the Lord God. A feeling of refined pride together with faith in the possibility for a man to live by his own wisdom, is very characteristic of many people who are "cultural" in the modern sense, who place above everything else the conclusions of their own minds and do not desire to be in everything submissive to the teaching of the Church, looking upon it favorably in a condescending way."

You don't need to know, dear brothers and sisters, the details of Sophiology to understand its underlying worldview. The worship of man, who is no longer the humble slave of God, but is himself a small god: we are all guilty of this, more or less. This is the crowning sin of our age, when personal choice, personal comfort, and personal autonomy and freedom, ideas by the way that have no absolute meaning outside a Christian framework, are so sacrosanct, that I have heard, recently, good Christians say things like "You and I can disagree and have civil conversation, but if you don't value human rights (meaning the right to have an abortion), there can be no conversation." The implication is simple: I won't talk to you because you are less than human.

This is where this culture of ours seems to be headed. And the warning should be frightening, because in Russia, a land whose government, culture, institutions were founded on the baptism of an entire people,

these cultural tendencies led to revolution, war, and the death of millions. And even if such calamities won't happen here in America, what we might have to expect is a life of marginalization, where public or even private confession of our beliefs will elicit hatred, demonization, and even violence.

So what must we do? What can we do in a society that more and more not simply disregards us, but seems ready to use all its powers to fight against everything we believe in? What can we do when our own Orthodox are in greater and greater numbers defecting to this culture?

What better example of what to do than the life of St John, a man who was physically unimpressive, to say the least. A man who was not eloquent and spoke with a slight impediment, like Moses. A man who, in spite of those physical defects, became a saint like the great ascetics of the Egyptian desert, a man whose intercession in prayer is so strong that he, in life a Russian patriot, became a truly universal saint beloved of Orthodox people the world over, many of whom have no connection whatsoever to Russia.

We can make a beginning by paying heed to his warnings. To examine ourselves honestly to see if we are beginning to pay lip service to the worship of man that has overtaken our society. To see if in any part of our own lives we unconsciously or consciously give preference to our own desires and whims, our own personal freedom, and sacrifice obedience to God's commandments and the true freedom that comes from a life free of passions.

At the very least, we can heed the words of the same Sedalen hymn from Matins. "unto us who honor thee, O holy John, grant patience, and instill in our hearts gratitude to the Lord, that we may not be condemned like those complainers, the lovers of the hotpots of Egypt, but may be vouchsafed to enjoy the incorruptible good things of the promised land."

I'm not suggesting that these warnings of St John should make us war-like against our brothers who hate us. St John certainly was not. No, the proper response to our condition is this, from the wonderful words of this prayer to St John:

Show us who feel frightened and alone the same compassion that thou didst once show to the trembling fatherless ones.

Give to us who have fallen into sin, confusion and despair the same stern yet loving instruction that thou didst once give to thy chosen flock.

In the pure life that thou hast led during our sinful times, we see a model of virtue, a source of instruction and inspiration.

Beholding the grace bestowed upon thee, we know that God hath not abandoned His people.

It is rather we that have fallen from Him, and so must regain the likeness of Divinity as thou hast done.

Through thine intercession, O blessed one, grant that we may increase our striving toward our heavenly homeland, setting our affections on things above, laboring in prayer and virtue, waging war against the attacks of our fallen nature.

Invoke the mercy of God, that we may one day join thee in His Kingdom.

For our deepest wish is to live forever with Him, with the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and ever and to the ages of ages. Amen.