



*St. John Kukuzeles*

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*Commemorated October 1*

*Now unto the Mother of God does thou chant on high, Together with the immaterial hosts, O blessed John.*

John Kukuzelis was born in Dyrrachium, the birthplace of the Great Justinian, in Macedonia, probably during the twelfth century. His father died while he was still a child, and his devout mother placed him in school to learn to read and write and to chant. It so happened that he was noticed during a search for talented students and accepted into the school of the imperial court in Constantinople. Here he attracted the attention of the Emperor Comnenos and his court because of his exceptionally fine voice, comely appearance and native talent. Soon he surpassed all his school mates and eventually became the principal chanter for the court.

It was during his school years that he received the nick-name Kukuzelis. Because he was of Bulgarian birth, when he entered the imperial school he did not know the Greek language very well. Once his class-mates asked him what he had eaten for lunch. He replied, "Beans and greens," using the Greek word for broad beans, "kukia", and the Slavic word for greens, "zelie"; hence the name coined first in jest by his school mates, Kukuzelis.

The young John was constantly being showered with flattery and all kinds of favors because of his very moving chanting and his modesty. But in the midst of all this, his heart was burdened with a sense of secret sorrow which he himself could not explain, and this was coupled with an indifferent attitude towards the pleasures of life. John was languishing among all the charms of the court, among all the bright and promising hopes for the future, and he languished all the more, because he had no bosom friend to whom he could reveal his sorrow, who could sympathize with him and alleviate his sorrowful yearning.

His sufferings were multiplied when he learned that the Emperor had decided to marry him into a wealthy family. The very thought that because of the temporal delights of life he could lose the joy of the Kingdom of God so distressed the young John that he made up his mind that surely he must run away from the capital and hide himself in some remote desert hermitage. God beheld the purity of his intentions and came to his aid in realizing them.

When the chaste young John thus grew weary of the life at court and was thinking of a way to escape, the abbot of the Grand Lavra on Mount Athos arrived in Constantinople on monastery



*The Great Lavra on the Holy Mountain of Athos, where the "angel-voiced" St. John struggled in the ascetic life*

business. It so happened that John saw this elder and his young heart trembled with joy. In his childish and innocent way he admired the reverent appearance of his visitor from the Holy Mountain. He made his acquaintance, revealed his thoughts and intentions to him and asked for his instructions. When the elder not only approved but even blessed them, John followed almost in his footsteps when he left the capital to return to Athos.

Exchanging the fine silken garments of the court for a hair shirt and a pilgrim's staff, John soon appeared at the gates of the

Grand Lavra. When the gatekeeper inquired where he was from and what he wanted, John replied that he was a simple shepherd and that he wanted to become a monk.

"You are too young yet," the gatekeeper remarked.

"It is good to take on the yoke of the Lord in one's youth," John meekly replied and began to beg to be presented to the abbot. The gatekeeper took him to the abbot, who was happy to accept him, because he was in need at that time of a shepherd to look after the goats.

After a short period of trial, John was tonsured and assigned the duty of looking after the monastery's flocks on the mountain pastures. This duty, which was completely new for him, overjoyed the devout young chanter. He went off with his flock into the depths of the Athonite wilderness, where his favorite occupation was meditation and prayer.

In the meantime the Emperor learned that his favorite chanter had run away. He was deeply hurt and sent special agents off to search everywhere for the young chanter. But being hidden by God, John remained totally unknown in spite of the fact that the Emperor's agents came to Mount Athos and were even in the Grand Lavra of St. Athanasius. No one could imagine that the poor shepherd in worn and tattered rags was a favorite of the imperial court.

Quietly and peacefully John passed his days and years in the desert; he could not get his fill of joy from his new circumstances. Once, when he was in a state of compunctionate and deep thought, he sat with his peacefully grazing flock. His thoughts went back over all his past life and his heart trembled with the sense of a living gratitude to God and His all-hymned Mother for Their providence concerning him.

After looking about to make certain there was no one else in that wilderness that could hear him, John began to chant. Just as before, the divine words of the hymns and his angelic voice resounded in graceful melodies, but now they echoed through the wild desert heights of Athos. John was deeply moved and he chanted with all his skill and to his heart's content.

However, there was a certain hermit, who lived secretly inside a cave in a nearby cliff. Suddenly this desert-dweller heard the most beautiful chanting ringing through that secluded wilderness. Quietly he came out of his cave and started to investigate where the chanting was coming from. Finally he discovered that the sweet sounds of the angelic chanting, which moved him to tears and brought his compunctionate soul into a state of special grace, was coming from a shepherd looking after a flock of goats. The desert-dweller was even more astonished when he noticed that the goats were not grazing under the melodious sounds of their shepherd's voice; these dumb beasts with bated breath encircled their shepherd and stood immovably staring before him, as if they were hypnotized or charmed by his angelic, rather than human, voice.

When he saw all this, the desert dweller made his way to the lavra and told the abbot about the marvelous shepherd and his extraordinary chanting, John was summoned from his secluded wilderness. "I adjure you by God," said the abbot severely, "!."Tell me the truth. Are you the court chanter John Kukuzelis who is being sought out by the Emperor?"

Falling at the abbot's feet, John begged his forgiveness, uttering through tears, "I am an unworthy sinner and I beg you with all my heart: let me remain with those same duties you assigned to me at the beginning. Let me look after the goats, so the Emperor will not find out about me."

The abbot could scarcely recognize in this pale and emaciated shepherd with his down-cast gaze the imperial favorite whom he had spoken with in Constantinople, a youth in his prime with a vibrant and captivating appearance. The abbot heeded his tearful request and left him to tend the goats as before.

However, the abbot was afraid the Emperor might hear some rumor about the discovery of this

goat-herd chanter. So he set out for Constantinople and personally appeared before the Emperor.

"Have mercy, O sovereign, on your slave!" the elder cried out, kissing the feet of his monarch. "In the name of God, Who seeks the salvation of each and every one of us, I beg you, listen with fatherly condescension to my petition and grant it, so that God will fulfill all your desires in His good pleasure!"

Moved by the sincere and subject humility of the elder, the Emperor lifted him up and kindly asked, "Father, what is it that you want from me?"

"Forgive me, my sovereign, if I am bold before your Majesty! My request is insignificant for you to grant it. It is easy for you and there is nothing that can stop you except your own word. Moreover by granting it you will provide consolation and joy for the very angels and a great boon for my lavra."

"What is it that you want?" the Emperor gently replied. "Tell me and I will grant you everything."

"Your kingdom is sacred," the abbot reverently remarked. "It cannot be changed."

"Exactly, exactly, my father," the Emperor said, touched by the simplicity of the old monk. "What is it that you want?"

"I beg and beseech your Majesty to grant me one of your subjects who is seeking his eternal salvation and is praying for your Majesty. Nothing else," said the abbot, and fell silent.

"At your pleasure," the Emperor smiled with relief. "And what is his name?"

"First you must assure me in writing that you will release him to me," said the abbot, and then added timidly, "He is already in our lavra and has been tonsured to the angelic schema."

The Emperor commanded that the necessary documents be drawn up and affixed his signature. "His name is John Kukuzelis."

"Kukuzelis!" the Emperor exclaimed, and tears rolled from his eyes and fell on his royal breast. Then the abbot related everything in detail about John. The Emperor listened attentively and finally cried out with emotion, "I miss my favorite chanter! I miss my dear John! But if he has already been tonsured, there is nothing I can do. The salvation of his soul is what is most important. Let him pray for my salvation and for my kingdom."

The elder blessed the Lord and his merciful sovereign and joyfully returned to his lavra. Thus John was given his freedom to continue hymning the King of the heavens unimpeded.

Soon he received the blessing from the monastery to build himself a cell dedicated to the Archangels. Here he spent six days of the week in solitude. On Sundays and other feast days he came to the monastery's main church, where he took his place on the right choir and chanted with compunction along with the other chanters.

Once he chanted with particular inspiration on the Saturday of the Akathist Hymn. After the vigil he sat in one of the stalls on the choir opposite the icon of the Theotokos before which the akathist hymn had just been chanted. Because he was tired he fell into a light sleep.

Suddenly he heard a meek voice say, "Rejoice, John!" He looked, and there in a glow of heavenly light the Theotokos was standing before him. "Chant unto me and never stop chanting," she continued. "For this I will never abandon you."

At these words the Theotokos placed in John's hand a gold coin and then disappeared. John woke up and saw that there actually was a gold coin in his right hand. Tears of sincere gratitude flowed from the eyes of the chanter. He wept and blessed the unspeakable mercy and blessing he

had received from the Queen of Heaven. The gold coin was placed on the icon of the Theotokos before which John had chanted and been granted this heavenly vision. Amazing miracles were worked by this icon which to this day is kept in a chapel just inside the main gates of the Grand Lavra.



From that time John carried out his duties in the choir even more fervently than before, and he was never absent from the right choir. However, because of his ascetic feats in his cell as well as from standing at the long services in church, his legs swelled up and were covered with infected sores full of maggots. But John did not suffer long. Once again, just as before, the Theotokos appeared to him in a light sleep and quietly told him, "From now on, be healthy!" The sores vanished and the grateful John spent the remainder of his days in astounding labors of the ascetic life, in fastings and vigils. He was especially gifted with deep humility.

St. John was spiritually enlightened to such a degree that he was found worthy to learn the hour and day of his death. He bid a tender farewell to all the brethren who came to him and after asking to be buried in the church of the Archangels, which he had built himself, with a blessed smile on his prayerful lips, he passed away to the Lord on the first day of October.

Now he dwells in the heavens together with the choirs of the angels and with lips no longer earthly and corruptible he is never silent in glorifying the Ever-glorified, unto Whom from us also be honor and glory and thanksgiving unto the ages of ages. Amen.

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Sources: *Athonite Patericon* (in Russian) and the *Great Synaxarion* (in Greek)