

Elder Joseph the Hesychast: an account of his deeds (Elder Efraim Vatopaidinos)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



Throughout the thousand- year long history of the saint-nurturing Mount Athos countless holy figures have been distinguished. This fact constitutes the greatest benefit which the Holy Mountain has given to Church and to the world. Many of those righteous monks have been marked out and widely recognized by the flock of the Church while still alive, some after their repose, while others wished to remain anonymous even after their death.

Demokritos' dictum "live in anonymity" constitutes the main attribute of the hagiorite monasticism. The monk from the Holy Mountain does not seek recognition in this life and diligently tries to hide his virtues. This is how St Siluan the Athonite lived. While still alive most people thought that he was an ordinary monk while in reality his was great in the face of the Lord. Only after his repose and especially after his biographer, the ever-memorable Elder Sophroni, preserved the saint's

scarce writings, that his pious life came to light.

Something similar has occurred with blessed Elder Joseph the Hesychast, this hagiorite monk who lived on the Holy Mountain for almost forty years in anonymity. Twenty years after his repose some of his letters and his biography were published and the world became aware of his teachings and his virtuous life in Christ.

Elder Joseph, known in the world as Francis Kottis, was born in Lefkes in the island Paros on the 12th February 1897. His parents, George and Maria were ordinary but righteous people. He was destined even from “his mother’s tummy” to follow in the footsteps of Christ and become His aide in the deliverance of men. When his mother gave birth to him, she had a vision where an angel was trying to take the baby away from her. When she protested, the angel showed her a note in which it was written that he must take the baby away (See Elder Joseph of Vatopedi: “Elder Joseph the Hesychast”).

His father died when he was a teenager and thus he had to leave for the port of Piraeus in order to work and help out his impoverished family with the many children, since he was the second oldest brother. He had six more siblings. Initially he worked at various jobs; later on he joined the Navy and afterwards he became a small-time merchant. Even though he did not consciously lead a spiritual life, he was nevertheless fair and conscientious in his dealings. He became engaged to a good girl and lived in chastity. He never touched her, scared in case he reached the point where he had to kiss her (See above).

His fiancé though, died from tuberculosis and he, having had a revealing dream, recognized the futility of the world and his heart started aching for monasticism. He was practicing that which he was reading in the Patristic books. He would fast every two days, sit on the trees praying on the mountains of Penteli and would visit many places of worship to strengthen his faith and receive the blessing in order to leave the world. During one such visit to Kefallinia where he stayed one week in the monastery of St Yerasimos, he witnessed with his very own eyes a miracle whereby the Saint healed a man. There he heard from the nuns that the Saint had reposed on the feast-day of the Dormition of the Mother of God and was praying to him to intercede for the same thing happening to him. Indeed this took place almost forty years later.

After marrying his sister off, he gave away a lot of money, dispersing his small fortune. Then during the early 1920’s, burning with “the immaterial fire” which is unheard of for the many, comes to the Holy Mountain to live the most perfect life. Initially he lived for a short time in Vigla near the Great Lavra monastery, looking

for spiritual guides to introduce him to the niptic work. Later on, he was receiving spiritual guidance from the discrete Elder Daniel of Katounakia for eight months. Elder Daniel, seeing the unstoppable and fierce zeal which young Francis was showing in favor of the ascetic life and foreseeing his future success, advised him to place himself under the obedience of a simple, elderly monk, named Efrem, who lived at the hut of the Annunciation of the Virgin at Katounakia. He asked him to take with him another one of his spiritual children, Fr Arsenios and after they receive the blessing of obedience from their elder to begin legitimately their great ascetic efforts. Indeed this is how it happened and Fr Arsenios became Francis' inseparable companion.

During their stay at Katounakia, Elder Efrem tonsured Francis giving him the Great Schema with the name 'Joseph' at the cave of St Athanasius. Fr Euthemios who lived there, officiated at the ceremony. Just before Elder Efrem reposed, they were all transferred to the ascetic and hesychastic areas of the Skete of St Basil, seeking a more peaceful environment. Then after Elder Efrem died, the young Fr Joseph began a most austere and beyond limits practice in fasting, poverty, indigence and hardship. He combined these with the practice of the mental prayer. During their stay at St Basil's, he launched fierce battles against the flesh and the devil, but had also received impressive visitation by divine Grace. There, he also created a small brotherhood. Even though many people wished to remain with him, because he had become famous as a great ascetic, could not do it since he was very strict and demanding (See above).

In 1938 they move on to the caves of Little St Anne just underneath the cave of the renowned hesychast and spiritual father, Fr Savva. In the summer of 1947 our blessed Elder, Joseph of Vatopedi, joins their brotherhood, which by now includes Frs. Arsenios and Athanasius, who is the brother of senior Elder Joseph. Everyone else had already abandoned the brotherhood. In the autumn of the same year, Fr Efrem- later Abbot of Filotheou- came to stay with them while in the summer of 1950 they are joined by Fr Charalambos, who later became Abbot of the Monastery of Dionysiou. As he had learnt from experience, blessed Elder Joseph became a little more tolerant as to the level of ascetic effort exercised by his underlings in contrast to the times he had stayed at St Basil's. That didn't mean of course that he ever gave up his austere ascetic regime which included fasting, obedience, silence, all night vigils and praying. Full of joy was telling Fr Arsenios: "Arsenios, I can now say to my Lord 'now, You may take Thy servant'. We have lived such tough lives together; we have shed our blood seeking the Lord inside us. But my constant complaint all these years was this: Many people joined us, benefited from us, but left us. They could not follow us in our spiritual efforts. I thought I will

repose to my Lord with this unfulfilled wish. But, behold! But now in our old age He has brought us these last few young monks. The entire Holy Mountain will rest on them. Just remember that!”

In 1951 they moved to New Skete, where they were a little more comfortable since their three subordinates had started exhibiting some serious health problems because of the ascetic hardship and the rough environment. In the end, they were given the cells belonging to the monastery of St Paul, situated above the tower. At this time, the ministry mission of Elder Joseph is revealed since many monks from the Holy Mountain and laity from outside visit him to receive his advice; they regard him as a perceptive guide without delusions. He reposed to the Lord on the feast-day of the Dormition of the Mother of God- as it was his wish and in accordance with the promise the Virgin gave to him- on Friday morning, 15th August 1959, after the Divine Liturgy and having taken the Holy Communion.

Elder Joseph was extremely strong and brave with an iron will. He began his monastic life with great intensity and fervent zeal, something very rare nowadays. He never lost this zeal not even at the end of his life but had even increased it, something which is rarely achieved. He carried the cross of the love for effort and hardship in a spirit of utter self-disregard. He practiced fasting, all night vigils and praying to the utmost. During Lent he only ate once a day 80 gr. of flour, cooked with a little water and salt. The rest of the time he ate food enough to fit in a small can of sardines for the whole day. This meager quantity was not cooked in oil either, unless it was during the weekend. This lasted for thirty five odd years until his last company of brothers was assembled. For the first eight years of his struggles, he never slept on a bed but sleep would overcome him sitting on a small stool. He persevered in all night vigils from sunset till dawn unto the end of his life.

He was relentless on himself and would not omit his regime of fasting and vigils even if he was sick. He was inventing ways to suffer hardship which seem unbelievable to our generation, because he was scared, as he used to say, of the monk’s worst enemy: negligence. Some people accused him of being delusional because of his austere regime. This is how negligent monks fight against the conscientious and the zealous ones. This is what St Siluan the Athonite was accused of by his fellow brothers, in addition to supposedly being damned (See Arch. Sophroni: St Siluan, The Athonite).

Elder Joseph was a man of virtue. He was lusting and struggling for virtue with all his determination. He pursued perfection. He struggled with all his might to acquire virtue. As a layman he was righteous, even though he had not yet experienced any perception of the Lord. When he was working as a ticket

collector, he was conscientious enough to destroy the tickets which hurried passengers purchased but did not pick up.

He struggled fiercely but was granted the charisma of perfect purity. In one of his letters he confesses: “For this reason, I have fought against the passions of the flesh more than anything else. Purity was given to me as a gift to such an extent that I am not moved if one is a man or a woman. No passion whatsoever stirs in me. With the Lord’s compliments I have perceptively received the virtue of purity (Γέροντος Ιωσήφ: Έκφραση Μοναχικής Εμπειρίας).

He loved humility, viewing it as the genuine state of self-perception. Humility is not ‘humble talking’, like when we say “I am a sinner’ etc. Humility is the truth. Namely, the fact that one learns that he is nothing. The Elder says that ‘nothing’ is the state of the world before the Lord created it, i.e. nothing. The monk attracts the presence of divine grace if he practices self-condemnation, which is humility in practice.

As a true Hesychast and imitator of the saints, Arsenios the Great and Fr Isaac the Syrian, Elder Joseph cried a lot during his all night vigils and prayers. He believed that if tears are not shed every time one remembers the Lord, then there is an underlying state of ignorance, pride and stiffness in his heart.

Even though he was uneducated in the normal sense of the world, he was very fond of reading and studying spiritual books. He especially insisted on the frequent, scheduled reading of the Holy Scriptures and of Patristic readings. “Spiritual studies act as a spiritual mirror, where one sees his mistakes and his weaknesses and corrects his life; he is also driven towards divine zeal. It is like the light in the darkness”, he said.

He was advocating the daily reading of the New Testament. He said that one must always carry a small book of the New Testament in his pocket to read every time he had some free time. Thus: “the Lord enlightens you and guides you to adhere to his commandments. He replenishes the love inside you and guides you how to imitate Him”, he said.

He believed that the entire ascetic life of the monk is void unless it directs him towards discretion. He didn’t place so much emphasis on any other charisma and was talking about discretion in admiration. He described it as the perfect weapon in the constant battles of the unseen war, especially for the monks. “You need salt, children! You need salt” he was saying, meaning the virtue of discretion.

Elder Joseph was a great struggler and enthusiast of the noetic practice. In his

entire life he was constantly reciting the mental prayer. His empirical knowledge of the mental prayer was like the professional knowledge one acquires in his job or in the arts. Every night he scheduled the reciting of the Jesus' prayer for over six hours without his mind wondering. He lived in a state of constant prayer.

He had received the charismatic state of prayer from the Lord: namely, the noetic and pure prayer in his heart. Those who practice the quietude of the mind strive to accomplish the unification of the mind (nous: νοῦς) with the heart. When this is achieved, every kind of spiritual darkness which affects the soul is expelled. Then the person as a whole, as a unified psychosomatic entity, enjoys peace, joy and the sweetness of the Holy Spirit; the mind is cleansed.

His main spiritual legacy towards his spiritual children was the practice of the mental prayer. He was inciting them in this way: "Whoever wants let him try. When this practice lasts a long time, he will find Paradise inside him. He will be set free from passions; he will become a different person. If one lives in the desert as well, then there is no telling of the benefits of the mental prayer!"

The Blessed Elder, having several times tasted the experience of divine perception, had become "faith-certain" as St Isaac the Syrian says. This inward faith, i.e. the faith of contemplation, is superior to the dogmatic faith. The faith of contemplation operates in those who contemplate; that is, in those who see the Lord with their spiritual eyes. He always prioritized faith against knowledge which stems from reasoning. He was saying: "When this kind of faith takes hold, the particular knowledge, which raises doubts in everything and reduces faith and occasionally nullifies it, is totally abolished. It is crucial to note that he had absolute faith in the Lord's providence even for the most insignificant and trivial issues. He was always stressing: "Where is the Lord? God always assists, always steps in on time, but we must be patient".

His heart was ablaze with passionate divine Eros towards Jesus and the Most Holy Lady. He perceived the energy of the uncreated divine love as a dynamic motion towards the source of love, namely Christ. The Elder's letters are brimming with such revealing, secret, spiritually ardent movement, rising from a God-loving soul. Thus, he would prompt: "If you become fond of the mental prayer, you must mourn and weep seeking Jesus. For His part, He will reveal Himself like blazing love, which will dissipate all passions...The heart must be so alight with such divine Eros and blistering love that as soon as one hears or says "Lord Jesus Christ, my sweet love!" or "My sweetest mother, Panayia, Parthene (Most Holy Lady, Virgin)!" immediately his eyes will fill with tears".

Often, after some really tough hardships and times of great tribulation, the Most Holy Lady would appear to console him. She was always stressing: “Didn’t I tell you to have your hope in me? Why are you discouraged?” Once at the little chapel of St John the Baptist in the caves of Little St Anne, the Lady Mother of God appeared from the icon-stand where her icon stood and told him: “Here, take Christ!” However, the Elder was mortified and didn’t move. Then the holy child caressed the elder’s forehead and his head three times with His hand and filled his heart with the uncreated light and divine consolation (See: Elder Joseph: Elder Joseph the Hesychast).

As the recipient of the fullness of divine Grace, the Elder managed to reach the highest level of empirical theology and become the perfect theologian, through the divine enlightenment of his charismatic mind. Theology, according to the Elder, is the result of the resident divine Grace. Whoever cleanses his senses, quiets his mind and purifies his heart through obedience and spiritual quietude, receives the visitation by divine Grace and acquires the enlightenment of spiritual perception. “He becomes full of light, full of lucidity, all nous and becomes abundant with theological meanings to such an extent that if three people were to write everything down wouldn’t be able to contain the wavy current which spreads peace and totally immobilizes all passions throughout the body”.

Elder Joseph the Hesychast was the modern Hagiorite monk, who had experienced and redrawn the monastic way of life, expressively and with detail. Numerous other righteous Elders have indeed been distinguished nowadays. But they have not left the fine points of monastic life as a legacy neither did they influence those with good will- “those able to receive”- towards the path of monasticism like Elder Joseph did. With his experiential way of life he reintroduced the teachings by St Gregory Palamas on hesychasm to the modern hagiorite monasticism and generally to Orthodoxy. He became a legitimate continuator of hesychasm and of the tradition which strives for virtue, which has greatly contributed towards the spiritual revival and repopulation of the Holy Mountain.

The former Abbot of the Great Monastery Simonos Petras, Elder Emilianos, who espoused the teachings by Elder Joseph and passed them on to his innumerable spiritual children, writes about the Elder: “Blessed Elder Joseph, the Hesychast, has become the jewel in modern hagiorite history, since during difficult times he managed to revive the centuries-old hesychastic experience, as well as the experience of prayer in mount Athos. Through the coordinated and unending practice and spiritual discipline and schooling of his spiritual children, he has prepared the new generation to practicing the ever-flowing Jesus prayer, radiating

further away than the borders of Greece”.

It is estimated that more than a thousand monks and nuns are direct spiritual descendants of Elder Joseph. Six monasteries, one Skete and many cells in the Holy Mountain, eighteen monasteries throughout Greece, six in Cyprus, twenty in the United States, two in Canada and one in Italy own their spiritual paternity to Blessed Elder Joseph, the Hesychast. Since the Elder was able to foresee this happening, eight months before his repose in December 1958, he divided his disciples into four groups. This is unusual in the Holy Mountain, since the first to join the brotherhood routinely takes on the succession. However, he already knew that his disciples would later become Abbots and Elders in large coenobiums.

Elder Joseph, however, as an ascetic and a hesychast, was not unaware of the afflictions of this world just because he lived away from people. He would do his utmost to console, mitigate the pain, help and benefit all those who visited him, wrote to him or asked for his prayers. The very few of the letters he wrote, which have been preserved, attest to the missionary aspect of his life.

He devoted most of his life praying for the world. As soon as he reached impassion and became “pure at heart”- and this happened eight years into monasticism- he became the vessel of Grace who would intercede with his prayers for the deliverance of mankind. He was able to experience and communicate with mankind’s pain; his prayers would present man in the face of the Lord, so that every afflicted person would find salvation.

“Once”, says his biographer, “I saw him being anxious and asked him what was bothering him. He worryingly told me that someone we knew was suffering and was asking for help” (See Elder Joseph: Elder Joseph, the Hesychast). He was not able to listen to something upsetting about somebody and not cry in sympathy or pray for him. He was asking Jesus to exclude him from Paradise unless He would receive his brother first or unless He consoled his brother first. He was overwhelmed with zeal until his fellow brothers received spiritual benefit. His heart had extended with such love that everyone was able to fit inside. His entire being had expanded because he was feverishly praying for mankind. Even though he was very austere- even relentless- towards himself, he would show great sympathy and kindness towards others. This is a distinguishing feature of the genuine orthodox ascetic.

His love and compassion for his fellow human beings is also evident in this instance: Just before World War II broke out, a young man suffering from tuberculosis was courting the monasteries and Sketes in the Holy Mountain to see

if anyone would accept him and tonsure him. However, no one would receive him despite his fervent zeal because they were scared of infection. Someone advised him that “only old-man Joseph from Little St Anne has enough love to receive you”.

Indeed, as soon as Elder Joseph set eyes on him, he liked him and was informed by the Lord to keep him. Despite the objections by the other members of his brotherhood, he kept him and built a separate cell, a little further away from the others. He personally looked after him and every night was teaching him how to recite the mental prayer, inciting him to show patience and thank the Lord for this hardship. He was also promising him that Christ would receive him as a martyr. He tonsured him and named him after St Basil the Great, who was also sickly. The young monk, Basil- little Basilakis as the Elder used to call him- with the discipline and prayers of Elder Joseph managed to attain a good spiritual state despite his physical disability and the pains from the illness. However, a few months later he reposed to the Lord. On the night of the fortieth day of his demise, when Elder Joseph was praying in his cell, he saw a light entering his room. Inside, he could see Fr Basil. The latter bowed in front of the elder to receive his blessing and thanked him for everything that he had done for him while still alive; he told him that Christ had indeed ranked him among the martyrs, as the Elder had foretold him.

Elder Joseph the Hesychast was a leading figure. The other hagiorites recognized in him the experienced, perceptive Elder and mystic of monastic life. It is not accidental that his brotherhood was created “from what they already had” while in St Basil’s place. This brotherhood, apart from Fr Arsenios and Fr Athanasius also included Fr Gerasimos Menagias (former professor of Chemistry at the University of Geneva), Fr Spyridon Kampanaos(renowned doctor from the Monastery of Great Lavra and Fr Athanasius Balsamakis (a pharmacist). The fact that three renowned scientists- older and with longer experience in the monastic life- showed obedience to an unknown elder, indicates that Elder Joseph possessed extraordinary spiritual abilities and virtues. When we met with Elder Sophroni of Essex and referred to Elder Joseph the Hesychast, he cried out: “I have met him; I visited him three times at the caves of Little St Anne and I got the impression that I was sitting in front of a spiritual general!”

Many hagiorite monks and laity, who knew about his spiritual state visited him and were asking for advice on spiritual issues. The Elder wrote about this mission: “A lot of people come here from various monasteries and Sketes from the Holy Mountain. With the Grace of the Lord, we tell them what the Lord provides”. His contribution did not just extend to the Holy Mountain or within Greece but was ecumenical. He says. “All this time I am writing to all those who ask me. They visited me from

Germany this year just to find out about the mental prayer. From the United States people write to me with such eagerness. In Paris, there are also so many people who ask questions so keenly”.

His heart, which became purified by the practice of the virtues, his enlightened and fine-tuned mind because of prayer and the love he showed for his fellow human beings as well as the rest of nature, granted him the kind of state Adam had before the fall. Thus, through divine Grace he would perform signs which were beyond natural phenomena. The Elder, of course, was not paying any attention to such events and would keep quiet about most of them. However, we will refer to some instances as a testimony to our account.

When they lived with Fr Arsenios at the Skete of St Basil, the mice were eating their dry bread. One night he caught them by surprise and told the mice: “We cannot go on like this. This is what we are going to do. We will divide our bread in two, one piece for you and one for us. You will only take yours and not touch ours”. Indeed, the mice obeyed his command and did as they were told! Often when he was praying in his cell many birds would gather by his window and would chirp happily. His mere presence would attract the mindless animals, creating a relationship reminiscent of paradise.

In the beginning of the 1930s while still at the Skete of St Basil, blessed Elder Joseph saw with his spiritual eyes through the Holy Spirit the mortal danger his natural brother, Nickolas, was facing when live, high-voltage cables had been wrapped around him while working on an electric pylon in Athens. Elder Joseph saved his brother with his prayer. Afterwards, Nickolas became a monk and was named Athanasius. Similarly, he saw and saved with his prayer a monk called David when a bear threatened to devour him in the garden of the monastery of St Paul. On another occasion when still at the caves of Little St Anne, he was able to watch the entire course Fr Athanasius was taking from the monastery of St Paul up to the caves. Elder Paisios would later compare this kind of vision with “seeing on television”.

After his repose he would also appear to his spiritual children as well as to strangers, conveying divine Grace and revealing to them God’s will. Even today, he appears in front of young people, known to us, and incites them to follow the monastic life. He consoles many monks and nuns in their times of hardship. He told one monk that the way towards salvation is to practice sobriety and inner spiritual work. He carried out a long conversation with a hagiorite Abbot on spiritual issues. One night he showed up in front of a woman in Crete and was discussing the matter of the many heretics who had been surrounding her. The following day, that

woman saw the picture of the Elder in a bookstore and learnt that the man who was talking to her had been dead for many years. In Texas, he showed up and blessed a protestant worker at the monastery of the Archangels. The worker later became a catechumen in the Orthodox Church. Lately, he appeared in front of a pregnant woman in Cyprus, who was worried sick about her pregnancy. He comforted her and blessed her. Afterwards everything went well and she had a natural childbirth.

In summing up, we may say that blessed Elder Joseph the Hesychast, the one who stayed away from the world and worldly worries, who was seeking seclusion in the most ascetic and isolated places of the Holy Mountain in the Skete of St Basil and the caves of Little St Anne, was able to influence his immediate circle of people and all those who were asking for his advice. During his last few years at the New Skete, his influence and authority as a spiritual bearer of divine Grace was more pronounced and obvious to monks and laity alike. However after his repose, the glowing crop of his ascetic struggles have become especially evident throughout the entire planet through his few published writings- which were, nevertheless, brimming with divine Grace- and through his successors and his spiritual descendents. His writings have already been translated into eight languages. In Elder Joseph, the words of the Scriptures “you shall know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7, 16) have been fulfilled. That is, the quality of the tree is revealed through the fruit it produces. We believe that this particular tree will not stop supplying the Church with the succulent fruits, which are the bearers of the genuine and perfect spiritual life in Christ. Amen.

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