



Saint John the Merciful, archbishop of Alexandria (November 12)

From *The Synaxarion: Volume 2 – November, December* by Hieromonk Makarios of Simonospetra, published by the Holy Convent of the Annunciation of Our Lady, Ormylia (Chalkidike), 1999.

Saint John was the scion of an illustrious family from Amathus in Cyprus. Urged by his parents, he married and had several children who, as God willed, died in early youth at the same time as his wife. Taking this loss as a call to free himself from every worldly care, John put himself entirely in the hands of God.

On the very day of his consecration as Patriarch of Alexandria in 610, John gathered together all the clergy and officials of the wealthy metropolis of Egypt and sent them to make an exact register of his *Masters*, as he called the poor and beggars, whom God puts in our way so that by giving them alms we will win the Kingdom of Heaven. There were found to be over 7,500 indigent persons in the city. The Patriarch commanded that they were to be fed every day and given the clothes they needed. He often said to God in his prayer, “We will see, Lord, which of us two will win this contest: You, who ever give me good gifts, or I, who will never cease distributing them to the poor. For I well know there is nothing of mine that is not owing to Your mercy, which upholds my life.”

Indeed, the Saint’s compassion for the poor was measureless and his alms-giving boundless, like the waters of the Nile which cover the land of Egypt every year to make it fertile. So he was surnamed the *Merciful*, after his Master Christ, Who is the source of all mercy. He could not encounter a poor or afflicted person without

shedding tears and without taking his sorrow upon himself. Drawing upon the treasure of the Church, he gave without calculation. As Christ has taught us (Luke 6:35), he made no distinction in his giving between the good and the bad, the deserving and the undeserving. On one occasion, a poor man who had already received alms presented himself three times more to the Saint in three different disguises. When this was pointed out to John, he ordered them to give the man twice as much, saying, "Maybe he is Jesus my Saviour who has come on purpose to put me to the test." Yet the greater his alms-giving, without thought for the amount or for the morrow, the more God increased the gifts to the Church, so that the people experienced the truth of the Saviour's promise: *Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on...But seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well* (Matthew 6:25, 33). One of the clergy, appointed to distribute alms by the Patriarch, gave a rich man fallen on hard times only a third of the sum that the Saint had said he was to have, thinking it unreasonable to empty the treasury for one person. But he was put to shame when Saint John revealed to him that a noblewoman who had meant to make a huge gift to the Church, gave in the end, only a third of the amount which she first had intended.

When the Persians invaded the province of Syria in 614 and took the city of Jerusalem with much bloodshed, many refugees made their way to Alexandria. Saint John received them as brethren, comforted them, built hospitals and great hostels for them, and used up all the resources of the Church to feed and maintain them. At the same time, he sent ships laden with grain and other foodstuffs to Palestine, and workmen to rebuild the ruined churches. The sick and needy whom he visited saw the presence of Christ reflected in his person. When anyone tried to thank him for his kindnesses, he would immediately stop the speaker saying, "No more of that, brother! I haven't shed my blood for you yet, which is what the Saviour asks." (John 15:13) Every Wednesday and Saturday he would station himself at his church door, waiting for anyone who might come asking him to settle disputes or to reconcile enemies. No one ever heard him speak an idle word or condemn anyone, even when the sin was plain to see. In fact, he only saw the good or good intentions, presumed that sinners had repented in secret, and took care not to claim for himself the judgement that belongs to God alone. He thanked those who spoke ill of him or who insulted him, for reminding him of his sins, and saw to it that they were given larger alms than the rest. When conversing with the proud, the hard-hearted, and other sinners, the holy Patriarch, greatly desiring their amendment, used to attribute to himself the sins that he wishes to correct in them, and would ask them to pray that he repent of them. With unflinching patience he exhorted the faithful to be humble and to repent by reminding them of the wonders that God has wrought for us in creating the world, in sending His own Son to save us and in having patience with us despite our innumerable sins and offences. But more than by word, he would, like the holy Prophets, convey the

teaching of Holy Scripture by his actions. So, one Sunday as he was serving the divine Liturgy in the Cathedral surrounded by his clergy and the whole people, the Patriarch stopped all of a sudden before the words of consecration, told the deacon to repeat the litanies, and sent to look for one of his clergy who bore him a grudge and had not come to church. When the man appeared, the Bishop bowed to the ground before him in tears and asked his forgiveness. Only upon their reconciliation and embrace did he go back to the altar and proceed with the service, having observed the commandment of the Lord to the letter. (Matthew 5:23)

Saint John loved the monks and went beyond them in asceticism, for all that he had once been a married man. He settled two monastic communities in the neighborhood of his cathedral and provided for their needs himself. He asked them, in return, to pray for him and for the Church during their time of common prayer, and for their own salvation during the remainder of the time in their cells, free of every material concern thanks to the especial care of the Patriarch. In his opulent palace, where there was nothing that he called his own, the Saint inhabited a comfortless cell. Knowing this, a worthy citizen presented him one day with a very expensive bed-cover. That night the Saint was unable to sleep, but kept blaming himself as he thought of all the poor, cold, and hungry people at his door while he lay in luxury. Next day he sold the bed-cover and gave the money away. However, his benefactor happened to come across his present up for sale in the merchant's shop. He bought it again and made John take it back, who sold it once more for charity. As neither of them would give in, the bed-cover passed through their hands a good many times and was the means whereby John indirectly prevailed on the rich man to give away a great fortune to the poor.

Notwithstanding his charity and extreme humility Saint John dealt firmly with the Monophysite heretics. He loved them and did them all the good that he was able, but was unyielding in condemning their errors and in forbidding the Orthodox to worship or to pray with them.

When famine and pestilence ravaged the city, the Saint was the first to comfort the sick and to bury the dead. He exhorted the faithful to pray earnestly for the fallen asleep and took occasion of such times of affliction to remind them of the fragility of our life and of the urgency of repentance. Some years after the fall of Jerusalem, Alexandria, in its turn, was threatened by the Persians. Saint John, at the request of Nicetas the Governor of Egypt, returned to Cyprus where he died in 619 at the age of 64, giving thanks to God for having left him nothing of the very great riches of which he had been given the stewardship for the benefit of the poor. Shortly before his death, there appeared to him the noble virgin that he had first seen at the age of 15. She had told him then that she was Mercy in person, who impelled Christ to take flesh for our Salvation, and she had promised to open the Kingdom of Heaven to John. Some time after his death, a fragrant myrrh flowed from the body of the holy hierarch for the joy and consolation of the faithful.