

15 Μαρτίου 2017

Fulfilment in monasticism (Elder Joseph of Vatopaidi)

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The sheer enormity

of holiness which the commemorated Saint has acquired throughout his righteous

life has fascinated the whole world. His name offers a lot of consolation to the devout. This degree of holiness is not something strange in our Church, since it is indeed capable of guiding its children to such heightened dimensions. We, who are truly smothered by our numerous weaknesses, are also genuinely encouraged by his example. Even during these difficult times one finds similarly afflicted people, who have not only won over their passions and transcended the unnatural life to life beyond nature, but through their sanctification have also reached the end of the most perfect promise, namely adoption. We are commemorating today the Saint who has attained to such heights.

This sky-scraping beacon of our Church became known from a young age for his abundant love for his neighbour and his faith in the Lord. Once, a great storm was brewing when he was travelling by ship. He was very young at the time. The other passengers were scared but in his childish simplicity and his wholesome faith in the Lord, he offered the following 'prayer' while expressing his amazement at the others: 'How is it possible for the Lord, whom we believe in and are calling upon, to let us perish and not save us?' Indeed, he was not disappointed. Even though their lives were in danger, they were eventually saved.

As I have already mentioned, he was renowned for his love for his neighbour. Prompted by love, he strove to convey to others anything he would read from the Scriptures or from the writings of the Holy Fathers, inciting them towards repentance and ultimately to their salvation. He would write such verses in small pieces of paper and hide in places where someone would find them. In his childish way he adhered to the command 'love thy neighbour'. This was just an instance of what transpired inside his holy soul; he was embracing all the faithful unto the end of the universe. Wherever they call upon his sweet name, he steps in with miraculous energy. His miracles form a torrent, streaming out from his overflowing, loving heart which constantly wishes to ease the pain of the entire mankind.

Recognizing how ignorant our nation was, the Saint believed that if could learn to read and write he could benefit others. Therefore, the appropriate people were found to help him gain an education. When he graduated from the gymnasium (which was of a much higher standard than today's schools) he was employed as a teacher on the island of Chios. He was not so much trying to educate the young pupils as to convey the essence of our faith and our Christian education to the faithful. This was his passion.

When the passion of this young man became obvious to the Christians in that area, they sent him off to university to complete his education. Upon his graduation, he expressed the wish to fulfil his heart's desire and point out the way

to salvation, the correct faith and the proper experience to his fellow human beings. He believed that he could only accomplish this goal if he persevered with learning and education. His young and pure heart believed that he needed these tools and therefore he directed all his efforts on learning.

As soon as he finished his studies in Theology, as he wanted, he turned his attention to the Church. He was employed by the Patriarchate of Alexandria and became Bishop of Pentapoleos. Without giving in the slightest, he devoted all his efforts to constantly support the Church. He even managed to beautify the churches with iconography and supply them with the necessary liturgical means, so that more people would be attracted and learn.

One thing became obvious here. His efforts and his knowledge were not enough to ease the passion of his devoted heart for the Lord. He knew there was a way to fulfil this need which he however, didn't possess and could neither find in passionate zeal nor in learning. It was somewhere else. Experiencing people's misconduct as well as their rivalry for authority and excessive envy against him which even resulted in his persecution, he left office as a bishop and intensified his efforts to ease the pain of his fellow human beings.

Persecuted he ended up in Greece. He began his mission as a preacher, giving fervent sermons on repentance, explaining the dogmas as well as the entire ecclesiastical tradition. He demonstrated his ardent zeal in this area as well, believing that he could find at last that which he was seeking with such thirst. He was searching to find something which would fulfil him and at the same time enable him to accomplish his mission.

Later on, he served in ecclesiastical education, teaching at the Rizarios seminary. He reaped many fruits there, as his pupils who are alive today are able to verify.

His zeal and his piety were not diminished. Yet, he did not meet with the secret which his soul was seeking. His passion was fulfilled neither as a preacher nor as the Head of the Seminary. Thus, he changed direction yet again, constantly seeking the path which would fulfil him as a person while at the same time conveying to others that which they needed.

Finally, he came to agree with the holy fathers that he would attain to this goal only through the absolute assistance of Grace. You may well ask: Was Grace not with him all this time? Of course She was. There is no Christian who does not receive the assistance of Grace. However, he had not yet acquired the kind of

Grace which the holy Fathers attain to at the end of their spiritual struggle; the kind of Grace produced by practice, leading man to contemplation, which is the highest level of deification, i.e. the fulfilment of the Divine promise, which is the adoption.

Eventually he abandoned all his efforts and espoused quietude. Here again our patristic tradition triumphs. This passionate preacher, the successful priest, the excellent writer realized that practice would guide him to contemplation only through quietude. But his social life placed obstacles to this path. Thus he withdrew from the world and established a small monastery, becoming the spiritual father and protector of several nuns. He accomplished his goal and became fulfilled as a person by practicing quietude with them and thoroughly applying the patristic spirit of monasticism.

We need to make a clarification here. As I have already said, he was not lacking the means to achieve sanctification earlier. He was holding on to these means and was progressing. But in quietude, he had perfected his mission and completed his personality; he had achieved the goal of sanctification; he became a perfect beacon; he became the lamp placed on a stand and he will continue to be the genuine light in our modern day Church, the consolation of all the faithful and the triumph of Orthodoxy unto the end of ages. This is the fulfilment of his perfection.

He served in all posts of the Ecclesiastical hierarchy and did well. But he only accomplished fulfilment through genuine quietude; in this way our patristic tradition triumphs. Here we meet with St Nektarios as a monk. He fulfilled himself as a hesychast through quietude without abandoning his hierarchic significance and his accomplishments, neither his perfect love for the devout. Do you see, then, the continuation of our patristic tradition? There are many instances in his hesychastic life which I have not mentioned. Namely, the fights he waged inside his cell, struggling against his thoughts, the demons and his passions and practicing the mental prayer. I will only refer to something I remember from his contact with the blessed Father, Joachim Spetsieris, with whom they were friends. When Fr Joachim asked him about the mental prayer, St Nektarios told him: 'Fr Joachim you should be absolutely moved when you recite the mental prayer. The prayer should pour out from your heart; you should not just recite it with your lips'. These words attest to his internal state and his experience of inwardness, sobriety and prayer. He perfected this state during his hesychastic phase as Nektarios monk.

Are you able to appreciate how perfect and how certain our own way of living is and that our fathers have passed it on to us so thoroughly and in such detail, i.e. organized, specified, sealed and successful? Let us continue with our struggle with

more courage so that nothing goes amiss. Bearing in mind the examples set by the former and latter day saints, who have accomplished their mission through this kind of life, we will also continue our ways with more courage and hope in our Jesus. We also possess this great saint's mediation as an anchor of certainty.

This is what I wished to remind you of today since we may boast about it. Namely that we believe that the saints will help us succeed if we hold on to their fatherly affection and are encouraged by their mediation. Our All merciful Lord, who has called both, them and us, has not made a mistake in the decision of His kindness. He will most certainly award us the trophy of success too. Amen.

Source: Translated by Olga Konari Kokkinou from the Greek edition: Γέροντος Ιωσήφ Βατοπαιδινού, Διδαχές από τον Άθωνα, Εκδόσεις 'Το Άγιον Όρος', Θεσσαλονίκη, 1989