



***St Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain (14 July)***

*By Aaron Tayler*

Among the genuine lovers, true workers, mystagogues and expounders of virtue in word and deed was God-inspired Nicodemus, the great and eminently wise Teacher of the Church, the wonder among the monks of Athos, the luminous morning star of heavenly wisdom and of the life in Christ; he that has shone in recent times, illuminating the remotest parts of the earth through his writings that are full of divine wisdom; the tuneful clarion of the Holy Spirit; the mellifluent and most wise tongue, which with ‘the power of speech’ has manifested and explained the words of eternal life and the concise thoughts of the Fathers; the most practical teacher of the ascetic life; the Godlike expounder of spiritual ascent and the revealer of the effulgences that occur on the way; ‘the pillar and bulwark’ of the Orthodox Church and its special boast, and the most powerful destroyer of every heretical and vain teaching; the man who in many ways has glorified God and has deservedly been honored by Him. ‘I shall glorify those who glorify me’ (I Kings 2:30 LXX), says the Lord Almighty. (pp. 65-6)

Born on the island of Naxos, St Nicodemus was first educated by his parish priest, but was later sent

to the school of Naxos to study with ‘the virtuous and learned Educator of the Nation’, Archimandrite Chrysanthos Aitolos, brother of St Cosmas Aitolos (Fr Gerasimos, p. 67). Later still, at 15 years, he went to the Evangeliki School in Smyrna (p. 68). Fr Gerasimos tells us:

As a child, he was very careful and well-behaved, avoiding bad company and everything capable of bringing harm to the inner man. Care about his manners, exceptional alertness, decorum, zeal for what is good and beneficial, and love of sacred and secular learning were the distinctive characteristics of young Nicholas. But above all he was distinguished by great acuteness of mind, accurate perception, intellectual brightness, and vast memory. These qualities made him astonish not only those of the same age, but also all those who saw so many exceptional abilities and splendid talents at such a young age. (p. 67)

George Bebis quotes a remarkable letter of one of the Saint’s fellow-students calling him ‘an excellent miracle of his times’, and going on to say (Introduction, *Handbook*, p. 10):

He knew from memory whatever he read, not only the philosophical, economic, medical, astronomic and even military treatises which he has read, but also all the poets, and the historians ancient and new, Greek and Latin, as well as all the writings of the Fathers. It was enough for him to read a book once and remember it throughout his life.

In addition to the general course, at Smyrna the young Saint studied theology, ancient Greek language and literature, Latin, Italian, and French. Fr Gerasimos notes, ‘He composed epigrams in the Homeric dialect with the same facility with which he interpreted sacred texts in simple modern Greek in order to render the latter understandable to the common people’ (p. 70).

In 1770, St Nicodemus was forced to depart Smyrna by the anti-Christian persecutions of the Muslim Turks, and returned to Naxos. There, he spent five years with Metropolitan Anthimos, who wanted to prepare him ‘for the more perfect works of grace’ and tonsure him a priest (p. 70). But while there, he also met a number of holy Athonite monks who ‘spoke to him of the monastic and angelic way of life of the ascetics of the Holy Mountain, and initiate him into spiritual prayer, recognizing him as fit to receive the mysteries of that blessed practice’ (pp. 70-1), and it was then that St Nicodemus began to long for monasticism. He first went to Hydra to visit St Macarius of Corinth, with whom he became quite close lifelong friends, and the Elder Sylvester of Caesarea, who was living the eremitic life at Hydra (p. 71). The Elder sent him with a letter of recommendation to the Holy Monastery of Dionysiou in 1775, where, ‘full of divine zeal for this holy life according to Christ, and renouncing completely every worldly thought and sentiment’, he was tonsured into the Small Schema by the pious Elder Macarius and took the name ‘Nicodemus’ (p. 73). Fr Gerasimos notes that the Fathers of Dionysious soon came to recognise the talents and prodigious learning of the young Saint, and his faithfulness to the cœnobitic rule, and thus tonsure him a reader.

Here Nicodemus was in every way incomparable, both in the special office to which he had been appointed and in his spiritual practices, through which he advanced day by day, ‘reaching out towards those ahead’, subjugating the flesh to the spirit, rendering the mind bright through meditation on what is superior, and preparing himself for the most perfect striving of deifying stillness and of supreme philosophy according to Christ, in which he proved himself most successful and great, both in word and in deed. (pp. 73-4)

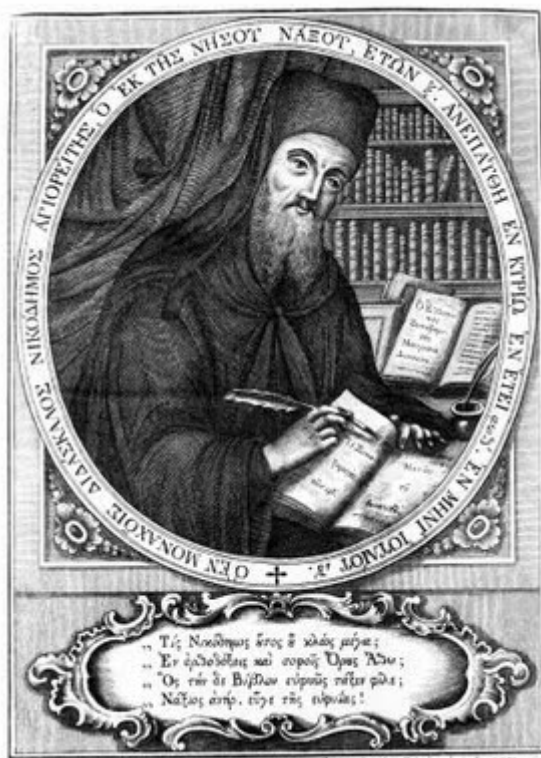
In 1777, St Macarius of Corinth came to the Holy Mountain and, settling at the Cell of St Anthony in Karyes, ‘called the blessed Nicodemus and exhorted him to edit’ the *Philokalia*, the *Evergetinos*,

and *Concerning Continual Communion*, ‘thus giving occasion to the holy man to apply himself to lofty spiritual efforts, which rendered him an ever-shining Luminary of the Church and a universal Teacher of piety’ (p. 74). After St Macarius left, St Nicodemus moved around a bit to different cells on the Holy Mountain, especially the Cell of St George in Karyes belonging to Megisti Lavra, known as the Cell of the ‘Skourtaioi’. At one point, he even attempted a voyage to Romania, to visit the renowned St Paisius Velichkovsky, but had to turn back from a storm. Bebis points out that during all this time the holy Father was doing research in various libraries, trying to find the most hesychastic location, and searching for a spiritual father under whom he could live in strict obedience (Introduction, *Handbook*, p. 13). He writes that Fr Theokletos Dionysiatis calls St Nicodemus ‘an eagle flying all over the spiritual mountains in order to live the experiences of divine love and be closer to his Creator—always closer and closer’ (Fr Bebis, p. 13). But during all this time, Fr Gerasimos observes, ‘[H]e devoted himself to spiritual meditation and unceasing prayer, through which his mind became brighter and his soul gained nourishment. He seemed altogether Godlike and full of heavenly serenity and grace’ (p. 76).

At last, when one of the fathers St Nicodemus had met at Naxos, Elder Arsenius, settled at the Kapsala Skete, St Nicodemus went to him and became his disciple, thus demonstrating his great humility. Fr Gerasimos writes:

At Kapsala he devoted himself entirely to the great spiritual struggles of sacred philosophy according to Christ. And studying day and night the Law of God—the divinely inspired Holy Scriptures—and the Fathers of the Church, wise in the things of God, he was filled with divine joy and came to know the mysteries of God, living above the realm of visible things. . . . And through this blessed way of life he became full of brightness, light and sanctity. From here, like another Moses, he ascended the mountain of the virtues and entered the glorious dawn of spiritual contemplation, and saw, as far as it is possible for man to see, the invisible God, heard ineffable words, and received the real illumination of grace, immaterial effulgences and inspirations of the Paraclete. He attained to theosis and became blessed and most God-like, an angel with a body, an inspired mystic with heavenly knowledge, a most accurate revealer of the life in the

Spirit, conveying and making clear to us through ‘the word of grace’ its fruits and blessings, of which he was full. (pp. 77-8)



St Nicodemus travelled with his Elder to spend a year on the barren island of Skyropoula near Euboea, where they had no books, had to scratch out a meagre living, and found for ‘their only companions . . . fish-eating birds’ (p. 79). It was a hard but holy existence. Fr Gerasimos quotes the Saint himself as saying that he preferred ‘the life of a worker and laborer: digging, sowing, harvesting, and every day doing all the other things by which the toilsome life in barren islands is characterized’ (pp. 79-80). Astonishingly, even without the rich libraries of the Holy Mountain St Nicodemus was able during this year to write his beautiful *Handbook of Spiritual Counsel*, filled with excerpts from the Holy Fathers, contemporary theologians, and even the ancient philosophers—an amazing demonstration of his photographic memory (though the inevitable gaps in the latter also perhaps

account for the difficulty I mentioned [here](#)!

St Nicodemus returned to the Holy Mountain in 1783, and, receiving the Great Schema from Elder Damascene Stavroudas, settled with a disciple from Naxos at the Kalyva of Theonas near a Skete of Pantocratoros (p. 81). Fr Gerasimos writes, ‘Practicing stillness here and elaborating the honey of virtue, and illumined by the light of the Holy Spirit, he wrote continuously and taught by means of wise and mellifluous words and spiritual advice the brothers that went to him’ (p. 81). At the kalyva, he edited the complete works of St Symeon the New Theologian, wrote the *Exomologetarion*, *Unseen Warfare*, *New Martyrologium*, and *Spiritual Exercises*, and put together with additions the *Theotokarion*. He also edited the works of St Gregory Palamas, unfortunately confiscated by the Austrians at the print shop they had been sent to (pp. 82-3), and edited with Hieromonk Agapius the *Pedalion*, or ‘Rudder’, which was sullied by the dishonest monk Theodoretus but later expurgated by the Patriarch (Bebis, p. 44).

St Nicodemus travelled around a bit more, living for a time at a cell with the Elder Sylvester who had first sent him to the Holy Mountain and for a time at the monastery of Pantocratoros before settling at a kalyva near Elder Sylvester’s cell (Fr Gerasimos, p. 86). Here he worked on the *Euchologion* and his own *Exomologetarion*, as well as writing interpretations of St Paul’s Epistles, the catholic Epistles, and the Nine Odes, and translating and commenting on Euthymios Zygadinou’s *Interpretation of the Psalms* (p. 87). Later, he wrote a *Lives of the Saints*, an interpretation of the canons for our Lord and the Theotokos (*Eortodromion*), another interpretation, of the Anabathmoi of the *Octoechos* (*New Ladder*), and finally, the *Confession of My Faith* (p. 91).

St Nicodemus was known for his strict asceticism. His spiritual brother Euthymius wrote:

His diet consisted sometimes of rice boiled in water, sometimes of honey diluted with water, but most of the time of olives, soaked fava beans, and bread. When occasionally he happened to get fish, he gave them to some neighbor who cooked them and shared them with him. His neighbors, knowing that he did not cook, often brought him cooked food. (p. 87)

St Nicodemus would often be so caught up in speaking to the brethren on spiritual matters that he would forget to eat food right in front of him. Fr Gerasimos writes:

He lived like an angel, and was a holy man and a Saint, a theologian wise in the thing of God, an inexhaustible treasury of the Paraclete, a God-like and luminous counselor of men, from the Patriarch to the simplest believer, radiating the grace of Christ. He was simple in his manners, forbearing, sweet and benign in character, devoid of possessions, meek and most humble. His humility was deep, both in word and in deed. . . . Instead of shoes he always wore sandals. He had but one cassock and lacked, as we have seen above, a permanent dwelling. The home of the God-inspired Teacher was the entire Holy Mountain, whence he has been named the Hagiorite, ‘of the Holy Mountain’. (pp. 92-3)

At the end of his life, St Nicodemus returned to the Cell of the Skourtaioi. He received Holy Unction and the Holy Mysteries, and after taking the latter, ‘he crossed his hands, stretched out his legs, became quiet and tranquil, and prayed continuously. When the brothers who were present asked him: “Teacher, are you resting?” he replied: “I have placed Christ within me, how is it possible for me not to be at rest?”’ (p. 94). St Nicodemus fell asleep in the Lord on 14 July 1809, at the age of sixty. His head, fragrant with sanctity, is still treasured at the Cell of the Skourtaioi.

Although many of the works of St Nicodemus have not yet been translated into English, a number of them have. I have already cited the English translations of *Unseen Warfare* (translated from St Theophan the Recluse's Russian revision) and *A Handbook of Spiritual Counsel*. The *Philokalia* published by Faber & Faber is well known, but less well known is Constantine Cavarnos's translation of selections from the *Philokalia* featuring St Nicodemus's introduction and biographical notes: *The Philokalia*, trans. Constantine Cavarnos (Belmont, MA: Institute for Byzantine & Modern Greek Studies, 2008)—available [here](#). I have already blogged about the *Evergetinos*, featuring St Nicodemus's introduction, [here](#). *The Pedalion* has been translated by D. Cummings—*The Rudder (Pedalion)*, trans. D. Cummings (Chicago: Orthodox Christian Educational Society, 1956)—but sadly, this edition contains the (unidentified) interpolations of the unfortunate [Apostolos Makrakis](#), about which see the comments [here](#), as well as Bebis's remarks on p. 44 of his *Introduction to the Handbook*. Finally, three of the Saint's other works have thus far been translated by my friend, Fr George Dokos, and published by Uncut Mountain Press: *Exomologetarion: A Manual of Confession* (Thessalonica: Uncut Mountain, 2006), *Concerning Frequent Communion of the Immaculate Mysteries of Christ* (Thessalonica: Uncut Mountain, 2006), and *Confession of Faith* (Thessalonica: Uncut Mountain, 2007).

As a sample of the Saint's writings, I shall give two passages from *Christian Morality* (Venice, 1803), a work not yet published in English but from which Cavarnos has included a few excerpts in his book on St Nicodemus:

We must despise and have an aversion for all of man's customs and traditions which are opposed to the holy Canons of the Holy Ecumenical and Regional Synods, and to the Canons and divine words of the God-inspired Fathers and holy Teachers of our Church. For the Holy Synods and the divine Fathers did not utter words of their own, nor did they speak with the spirit of this world, as do worldly men, but they spoke with the illumination and grace of the Holy Spirit, and their words are Divine teachings that lead men to the kingdom of God. (Cavarnos, pp. 125-6)

The grace of the Holy Spirit which is given mystically to every Christian when he is baptized acts and is manifested in proportion to our obedience to the commandments of the Lord. That is, if a Christian obeys the commandments of the Lord more, grace acts within him more, while if he obeys them less, grace acts within him less. Just as a spark, when covered in the ashes of fire becomes increasingly manifest as one removes the ashes, and the more fire wood you put the more the fire burns, so the grace that has been given to every Christian through Holy Baptism is hidden in the heart and covered up by the passions and sins, and the more a man acts in accordance with the commandments of Christ, the more he is cleansed of the passions and the more the fire of Divine grace lights in his heart, illumines and deifies him. (pp. 133-4)