

Saint Theophan the Recluse

On January 23rd (the 10th by the old calendar) the Church commemorates the holy Russian hierarch

St. Theophan was born Georgiy Vasilyevich Govorov on January 10, 1815 in the Chernavskoye village of the Yeletsk county in the Orlov province. The young Georgiy received his primary education at home. In 1823 he entered a religious school, while in 1829, as one of the school's top students, he was transferred to the Orlov Seminary. The latter was headed by Archimandrite Isidor, who later became a well-known hierarch of the Russian Orthodox Church. After graduating from the seminary with top honors in 1836, Georgiy Govorov was assigned to the Kiev Theological Academy. In his last year of study Georgiy Govorov decided to dedicate himself entirely to serving the Church in a monastic capacity. In 1841 he was tonsured a monk with the name of Theophan, was subsequently ordained a hierodeacon, and soon afterwards became a hieromonk. In that same year Hieromonk Theophan graduated from the academy among its top students and began his service in the pedagogical field in various religious schools and academies. In this endeavor he showed himself to be a talented educator and a wonderful teacher. Being aware that the spiritual education of youth constitutes a great responsibility before God, Father Theophan tried to treat the future pastors primarily with kindness, love, and meekness.

Hieromonk Theophan was deeply dedicated to Christian education; however, he was also greatly attracted to solitary monastic life. Soon an opportunity arose to satisfy the spiritual yearnings of Father Theophan. In 1847, at his own request, he was appointed a member of the Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem. His 6-year sojourn in the East had great spiritual and moral significance for Hieromonk Theophan. Visiting the ancient monasteries, he indefatigably studied the writings of the Holy Fathers from ancient manuscripts and became acquainted with the monastic rules and lives of the ancient ascetics of Eastern monasteries and holy Mount Athos. The young ascetic established close spiritual ties with the Athonite elders, who had a benign influence on the direction of his spiritual life and later promoted the publication of his writings. In 1853 the Crimean War began, and in 1854 the members of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission were recalled from Jerusalem to Russia. For his labors in the mission Hieromonk Theophan was promoted to the rank of archimandrite and subsequently appointed to the position of dean of the St. Petersburg Theological Academy. In this position Father Theophan also engaged intensely in editorial and theological work.

In 1859 Archimandrite Theophan was ordained Bishop of Tambov. Bishop Theophan's hierarchical service in the Tambov diocese lasted only four years. In that time, however, with his extraordinary meekness of nature, rare gracefulness, and sympathetic attention to the needs of his flock he succeeded in earning universal and quite sincere love. Bishop Theophan proved to be a zealous hierarch in all spheres of church life. In days of sorrow and in peacetime he was a loving father to all. Despite his numerous and diverse affairs and concerns in the ruling of his diocese, Bishop Theophan found time for learned and literary activity. During this period of time he wrote his theological opus "Letters on a Christian life," which comprises an entire system of Christian moral teaching.

After 25 years of service to the Church in diverse spheres of endeavor, Bishop Theophan decided it was time to realize his long-standing aspiration. After consulting with his long-time spiritual advisor Metropolitan Isidor, he submitted a request to the Holy Synod to be allowed to retire to the Vyshy hermitage in the Tambov diocese. The Bishop's request was approved, and in 1866 he was relieved of his diocesan duties. Long-awaited solitude, for which the hierarch had yearned so deeply, finally came to him by the mercy of God. For the first six years of his sojourn in the Vyshy hermitage Bishop Theophan did not cut himself off completely. Together with the hermitage monastics he attended all church

services, and on Sundays and feast days he himself served the liturgy together with the brothers. He willingly welcomed visitors – relatives and admirers – who sought his spiritual counsel and guidance.

After the paschal days of 1872, he began to lead the life of a recluse. He cut off all contact with people, ceased going to the monastery church, and shut himself off in separate quarters. From that time on he saw only the abbot of the hermitage, his spiritual father, and his cell attendant. By that time Bishop Theophan set up a small church in his quarters in honor of the Baptism of our Lord, in which he served the Divine liturgy on all Sundays and feast days, and then daily for the last 11 years of his life.

The hierarch's life of solitude was spent in services and prayer, in physical and spiritual labors. In his free time he worked on literary theological writings and wrote a multitude of letters to various people who turned to him with perplexing questions and appeals for help and guidance. Having left the world and ceased to meet people, the reclusive Bishop was nevertheless interested in the life of the Church and of his homeland. He subscribed to many magazines. There was a huge library in his office. In his writings the hierarch made extensive use of literary works in the Russian and foreign languages.

The topics and content of the writings of the Vyshy recluse were quite diverse. Not a single detail of spiritual life escaped his deep and attentive observation. But the major theme of his many works is salvation in Christ. Just an enumeration of his writings causes awe. His oeuvre is divided by content into three sections: moralistic, interpretive, and translational. Of especially great value for theology are the hierarch's many writings on Christian morality. In his moralistic works Bishop Theophan depicted the ideal of Christian life and the paths leading to its achievement. St Theophan's writings also define the basic principles of patristic psychology.

One of the most important achievements of Bishop Theophan's life work are his wonderful interpretations of the Word of God, which represent a valuable asset to the Russian Scriptural collection. The hierarch's most important translational work is the Philokalia, whose major subject comprises writings on spiritual life by the founders and great teachers of Christian asceticism. A special facet of Bishop Theophan's literary oeuvre are his numerous letters, which he exchanged with everyone who asked for his advice, support, and guidance, beginning with high-ranking officials and ending with the common folk. The hierarch preserved his sincerity and love for people to his blessed end.

On January 6, 1894, on the feast day of his small church of the Baptism of our Lord, at about 4:00 P.M., the holy Bishop Theophan peacefully reposed.

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