St. John the Merciful, Patriarch of Alexandria
Feastday: November 12

St. John the Merciful (Ελεήμων) was born in Amathus on Cyprus c. 550 to the patrician Epiphanius, a governor of the island. He married and had children, but was a widower when he was called to become patriarch of Alexandria in 611 AD.

He quickly gained his epithet "Merciful" from his unstinting generosity in distributing the vast wealth of the patriarchate of Alexandria to the poor and afflicted.

One of the first steps he took was to make a list of several thousand needy persons, whom he took under his special care. He always referred to the poor as his "lords and masters", because of their mighty influence at the Court of the Most High God. He assisted people of every class who were in need.

John was remarkable for his almsgiving or mercy (ἐλεημοσύνη in Greek, hence his title Ἐλεήμων). To someone who was astounded at his generosity he recounted a vision he had seen in his youth in which "Compassion" appeared to him as a beautiful maiden and told him that she was the eldest daughter of God. The patriarchate of Alexandria had at its disposal immense wealth in both money and commercial enterprises, including shipping, and John put it all at the service of the poor. He was not only generous with the resources of his see, but with his own goods, as well. In one incident in his life he felt remorseful for accepting a richly-embroidered blanket as a gift and was unable to sleep until he sold it and gave the proceeds to the poor. He also made himself available to anyone who had a petition, grievance, or request. His generosity did draw censure at times. In one case one of his aides noticed that someone was abusing the distribution of goods in John's very presence, returning several times in different guises, but when he mentioned this, John replied that it might be Christ in disguise. In another case he came to loggerheads with his friend Nicetas when the latter, wanting to contribute to Emperor Heraclius' war effort against the Persians, tried to appropriate some of the church's wealth to that end, an attempt which John firmly resisted and which ended in Nicetas' apology.

His care was not limited to his own flock in Alexandria, but extended to the people of Palestine in their sufferings during the Persian invasion and sack of Jerusalem. John sent convoys of essential supplies to Palestine and welcomed many refugees to Alexandria.

John took care of the spiritual as well as bodily nourishment of the people and during meals and other gatherings in the patriarchal palace he would only converse on the Scriptures or other spiritual topics.

He was forced to flee Alexandria by the Persian invasion of Egypt in 619. Returning to Cyprus, he died soon thereafter.

St. John is commemorated in the Orthodox Church on November 12.