



## Hieromonk Anthimos the Fool for Christ

*By Elder Paisios the Athonite*

Father Anthimos (+ December 9, 1867) was from Sofia in Bulgaria, where he was a married parish priest. After the death of his wife, in about 1841, he came to the Garden of the Mother of God and took root like a good plant, as we shall see below, blossoming with a sweet fragrance.

His first place of repentance was in the Holy Monastery of Simonos Petra, where he was tonsured a monk. Afterwards, he began to act as a fool for Christ, in order to hide the inner wealth of his spiritual experience. He made the whole of Athos his place of repentance; he continually travelled about in the desert, sometimes staying in caves and at other times in the hollows of trees. Now and again, he would also appear at the Russian Monastery of Saint Panteleimon, because he could understand the services which were in Russian. He usually hid in the narthex and followed the service from there. Whenever he saw one of the fathers watching him and regarding him with reverence, he would start behaving stupidly, talking to himself or making jokes, and so he would spoil their thoughts. He would stay at the monastery for varying lengths of time, sometimes a few days, sometimes a little longer. Then he would disappear again into the mountain of Athos entirely alone for two or three months, before making his appearance again at the Russian Monastery of Saint Panteleimon.

At the beginning of his divine madness, he wore an old habit for five years, and later patched up garments. Later still, he ended up wearing an old sack in which he had made three holes, one at the top to put his head through and two more for his arms. He appeared in it everywhere. It was for this reason he was known as "Sacky". When he returned to the forest, however, he took off his sack as a precaution against tearing it, and instead he tore his body on the twigs. Those who had no spiritual depth, but only judged from external appearance, called him "Dotty". But Father Anthimos amazed

them when he would tell them their innermost thoughts. This way, he spiritually benefited those with good intentions, revealing their innermost thoughts to them.

You notice about fools for Christ that because they have such great humbleness, they also have great purity, that is spiritual clarity, so that they know the hearts of men and even the mysteries of God. Such a man was Father Anthimos, who had covered his own pure heart with an old sack.

Whenever he went to the Monastery of Saint Panteleimon, he wouldn't go in but stayed with the monastery workers and sat and ate with them in the same refectory. It seems that the abbot of the monastery got word of this and asked the monk on duty to take care of the ascetic, Father Anthimos. From then on, the monk who was assigned to take care of the worker's refectory held him in great reverence, helped him and watched over him. In this way, he acquired greater confidence and was able to understand some of Father Anthimos' hidden virtues.

One of his great virtues was the gift he had in the matter of fasting: he could fast for days on end! He went once to the Russian monastery before the Fast of the Holy Apostles utterly exhausted. The monk on duty received him with great joy and prepared something for him to eat. The elder began to eat, while the monk who was waiting at table went in and out. He looked at the elder, who was munching away all the time, and thought badly of him: "Such a withered up and weak monk and yet he can eat so much!" All upset with these thoughts of condemnation, the monk went to his cell. When Father Anthimos had finished his food, he went and sat at the door of the monk's cell. Seeing his friend troubled by these thoughts, he took pity on him. In order to help him, he was forced to tell him why he had eaten so much, so that he would be more careful about judging other people. We can also learn from this and avoid judging people. Taking him by the hand, he asked him:

"Brother, do you perhaps know what humbleness is?"

The brother felt constrained to answer: "No, I don't."

Then the elder said to him: "Humbleness consists in this - not judging anybody and thinking yourself worse than everybody. See, just now you were deceived and judged because I was eating so much. But what you don't know is how many days I have gone without eating at all. Do you remember the last time I was here and had something to eat?"

The brother replied: "I remember, father. You were here with us on Sunday of Thomas and you ate. But I haven't seen you since."

The elder said to him: "Well, now you see how many days I spent without eating (*In other words, he had not eaten from Sunday of Thomas until the beginning of the Fast of the holy Apostles, about 7 weeks!*). Yet, you were judging me because I was eating so much. My brother, not all God's gifts are the same. Everyone is given something by God. Well, to me God has given the strength to bear cold and hunger. Do you think you could put up with so much? Are you able to humble yourself, take off the habit and come with me to the next monastery, and then spend the winter at the peak of Athos with only those clothes? You, being a chanter, how do you chant to god? Your mind is elsewhere, on distractions, rather than on God. Just you listen to how I chant."

Father Anthimos raised his hands to the heavens and with heaving sobs chanted *Alleluia*, tears streaming from his eyes. The monk assigned to the refectory was astonished and felt great contrition. The elder then said to him:

"So you see, my brother, don't judge anyone, because you don't know who has been given what gift. You must pay more attention to your own self."

The brother made a prostration to the elder and asked his forgiveness, admiring the latter's spiritual foresight. From then on, Elder Anthimos began to confide in him more of his personal life.

There was once a brother who was fooled by Father Anthimos' pretences and said to himself: "What kind of gifted person is this? Do all people with the gift of foresight eat as much?" The elder read his thoughts, called him over and said to him:

"Brother, you want to be a monk, and yet your thoughts are always running back to Russia. Well, go there and fulfill your wish, but you will be back here again later, and then you will be deemed worthy of becoming a monk."

The words of the elder were fulfilled with great precision. Indeed, this brother was deceived by his thoughts, left the monastery and returned to Russia. A year later, however, he came back to the Holy Mountain and was tonsured a monk in the same monastery.

The monk assigned to the refectory held Father Anthimos in great respect - he considered him a saint - but was afraid to express his admiration, well aware that he didn't like being praised. Once, when the elder came again, the monk was overjoyed and prepared something for him to eat, though he himself, out of respect, didn't want to sit with him. He started bustling about the refectory in order to escape from the elder's attention. When he had finished his food, the elder got up from the table and said:

"All right, all right! Stop! May God have mercy on you and support you."

One of the Russian hieromonks told this brother how he was once overwhelmed by nostalgia for his homeland and, one day, he had been thinking about leaving the Holy Mountain to go back to Russia. While he was thinking, Father Anthimos suddenly came into his cell out of nowhere and said:

"Father, the Mother of God sent me to tell you not to go to Russia, because if you leave the desert for the world, you will fall into sin."

At one point, Father Anthimos lived in quietude on the heights of Athos for a long time. The monk assigned to the refectory was very worried and prayed to god to inform the elder to come to the monastery to bring him spiritual benefit. He was also thinking: "He must be worn out by his labors in the desert and if he were here, I could look after him with a little food, or make him some tea."

The next morning the elder came to the monastery and said jokingly to his friend:

"Here you are. I have come from Athos, according to your wish, completely exhausted and my feet cut with the stones. Is your tea worth all the effort!"

The brother saw the elder's foresight and asked his forgiveness for the trouble he had caused him.

On another occasion, the same brother felt deep sorrow and listlessness and prayed to God to send him his friend, Father Anthimos, to comfort him. No more than a few hours later, Father Anthimos appeared before him. On seeing him, the grieving brother was overjoyed and asked him:

"How is it, father, that you came in the hour of my need?"

The elder smiled and answered:

"You wanted to see me and asked God, so I came."

Another time, at the Russian Monastery of Saint Panteleimon, on the eve of October 1, when there is an all-night vigil for the Protecting Veil of the Mother of God, Father Anthimos arrived at the monastery, nearly dead. When he met his friend, he said:

"Tonight I was not far from the Monastery of Zographou, praying in the desert, standing on a rock. As I was praying, I saw the Mother of God descending on your monastery. I was filled with joy at this vision and set off in a hurry to meet Her here so She could cover me, the sinner, with Her veil, as well as Her servants honoring Her. I had just started running here from that place, when suddenly a snake appeared. It struck at me angrily and gave me a terrible bite in the leg. I realized that the bite was from the envy of the evil one and paid no attention to the hindrance because I was in a hurry to get to your monastery."

The brother looked at the elder's leg, and the wound from the bite really was a serious one. The elder's great love for God had made him insensitive to bodily afflictions.

The winter of 1862 on Athos was very cold with a lot of snow. At that time, Father Anthimos was up on the heights of Athos, deep in the desert, living in the hollow of a tree. A lot of snow fell and he was completely cut off, so that it was impossible for him to come out of there. Forty-six days he spent there without bread. Almost always, he would be closer to the monastery before winter set in. The elders of the Russian monastery learned that in that freezing and snowy winter Father Anthimos was not nearby and began to worry about him. At the end of forty-six days, Father Anthimos arrived at the monastery utterly exhausted and numb with cold. When the brother saw him, he cried aloud in joy:

"Ah, father, is that you? We had given up hope of ever seeing you again. Where have you been all this time?"

"Well, I was living in the hollow of a tree," answered the elder with a smile.

"What did you have to eat there father?" asked the brother.

"Victor, my brother, God alone knows what I suffered from the demons and the freezing cold. But Saint John the Baptist appeared and saved me from death."

Once, Elder Anthimos had not been at the Russian monastery for five months. The monks didn't know why. They were worried and many different thoughts occurred to them: "Maybe somebody has offended him" and so on. The spiritual father of the monastery knew a hermit in whom Anthimos had confidence and asked him to find out the reason. The hermit asked Father Anthimos, who replied:

"As long as they praise me there and honor me as a saint, I am not going back... The last time I was there, one of the hieromonks fell at my feet and said: 'Pray for me, holy father, sinner that I am, that I may be saved through your prayers...' You see? How can I go there when they treat me like a saint?"

After that, Father Anthimos would go the monastery almost by stealth and confided in Father Victor some of the secrets of his life during the course of their conversations.

Another time, when he was visiting the monastery and Father Victor was setting the table for him,

the elder said to him:

"Saint John the Merciful visited your monastery yesterday."

That day was Sunday, and, according to custom, hermits, skete-dwellers, and several lay people came and ate in the refectory and were then given a blessing.

Father Anthimos had no fixed abode, but rather the whole of Athos was his to dwell in. In the last years of his life, he lived close to the Bulgarian Monastery of Zographou, and often helped with the building work and repairs - carrying stones and water.[2]

In August 1867, the great ascetic visited his beloved Russian Monastery of Saint Panteleimon for the last time. He went into the monastery and straight to the guesthouse. There he met his friend, Father Victor, and spoke with him at length, instructing him on how to defeat evil thoughts and the passions. Finally, he said to him outright:

"I will not be coming here any more now, because I am going to die soon."

Indeed, that's what happened. At the end of November in the same year, he went to the Monastery of Zographou and fell ill. They put him in the monastery infirmary, where he remained for twelve days.

On December 9, 1867, Father Anthimos left the Garden of the Mother of God where he struggled with great *philotimo* (dignity) and rested in the Lord. His blessing be upon us. Amen.

***(Note: The biography of Righteous Father Anthimos was published in the book Modern Athonite Ascetics, 9th ed., Moscow 1900, pp. 31-40. I have abbreviated it somewhat, without changing what Hieromonk Arsenios wrote. I did it with the best of intentions, lest some things concerning the righteous father were open to misinterpretation.)***

From *Athonite Fathers and Athonite Matters*.

Source: <http://www.johnsanidopoulos.com/2009/12/hieromonk-anthimos-fool-for-christ-1.html>