



St. John the Silent

Born: 8 January 454 at Nicopolis, Armenia

Died: 8 January 558 in Jerusalem of natural causes

Saint John the Silent (January 8, 454 – May 13, 558), also known as St John the Hesi-chast was a Christian saint known for living alone for seventy-six years. He was given the surname because he loved recollection and silence. St. John's feast day is May 13 in the Latin Rite of the Roman Catholic Church, and December 3 in the Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Churches.

Biography

John was born in 454 AD in Nicopolis, Armenia. He came from a family of mainly generals and governors. His parents died when he was eighteen and he built a monastery where he stayed with ten young monks. Under John's direction, they led a life of hard work and devotion. He obtained a reputation for leadership and sanctity, which led the archbishop of Sebaste to consecrate him bishop of Colonia in Armenia. John was only twenty-eight at the time and had no desire to be bishop. John was bishop for nine years then decided to stop due to his desire for secluded life and inability to stop certain evils. Uncertain of his future vocation, he went to Jerusalem.

His biographer says that while John was praying one night, he saw a bright cross form in the air, and heard a voice say to him, "If thou desirest to be saved, follow this light." He saw it move and point out to the Laura (monastery) of St. Sabas. At thirty-eight years old he joined the monastery, which held one hundred and fifty monks. After some tests, St. Sabas let John have a separate hermitage for uninterrupted contemplation. For five days a week he fasted and never left his cell but on Saturdays and Sundays he went to public mass. After three years of this he was made the steward of the Laura.

John had never told anyone he had been bishop so after four years, St. Sabas thought John was worthy to become a priest and presented him to the patriarch Elias of Jerusalem. They traveled to Calvary for the ordination but upon their arrival John requested a private audience with the patriarch. John said, "Holy Father, I have something to impart

to you in private; after which, if you judge me worthy, I will receive holy orders." They spoke in private after a promise of secrecy. "Father, I have been ordained bishop; but on account of the multitude of my sins have fled, and am come into this desert to wait the visit of the Lord." The patriarch was startled but told St. Sabas, "I desire to be excused from ordaining this man, on account of some particulars he has discovered to me." St. Sabas was afraid John had committed a crime and after he prayed, God revealed the truth to him. He complained to John about keeping it from him and John, finding himself discovered, wanted to leave the monastery. St. Sabas convinced him to stay by promising to keep his secret. John stayed in his cell for four years, speaking to no one except the person who brought him necessities.

In 503 AD., certain turbulent disciples forced St. Sabas to leave his Laura. St. John went into a neighboring wilderness, where he spent six years in silence, conversing only with God and eating only the wild roots and herbs which the desert provided. When St. Sabas was brought back to his community, he found John in the desert and convinced him to return. John had become used to speaking only with God and found only bitterness and emptiness in anything else. He treasured obscurity and humility so he wanted to live unknown to men but, he was unable to do so. He returned with St. Sabas and lived in his cell for forty years. During this time, he did not turn people away who desired his instruction. One of these people was Cyril of Scythopolis who wrote about John's life. The two men first met when John was ninety and Cyril was sixteen. Cyril had asked him what to do with his life. John recommended he join the Laura of St. Euthymius but Cyril did not listen. Instead, he went to a small monastery on Jordan's banks. He fell ill there and deeply regretted not listening to John. While there, John appeared to him in a dream and after scolding him for not obeying said that if he returned to St. Euthymius' monastery, he would get well and find his salvation. The next day he did so and was well again. John died in 558 AD at the age of one hundred and four. He lived in solitude for seventy-six years interrupted only for the nine years he was bishop.