

SAINT NIKON, THE PREACHER OF REPENTANCE

—Commemorated November 26—

Saint Nikon was born during the first quarter of the 10th century in Pontos. Although his parents were prominent and wealthy people, and all of life's comforts were readily accessible to Nikon from youth, he consciously declined to enjoy these worldly pleasures and, instead, chose to live with modesty and abstinence. Rather than playing games and taking part in activities with other children of his age, he chose to spend his time in church, listening to the services, and conducting himself with dignified demeanor.

Exercising such Christian virtues, Nikon's heart was slowly set ablaze with the love of God, and he began to feel his soul drawn to the angelic way of life; that is, monasticism. One day, when he was in his late teens, his father sent him to supervise a group of workers in certain fields they owned. When Nikon witnessed the peasants working laboriously, he was moved to compassion for them and simultaneously became profoundly aware of the vanity of this present life.

“O, how deceitful this present life is!” he thought to himself. ***“Truly, every person is troubled in vain. Blessed are they who have abandoned everything on account of the Lord, in order to attain the eternal goods that He has promised. What will a man profit if he acquires and is able to enjoy the entire world, but ends up losing his soul? All of man's glory is like a flower. When the flower dries up, it withers and falls. The word of the Lord, however, remains unto the ages.”***

At that moment, Nikon felt compelled to fulfill his long-standing desire for monasticism. Fully cognizant of the decision he was making, he raised his eyes and heart to heaven and said:

“Lord Jesus Christ, my God, the true Light, Who descended to the earth for our salvation and simultaneously did not leave the bosom of the Father, become the protector of your unworthy servant, and guide me along the straight path leading to Your heavenly dwellings. For you, O Lord, are the source of every good thing, and You desire every person to attain the knowledge of truth and salvation. Please do not abandon me, because I

have placed my hope in You alone, my God and Savior, and I will bless, glorify, and magnify You unto the ages.”

Having prayed in this manner, Nikon abandoned his homeland, and straightaway set out on foot—all alone—toward an unknown destination. The Grace of God, however, invisibly accompanied Nikon, and led him to a monastery named Golden Rock that was situated upon a mountain summit. As soon as he encountered it from the distance, Nikon was filled with inexpressible joy and gratitude, and raised his hands in prayer:

“Lord God Jesus Christ, Who commanded Patriarch Abraham to abandon his native land and his paternal home and to relocate to the region You appointed, You have also led me the unworthy one through Your infinite providence and power to this place, in order that I may be saved. I beseech You, therefore, reveal everything about me to the Abbot of this Monastery, and through him show me the path to salvation. In this manner I, your servant, will know that You have looked favorably upon me, and that You are with me, O blessed Lord unto the ages. Amen.”

The Monastery of the Golden Rock at that time had a very virtuous Abbot, who possessed, amongst other spiritual gifts, the gift of clairvoyance. As Nikon was praying from a distance, the Holy Spirit simultaneously revealed everything about him to the Abbot, who at that moment was serving the Divine Liturgy within the Monastery’s chapel. The Abbot immediately paused the Liturgy, and, to the great surprise of all the monks who were in attendance, he quickly exited in order to greet Nikon. When the two met, the Abbot embraced Nikon, whom he also called by name, and in following, accompanied by all the fathers of the brotherhood, the Abbot led Nikon into the chapel, and tonsured him a monk at the conclusion of the Divine Liturgy.

Thereafter, Nikon gave himself to serving the monastery, eagerly and tirelessly carrying out all the tasks appointed to him without fail. He would carry wood and water, and he also prepared food for the monastic community, all the while never missing any of the divine services. He himself would eat only a piece of stale bread once a week, while his drink consisted of water alone. This super-human struggle, which he continued for two years, not only caused all the monks of the sacred brotherhood to marvel, but also prompted the Abbot to moderate

Nikon's austere diet and labors, lest he become ill and die prematurely. Thus, the Abbot built a hut for Nikon a small distance from the Monastery, and having relieved him of all his duties, he allowed him to remain therein, to lead a life of prayer and solitude.

Certain fathers from the brotherhood who would visit him from time to time were astounded and awestruck when they witnessed his forcefulness to acquire virtue, his persistence in prayer, his profound compunction and contrition of heart, his lamentations and heartfelt sighs, and the ceaseless streams of tears flowing from his eyes. The Abbot, desiring to ascertain the cause of Nikon's lamenting and weeping asked him one day: ***"My child, as you know, there is nothing I do not know about you. I am not aware of anything you have done that warrants so many tears and grief. What, therefore, is the cause of your ceaseless sorrow, and what is the reason of your endless sighs and tears?"*** To this, Nikon replied with simplicity and modesty: ***"I, the lowly and wretched one, lament and cry for two reasons, venerable Father. First, because I have not yet been deemed worthy of beholding the beauty and blessedness of the eternal riches with the eyes of my soul. And since I am still bound by an earthly and mortal body, I fear lest I do not attain this in the next life either. Second, I feel great compassion and pity for the people who foolishly squander their paternal inheritance in debauchery and prodigality, who are focused entirely on earthly matters, and who prefer transient and unstable things instead of eternal and incorrupt riches. And when I consider how they deprived themselves of all the heavenly goods, I regard their misfortune as my own. These are the reasons for my excessive sorrow, lamenting, and tears."*** Having heard this reply, the Abbot realized that Nikon had been granted an abundance of divine grace, in order to love, empathize with, and concern himself for his fellow human beings. Astounded by this great measure of love, the Abbot sent up doxologies to the Lord, and henceforth permitted Nikon to continue his ascetical struggles unhindered.

Nikon lived in this manner for twelve years since becoming a monk. Throughout this time, his family never went looking for him. This was undoubtedly an act of God's divine providence, Who wanted to give Nikon the time to become perfected prior to sending him to enlighten His people. However, when the

fulfillment of time had arrived, Nikon's father suddenly decided to search for him, and bring him back to his home. Having set out with his other children and servants, and after exploring the surrounding regions, they decided to make their way toward the Monastery of the Golden Rock. In the meantime, through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, both the Abbot and Nikon were informed of his father's imminent arrival. Fearing that his father may take him away from the monastery by force, and uncertain of the potential consequences, Nikon went to the Abbot and with tears begged him to grant him permission to depart from the monastery before his father showed up.

To this, the Abbot replied:

“My child, it is not up to me to decide if you will leave the Monastery. This is a decision that has been made by the divine providence of God, Who deemed you worthy of becoming equal to an apostle, and Who has prepared the salvation of many through you. Therefore, my child, you should be grateful to Him Who rendered you an honorable and select vessel, like the Apostle Paul, and Who revealed both to you and myself the imminent arrival of your father. Therefore, go in peace. Since your departure from us is in according to God's will, it is necessary for me to give you some useful advice and guidance; hence, please do not disregard what I am about to say, but listen carefully.

“The struggle you will undertake, my child, is difficult. You are not going to wage war against men but against the rulers and principalities of this present dark age. Hence, your struggle is spiritual in nature. One must be properly armed in order to begin such a spiritual battle and fight... You will journey like an evangelist. You will carry with you neither a bag nor silver in your belt. Your garment will be of camel hairs and it will reach half-way down your legs. Your diet will be simple and consist of only bread and water. You will preach saying: ‘Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand. Learn to do good. Return to the Lord and seek Him with all your heart, so that you may acquire the eternal, heavenly goods.’ This will be your armor, and this is how you will preach. On account of this you will be given the honorary title of ‘the preacher of repentance,’ a name you will be known by both in this life and after you die.”

When the Abbot finished prophesying all these things to Nikon, they embraced one another and Nikon quickly departed from the Monastery. Shortly thereafter, Nikon's father arrived at the Monastery. He and his followers dismounted their horses and began a thorough search of the Monastery in hopes of discovering his son. When he realized that he was toiling in vain, he and his followers mounted their horses and rode off in the direction that Nikon had taken.

Their stopover at the Monastery had afforded Nikon the opportunity to make it to a nearby river named Parthenios. However, at that particular time of the year, the river was flooded from the melting snow and the water level had risen to the point where there was no way to gain access to the other side. As Nikon contemplated what to do, he started to hear the gallop of horses in the distance. Confronted with this dilemma, Nikon made the sign of the cross and jumped into the raging river—at which point, a great miracle occurred. The Mother of God appeared upon surface of the water, and, grabbing him by his right hand, she carried him to the other side of the river bank, without even a drop of water getting on Nikon. She also gave him a Cross fabricated from steel, which he fastened to the top of his staff, and which he henceforth always had with him.

When his father and his father's companions reached the edge of the river, they became disheartened. Even though they repeatedly examined the area, they realized that there was no way they could cross over the river. As they stood bewildered as to how Nikon had been able to get to the other side, Nikon turned to his father and brothers, greeted them, prostrated himself to them three times, and then quickly fled, disappearing into the distance.