

Saint Julianna Lazarevskaya

January 2

Russia; 16th century

The following is taken from the book, Marriage as a Path to Holiness, by Drs. David and Mary Ford.

A first-hand account of the life of Saint Julianna, written by her own son, has come down to us. The following is an abridged version of this Life.

Saint Julianna's father, Justin, is described by her son as "a pious and charitable man of the royal court" — one of the lesser nobility. Her mother, Stephanida, likewise is described as one who "also loved God and the poor." They had many children and were quite wealthy, yet this did not distract them from the "one thing needful" — for they lived very virtuously.

When Julianna was six years old, however, her mother died, and she went to live with her grandmother. There she was brought up in piety and virtue for six more years. At this time, her grandmother died, and she went to live with her aunt, who had been charged by the grandmother to bring up Julianna well and in piety. This aunt had eight daughters of her own, and one son, so again Julianna entered a large family.

Saint Julianna had been very pious since she was a young girl, loving prayer and silence. Apparently her aunt, although a good woman, was not as pious as her mother and grandmother had been. For instance, she used to scold Julianna for fasting, since the girl preferred not to eat in the mornings. Her cousins made fun of her as well.

By temperament Julianna was very gentle, quiet, and humble. Already at age twelve, however, she showed a great inner strength, continuing her life of prayer and fasting, even when she was opposed and mocked. She was talented as a seamstress and as an embroideress, and she spent many hours sewing for the orphans, widows, and those who were ill in the village. Her son says that "everyone was amazed at her understanding and piety; and the fear of God came to dwell in her."

Her aunt lived quite far from a church, so Julianna had little opportunity to hear the word of God, or teachings about salvation. Her son tells us that she learned about the faith by diligently following the Gospel commandments. She became wise through being virtuous, even though she was illiterate.

When she was sixteen, she married George Osorin, a wealthy nobleman who lived in the Murom district. Her son tells us they were married in her husband's village by the priest Potapius — who because of his virtue was later made an archimandrite in a monastery there. This virtuous priest taught them about the Faith — the precepts of the apostles and holy fathers. He taught them how Christian husbands and wives should live — about prayer and fasting, almsgiving and other good works. (So we see that pre-marital counseling is not a new idea.) Saint Julianna not only listened attentively, but tried to put all she was taught into practice.

She and her husband lived with her in-laws, as was the custom, since they had only one son and two daughters. When her in-laws saw Julianna's many good qualities, they "rejoiced in her and praised God and put her in charge of the household." Since they had many servants, and

much property, this was a very demanding task with great responsibilities. Included in the running of the large household was the job of assigning all the servants their duties. Her son says several times that she was careful to give each servant a job “according to his strength.”

Julianna gave the greatest respect to her in-laws, and strove to do whatever they asked her without protest — so much so that they “marvelled and greatly respected her for it.” Again her son says that although she was not formally educated, everyone ‘marvelled at her good sense,’ for she was able to answer all their questions well.

This is how her son describes her prayer life at this time: “From childhood the blessed Julianna had been accustomed to pray to God for a long time every evening and to make a hundred or more prostrations and only then give way to sleep; similarly on rising from sleep every morning she would pray much to God; she showed her husband how to do the same, for, as the great apostle Paul said, ‘There is no knowing whether thou, the wife, wilt save thy husband’ (cf. I Corinthians 7:16); he says the same to the husband too. “

Her son then quotes at some length from a book, very popular at that time in Russia, called *The Emerald* — with which Saint Julianna was clearly very familiar. This was a compilation of excerpts taken from the saints to emphasize to lay people that one can be holy and live in the world — that it is not necessary to go to a monastery. For example, her son quotes from this book:

“Human life is divided into two states: the monastic and the ordinary. The ordinary are permitted to marry and to eat meat, but they must carry out the other commandments of Christ just like the monks.” Or again, “Not everyone who is shorn (becomes a monastic) is saved, but he that does what is worthy of monks.”

At times during their long marriage, her husband would be gone for two or three years consecutively in his service to the Tsar. In these times Julianna would intensify her ascetic struggles. She would pray more, and also would spend her nights secretly embroidering things to be sold to help the poor, or to benefit churches. In this way she was able to give alms without her in-laws or anyone else knowing about it, except one servant girl who distributed the alms.

In the description of her daily life her son says:

“In the daytime she diligently ran the household and cared for widows and orphans like a real mother. She washed them with her own hands, clothed them, fed them, and gave them to drink. . . . She hated pride and arrogance, she never called the servants by a familiar name, and did not ask anyone to bring her water to wash her hands, or to pull the boots off her feet; all this she did for herself. Only when necessary, when guests came, did the servants wait on her and serve her formally. As soon as the guests left, however, she would change completely, and endlessly and humbly reproaching her soul, would say: “Who am I, a wretched woman, to be waited on by such people, God’s creatures?” And praising God for this she was in all things the image of virtue.

Some of the servants, though, were unreasonable and disobedient and lazy at their work; others argued with her, but she bore all these things with humility.”

If a servant did not do a job, or did it carelessly,

“She would put everything right herself. . . saying: “I myself am always sinning before God, and God is patient with me, so what should I ask of them, for they are human beings

just as I am; although God has entrusted them unto us for service, their souls thrive better than ours.” She remembered, too, the words of our Savior: “Offend not these little ones, for their angels do always behold the face of my heavenly Father” (cf. Matt. 18:10). She would never blame any of the offending servants and was frequently reprovved for this by her father-in-law, her mother-in-law, and her husband. Nothing, however, disconcerted her; she stood firm, immovable as a pillar, placed all her hope in God and in the most pure Mother of God, and fervently invoked the great miracle-worker Nicholas, from whom she received much help.”

Then her son says that later in her life, she told about an incident from her earlier years. She was alone one night when her husband was away on business, and she became very terrified as she was praying. So she got into bed, covered herself with a blanket, and fell asleep. Then demons appeared, terrifying her and telling her they would kill her if she did not stop “this business” of praying so much. She began to pray all the more and called upon Saint Nicholas for help. The Saint appeared, hit all the demons with a book and chased them away. Then he blessed her and said: “My daughter! Be brave and strong and do not be frightened by the threats of demons, for Christ has told me to preserve you from demons and evil men.” After he finished speaking, she woke up, and saw a venerable old man going out of the room. But when she checked the door, it was locked as usual. This is just one of several miraculous incidents which her son relates.

In addition to running the household, Saint Julianna gave birth to ten sons and three daughters. Six of these children died in infancy, but she raised the other seven. Even with all these responsibilities she was able to do many other good works. For instance, while her in-laws were still alive, a famine and a plague came upon their district. Julianna pretended to want more to eat, so she could give her food away during the famine. During the plague, she secretly took care of the infected with her own hands — while most people, fearing contagion, would not get near those who were sick.

After her in-laws died in old age, Julianna increased her almsgiving and good deeds. She followed an excellent custom of feeding the poor and orphans in honor of those departed this life, asking those whom she helped to pray for the souls of these departed ones.

After two of her sons were tragically killed (one by a servant in an argument, another in a battle), she wanted to retire to a monastery and devote her time to prayer. She especially wanted to pray for these two sons, since she felt that they had died unprepared. She begged her husband to let her go into a monastery (they had already had a long married life together, and he was old), but he insisted to her that she was still needed at home. She even told him, if he would not agree to her going, that she would run away. Then her son tells us that her husband “read to her the books of the blessed Cosmas the priest and other holy Fathers and much more of the holy writings” — all about how one can be holy “in the world,” and how one should not neglect one’s own family in order to enter the monastic state. After hearing all these words of the Saints, she gave up this idea about entering a monastery, saying, ‘The Lord’s will be done.’”

She did, however, ask her husband that they live from this point on as brother and sister. This her husband accepted. Now she intensified her ascetic struggles, including every Saturday and Sunday feeding many priests, widows, and orphans in her own home, waiting on them and her servants herself.

Again her son mentions that although she was illiterate, she had her children read to her often, and had such wisdom that she was able to interpret “all the difficult passages like a wise philosopher or man of letters.” She frequently would say to her children things like, “How can we, in these modern times [the sixteenth century!], imitate the life of the saints of the past?”

Her husband lived ten more years. After his death she increased her spiritual struggle even more, and especially her charity. Her son mentions that she often prayed for her departed husband, and quotes from a sermon of Saint John Chrysostom about the good influence a wife can have for her husband through prayer and good deeds, even after his death. He then says, ‘She imitated the pious Empress Theodora (February 11) and other holy women who prayed to God for their husbands after death.’

Near the end of her life, a terrible famine struck the whole of Russia. Saint Julianna spent nearly everything she had to buy food for her family and servants, and for anyone who came asking for help. She gave away all the food in the house, her son says, until there was not one grain of corn left. Then she moved all her household to another village. When things became very bad there also, she told the servants that any of them who did not want to endure the famine with her were free to leave, to live as best they could. Some left, but quite a few stayed with her.

She taught the servants who remained how to make a special bread out of certain weeds and bark. Her entire household and many beggars lived on this bread during the whole famine, which lasted for two years. Many said that this was the sweetest bread they had ever tasted; her son says that it was made sweet by prayer. He also says that during this hardship she was more cheerful than ever. Her generous sharing of this bread, and many acts of charity done throughout her life, made her well-known and very beloved in her community.

On December 26, twelve years after her husband’s death, she became very ill. Her son tells us that she prayed lying down all day, and then prayed standing at night. Her servants laughed at her for this, and said to her face that they thought she was not really ill. But she insisted that she was. Then, on January 2, knowing that her earthly life was at an end, she called her spiritual father, and received Holy Communion. She also called her children, servants, and all those nearby in the village to her bedside, where her son says that “she taught them about love, about prayer, about almsgiving and other virtuous works.” She kissed all the people who were present, and offering them peace and forgiveness, she lay down, made the sign of the cross three times, wound her prayer beads around her hand, and spoke her last words — “Glory to God for all,” and, “Into Thy hands I commend my spirit. Amen. “

Then she gave up her soul into the hands of God, whom she had loved since she was a young child; and at that moment everyone saw a golden crown around her head, “and all the house was filled with fragrance.” Later that night she appeared to one of her servants and asked to be buried next to her husband in the other village.

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Her son recounts that, years later, when a grave for one of her sons was being dug next to hers, the grave-diggers came upon her relics, which were bubbling with sweet-smelling myrrh. He says that this is why he wrote down her life. Also, later on, miracles were worked through her intercessions.

Troparion, Tone 4

By your righteous deeds, O Julianna, you revealed to the world an image of a perfect servant of the Lord. By your fastings, vigils, and prayers, you were inspired in your evangelical life

— feeding the hungry and caring for the poor, nursing the sick and strengthening the weak. You now stand at the right hand of the Master, Christ, interceding for our souls.