



Golgotha

St. John the Muslim

Neomartyr John was born of noble Muslim parents in the small town of Konitza (Konica), in the diocese of Vellas which was part of the Metropolis of Ioannina, Epeiros. His father was both a dervish and a sheik. When he reached twenty years of age, he also joined the order of dervishes. He then moved to the city of Ioannina, Epeiros, but later he moved on to the town of Vrachori in the province of Aitolia, whose *vali* (pasha) was Haznatar Isufaravos a friend of his father. So the pasha made John his private dervish.

John took up residence in Vrachori in the so-called Muslim Serai. In a short time John rose high in the dervish order. As such he participated in the war fought by the Turks and Russians in the area of the Ionian Islands.

After returning from the conflict John began to live and act as an Orthodox Christian. This was due to his frequent contacts with Orthodox Christians. He consequently took off his dervish attire and put on Orthodox Christian garments and sought baptism, but no one would baptize him out of fear of the consequences. So when his mentor Haznatar Pasha was transferred, John did not accompany him.

Because he could not be baptized in Vrachori, John went to the island of Ithaca and received holy Baptism and took the name of John. When he returned to the mainland, he married an Orthodox woman and became a rural guard, keeping out of the way of the Muslims.

In time his father the sheik learned of his son's apostasy and sent two dervishes to persuade him to return to his former Islamic faith. But the messengers failed in their efforts, for John remained faithful to his Orthodox Christian faith.

During the discussions some of the other Muslims from the village of Vrachori recognized John as a

former Muslim and dervish and brought charges against him of having become an Orthodox Christian when once he had been a Muslim. As a consequence, soldiers sent by the *muselimi* (high government official) of Vrachori arrested John and brought him before him. He asked John to identify himself. John replied, "I am an Orthodox Christian and my name is John."

The *muselimi* replied, "Aren't you the young dervish, the son of the sheik of Konitza?"

"Yes, I am," answered John, "but now I am an Orthodox Christian and I will die as an Orthodox Christian."

"You were deceived by your wife," countered the *muselimi*, "and changed your faith. But come to your senses now and make a confession of your old faith and then you will see how much you will be honored by me."

But John dismissed what the *muselimi* had to say to him and said, "Don't think, *muselimi*, that I will be so foolish and dumb as to leave the holy faith of the Orthodox Christians and be blinded again to come to the faith of Islam."

Since nothing could persuade him to return to the Islamic faith, John was sentenced to death by beheading. Just before he was decapitated, John asked to have his hands untied. When his request was honored, he made the sign of the Cross and said, "Lord, remember me when you come into Your Kingdom." He then bent his head and it was cut off.

The *muselimi* decided that since John was neither a Christian nor a Muslim, that is, according to him, he could not be buried in the cemetery of either faith. His head and body, which were thrown into a stream near the Church of St. Demetrios, were recovered with the permission of the aga who, after being paid, granted the request for burial made by some influential Christians. His body and head were buried quietly and secretly by pious Orthodox Christians in the village of Vrachori with full honors, although they had promised the aga not to bury him with any service or ceremony. This was the condition he insisted upon when he gave permission for the burial.

Thus John the former Muslim sacrificed his life for the love of Jesus Christ in Vrachori, Vellas, Epeiros, on September 23, in the year 1814.

Nomikos Michael Vaporis. *Witnesses for Christ—Orthodox Christian Neomartyrs of the Ottoman Period 1437–1860* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), 288-290.

