



Monastery of St John of Shanghai and San Francisco

Orthodox Church in America, Diocese of the West
Manton, CA

July 2023



A Death to Glorify God

*To Thee, Lord, the Planter of Creation, the universe offers the God-bearing Martyrs as the first-fruits of nature.
Through their prayers and the Theotokos, Most Merciful One, keep Thy Church and Thy people in profound peace.
(Kontakion for Friday)*

When our resurrected Lord met Peter over the burning coals, he restored him as apostle and leader. He also foretold his death: "...when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go." This was the death by which he would glorify God. We may rightly ask ourselves: Why was his death something that would glorify God? Didn't Christ conquer death? Isn't death the great enemy?

Since Christ has risen from the dead, death no longer holds the terror, as it did before. For those who follow Christ, death is the passage through which we enter eternity to be with the Lord. Furthermore, all the events that lead up to and occur during our death are often a sign that God has completed his work in us. With our cooperation, He has finished His task of all the virtues and repentance he has intended us to accomplish.

The day of the death of a righteous man is like the plucking of fully-ripened fruit. It is the end and culmination of his earthly life, but the moment that he enters into the glory of the Lord. Every Christian, in the real sense, has decided to take up his cross and followed the Crucified One. It should come as no surprise that the way of Christ is a daily death and also one that leads to the ultimate Golgotha. This is the moment when everything that God has planned for our life and every test has been completed, and, at that final hour, the true Christian can say to the One he has followed, "Into Thy hands, I commit my spirit."
--Fr Innocent

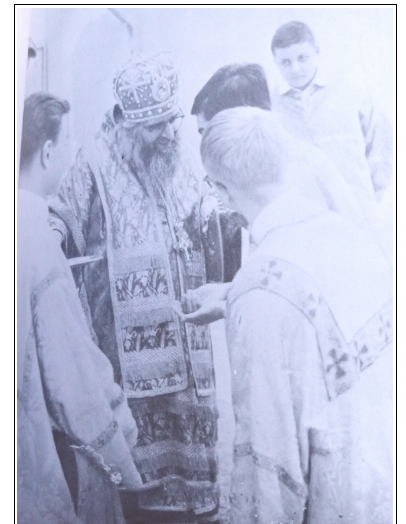
Stavrophore Monk John Reposes

The true seeker of the monastic life awaits two events: the day of his tonsure and the day of his death. He awaits the day of his tonsure because it is only then that he is wed to Christ as he makes the four solemn vows: poverty, chastity, obedience, and stability. He awaits the day of his death because it is a departure from this earthly life, and it is then that he meets the bridegroom, Christ, face-to-face, and presents to Him the fruit of those vows. Fr John crossed the threshold of his earthly life on May 25th / June 7th on the feast of the 3rd Finding of the Head of St John the Forerunner.

Fr John was born to Vasili and Vera Romanzov on January 2, 1954. He was baptized shortly thereafter and given the name Vasili. He grew up in the Russian emigre community in San Francisco. His mother and his Aunt Dyusha saw to it the Vasili and his siblings attended services regularly. Vasili had opportunity to serve as acolyte for Archbishop John Maximovitch—a remarkable person, later glorified as a Saint by the Russian Church Abroad. Fr John would later recount on how peaceful he felt as he assisted Vladika during the liturgy, holding his staff.

At age 18, the allurements of the world drew Vasili away from the Orthodox community. An idealism and desire to seek truth from Eastern religions put this seeker on a different spiritual path. He spent time in Auroville, India—an international community based on eco-sustainability and the practice of yoga and meditation. He worked on a construction crew for a time in Arizona at Arcosanti, helping to build an architectural utopia with a vision to be completely independent of fossil fuels.

Completing his art degree at San Francisco State, he went on to pursue his doctoral degree at the California Institute of Integral Studies, a private university which combines Eastern and Western spiritual and intellectual traditions. By the end of his time at CIIS, he had a devoted partner, Robin, their first child on the way, and a promising career in psychology ahead of him—everything that a man of his time could desire. But something was not right.



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Before and (especially) during the busy years of graduate school, Vasili faced a series of losses that culminated in a major life crisis. He had been caring for his aged parents, living across the street from them in San Francisco, driving them to appointments, and serving as translator. Then a series of deaths occurred: first his sister-in-law Jeannette died of cancer, then his father. He continued to care for his mother for several years, driving her to dialysis. After her death, Vasili worked with his brother Nik to settle her estate and sell the house. Then Nik died suddenly, leaving his 16 year old daughter, Katie, in Vasili's care. All of these stresses, combined with grad school and caring for a new child of his own pushed him to the limit. Seeking escape in drugs and alcohol, there seemed no end to the darkness. At Robin's urging, he began to receive counseling.

As Vasili sifted through his mother's belongings, he came across a prayer book. Opening the inside cover, he read his mother's words: "Vasya, remember to pray every day." Taking this as a word from eternity, he returned to the practice of the prayers of his childhood. One night, he had a dream. Archbishop John held up an oil lamp that had been completely blackened with soot and grime. He looked at Vasili and spoke these words: "Clean the inside of the glass, so the light can shine through." With his partner's full support, Vasili left the world to join St Herman Monastery in Platina, CA.

The true monk gives himself to God completely. He receives every trial as from the hand of his Savior. The cross that Vasili (now Monk John) received was to suffer the chronic ailment of fibromyalgia. This debilitating and (often) mis-understood disease progressively limited Fr John's activity. A sickness with no real cure, he had to manage a life of constant pain and fatigue, storing up his energy so that he could make his doctor's appointments and still have enough energy to make it to a few Liturgies at the monastery chapel each month. Soon, the harsh physical conditions at St Herman compelled him to transfer to our monastery in Pt Reyes Station. (Fr John is standing in the front.)

Though Fr John was limited in his outward activity, his cell became a place of much inner, spiritual work. He was free to delve into all the writings of the fathers and to practice inner prayer. How often, during my visits, would he hold up a book and excitedly tell me all the wonderful things he had been learning! How often would he recount the events of his life, repenting deeply of his sins in confession! Even a few months before his untimely death, as he related to Robin in a phone call, he had finally reached the state where prayer was almost constant.



We prepared his body at the monastery, clothing him in the full monastic garments, as a stavrophore monk. He was placed in a coffin and brought to the chapel. A pannikhida was served in the evening and the Divine Liturgy, funeral, and burial the following day. He was surrounded by family and friends and monastics who sang his funeral and helped bury him. As the coffin was lowered into the ground, thunder, lightning and torrential rain and hail came down, soaking the mourners! When extraordinary events like this occur, it is a consolation of God's blessing and a strengthening of our hope that our fellow monastic, friend, and father has found favor with God.

--Fr Innocent

New Book Due for Release From Divine Ascent Press

Our own story is the most powerful message we have to share. The story of how God has led us to the true faith is especially memorable, meaningful, and faith-building. Working together with Archpriest David Fontes and a consortium of contributors, we are pleased to be nearly finished with the new book, *Roads Less Traveled*. It is an anthology of 13 different stories of journeys to Eastern Orthodoxy. Please check our website for updates on a release date.

