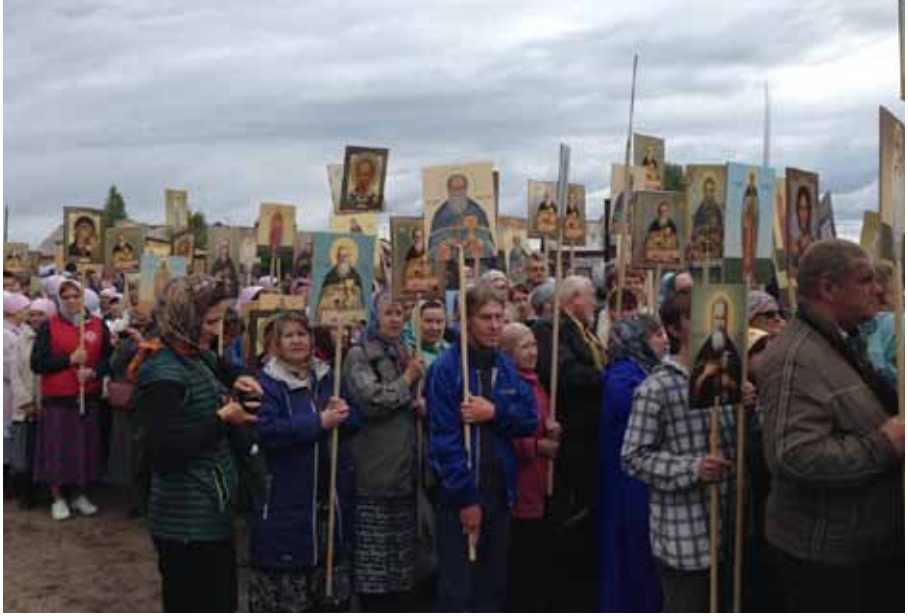


Cross procession at Sura, Archangelsk, 2015.

CLOUD OF WITNESSES

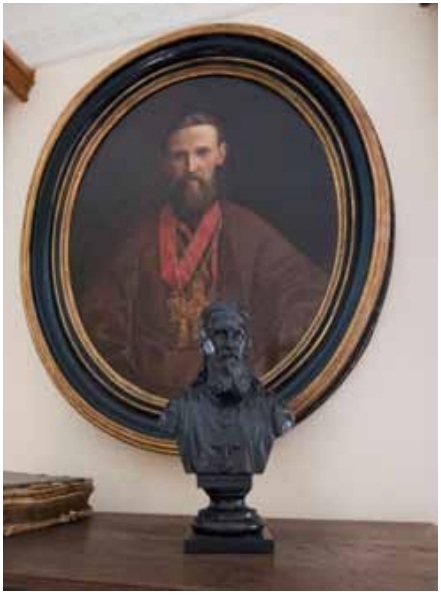
The Lives and Afterlives of St. John of Kronstadt

Nadieszda Kizenko

That saints are products of not only the societies that they lived in but also the ones they continue to engage, is by now a truism. It is not only a matter of making it into the *menaia* and once in, always in. Servicebooks can be altered. To use the metaphor of a modern museum, just as it is possible to enter the collection, so it is possible to be deaccessioned or put in storage, rarely to see the light of day.

It is not simply a matter of pursuing historical accuracy, although that can play a role. In the early seventeenth century, the Bollandists worked to identify the most reliable sources on Roman Catholic saints in the process of compiling the *Acta Sanctorum*. In the process, they began noting points of difficulty. One result of that historical impulse came much later, in 1969, when ninety-three saints—including St. Christopher—were removed from the universal calendar.

The issue that St. John of Kronstadt (1829–1908) raises is of a different nature. He was extraordinarily tied to the imperial Russian society in which he lived. Born into a poor sacristan's family in the remote village of Sura in the northern province of Arkhangelsk, he managed to enter the elite Theological Academy in St. Petersburg. His 1855 ordination happened to coincide with Alexander II's Great Reforms, which sought to modernize Russia and engage more of society. Father John was part of this turning outward, which



John of Kronstadt's portrait in his St. Petersburg apartment.

included creating shelters, developing employment programs, and encouraging the temperance movement. Yet he went beyond these practical measures. He served ecstatically, exhorting the faithful to partake of the Eucharist more often. So many people sought to take communion from him that the Church hierarchy allowed him to hold mass public confessions. His reputation for healing brought him national fame and established Kronstadt as one of the leading pilgrimage sites in the Russian empire. He became the first modern Russian religious celebrity, with his image on souvenir scarves, mugs, placards, and postcards. In 1894, when he was asked to minister to the dying emperor Alexander III, his fame became international, attracting correspondents from Europe and the United States.

To this point, Father John's successful combination of social service, liturgical revival, charismatic prayer, and healing, seemed to embody the answer of the Russian Orthodox Church to the challenges of secularism, urbanism, and sectarianism. With the rise of terrorism and the revolutionary movement, however, St. John allied himself with the politics of the far right. He called for the killing of revolutionaries ("as Moses did with the rebels at Mount Sinai") and blessed the banners of the Union of the Russian People.[1] Political neutrality about Father John was no longer possible: liberals squirmed, rightists hailed him as a prophet, and radicals branded him as representing everything they hated about the Orthodox Church. How one felt about him became a simple way to gauge where one stood on relations between church and state, Tsar and revolution, priests and people, men and women.

This "barometric" quality only continued to grow after Father John's death at the end of 1908. The revolutions of 1917, the Soviet policy of official atheism, the émigré experience and Father John's 1964 canonization by the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, *perestroika*, the 1988 millennial anniversary of Christianity in Rus', his canonization in Russia in 1990—all of these forces created new versions of St. John that corresponded to new social and political conditions. Although the practice of altering *vitae* to suit historical circumstances is nearly as old as hagiography itself, the pace of change in Russia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries makes his case unique.[2]

It is therefore instructive to reflect on how St. John of Kronstadt's veneration has evolved in Russia since his canonization in 1990. Russia has changed significantly in the past twenty-five years. So has the Russian Orthodox Church. Sergei Chapnin has described that process, in this journal and elsewhere.[3] What, if anything, have these changes meant for the posthumous career of a supremely Russian saint?

Some of these developments were predictable. Since St. John's 1990 canon-

[1] The Union of Russian People (URP) (Russian: Союз Русского Народа, translit. *Soyuz Russkogo Naroda* (CPH/SRN) was a loyalist extreme right nationalist political party, the most important among Black-Hundredist monarchist political organizations in the Russian Empire between 1905 and 1917. - *Ed.*

[2] I explore St. John in historical context at greater length in *A Prodigal Saint: Father John of Kronstadt and the Russian People* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000).

[3] Sergei Chapnin, "They Never Met: Church and Civil Society in Present-Day Russia," T*he Wheel* 1 (Spring 2015): 13–21; *Церковь в постсоветской России: возрождение, качество веры, диалог с обществом* (Moscow: Arefa, 2009).

ization more than sixty new churches or altars have been dedicated to him in Russia alone. In 1999, the Kronstadt flat in which St. John lived from 1855 to 1908, and which had been turned into a communal apartment in the Soviet period, was partially restored and officially registered as a memorial museum.[4] St. John has joined the roster of the biographical book series *Lives of Remarkable People*.[5]

Two things are particularly telling, however. First is the extensive activity of the so-called "John Family" headed by Archpriest Nikolai Beliaev, priest of the parish linked to the Karpovka Convent in St. Petersburg founded by St. John in 1900.[6] Second is the elaborate 2015 commemoration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the saint's canonization, which included a pilgrimage by rail from the Karpovka convent to St. John's birthplace in the village of Sura. Taken together, the "Family" and the commemorative pilgrimage embody the mixed legacy of the saint in present-day Russia.

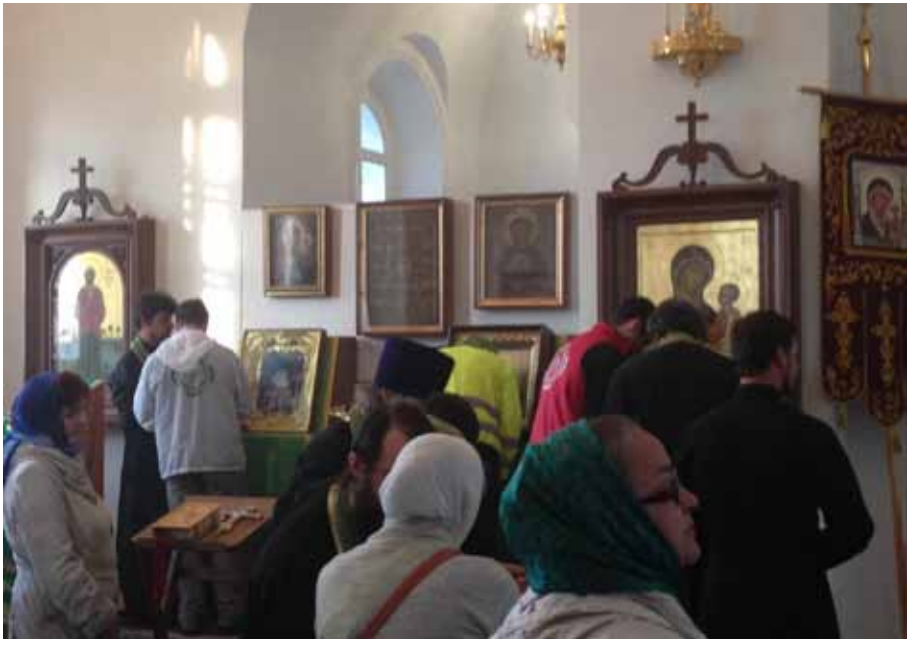
The Family has its origins in St. John's own House of Industry. The parish formed around the St. Petersburg convent where St. John is buried, and the group that organized the anniversary jubilee follows its founder's tradition of social work. With over thirty separate charitable groups, its activity spans everything from coordinating prayer to elder care, medical assistance, legal support, childcare, Sunday school, finding work, car service, computer consultation, and home repair. This kind of large-scale grassroots activity and initiative, impossible under communism, is something new for Russian parishes.

In the reach of its activity and in its success, the Family would seem to be a socially active, vibrant parish, a contemporary version of St. John's own House of Industry. It would seem to offer a promising model to other parishes in Russia seeking to revive the tradition of Christian mutual aid. But Father Nikolai's situation is unique. He is able to operate as freely as he does because, unlike most parish priests, he

[4] www.leushino/kvartira (this and all other links cited here last accessed August 10, 2016).

[5] Mikhail Odintsov, *Иоанн Кронштадтский* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 2014).

[6] The Family website is pravprihod.ru



Confession at Sura pilgrimage.

does not have go to through the usual hierarchy of dean, archbishop, synod. He answers directly to the Patriarch, who fully supports his initiatives. It is thus perhaps fitting that the body most closely reflecting the community outreach and spiritual sustenance of St. John himself is as unique, and as uniquely privileged, as was the saint for whom it is named.

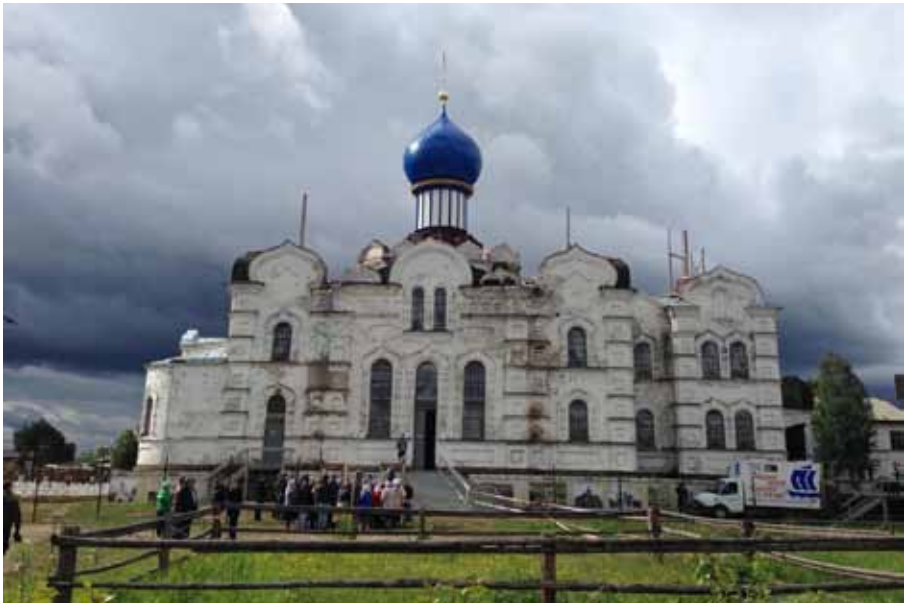
The 2015 pilgrimage organized by the "Big John Family" to commemorate the canonization of their hero, by contrast, makes clear the differences between Orthodox piety and commemoration in imperial Russia and the Russia of the present. During St. John's lifetime, Kronstadt was a leading pilgrimage site. Pilgrimages to Kronstadt were mass occasions, especially during Great Lent.

The pilgrimage of June 2015 was different. For two years, the parish raised over twelve million rubles to fund a pilgrimage by rail for anyone connected to St. John parishes or causes to Sura, the village where St. John was born. They successfully competed for a major grant given annually to projects boosting Russian patriotism. They made a movie about their hero. They printed icons, brochures, bookmarks, and briefcases. They got the support of the mayor of St. Petersburg, the mayor of Kronstadt, the governor of Arkhangelsk, and Patriarch Kirill himself.

Mini *kliros* in chapel car on John of Kronstadt's pilgrimage train.

Priests as far afield as Pakistan, Indonesia,and Nebraska, teachers raised as orphans in Chile, archimandrites and abbesses from war-torn Ukraine—all rode in the chartered train like Chaucer's pilgrims, praying together and sharing their stories. As on all good pilgrimages, we had plenty of time for both. We woke to a loudspeaker reading morning prayers and either went to sleep or to the café car after hearing evening prayers. In between, each wagon took turns going to akathist services in the church car, which, with its altar and icon-stands and swinging oil lamps, could hold only fifty people. Every few hours the train made a whistle-stop to be greeted by Russian locals bringing the traditional gift of bread and salt. Pretty girls in kerchiefs held placards and banners with images of their saintly hero, brass bands played patriotic tunes, local notables made speeches of welcome, and more pretty young women in national costume danced as older women sang. Then the 250 clerics and hierarchs led the faithful in a short prayer before hopping back on the train.

Besides the prayers, in between cups of tea and vegan meals, there were conversations lasting till two or three in the morning. The white nights were in full swing, and the sky over Arkhangelsk never went dark. In the daytime people talked in all the languages they knew about turning points in their lives, and what had brought them to the saint they had come to honor. At night the more daring monastic millennials crept out



Restored Dormition Cathedral, Sura, 2015.

of their sleeping cars, shed their black robes and stiff hats, brought out their Jameson's Irish whiskey, Soviet champagne and smoked fish, sang songs, and remembered riotous days before tonsure at age twenty-three. ("So I make my decision to become monk, and then this girl I barely know posts on social networks that I'm 'looking for a relationship.'")

The pilgrims then drove over dirt roads and pontoons to the village of Sura, St. John's birthplace, where Patriarch Kirill, who flew in by helicopter, joined them Sunday morning for Liturgy followed by fairs and folk-singing. The dirt roads, the absence of running water, and the tent city of individual pilgrims evoked both the conditions of St. John's early life and the timeless aspect of every pilgrimage.

But there were some differences. The first was numbers. If in St. John's lifetime both he and Orthodox Christianity drew millions of Russians, and if at his 1990 canonization it seemed as if they might again, the number of practicing faithful is now minuscule. The pilgrimage organizers acknowledged as much, calling their pilgrimage a missionary effort seeking to remind Russia that St. John existed.

In this way, the commemorative pilgrimage expressed the position Pope Benedict articulated in interviews with the German journalist Peter Seewald. In those conversations, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger mused that, "Perhaps we are facing a new and different kind of epoch in the Church's history, where Christianity will again be characterized more by the mustard seed, where it will exist in small, seemingly insignificant groups that nonetheless live an intensive struggle against evil and bring the good into the world."[7]

The discrepancy between the scale of the veneration Father John received at the height of his fame in his lifetime and the sort he receives now is a Russian version of such "remnant" theology. With a few exceptions, like papal visits, the era of mass appeal, of large numbers, whether Roman Catholic or

[7] Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth: The Church at the End of the Millennium* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997). See also *God and the World: A Conversation with Peter Seewald* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002).

Confession.

Russian Orthodox, is gone. In its place, people create different pilgrimage practices.

On the one hand, the commemorative 2015 pilgrimage to St. John seemed a well-funded, well-crafted, socially-networked opportunity for small numbers of dedicated faithful to celebrate their devotion to the saint and to reach out to Russian society. But, as in other variants of contemporary Russian pilgrimage, it had some less well-crafted results. First-time pilgrims might be motivated by imagined heritage tourism or help during personal crisis—and then find, sometimes to their own surprise, that saints and sites offer more than they thought possible. They want to experience again, or experience in more depth, what Stella Rock calls the "unexpected pull of the holy."[8]

What role does the Eucharist play in these pilgrimages? Perhaps the most telling difference between the pilgrimages to Kronstadt in Father John's lifetime and the one from St. Petersburg to Sura in 2015 is the approach to Eucharistic theology and to confession and communion. In Father John's lifetime, despite his desire for more frequent communion on the part of his flock, pilgrimages to Kronstadt remained clustered during the Lenten periods when Russians traditionally went to communion, and in Great Lent in particular. The mass confessions he introduced were the one of the few solutions he could devise in response to the conundrum of having *govienie*—the combination of a minimum of three days of fasting, church attendance, and confession—be a necessary prelude to the Eucharist. (Written confessions and blessing his spiritual children to go to communion without confession were among the other, more unusual ones.)

[8] Stella Rock, "Seeking out the Sacred: Grace and Place in Contemporary Russian Pilgrimage," *Modern Greek Studies Yearbook* 28/9 (2012/13): 193–218. Compare this perspective to that of Jeanne Kormina, "*Abtobusniki:* Russian Orthodox Pilgrims' Longing for Authenticity," in *Eastern Christians in Anthropological Perspective*, ed. Chris Harris and Hermann Goltz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 287–86, and Christine D. Worobec, "Commentary: The Coming of Age of Eastern Orthodox Pilgrimage Studies," *Modern Greek Studies Yearbook* 28/9 (2012/13): 219–236.

Post-communion at Sura pilgrimage.

The 2015 pilgrimage found a different solution. When the pilgrims reached their final destination in Sura and almost all wished to partake of the Eucharist, priests heard individual confessions not only in church during services, but also in the open air throughout the streets of the village, between the convent church and the cathedral. There were special confession tents, confession booths, confessions in front of wooden huts, confessional conversations. But there was no communion without confession, and all of the confessions were individual, "auricular."

For, in contemporary Russian practice, as in the days of St. John, one cannot partake of the Eucharist without having first gone to confession, read lengthy prayer rules, fasted for several days, and abstained from food and drink from midnight. Although there may be exceptions—for devout, truly "enchurched" parishioners at the discretion of their father-confessor, or for others during the week after Pascha—still, "confession is an inextricable part of preparation for communion."[9] By providing all these conditions as well as providing access to a shrine, Russian pilgrimages offer a unique temporal space to take part in the sacraments. But they are also an occasion to ponder on Eucharistic theology inside and outside Russia, and on St. John's own Eucharistic legacy.

St. John found his own sustenance in the Eucharist, and sought to have his flock do the same. When he—daringly—turned to face the flock saying, "Come, drink ye all of it," this reminded those present that they, too, were expected to take part in the eucharistic celebration.[10] In his sermons, he linked spiritual health to the reception of the Eucharist. He broke with contemporary practice, occasionally permitting menstruating women and both men and women he knew with little formal preparation. A more frequent participation in communion was perhaps St. John's most important contribution to Russian piety. Both the change in standards of "proper" reception, which had previously discouraged frequent communion as potentially leading to diminished reverence for the sacrament, and the revival of Eucharistic theology in the Russian tradition, may be traced to this quiet revolution. Indeed, with respect to both their intimate personal journals and their emphasis on more frequent communion, one might even argue that St. John of Kronstadt was the forefather of the late Father Alexander Schmemann.[11]

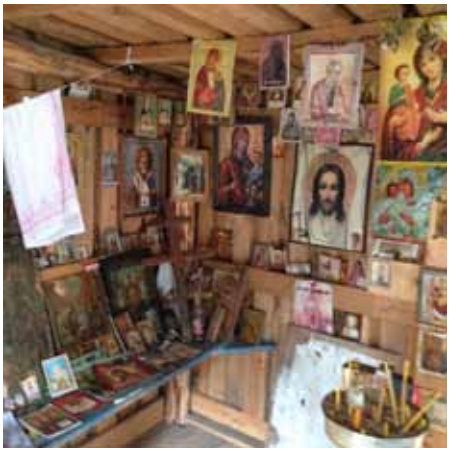
But St. John left another legacy, one that has come to the forefront more in the last few years than it did when he was canonized in Russia twenty-six years ago. This is the political aspect of Orthodoxy in Russia. In this sense, the 2015 pilgrimage had more in common with the revolutionary last years of St. John's life than it did with the early years of perestroika when he was canonized. If in 1990 the hymns to St. John emphasized his social service and his local roots, some of messages in the film produced by the "Big John Family" for the commemoration of his canonization were as political as any the saint preached in his last years.[12] Of the four refrigerator magnets for sale in St. John's former apartment, one features a quotation that mentions Jesus; three mention Russia. In his sermon at the canonization commemoration, Patriarch Kirill told the thousands in attendance that St. John saw "the decline of morals, the dissolution of the elites, the departure from the faith of those who should protect it, including those in the entourage of the autocrat. . . . We must pray to him to avert the dangers facing our Fatherland."

[9] www.pravmir.ru/proekt-dokumenta-o-podgotovke-ko-svyatomu-prichashheniyu/.

[10] K. Glizhinskii, *Из объятий умирающей бурсы в горнило жизни* (Ekaterinburg, 1912), 68.

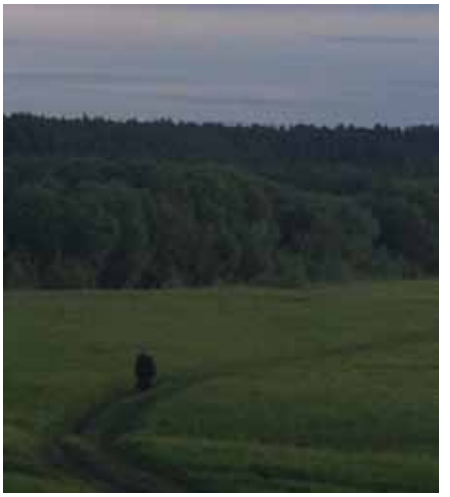
[11] Alexander Schmemann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir Press, 2003). For the tradition of priests' diaries in imperial Russia, see Laurie Manchester, "The Diary of a Priest," in Heather J. Coleman, ed., *Orthodox Christianity in Imperial Russia: A Source Book on Lived Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 85–94.

[12] "Именем Иоанна Кронштадтского," www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vo9477JYA_A.



Shrine at Sura.

The tension in St. John's legacy for Russia emerges with particular clarity in the film produced by the Big John Family. The film begins by emphasizing St. John's universality: the voice-over informs the viewer that "St. John is known everywhere, celebrated in every language. . . . He is known on every continent. . . . He showed us that life in Christ is open to everyone." But the last scenes of the film take place in Crimea after its annexation by Russia. Priest Sergii Khaliuta in Sevastopol and Chersones is shown declaring that Crimea, where Prince Vladimir was baptized into Orthodox Christianity, is "our common font: there are not three fonts, one in Moscow, one in Kiev, and one in Minsk: our one people cannot be separated into three parts." The narrator declares that the new St. John of Kronstadt Church in Crimea is a symbol of unity. St. John is likened to Admiral Makarov as "endlessly dedicated to the task of serving Russia." As cruisers from the Russian Black Sea fleet sail across the screen, a voice reads: "I foresee the restoration of a mighty Russia, ever more mighty and powerful."



Priest walking home from a service in a midsummer village in Russia.

This message is not inconsistent with some of St. John's own sermons in his last years. It is certainly consistent with many Russian political decisions in the past three years. Still, those seeking a more universal celebration of St. John's legacy may be glad that the film made to celebrate his commemoration ends with a series of icons of the saint, showing him holding a chalice with one hand and pointing to it with the other. ✠

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