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AN AMERICAN *in* TSARIST RUSSIA:

Isabel Hapgood's Meeting with
St. John of Kronstadt

Mathew Namee, Associate Director of The Society for Orthodox Christian History in the Americas¹ writes: "It is difficult, a century later, to understand the fame of St. John. He was the most famous Orthodox priest in the world... and was covered by all the big papers – The New York Times, Chicago Tribune, The Washington Post.... In 1891, The Idaho Avalanche devoted nearly a full column on its front page to a description of St. John. Papers in Wisconsin, Oregon, Ohio, and Georgia wrote about his miracles. The Iowa City Citizen reported that a blind man received his sight at St. John's funeral. The Boston Globe called him Russia's "uncrowned pope." His diary, My Life in Christ, was translated into English and distributed in America. For many Americans, Father Ioann, or Ivan, or John, simply was Orthodoxy. No comparable figure exists today; probably, no comparable figure could exist. The American press reported on St. John like you would expect them to report on a superhero.

...St. John himself took a personal interest in American Orthodoxy, sending money to support the building of St. Nicholas Cathedral in New York City.... If you visit today the cathedral has a great icon of the saints of the cathedral – founders Tikhon and Alexander; those who served there: Raphael, John of Chicago, and Alexis Toth; and their financial benefactors Tsar Nicholas II and St. John of Kronstadt."

In 1895, Episcopalian Isabel Hapgood (1851-1928), a Boston native and translator of French and Russian literature and Orthodox church services² who traveled extensively in Russia, wrote her own profile of St. John – then known as Fr. John Sergieff, pastor of St. Andrew's Church in Kronstadt. The article appeared on August 8, 1895 in The Independent, an American journal published between 1848 and 1921 and is reprinted here:

Father John, of Kronstadt, who prayed with the late Emperor of Russia on his deathbed and comforted his sorrowing family, is one of the most famous men in Russia, in a quiet and peculiar way. So famous is he that Otetz Joann – Father Joann, is no more likely to be mistaken for indicating any other Priest John out of the multitudes who bear that name, than is the man him-

¹ With thanks to Mathew Namee and OrthodoxHistory.org for the use of this article, first posted on Oct. 14, 2009.

² Hapgood's Service Book of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic (Greco-Russian) Church was first published in 1906, with a second edition in 1922 that she hoped would be reviewed and corrected by Patriarch Tikhon, a close friend from his years of service in America. His house arrest prevented any personal or literary contact.

self, after one sight of him, to be mistaken for any other priest. For the last ten years, at least, he has held a unique place in Russian society and Russian hearts. I had something of an experience with him precisely in one of the directions which have rendered him famous and beloved. I confess that I do not yet quite know what to make of it. One day, in an Imperial summer resort about sixteen miles from St. Petersburg, I saw a large crowd assembled in front of a house and gazing with rapt eagerness at the door and at a carriage drawn up before it. Crowds thus gazing are not usual in Russia, except when royalty is expected. But I knew that that house belonged to a merchant, and that royalty would hardly be calling there; moreover, the private equipage, the hansom, did not bear the stamp of even the plainest imperial turnout. On inquiry, I found that "Father Joann, of Kronstadt," was visiting a sick person in the house, and that the people were patiently waiting for a glimpse of him. They were too eager to tell me more, and I was too busy to lie in wait for "an ordinary priest," as I put it to myself. However, I began to ask questions. I heard a very great deal, but was puzzled by the attempt to make even a small part of it fit in with the photographs of the man which I saw everywhere, and to which hitherto I had paid no attention. The pictures represented a man apparently about forty years of age, with long, smooth hair, and none of the waving locks, graceful beard or picturesqueness possessed by many Russian priests. His eyes arrested my attention; they seemed to be light in color, and peculiar in expression. That was all.

What did I hear of him? What did I not hear! And from people of every rank and degree of intelligence. Princesses and countesses assured me that he performed miracles of healing, by a mere touch, that he read one's past at a glance, and foretold the future. Princes and counts – I mention titles by way of labeling ranks and prejudices broadly – declared that he had a way of picking out skeptical and hardened young men in a large company, which he saw for the first time, and not only winning their hearts with a few gentle words, but sending them home repentant and reformed. People in the artistic and literary class hesitated to condemn him, even when they believed in little else. Sisters of Charity, semi-religious, servants, peasants, all devoutly believed in any power which might be ascribed to the man; and many members of all these classes had personal experiences with him to relate in confirmation of their beliefs, or cures, partial or complete, which they had witnessed, to allege in proof. It was regarded as an immense honor to be singled out in a company and addressed by Father Joann; and a friend of

mine told me, in open triumph, that he had once walked up to her and kissed her with a holy kiss. It meant some sort of blessing, but precisely what she had not decided. Not another priest in Russia could have kissed a woman of the highest society in company like that and escaped the natural consequences, much less have been thanked for such a flagrant breach of propriety in general, and in particular, of the propriety which regards the whole priestly class as inferior, a thing apart, not to be invited to dinner with one's first-class friends and the like.

The plain facts, as I eventually sifted them out, were these: Father Joann is a man about twenty years older than he looks. He is a parish priest in Kronstadt, the fortified island about twenty miles from St. Petersburg, where the river Neva enters the Gulf of Finland, and almost opposite the Imperial summer resort, Peterhoff. Whether his wife (all parish priests must be married before they are ordained), weary of his eccentricities and carelessness of material interests, really separated from him, as rumor declared, I do not know.³ His ways with money were – and probably are still – enough to vex a saint. Whatever any one gives him "in Christ's name, for the poor," he takes, and thrusts into his pocket without looking at it. Equally without looking at it, he hands over the whole, be it a fat roll of bankbills, or a few bits of silver, to the next person who begs of him; and his own little stipend goes in the same way. Result – an undeserving, plausible scamp may get a thousand rubles from Father Joann, and a worthy sufferer may get next to nothing. This is regarded by Father Joann's admirers as saintly; but a little mathematics and discrimination would not interfere with the essential quality of his nimbus, as I ventured to remark occasionally, getting plenty of frowns for my hardness of heart.

Several weeks after my first knowledge of Father Joann had prompted my interest, as I have described, I was driving from Oranienbaum palace to the wharf to take the steamer for Kronstadt, when I met a very ordinary looking merchant's wife in a carriage with a priest, also ordinary, I thought – until he looked at me. I was startled – why, I could not tell. I asked, on the steamer, if Father Joann had just come over, and found that the strange priest was really the man in search of whom my trip to Kronstadt in great part had been undertaken, as the forts are inaccessible to visitors, the docks are soon seen, and the town itself is uninteresting. His absence was short, however, and I

³ Ed. Note: Isabel Hapgood's informants were mistaken. Father John's wife, Mat. Elizabeth, served her husband until his repose, guarding his few daily hours of home life for fifty years.

went to early mass to see him officiate. That is considered a rare sight and a privilege, and always attracts great crowds. He was very quiet, very impressive, very "intense." His peculiar eyes, and manner of floating about rather than walking, would have riveted my attention had I never heard about him. The throngs which were waiting for a word with him, and his habit of slipping away to avoid people, suggested to me the advisability of seeking him at his hospital. It is due to Father Joann to say, that his Faith Cure hospital was established by his admirers, not by him, as he lays no claim to miraculous powers. At the hospital I was received by a young priest, who declared that there were no patients on hand; that Father Joann never came there unless someone needed him; but that he might happen to come in at any minute if I were ill, and that he was going to St. Petersburg by the next boat. I have omitted to state that, although nominally attached to the parish in Kronstadt, Father Joann is in such great demand that he is, on the whole, more rarely to be found there than elsewhere; and that when his coming is expected he can take his choice from among the aristocratic carriages whose owners throng to the wharf, in the hope that they might be thus honored....

I sought Father Joann no more. It seemed hopeless. But many months later, I met him in a railway carriage quite unexpectedly, and recognized him at once. His clear, brilliant blue eyes were very searching, but gentle, and in nowise alarming seen thus at short range. He looked through me for a moment, then grasped one of my hands firmly in his, and softly patted me on the shoulder with the other, in an unconventional manner which must have aroused the envy of all the Russians who beheld the scene. After standing thus for what seemed to me a long time under the scrutiny of those eyes, he tightened his clasp on my hand and said: "You will have strength; yes, you will have strength!" Then he blessed me – a voluntary blessing from him is regarded as an honor and prophetic of good fortune – gently refused the hand kiss due him, and clasped both my hands instead. That is a fair and characteristic specimen of a favorable interview with Father Joann, and of his prophecies. Like the prophecies of the Delphic oracle, one has to live through the fate before it is possible to interpret it. Now, so far as my own case is concerned, I can believe that his prophecy has come true, if I choose so to believe. Events have taken place since in which I have required much strength, and in which I have, most unquestionably, had all that Father Joann or the Delphic oracle could have demanded. But, to tell the truth, before guaranteeing the prophetic powers of Father Joann, I should require

some sort of proof that he foresaw precisely that complicated set of circumstances, and foretold the strength precisely in that connection and in no other. Of course, that is just the point which never can be proved; but I am content with having had such a sight of this singular individual. ✚