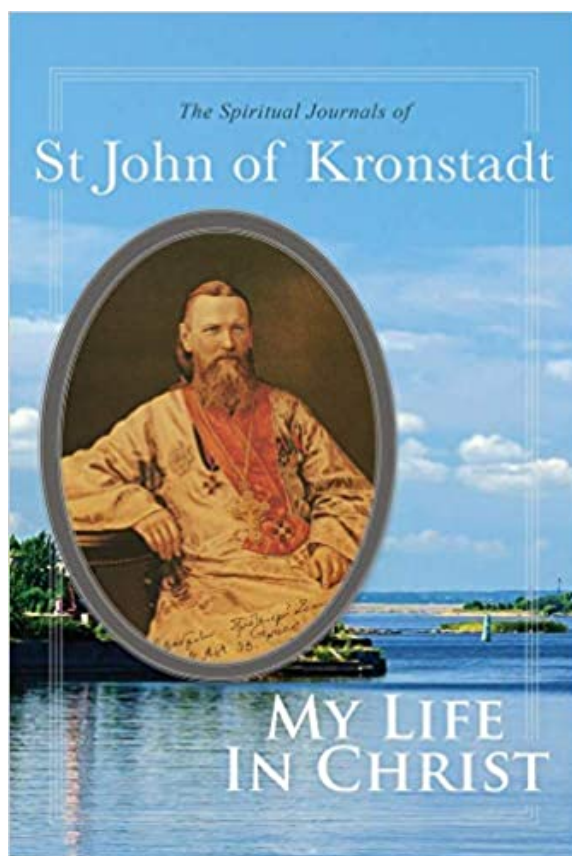


The Soul of a Saint

My Life in Christ: The Spiritual Journals of St. John of Kronstadt.

Edited by Nicholas Kotar, Translated by E.E. Goulaeff.

Jordanville, NY: Printshop of St. Job of Pochaev, 2015.



*Reviewed by:
Thomas Barton*

One charm about Father John is his broadness. While orthodox in the essential meaning of that word, he makes no distinction between those that follow his and other beliefs. He bestows his blessing on all alike, for he recognizes as divine every channel through which a devout spirit and a realization of the highest life can flow into the human soul.

– St. Alexander Hotovitzky

This charm that the martyr St. Alexander speaks of, this broadness, the ability to recognize the ways in which humanity acts as a channel for divine grace, is only possible because first and foremost the great Saint of Kronstadt was such a channel. Indeed, one cannot read his monumental work, “My Life in Christ,” taken from his spiritual journals, without coming to understand that this great man had God’s grace flowing through him. Every passage speaks of a depth of faith, a simplicity of understanding, that few of us could hope to achieve. And more than this, there is true knowledge which is held within this beautiful work, a knowledge of the workings of the human soul which one can

imagine St. John won through the hard work of repentance and self-knowledge, which enabled him to speak and guide the many faithful who flocked to him for counsel. In knowing himself and the workings of God in his life the way he did, he was able to share that knowledge with others. Moreover, it is just this knowledge that sets apart this work from many other works of the Saints. For while the Church in her infinite treasury has bequeathed us with saintly lives and counsels, in “My Life in Christ,” we get to bear witness to something exceedingly rare: the inner workings of the soul of a Saint.

The book itself is beautiful. Bound in green cloth bordered by vines and blossoms, it speaks of Pentecost and the greening of our Temples which reminds us of the life-giving and fructifying power of the Holy Spirit. The weight of it in your hands inspires one to search the depths held within. The pages are clean, and the quality of the paper speaks for itself. The whole apparatus speaks of a work of love painstakingly undertaken, and the care given to the work as an *object* matches the beauty of the words and thoughts it holds. One minor complaint would be the lack of a dustjacket, but that is simply splitting hairs. The book is a joy aesthetically, something that is often lost in modern publishing. Dostoevsky said, “beauty will save the world.” Here we have beauty abundant, flowing out to us across time from the soul of our beloved St. John.

This interiority radiates through every passage and gives the work an intimacy that heightens its meaning and gives weight to its guidance. One almost feels as if they are sitting right next to St. John, listening attentively as he joyously shares what he has learned from a life lived in service to God and neighbor. The book welcomes us like an old friend, a confidant, a mentor who seeks the best for those placed in his care. And in its richness, subtleties of texture, and openness of feeling, it provides the reader with insights that touch upon almost every aspect of the spiritual life, as a perusal of the index at the end of the book will instantly show. This is a blessing in and of itself, as one can search through this immense text and find passages for whatever question may be pressing upon their soul. Deacon Nicholas Kotar has done the Orthodox faithful a great service in editing this text, allowing us to easily search through the many topics and thoughts that St. John covers.

More than this, there are many passages within the work that function as a commentary on Scripture; and here Deacon Nicholas Kotar has again blessed us, providing a Scriptural Index in addition to the Subject Index, allowing for an easy search of the scriptural references made, which are beyond plentiful. The genius of St. John here is not found in an erudite exegesis, which he was obviously more than capable of, but in his ability to personally apply Scripture to himself and those whom he seeks to counsel. He is constantly seeking to work out his salvation through the application of scriptural texts and his wrestling with their meanings and how they speak to the soul of man. In doing so, St. John shows himself to be an expert psychologist in the truest sense of the word. An example picked more or less at random:

In our thoughts, hearts, and wills, a supernatural, evil power lives and acts, every day and every moment endeavoring to estrange us from God, suggesting sinful thoughts, desires, worries, intentions, actions, exciting the passions, and forcibly instigating us to them, inspiring malice, envy, covetousness, pride, ambition, vanity, slothfulness, disobedience, obstinacy, deceit, and impermanence. To love God means to fulfill His commandments: *“If anyone loves Me, he will keep my word... He who does not love Me, does not keep My words...”* (303).

And again:

What would happen if everyone were to notice all their neighbors' iniquities? Eternal animosity and discord, for who is without sin? Therefore, we are commanded to forgive all those who trespass against us, for if the Lord will be quick to mark our iniquities, who of us still stands before His justice? *“For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you”...* We stand before the altar of love in the presence of Incarnate Love Himself, but we have no love for each other. How strange it is! And we do not even care about this. But love will not come of itself without our zeal, efforts, and activity (229).

Note the use of the plural pronoun in the above passages. This is typical of St. John in his writings, never pointing the finger, never accusing others of what he does not recognize in himself. And, of course, this very recognition of the workings of his own soul allows him to speak so deeply to us in our despair and sin. In his application of Scripture, he paves the way for us to enter into communion with the living Word of God Himself. In his laying bare of his soul,

he calls us to lay bare ours before the altar of God so that grace may transform us beyond the image of He who created us into the likeness we lost through the sin of Adam. If St. Anthony the Great entered the desert not just for his salvation but for the salvation of the world, then the same must be said about the reasons for St. John picking up his pen.

In his *Stromata*, Clement of Alexandria speaks of Christians holding the true *gnosis*. The true knowledge of God. This gnosis, according to Clement, is something that can only be revealed by faith. This is one of the reasons the gnostics went astray. Knowledge could only be arrived at through the workings of faith in a person's life, because true knowledge of God relies upon His self-revelation, not upon our speculation or through arcane, esoteric practice. God reveals Himself to the humble heart that seeks Him and believes rightly in all He has declared through his prophets, apostles, and saints. Something of this knowledge comes through in the writings of St. John of Kronstadt. And if the idea may pose a hazard, it nevertheless must be said that in some of the passages of this work St. John is bordering upon the revelatory, as if God Himself were causing the ink to flow across the page.

One can image our Lord answering St. John's fervent prayer:

Take me captive, Lord, in the sweet captivity of Your Holy Spirit, so that my words may flow "*as streams in the south*"... for Your glory and for the salvation of Your people! Grant me this sweet and powerful inner impulse to write down all of these spiritual visions and feelings! Let "*my tongue be the pen of a ready writer*"... of the All-holy Spirit! (469).

This focus on the deep things of God, this complete devotion to our Lord expressed through the writings found in this work, grace every word which decorates these pages. Open the book randomly, and you will find truth. Let the pages fall where they may, and you will be edified. It is almost as if what is laid bare here is not just the soul of St. John, but its complete consummation in the Risen Lord. A consummation which speaks to us of the depth of love which Christ gives to us, and which enables us to love in turn. And it is this very love of Christ which gives such great life to St. John's words. His devotion to God, his searching out things hidden and divine, his great knowledge of the workings of the human heart, resonate with us today because we recognize the

authenticity of St. John's yearning, a yearning which lives within all of us, and which can be awakened and deepened through reading these spiritual journals.

And here we come to the greatest gift which this towering saint has left us: The image of whom we are meant to be. If we let it, "My Life in Christ" acts as a mirror, reflecting to us both our sinfulness as well as the divinity which we can attain through union with God in Christ. Here we will find our fears and insecurities, our doubts and errors, our petty viciousness. We will see how short we fall. But we will also see what it is possible to attain. We will see the love we are capable of. The hope which we can kindle for others. The service we can provide, and the sacrifices we can make. If we open our hearts and minds to the truth expressed in these pages, we can learn to see beyond our fallenness to what God has always intended us to be: men and women who become lights of the world through participation in *the* Light of the World. Thus, ultimately, what is written here is hope. Hope for all of us who have made the decision to shoulder our cross and walk the long road towards the Kingdom of God. Many saints have gone before us to provide an example. In St. John of Kronstadt we have more than this; we have a soul laid bare for all to see, and the unique gift of ink as blood given to the world for its edification. We should read with care. We just may be moved to give our own.

About the reviewer: Thomas Barton is a parish president of the Holy Trinity Church in Springfield, Vermont, U.S.A.