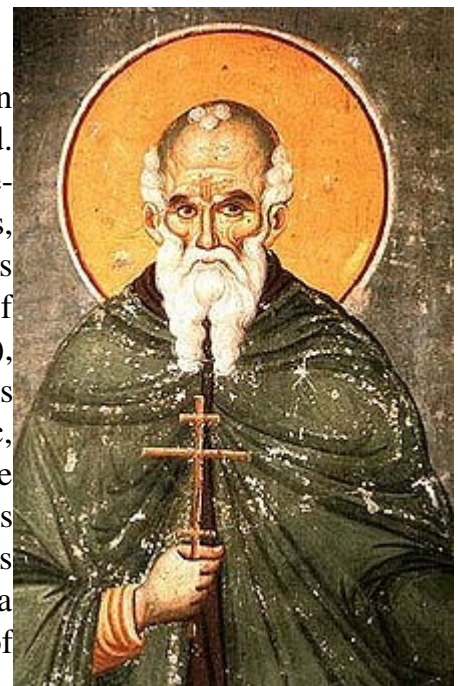




Saints of Mount Athos

The Holy Mountain during its history of more than a thousand years has always been a busy workshop of wisdom and virtue which has produced monks distinguished for their learning and sanctity.

From the mid 18th century down to our own times has been a period when the Holy Mountain has greatly flourished. Akakios Kafsokalyvitis († 1730), the extremely severe cave-dwelling ascetic, the imitator of St Maximus Kafsokalivitis, Ierotheos of Iveron († 1745), a wise teacher, Anthimos Kourouklis († 1782), the joyful missionary to the islands of the Aegean and the Ionian, Paosios Velitskovski († 1794), the founder of the 'ascetic-literary' school, Sophronios Ayiannanitis, Makarios Notaras († 1805), the bishop-ascetic, Georgios of Tsernika in Romania († 1806), Nicodemus the Athonite († 1809), a writer noted for his wisdom, Athanasios of Paros († 1813), a teacher of distinction, Sophronios Vratsis of Bulgaria († 1813), Arsenios of Paros († 1877), a renowned ascetic, Antypas of Moldavia († 1822), Siluan of



Russia the Athonite († 1938), well-known from his fine biography, and Savvas of Kalymnos († 1948), the worker of miracles, form an important nucleus of enlightenment, education, and service to God and man. To these names we must add the glorious latter-day Athonite martyrs, who in the 18th and 19th century number as many as 60, of whom we could mention: Pachomios of the Nea Skete († 1730), Constantine the Russian († 1742), Damaskinos of Thessaly († 1771), Cosmas of Aetolia († 1779), that renowned teacher and founder of churches and schools, Loukas of Stavroniketa († 1802), Gerasimos of Koutloumousiou († 1812), Efthymios of the Skete of Iveron († 1814), Gedeon of Karakallou († 1818), Agathangelos of Esphigmenou († 1819), Gregory V, Patriarch of Constantinople († 1821), Pavlos of Konstamonitou († 1824), and the renowned Athanasios of Lemnos († 1846).

The foundation of the Athonite Academy (1749) was an important point in this modern Athonite renaissance. The distinguished teachers who served there included Neophytos Kafsokalyvitis, its first principal, who was succeeded by Archimandrite Agapios of the Holy Sepulchre, slaughtered by the Turks outside Thessaloniki, Evyenios Voulgaris, that gifted teacher, Nikolaos Zertzoulis of Metsovo, Panayotis Palamas, and Athanasios of Paros, among others. Among those who served as the Academy's trustees and patrons were Gregory V, Nicodemus the Athonite, and Makarios Notaras. Among the Academy's students were the martyrs Cosmas of Aetolia, Constantine of Hydra, and Athanasios Koukaliotis; there were



also leaders in the intellectual world such as Iosipos Moisiadax, Sergios Makraios, and Rigas Pheraios, who died for his country. It is an undoubted fact that for the Greek nation then enslaved to the Turks the Athonite Academy lit one more lantern of hope for its survival. The printing-press set up at the Megiste Lavra by Cosmas of Epidaurus (1755) and the school at the Vatopedi Monastery also contributed to the awakening of the nation, but unfortunately these were short-lived.

The same period coincided with the lives and work of important men of letters such as Papa-Ionas Kafsokalyvitis, Dionysios Siatistias, Neophytos Skourteos, Vartholomaios of Koutloumousiou, Pachomios of Tirnovo, Dionysios of Fournas († 1745), the icon-painter and author of the famous book on the art of painting, who lived at Karyes, Kaisarios Dapontes († 1784), a much-travelled writer and poet who was a monk of Xeropotamou, Dorotheos (Evelpidis) of Vatopedi, and Nikiphoros of Iveron.

In the mid 18th century a grave theological debate developed all over the Holy Mountain in connection with the issues of the holding of memorial services for the departed, frequency of Holy Communion, and other matters relating to the exact observance of Orthodox tradition. The starting-point for this prolonged controversy was the building of the kyriakon at the Skete of St Anne (1754). The question arose as to whether the commemoration of the founders and benefactors should be held on Saturday or Sunday, and with what frequency the monks should receive Holy Communion. The debate divided the monks, and those who insisted

that the memorial services should be held on Saturdays were mockingly dubbed 'kollyvades'. It seems, however, that, behind their apparent obstinacy, they had a profound knowledge of church tradition and fought hard for its authenticity and for its purification from adulteration. Thus the name of 'kollyvas' became a title of honour and the movement was responsible for a profitable and beneficial regeneration and renewal. Indeed, this devout movement was led by three saints: Makarios Notaras, Nicodemus the Athonite, and Athanasios of Paros, and they numbered among their supporters and sympathisers distinguished scholars such as Neophytos Kafsokalyvitis, Christophoros Artinos, Agapios of Cyprus, Iakovos the Peloponnesian, Pavlos the hermit, Theodoritos of Esphigmenou, and a number of others. Some of them chose voluntary exile and took refuge in mainland Greece or the islands, where they founded scores of monasteries, of which a fair number survive today. Thus we see Makarios Notaras on Chios, Niphon on Skiathos, Dionysios of Skiathos on Skyros, Ierotheos on Hydra, with numerous disciples and friends of that Athonite tradition which has nourished monks and saints. The monasteries which they founded were noted for their vigour and service. The Ecumenical Patriarchate by decisions of the Holy Synod finally put an end to the 'kollyvades' issue, by ruling that memorial services could be held as circumstances demanded and that Holy Communion, with the proper preparation, could be received frequently, and that the life of the substance, and not the aridity of the form, was to be adhered to.

Sts Nicodemus the Athonite, Makarios Notaras, and Athanasios of Paros are the typical representatives of the renaissance on the Holy Mountain, and of the spirit which prevailed. They were the authors of widely circulating books which had their effect on the souls of the enslaved Greeks, and their works continue to be re-issued even today. The seal was set on the Athonite theological spirit of the time by the publication of the 'Philokalia of the Ascetic Fathers' (1785), a publication which was a landmark in theological literature.

In a difficult period such as that of Turkish rule, the Holy Mountain kept its lamp perpetually burning, and was able, moreover, to hand on the flame to the peoples of the Balkans and the North. Thus the exchange of visits and the sojourn of many on the Holy Mountain of Athos gave rise to an important spiritual and cultural movement. The quiet of Mount Athos acted as a school of superior philosophy in which not only asceticism and vigilance, but also study in its rich libraries, the translation of rare texts, concern for art, and the transmission of a spirit of service and self-sacrifice were cultivated. The work of the starets PaOsius Velitskovski, the reformer of monasticism in Romania and Russia, after his departure from Athos, was particularly inspired. Similar work was carried out by his disciple the Blessed Goergios of Tsernika († 1806) in the monasteries of Moldavia, where hundreds of monks were his spiritual children, by the Blessed Sophronios Vratisis († 1813) in Bucharest, while the Blessed Antypas († 1882) from Moldavia went to Jassy and finally reached the Monastery of Varlaam in Finland. The Russian Saint Siluan the Athonite († 1938) continues to teach through his much-translated biography by Archimandrite Sophronios († 1993) even after his blessed death. Yet again the illuminating influence of the universality of the Holy Mountain is apparent.

The Athonite monastic community has never kept the fragrance of the blossoming of its virtues all for itself. In spite of the harshness of enslavement to the Turks, penury, the difficulties in travelling and the many perils, the Athonite monk in his humble cap went everywhere in the Greek world, to bring the sober preaching of salvation, of redemption, of

consolation, of support, and of hope - fiery missionaries like Cosmas of Aetolia, who crowned his long preaching mission with martyrdom, the Blessed Anthimos Kourouklis, who travelled the islands and built churches and monasteries, the Blessed Makarios Notaras, who on the islands of the Aegean created real centres of refreshment and aspiration, while similar work was carried out by his companion Blessed Athanasios of Paros, Arsenios of Paros, and Savvas of Kalymnos, to name but a few. The Ecumenical Patriarch Gregory V the Martyr and the company of glorious latter-day Athonite martyrs still teach more strikingly today after their martyr's end and strengthen the hearts of the people.

In our own century the Holy Mountain has continued its hidden service to mankind which makes known the lofty spirituality and life of Orthodoxy and its benign influence beyond its boundaries by continuing to produce ascetics and figures of great spiritual and theological stature. In a world which thirsts and seeks in anguish for authenticity, discipline and truth, it gives its testimony of the experience of the Orthodox spiritual life and the salvation of the soul. The many young pilgrims today may not always be fired with enthusiasm, but they are set thinking by this way of life of asceticism, abstinence, simplicity, and quiet of the monks. Thus often a pilgrimage to the Holy Mountain is a turning-point in their lives. The humility and sanctity of Mount Athos play a role of spiritually alerting the Church and the people.

This spiritual portrait of Athos has to show in our own times many figures who vie with those of earlier eras, whose spirit they transmit, while at the same time providing a starting-point for the carrying on of their work in the future. Among those Abbots known for their great love for the Holy Mountain, for their monasteries, for their spiritual children, for the Theotokos and for God, lovers of virtue and hard work, were the now departed Archimandrites Symeon of Gregoriou († 1905), Neophytos of Simonopetra († 1907) - who were re-founders of their monasteries - Kodratos of Karakallou († 1940), Athanasios of Gregoriou († 1953), Ieronymos of Simonopetra († 1957), Philaretos of Konstamonitou († 1963), who wore themselves out in the service of their monasteries and their monks, Serapheim of Aghiou Pavlou († 1960), Vissarion of Gregoriou († 1974), Gavril of Dionysiou († 1983), who successfully worked together to promote the common interests of the Holy Mountain, Charalambis of Simonopetra († 1970), and Ephraim of Xeropotamou († 1983).



Apart from these distinguished figures, the following, now at rest, were excellent and discreet spiritual counsellors and confessors in our own century: Savvas († 1908) and Grigorios of Little St Anne, Ignatios Koutounakiotis († 1927), Chariton Kafsokalyvitis, Kaisarios, and Mikhail the blind († 1952) of the Skete of St Anne, Neophytos, Gavril († 1967), Efstathios († 1981) and Elpidios († 1983) the Cypriots, and Spyridon († 1990) of the Nea Skete, Grigorios of Dionysiou, Maximos of Karakallou, Nikodimos of Crete of the Koutloumousi Skete, among others.

Of widely acknowledged sanctity were the departed Elders Hatzighiorghis († 1886), renowned for the severity of his fasting, Danil the Romanian, the cavedweller, of Kerasia, Avimelech of Crete and Gerasimos († 1991), the hymnographer of Little St Anne, Kallinikos († 1930), the ascetic and Hesychast and Danil of Smyrna († 1929) of Katounakia, Gerasimos

Menayias († 1957), the wise hermit, Avvakoum († 1978) the unshod, of the Lavra, Isaak († 1932), the best of coenobites, and Lazaros († 1974) of Dionysiou, Iosiph the cave-dweller († 1959), the great ascetic, and Theophylaktos († 1986), the lover of the saints, of the Nea Skete, Gerontios († 1958) of St Panteleimon, Athanasios of Iveron († 1973), known for his humility and devotion to the Theotokos, Evlogios († 1948), the great faster, and Enoch († 1978), the delightful Romanian, at Karyes, Papatychon († 1968), the great Russian ascetic of Kapsala, Porphyrios († 1992), an elder of Kafsokalyvia with prevision and insight, who for years carried the blessings of Athos into Attica, and PaOsios († 1944) the Athonite, who gave rest to many who approached him with reverence. Many have written many worthy accounts of all of these.

The last two to be mentioned above were widely known for the grace which was given them. Elder Porphyrios was one of the most important figures of our times: he had the authority of authenticity, he had the experience of the Holy Spirit, he was truly humble, his simplicity was thoroughgoing; in him childlikeness was interwoven with holiness. He was a discerner of souls, a teacher and a guide to many, who, greatly moved, will tell of their meetings with him. Elder PaOsios was also an experienced, patient and persistent physician of souls and a guide to a host of people with great needs. His joyful discourse, his example, his counsels reached people, and infected them with his peace, the joy of blessing, the refreshment of the spirit.

Amongst the men of letters of our time whom the Holy Mountain has produced are the priest-monk Theodoritos of the Lavra, Gerasimos of Esphigmenou (Smyrnakis), famed for his fine book on the Holy Mountain, the deacon-monk Cosmas of Aghiou Pavlou (Vlachos), similarly, the priest-monk Christophoros of Docheiariou (Ktenas), the author of a host of works on the Holy Mountain, the Lavra Elders Paneleimon, Chrysostomos, Alexandros (Evmorphopoulos), Spyridon (Kambanaos), a doctor, Pavlos (Pavlidis), also a doctor, Alexandros (Lazaridis), Evlogios (Kourilas), subsequently Metropolitan of Korytsa, Ioakeim of Iveron, Theophilos, Nikandros, Iakovos and Arkadios of Vatopaidi, and the Xeropotamou Elders Pavlos, Chrysanthos and Evdokimos, Athanasios of Pantocrator, Zosimas of Esphigmenou, Neilos (Mitropoulos) of Simonopetra, Savvas of Philotheou, Varlaam of Gregoriou, Theodosios of Aghiou Pavlou, and Ioakeim (Spetsieris) of Nea Skete.

The work of the saints, the abbots, the spiritual fathers, and the scholars of the Holy Mountain, of yesterday and today, radiates outwards and has a beneficial effect upon the world - because Athos, over and above its priceless material treasures, is the guardian of treasures of living virtue, which is of greater importance; it can provide a way of life to cope with the harshness of everyday life, its monotony and loneliness. Thus the Holy Mountain has been justly called by Prof. A. Stavropoulos "a school of spiritual fatherhood and counselling", through offering hospitality to many and through those monks who are able to go out into the world for confessions, conversation, and mission. The audience for their advice includes bishops, priests, monks, nuns, university and school teachers, and 'the least of the brethren'. As has been rightly said by J. Lacarriere "in the person of these few men who remain isolated in their kalyva or cave one can see the guardians, the trustees, the 'athletes' of a wisdom and a science of man which we hasten to admire when it comes from India or Tibet, but which we ignore when it is practised next door to us".

The words of Elder PaOsios about Hatzighiorghis, the subject of his biography, apply

equally to himself and to many others of those whom we have spoken of and describe their noble fight for the well-being of the world. "He advises each one appropriately, with discretion, and comforts their souls and aids them with his prayers of the heart. His face is radiant with the holy life that he lives and brings divine grace to anguished souls. His reputation has spread everywhere and people hasten from every quarter to derive spiritual benefit. From morning till night he deals with the pain of the anguished and warms their hearts with his spiritual love, which is like the spring sunshine".

Elder Avimelech of Little St Anne used to say when asked what he was doing, "We are keeping alert". The blind Elder Leontios of Katounakia used to reflect that "now I see everything better, I experience everything better; God has given me more powerful light than that which I had when I had my health". Elder Mikhail of Kafsokalyvia with a perpetual smile on his lips used to converse with the saints. The Konstamonitou bibliophile Elder Modestos would say: "If we do not feel that all our brethren are ours and that we are theirs, the Holy Spirit will never dwell in our hearts. Our behaviour towards them should not be regulated by their spiritual quality". Elder Philaretos of Karoulia, a most strict ascetic, used to say: "My brethren, everybody strives for his salvation, except me, a sinner".



A Koutloumousiou elder who suffered ill health for years on end would say that "it is the divine will and it is profitable that the body should be ill so that the soul should be saved". Another wise elder of our own times used often to stress that "natural quiet helps towards inner peace. But if it doesn't exist, you must stick patiently to whatever you find before you, and God will give you the greater gifts. And look to see why you do not have peace". He also said, "you should be sad so that you may be glad", and "it's better to have difficulties than to think that you are doing fine; by means of difficulties you become more mature, more beautiful ...". In one of his books, Elder Mitrophanis of Chilandari says of the service which monks perform that it is "the heartfelnness of prayer, love which goes as far as sacrifice, forgiving humility, and the enthusiastic love of mankind".

It is a marvellous thing for holiness to be accompanied by skill with words. When on the Holy Mountain today there continue to be such figures, it is an unexpected blessing for the world.

Monk Moysis the Athonite

