

## **Joseph of Volotsk (Volokolamsk), abbot, venerable, wonderworker**

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### **Dates of commemoration**

Jul 17 (Church calendar - Jul 4) Synaxis of saints of Tver (movable feast on the 1st Sunday after June 29th)

Sep 04 (Church calendar - Aug 22) Synaxis of all saints of Moscow (movable feast on the Sunday before August 26th)

Sep 22 (Church calendar - Sep 9) Day of repose in 1515

Oct 31 (Church calendar - Oct 18) Day of uncovering of the relics in 2001

### **Life**

Saint Joseph of Volokolamsk, in the world John Sanin, was born on November 14, 1440 (1439 according to another source) in the village of Yazvisch-Pokrov, not far from the city of Volokolamsk. He was born into a pious family with his father named John (in monasticism Joannicius) and his mother Marina (in schema Maria). The seven-year-old boy John was sent to the pious and enlightened Elder Arsenius of the Volokolamsk-Exaltation of the Cross monastery to be educated.

Distinguished by rare qualities and extraordinary aptitude for church service, for one year the talented youth studied the Psalter, and, the following year, the entire Holy Scripture. He became a reader and singer in the monastery church. Contemporaries were astonished at his exceptional memory. Often, without having a single book in his cell, he would do the monastic rule, reciting from memory from the Psalter, the Gospel, the Epistles, and all that was required.

Even before becoming a monk, John lived a monastic lifestyle. Thanks to his

reading and studying of Holy Scripture and the works of the holy Fathers, he dwelt constantly in contemplation of God. As his biographer notes, he "disdained obscene and blasphemous talk and endless mirth from his childhood years."

At twenty years of age John chose the path of monastic striving and, leaving his parents' home, he went off into the wilderness nigh to the Tver Savvin monastery, to the renowned Elder and strict ascetic, Barsanuphius. But the monastic rule seemed insufficiently strict to the young ascetic. With the blessing of Elder Barsanuphius, he set off to Borov to Saint Paphnutius of Borov (May 1), who had been a novice of Elder Nikita of the Vysotsk monastery, who in turn was a disciple of Saint Sergius of Radonezh and Athanasius of Vysotsk.

The simple life of the holy Elder, the tasks which he shared with the brethren, and the strict fulfilling of the monastic rule suited John's spiritual state. Saint Paphnutius lovingly accepted the young ascetic who had come to him, and on February 13, 1460 he tonsured him into monasticism with the name Joseph, thus realizing John's greatest wish. With love and with zeal the young monk shouldered the heavy obediences imposed upon him, in the kitchen, the bakery, the infirmary. Saint Joseph fulfilled this latter obedience with special care, "giving food and drink to the sick, taking up and arranging the bedding, so very anxious and concerned with everything, working, as though attending to Christ Himself."

The great spiritual abilities of the young monk were evidenced in the Church reading and singing. He was musically talented and possessed a voice that "in church singing and reading was like that of a swallow and wondrously harmonious, delighting the hearing of listeners, as much as anyone anywhere." Saint Paphnutius made Joseph ecclesiarch in church, so that he would observe the fulfilling of the Church rule.

Joseph spent about seventeen years in the monastery of Saint Paphnutius. The strict efforts of monastic obedience under the direct guidance of the experienced abbot was for him an excellent spiritual schooling, having educated him into a future instructor and guide of monastic life. Towards the end of the life of Saint Paphnutius, Joseph was ordained hieromonk and, in accord with the final wishes of Saint Paphnutius, he was appointed Igumen of the Borov monastery.

Saint Joseph decided to transform the monastic life along strictly coenobitic principles, following the example of the Kiev Caves, Trinity-Saint Sergius, and Saint Cyril of White Lake monasteries. But this met with strong opposition from a majority of the brethren. Only seven pious monks were of one mind with the igumen. Saint Joseph decided to visit Russian coenobitic monasteries, to investigate the best arrangement for monastic life. He arrived together with the Elder Gerasimus at the Saint Cyril of White Lake monastery, which itself presented a model of strict asceticism on the principles of a coenobitic monastery rule.

His acquaintance with the life of these monasteries strengthened Saint Joseph's views. But, after he returned to Borov monastery at the wish of the prince, Saint Joseph encountered again the former staunch resistance of the brethren to change from their customary rule. Therefore, he resolved to found a new monastery with a strict coenobitic rule, so he took seven like-minded monks to Volokolamsk, his native region, to a forest known to him since childhood.

In Volokolamsk at the time, the prince was Boris Vasilievich, the pious brother of Great Prince Ivan III. Hearing of the virtuous life of the great ascetic Joseph, he gladly received him and allowed him to settle on the outskirts of his principality, at the confluence of the Rivers Struga and Sestra. The selection of this spot was accompanied by a remarkable occurrence: a storm blew down the trees before the eyes of the astonished travelers, as though clearing the place for the future monastery. Here the ascetics set up a cross and built a wooden church in honor of the Dormition of the Mother of God in June 1479, which was consecrated on August 15, 1479. This day and year stand in history as the date of the founding of the monastery of the Dormition of the Most Holy Mother of God as "volok' lamsk" ["broken-up peninsula"], later named after its founder.

The monastery was built rather quickly. Much of the work in the construction of the monastery was done by the founder himself. "He was skilled in every human craft: he felled trees, carried logs, he chopped and sawed wood." By day he toiled with everyone at the construction of the monastery, but spent his nights in solitary cell prayer, remembering always that "Desires kill the sluggard, for his hands do not choose to do anything" (Prov 21:25).

Good reports about the new ascetic attracted disciples to him. The number of monks soon increased to a hundred men, and the venerable Joseph strove to be a good example for his monks in everything. Preaching temperance and spiritual sobriety in all things, his external appearance was no different than the others. His simple, cold-weather rags were his constant clothing, and bast shoes (made from bark) served as his footwear.

He was the first one to appear in church, he read and sang in the choir beside the others, he gave instruction and was the last to leave church. At nights the holy igumen walked around the monastery and the cells, safeguarding the peace and prayerful sobriety of the brethren entrusted him by God. If he chanced to hear a frivolous conversation, he rapped on the door and quietly withdrew.

Saint Joseph devoted much attention to the inner ordering of the life of the monks. He himself led a strict cenobitic life in accord with the Rule he compiled, to which all the services and obediences of the monks were subordinated, and it governed their whole life, "whether in their comings or goings, their words or their deeds." At

the core of the rule was total non-covetousness, detachment from one's own will, and constant work. The brethren possessed everything in common: clothing, footwear, food and other things.

None of the brethren could take anything into their cell without the blessing of the igumen, not even a book or an icon. Part of the trapeza meal of the monks, by general consent, was given away to the poor. Work, prayer, spiritual efforts filled the life of the brethren. The Jesus Prayer never vanished from their lips. Festivity was viewed by Saint Joseph as a chief weapon for demonic seduction. Saint Joseph invariably imposed upon himself quite burdensome obediences. The monastery was occupied with the copying and transcription of Service Books and the writings of the holy Fathers, so that the Volokolamsk book collection soon became one of the finest of Russian monastic libraries.

With each passing year the monastery of Saint Joseph flourished all the more. In the years 1484-1485 a stone church of the Dormition of the Mother of God was built in place of the wooden one. In the Summer of 1485 "artistic masters of the Russian land" painted within it, Dionysius the Iconographer with his sons Vladimir and Theodosius. Saint Joseph's nephews, Dositheus and Bassian Toporkov, participated in the adornment of the new Church. In 1504 a heated church in honor of the Holy Theophany was set up, followed by the establishment of a bell-tower and next to the bell tower, a church named in honor of the Hodigitria (Directress) Icon of the Most Holy Theotokos.

Saint Joseph trained a whole school of renowned monks, some of whom gained notoriety in the arena of church-historical activity since they were "good pastors," while others gained fame with works of enlightenment. Some were remembered as worthy examples of pious monastic struggles. History has preserved for us the names of many disciples and co-ascetics of the holy Volokolamsk igumen, who continued to develop his ideas.

Among the disciples and followers of Saint Joseph were: the Metropolitans of Moscow and All Rus: Daniel (+ 1539) and Macarius (+1563), the Archbishop of Rostov Bassian (+1515), the Bishops of Suzdal: Simeon (+1515), Dositheus of Krutitsa (+1544), Sava of Krutitsa, called the Black, The activity and influence of Saint Joseph were not limited to the monastery. Many laypeople went to him to receive advice. With a pure spiritual insight he penetrated into the deep secrets of the souls of questioners and clairvoyantly revealed to them the will of God. Everyone living around the monastery considered him their spiritual Father and protector. Eminent nobles and princes asked him to be godfather for their children. They revealed their souls to him in confession, they asked for letters of guidance to help them fulfill his directives.

The common folk found at the monastery the means for sustaining their existence

on occasions of extreme need. The number of those fed through monastery resources sometimes approached 700 people. "All of the Volotsk land are inclined to good, enjoying peace and quiet. And the name Joseph, as something sacred, is on everyone's lips."

The monastery was famed not only for its piety and help for the suffering, but also for its manifestations of the grace of God. During Matins of Holy Saturday, the righteous monk Bessarion once saw the Holy Spirit in the form of a white dove, sitting upon the Shroud of the Lord, which was being carried by Saint Joseph. The Abbot, bidding the monk to keep silent about the vision, himself rejoiced in spirit, hoping that God would not forsake the monastery. This monk had seen the souls of dying brethren, white as snow, issuing forth from their mouths. To Saint Joseph himself was revealed the day of his end, and he fell asleep in the Lord with joy, having received the Holy Mysteries and assuming the schema.

The saintly life of Saint Joseph was neither easy nor placid. In these difficult times for the Church in Russia, the Lord raised him up as a zealous defender of Orthodoxy in the struggle with heresies and churchly disputes. Saint Joseph exerted quite a great effort in denouncing the Judaizers, who tried to poison and distort the foundations of Russian spiritual life. Just as the holy Fathers and teachers of the Ecumenical Councils had elaborated on the teachings of Orthodoxy in responding to the ancient heresies (which contended against the Spirit, Christ, or icons), so also Saint Joseph was summoned forth by God to oppose the false teachings of the Judaizers and to compile the first manual of Russian Orthodox theology, his large book *The Enlightener*.

Even earlier, preachers from the Khazars had come to Saint Vladimir (July 15), trying to convert him to Judaism. But the great Baptizer of Rus repudiated the pretensions of the rabbis. After this, Saint Joseph writes, "the Great Russian land dwelt for five centuries in the Orthodox Faith, until the Enemy of salvation the devil, should bring the cunning Jew to the city of Novgorod."

Along with the retinue of the Lithuanian prince Michael Olelkovich, who came to Novgorod in 1470, the Jewish preacher Skhariya (Zachariah) accompanied them. Playing upon the deficiencies of faith and of learning on the part of certain clergy, Skhariya and his accomplices sowed distrust among the petty-minded towards the church hierarchy, inclining them towards a revolt against the spiritual authorities, tempting them with the idea of "self-authority," i.e. a capricious self-determination of each individual in matters of faith and salvation. Those they tempted gradually pushed towards a full break with the Church: they disdained the holy icons, and repudiated the veneration of the saints, basic elements of Orthodox popular morality.

Ultimately, they led the religiously blind and deluded to a denial of the saving

Mysteries and the fundamental teachings of Orthodoxy, outside of which there is no knowledge of God: the teaching of the Most Holy Trinity and the teaching of the Incarnation of the God-man our Lord Jesus Christ. If decisive measures were not taken, "all of Orthodox Christianity would be doomed by heretical teachings." So the question was posed for history. The Great Prince Ivan III, enticed by the Judaizers, invited them to Moscow. He had two of the most prominent of the heretics made archpriests, one at the Dormition, the other at the Archangel Michael cathedrals of the Kremlin, and he summoned to Moscow even the arch-heretic Skhariya himself.

All those close to the prince were led astray by the heresy, beginning with the clerk heading the government, Theodore Kuritsyn, whose brother became a ringleader of the heretics. Even the in-law of the great prince, Elena Voloshanka, accepted the Judaizers. And finally, the heretical Metropolitan Zosimas was installed upon the bishop's Throne of the great Moscow Hierarchs Peter, Alexis and Jonah.

Saint Joseph and Saint Gennadius, Bishop of Novgorod (December 4), called for a struggle against the spread of the heresy. Saint Joseph wrote his first epistle "Concerning the Mystery of the Most Holy Trinity" while still a monk at the Paphnutiev Borov monastery in the year 1477. From the very beginning the Dormition Volokolamsk monastery became a bulwark of Orthodoxy in the struggle against the heresy. Here Saint Joseph wrote his chief works, The Enlightener, engendered with his fiery anti-heretical epistles, or as the monk himself unassumingly called them, "book exercises." The works of Saint Joseph and Archbishop Gennadius were crowned with success. In 1494 the heretic Zosimas was deposed from the bishop's Throne, and in the years 1502-04 the malicious and unrepentant Judaizers, who blasphemed against the Holy Trinity, Christ the Savior, the Most Holy Theotokos and the Church, were condemned at a church council.

Saint Joseph had many other trials and tribulations, but each time the Lord tried him according to the measure of his spiritual strength. The saint angered the Great Prince Ivan III, who only towards the end of his life reconciled with the saint and repented of his former weakness for the Judaizers. The saint also angered the Volotsk appenage prince Theodore, on whose lands Joseph's monastery was situated. In 1508 the saint suffered wrongful interdiction from Saint Serapion, Archbishop of Novgorod (March 16), with whom, however, he soon reconciled.

In 1503, a Council at Moscow, under the auspices of Saint Joseph and his disciples, adopted a "Conciliar Reply" concerning the indissolubility of church properties, "therefore all church-acquired property is essentially the acquired property of God, pledged, entrusted, and given to God." The legacy of the canonical works of Igumen Joseph is notably in "The Nomocanon Codex," a vast

codex of canonical rules of the Orthodox Church, begun by Saint Joseph and completed by Metropolitan Macarius.

There are opinions about the differences of outlook and discord between the two great pedagogues of Russian monasticism at the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth centuries: Saint Joseph of Volotsk and Saint Nilus of Sora (May 7). In the historical literature these views usually present them as proclaiming two "contrary" currents within Russian spiritual life: external action and inner contemplation. This is profoundly incorrect. Saint Joseph in his Rule synthesized these two aspects of the Russian monastic tradition, proceeding without interruption from the Athonite blessing given to Saint Anthony of the Kiev Caves, through Saint Sergius, and down to our own day.

The Rule presupposes the need for a full inner regeneration of man, submitting one's whole life to the task of salvation and deification [Greek theosis] not only for each individual monk, but also for the collective salvation of the whole human race. A great emphasis in the Rule is put on the demand to monastics for constant work in connection with inward and churchly prayer, "the monk should never be on holiday." Work, as "a collective deed," comprised for Joseph the very essence of church life: faith, embodied in good works, is the realization of prayer.

On the other hand, Saint Nilus of Sora had lived the ascetic life for a number of years on Mt. Athos, and he brought from there the teaching about the contemplative life and "the Jesus Prayer" as a means of a hesychastic service of monks to the world, as a constant spiritual activity, in connection with the physical work necessary for sustaining one's life.

But spiritual work and physical work are but two aspects of the same Christian vocation: a vital continuation of the creative activity of God in the world, encompassing as much the ideal as well as the material spheres. In this regard Saints Joseph and Nilus are spiritual brothers, varied in continuing the Church Tradition of the holy Fathers, and are heirs to the precepts of Saint Sergius of Radonezh. Saint Joseph highly regarded the spiritual experience of Saint Nilus and sent his own disciples to him to study inner prayer.

Saint Joseph was also an active proponent of a strong centralized Moscow realm. He was one of the originators of the teaching about the Russian Church as the recipient and bearer of the piety of the Byzantine Empire, "the Russian land has now surpassed all in piety." The ideas of Saint Joseph, possessing tremendous historical significance, were further developed later by his disciples and followers. From them came the Pskov Spaso-Eliazarov monastery Elder Philotheus with his own teaching about Moscow as the Third Rome. He declared, "Two Romes have fallen, Moscow is the third, and a fourth there shall not be."

These views of the Josephites on the significance of monasteries possessing properties for church building, and the participation of the Church in social life, were set amidst the conditions of the struggle for centralized power by the Moscow prince. His opponents were separatists who tried to disparage these views for their own political ends, surreptitiously using the teaching of Saint Nilus of Sora about "non-acquisitiveness," the withdrawal of monastics from worldly matters and possessions.

This supposed opposition engendered a false view on the hostility between the trends of Saints Joseph and Nilus. In actuality, both trends legitimately coexisted within the Russian monastic Tradition, complementing each other. As is evidenced from the Rule of Saint Joseph, its basis was complete non-acquisitiveness, and renunciation of the very concepts of "yours-mine."

The years passed. The monastery flourished with the construction work and efforts of Saint Joseph, and as he got old, he prepared himself for life eternal. Before his end he received the Holy Mysteries, then summoned all the brethren. He gave them his peace and blessing, and peacefully fell asleep in the Lord on September 9, 1515.

The funeral oration to Saint Joseph was composed by his nephew and disciple, the monk Dositheus Toporkov.

The first Life of the saint was written in the 1540s by a disciple of Saint Joseph, Bishop Sava the Black of Krutitsa, with the blessing of Macarius, Metropolitan of Moscow and all Rus (+ 1564). It entered into the Great MENAION Readings compiled by Macarius. A second redaction of the Life was written by the Russified Bulgarian writer Lev the Philolog with the assistance of Saint Zenobius of Otensk (October 30).

Local celebration of Saint Joseph was established at the Volokolamsk monastery in December of 1578, on the hundred year anniversary of the founding of the monastery. On June 1, 1591, the church-wide celebration of his memory was established under Patriarch Job. Saint Job, a disciple of the Volokolamsk saint, tonsured Saint Germanus of Kazan, and was a great admirer of Saint Joseph and was author of the Service to him, which was included in the MENAION. Another disciple of Saints Germanus and Barsanuphius was also the companion and successor to Patriarch Job, the Hieromartyr Patriarch Hermogenes (February 17), a spiritual leader of the Russian people in the struggle for liberation under the Polish incursion.

The theological works of Saint Joseph comprise an undeniable contribution within the treasury of the Orthodox Tradition. As with all Church writings inspired by the



grace of the Holy Spirit, they continue to be a source of spiritual life and knowledge, and they have their own theological significance and pertinence.

Saint Joseph's chief book was written in sections. Its original form, completed at the time of the 1503-1504 councils, included eleven sections. In the final redaction, compiled after the death of the saint and involving a tremendous quantity of scrolls, *The Book against the Heretics* or *The Enlightener* includes sixteen sections, prefaced by *An Account of the Newly-Appeared Heresies*. The first section expounds the Church teaching about the teaching of the Most Holy Trinity; the second, about Jesus Christ, the True Messiah; the third, about the significance within the Church of the prophecies of the Old Testament; the fourth, about the Incarnation of God; the fifth through seventh, about the veneration of icons. In the eighth through tenth sections, Saint Joseph expounds on the fundamentals of Christian eschatology. The eleventh section is devoted to monasticism. In the twelfth the ineffectiveness of the anathemas and sanctions imposed by heretics is demonstrated. The final four sections consider methods of the Church's struggle with the heretics, and the means for their correction and repentance.