

Saint Juliana the Merciful

A Model of Compassion

3 St. Nicholas blesses St. Juliana and drives away demons disturbing her in prayer.

2 Even at night, St. Juliana worked for her family and for the needy.

1 St. Juliana with her husband and children.



4 St. Juliana distributes her bread to the victims of famine.

5 St. Juliana cares for disease victims in the bath house of her family's estate.

6 St. Juliana falls asleep in the Lord.

Saint Juliana the Merciful

Saint Juliana the Merciful was born in Moscow, Russia in 1530, the daughter of a middle-class family of merchants. Her loving parents raised her to be a faithful Orthodox Christian, but when she was just six years old, her mother died. Her father's obligations were so demanding that he could not give his child the time and attention she needed. Little Juliana was sent to live with her maternal grandmother. The two loved going to church together, praying at home, and helping neighbors in need.

When Juliana was twelve years old, her grandmother died and she was sent to live with an aunt, whose family made fun of her for praying and fasting. They were not eager to share what they had, so Juliana's charitable efforts were also unwelcome. This was a hard time in the girl's life, but she kept her smile and friendly manner, and continued to care for others.

A wealthy nobleman named Yuri (George) Ossorguine noticed Juliana's lovely qualities, and in 1546 they were married. They made their home on his estate, and soon started a family [1]. Juliana bore thirteen children, but as often happened at that time, several died while still young. At one point, Juliana's grief at the loss of her children overwhelmed her, and she asked her husband to let her go to a monastery. He answered by reminding her that if it is good to care for other people's orphans, it is surely not good to make orphans of one's own children. So Saint Juliana stayed home, praying and fasting, but also working, often late into the night [2]. She sewed clothing, embroidered altar cloths, and cooked food to share. Most unusual for the wife of a wealthy man, she made items to sell, giving the money she earned to the poor.



Like many people who try hard to be close to God, Saint Juliana was attacked by His demonic enemies, who try to divide us from Him. One night as she stood praying, she heard them whisper in her ear, "Stop what you are doing, or we will destroy you." This experience was so frightening that Saint Juliana fainted and fell onto her bed. She had a terrible dream of being attacked by unclean spirits wielding swords. But just at the worst moment, Saint Nicholas appeared in the dream. He drove away the spirits and gave her words of blessing: "Be of good cheer, my daughter. Do not fear the wiles of demons, for Christ has told me to defend you." When she woke up, she clearly saw a radiant-looking man near the door of her room [3].

Saint Juliana's husband was often away for long periods of time in service to the Tsar. But he trusted her so completely that he didn't hire a male estate manager, as would have been the common practice at that time. He let his wife make all the decisions about their home, family and estate. This allowed her to use their money as she wished, and she gave away a great deal of it, depriving herself so as to have even more to give.

In 1601 Russia experienced a famine so severe that the most desperate people were tempted to cannibalism. Saint Juliana sold livestock to raise money, and she gave away whatever was stored in the estate barns. As things got even worse, she went out with helpers to gather pigweed and the stripped bark from a particular variety of elm tree. From these ingredients she baked bread, praying as she worked. She shared the bread with all who asked, and it was said to be the sweetest-tasting bread anyone had ever tasted [4].

Hard times continued for Saint Juliana and her neighbors. Her husband had died, and a very contagious disease struck the area. Many people refused to leave their homes, and would not offer help to the poor who begged at their doors. But Saint Juliana secretly took the sick into the bath house on the estate, washed them, and treated them as best she could [5].

In January 1604, Saint Juliana became ill and took to her bed for six days. She continued to pray, and on the sixth day she received Holy Communion from her spiritual father, the Priest Athanasius. She gathered her children, encouraged them to do good works, and kissed them. Finally, she made the Sign of the Cross and prayed, "Glory to God for all things! Into Thy hands, O Lord, I commit my spirit," and reposed in the Lord [6]. Witnesses saw a light, shaped like a crown, around her head after she died. Her grave became a place of pilgrimage, and many who came to pray there were healed and restored.

Saint Juliana had once hoped to be a monastic, but God had another plan for her. She accepted His plan, and found a fulfilling life with a loving husband, sons and daughters, and many opportunities to serve others.

O Holy Saint Juliana, pray to God for us! ■