

# SAINT JOHN OF DAMASCUS

—Commemorated December 4th—

During the reign of Leo the Isaurian, there was widespread iconoclasm in Constantinople, and this Christ-hating emperor was tormenting many Orthodox Christians who venerated icons with various instruments of torture. At that time, St. John of Damascus (†749 AD) was the chief advisor to the ruler of the Saracen Arabs. When he learned of this, he began to write letters daily and send them to the faithful in Constantinople. In his messages, he proved with irrefutable testimonies that they who do not venerate the holy icons are heretics, atheists, and estranged from Christ the King. When the emperor Leo heard of this, he found a way to acquire one of St. John's letters, which he showed to certain scholars, asking if any of them could copy his handwriting. One of the scholars who was an experienced master of calligraphy assured the emperor that he would forge a letter with script so identical to that of St. John's, that even the Saint himself would not be able to distinguish it from his own penmanship. The wicked emperor then commanded them to forge a letter, supposedly authored by St. John and addressed to himself. The letter read as follows:

“May you live many years, Most Esteemed Emperor! I, your servant John from Damascus, convey the deserved homage to Your Majesty! The purpose of this letter is to advise You that our city is currently undefended, as the majority of the Saracen soldiers are at war. If you decide presently to send a small fleet, you will easily conquer it; and I can help you in any way possible with this campaign because the entire city is under my control.” Having written this and much more, the cunning emperor composed a second letter with his own hand-writing to the Saracen Ruler, containing the following: “To the Most Beloved and Gracious Emir of the City of Damascus, Hail! I have known nothing to be more blessed than mutual love, nor more praiseworthy and pleasing to God than maintaining peaceful relations with others. Thus, I do not wish to ruin the friendship that exists with your Graciousness, despite the fact that one of your close friends has sent me letters repeatedly, pressuring and inciting me to come attack you. To verify the truth of the matter, I am sending you one of his letters, so that you may perceive my genuine affection for you, and also be aware of the author's guile.”

This sly villain sent one of his messengers to deliver these two letters to the foreign Leader, who, upon reading them, became infuriated, and immediately called John and showed them to him. John, in turn, realizing the emperor's deceit, tried to explain that he neither wrote these letters, nor did such a thought ever cross his mind. The ruler, however, remained unconvinced. Overcome with rage, and without giving St. John an opportunity to prove his innocence, he ordered his soldiers to cut off the Saint's right hand. Thus, the hand that was previously stained with ink from the quill pen became covered in its own blood. Then, in order to add insult to injury, it was hung in the marketplace for all to see.

That evening, John sent messengers to request from the Emir that his hand be returned in order to bury it, and thus somewhat soften his pain. The ruler consented and gave the severed hand to them. When St. John received it, he entered his house, fell to the ground prostrate before the holy icon of the Mother of God, and, beseeching her with faith and tears, he uttered, "Purest Lady and Mother, who bore my God, my right hand was severed on account of the holy icons. You know why Leo plotted maliciously against me. Now, rush to my aid and heal me. The right hand of the Most-High, which received flesh from you, works many wonders through your intercessions. May He now heal my right hand through your petition, so that it can compose melodious verses unto you, O Theotokos, and serve as a collaborator of Orthodox worship."

Having prayed in this manner with many tears, St. John fell asleep—at which time the Ever-Virgin appeared (as She was depicted in the icon) and said to him with a tender countenance, "Behold, your hand has been healed. Worry no longer. Turn your hand into a sharp quill of a speedwriter, just as you promised me." At that moment, St. John woke up to find his hand—great is Thy power, O Immaculate Virgin!—intact and re-attached, and his spirit rejoiced in the Lord and His Holy Mother. That entire night he chanted in jubilation odes of thanksgiving to the Lord, and hymns of praise to the Ever-Virgin Mother of God.

The following morning, when the neighbors witnessed the miracle that had occurred, the news quickly spread throughout the city. Certain people driven by hate and jealousy, nevertheless, approached the Emir, claiming that St. John's hand had not been cut off. They insisted that one of his slaves had agreed to have his own hand severed in return for an immeasurable amount of silver.

Consequently, the ruler summoned John to appear before him, in order to examine his hands. When the Saint came forth and displayed the hand that had been severed, the ruler noticed the scar line (which the Panagia allowed to remain as irrefutable testimony of the amputation) and asked John, “Which doctor healed you, and what medicine did he use?” Then, with a loud and gleeful voice, the saint freely proclaimed the miracle: “My Almighty Lord, Who has the power to do as He wills.” The Emir then responded, “Forgive me, my dear sir, for it appears that you are innocent, and you were not at fault in this matter. I condemned you unjustly. Receive your former position of honor as my chief advisor, and I promise never to do anything without your consent.” St. John, though, fell at his feet, begging the Emir to allow him to depart in order to labor for his Benefactress, as She had instructed him. After trying at length to convince him to stay, the ruler finally agreed and gave John permission to go wherever he wished. Having thanked the Emir, John then distributed his wealth to the poor, freed his slaves, and became a monk at the monastery of St. Savva, where he submitted himself to a strict and austere elder. From the very onset, his elder instructed him (according to the principles of monasticism) to completely cut off his own will, and never to do anything—not even to chant a hymn—without a blessing.

One day, a certain monk from the monastery, who was bereaved on account of his brother’s death, asked St. John to compose a consoling funeral hymn to help soothe his sorrow. John was reluctant lest he offend his elder; however, finally overcome by the monk’s repeated pleading, he drafted a melodious hymn that began thus, “All the affairs of men are vanity,” and subsequently he chanted it. At that moment, the elder happened to be passing by. When he heard his disciple chanting, he was scandalized to such an extent that he expelled the Saint from the monastery for his disobedience. St. John fell at the feet of his elder, pleading for forgiveness, but the elder refused to consent. On account of the fervent requests of the monastery’s superiors, however, he eventually gave in and agreed to take back St. John, as long as he was willing to clean the latrines used by the monks. St. John, recognizing the value of obedience, immediately complied. When the elder witnessed his

submissiveness, he received him again and ordered him to maintain silence, as before.

Sometime later, the Panagia appeared to the elder in his sleep and said the following to him, “Why have you closed off such a wonderful fountain, which gushes forth sweet and refreshing water? Allow the spring to fill the entire earth, to flow into heretical seas and convert them into superb, sweet freshwater. He will imitate the Cherubic hymns, correctly set forth the dogma of the Orthodox Faith, and reveal the deceit of all heresies.”

Having witnessed this vision wherein such secrets were revealed to him, he called the Saint and declared, “Oh, obedient child of Christ! Open your mouth in truth and in dogma, and speak the words which the Holy Spirit has inscribed within your heart. You have humbled yourself beyond measure. Therefore now climb the mount of the Church and raise your voice in strength—for the Mother of God has informed me of great and glorious things concerning you! Please forgive me if I have offended you in any way, for I unknowingly impeded you.” Henceforth, St. John compiled beautiful canons, harmonious hymns, and various festive sermons in honor of his benefactress the Panagia, with which he magnificently adorned the Orthodox Church. Thus, leading a virtuous and extraordinary life, he reposed in the Lord, to Whom is due all glory and power unto the ages. Amen.