

# **St Maximus as a monk at the Vatopedi Monastery (Archimandrite Ephraim, Abbot of the Vatopaidi Monastery)**

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The spiritual unity and communion in Christ between the Holy Mountain and Russia is not something recent. It goes back to the last one thousand years. Those who contributed to this unity were mostly Russian Hayiorite monks, from the times of St Antony from Esfigmenou, the founder of the Kievo-Pecherskaya Lavra (beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century) to St Silouan the Athonite and his disciple, blessed Elder Sofroni (20<sup>th</sup> century).

In the lives of those Saints one may recognize the mutual benefit derived both by Russia and the Holy Mountain. The saints' country is Russia. This country initially offered them Christ and His Most Holy Mother but they were destined to mature spiritually and accomplish their deification in the Garden of the Most Holy Lady. Therefore, as a result of their personal communion with God, namely their deification, they become the true, fervent intermediaries to Him for the Russian people. According to God's inexplicable judgments some remained at the Holy Mountain until the end of their lives (like St Silouan the Athonite and Fr Tychon), others returned to Russia, where they transplanted the genuine hayiorite spirit by establishing monasteries and by becoming Elders and spiritual fathers to Christ's flock (Like St Antony Petserski, St Kyprianos, Metropolitan of Kiev, St Nil Sorsky, and Antipas of Balaam).



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However, St Maximus is the exception confirms that the Holy Mountain has thoroughly benefited Russia. He was a gift from God, of the abbess of the Holy Mountain, the Lady Mother of God, towards Russia. He was born in Arta, was educated in Italy and was reborn and bore spiritual fruit in the Holy Monastery of Vatopedi in the Holy Mountain. Then he left for Russia and lived there during the last 38 years of his life, arguably the most creative and God- inspiring years. His holy relic operated like a seed sown in the fertile Russian land which bore fruit “ *hundred times over*” (Luke 8, 8).

St Maximus was a genuine spiritual child of the Holy Monastery of Vatopedi. In Russia he lived and worked as a genuine monk from Vatopedi. Let us have a look at his life and deeds as a Vatopedi monk.

God visited Michael Trivoli (the secular name of St Maximus) during the last years of his stay in Florence awarding him with the gift of the memory of death which helped him to experience the deadening of anything temporal, worldly and secular in his heart. This experience confirms that one has been called to fill the ranks of monasticism. Michael did not take long to recognize this calling from God for the monastic, angelic life, and despite the respect he commanded in the scientific and social community, he abandons Italy and comes to Vatopedi at the ripe age of 35, around the end of 1505 BC.

Here he meets with the dear family friend of Emmanuel Trivoli (the father of St Maximus) St Nifon, former Patriarch of Konstantinoupolis with his two disciples, Makarius and Iosafat, the holy martyrs( See Jack Haney: From Italy to Muscovy). As a young subordinate and hierodeacon, St Nifon, with his Elder Zachary, a missionary for Vatopedi and thereafter bishop of Achrida, were very close to the ruler of Arta, Emmanuel Trivoli during their stay there.

In 1449, the monastery of Vatopedi had become a coenobium. However, during the times of St Maxiums, the monastery which numbered around 300 monks was still found in a semi-coenobium state. The abbot, apart from having the leading role in administration and the holy worship, was also receiving confession from the monks and was following their spiritual progress. Unfortunately, we do not have much direct written information as to the life of St Maximus in the monastery, but we are indirectly able to relate and connect some events and gather some important information.

We do not know who St Maximus' elder was. Perhaps it was one of the then abbots, Cyril, Neophytos or Simon. It's possible that St Nifon may have initially been his

elder. We may assume that until his departure from Vatopedi, St Nifon must have contributed a great deal towards the spiritual advancement of the novice and acolyte Michael Trivoli. He handed over to the son of his beloved friend, who was distinguished for his secular wisdom, his ample wisdom and experience in God. It is possible that St Nifon may have carried out Michael's tonsure, naming him Maximus. The name "Maximus" was chosen mainly because the former Patriarch of Konstantinoupolis, Maximus the Fourth, had died in the monastery a few years earlier and St Nifon had succeeded him during his second rise to the Patriarchate throne. It is certain that the martyrdom of St Makarius, disciple of St Nifon, in 1507 in Thessaloniki, must have shaken St Maximus. It formed a fervent zeal at the beginning of his monastic years which lasted unto the end of his life.

In Vatopedi, St Maximus was keeping company with other intellectual and devout monks. For example abbot Jove who was "a man well educated in the Holy Scriptures as well as in secular schooling, reached the highest of virtues", the intellectual hieronmonk Savva (who was the one initially invited to translate ecclesiastical books in Russia by the great ruler Basil Ivanovits the Third), the former Metropolitan of Berroia Methodios and the First of the Holy Mountain, Simon.

At the same time, notary and exarchos of the Great Church of Christ, Saint Theofilos the Myrr-Steamer lived at Vatopedi. The latter eagerly and humbly obeyed the bishop of Methimnis Malachi. St Theofilos stayed only a few years at Vatopedi but he must have been in contact with St Maximus. They had common interests. Apart from their love for the monastic life and the Patristic Tradition, both loved books, had been readers and authors, as well as copy writers of manuscripts. In the monastery's library, some handwritten comments by St Maximus are preserved in codicil 1134.

St Maximus must have benefited a lot from several personalities of great spiritual stature who had been visiting Vatopedi at the time. In accordance with divine providence, Vatopedi had become the place of contact of great personalities of our Church. The intellectual metropolitan of Korynthos and then of Thessaloniki Makarius Papageorgopoulos was one of the main visitors to the monastery. When he had stepped down from the throne of Thessaloniki, he returned to Vatopedi and lived the rest of his days as a megaloschemos monk.

Maximus benefited a great deal from the holy martyr Jacob (+ 1519), who used to visit the monastery often at the time, since his first acolyte, Markianos, was a former Vatopedi monk. St Jacob, at the invitation of Vatopedi, even though he was a simple monk and not a priest, used to receive the confessions of the monks and give them advice. Because of the responsibility assumed against God, he somehow

viewed priesthood as an obstacle to the experience of the pure, virtuous monastic life. St Maximus must have been influenced by this view and that's why he was not ordained a priest. St Maximus lived in Russia in the same way as Saint Jacob. Even though he was not a priest but only a monk, numerous people of all walks of life would visit him and take his advice. In his cell one could come across anyone from the Princes Andrew Kourmpski and Nile Kourliatov, to the former metropolitan of Moscow Ioasaf, to the vogiario Tourskof-Morozof and to the most simplistic villager. All these people would come looking for a solution to their problems, ask for advice or consolation as well as his prayers for the attainment of their life's goals. Had Maximus stayed at Vatopedi, we doubt if he would have accepted any administrative post out of humility.

St Nifon united St Maximus with another of his disciples, the Slav hieronmonk Gabriel, the First of the Holy Mountain, hailing from the cell of Kofou at Karyes. Gabriel was the one who wrote the first biography of St Nifon as well as many hagiological manuscripts. It was at his order that St Maximus wrote the Holy Service in honor of the holy hieronmonk, martyr Erasmus, bishop of Archrida. Gabriel was an exceptional personality in the Holy Mountain during the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. He assumed the office of the First, five times. Even when he did not hold the office, he was always at the forefront as a former-First. He visited the countries of Moldova and Vlachia several times.

Gabriel, who was later named Serapheim, as a megaloschemos monk, was the first one to write about the miraculous story of Archangel Gabriel and the archangelic hymn "Axion estin" which relates to the resident, miracle-performing icon at the Holy Mountain. This story was written before 1516, since St Maximus seems to know about it and has translated it into Russian during his stay in Russia. The story may have been written at the instigation and contribution of St Maximus, who liked to describe any set of rules as well as any miracles.

The relationship between St Maximus and the First Gabriel, as well as with the First of Vatopedi, Simon, justifies his preoccupation with the administration of the Holy Mountain, since he held the officio of notary and Secretary of Protato. There is an indecipherable Decision taken by the First Theofylaktos, written by St Maximus, preserved at the Holy Monastery of Konstamonitou.

At the cell of the First Gabriel in Karyes, St Maximus must have also met with St Dionysos of Olympos, who as Gabriel's acolyte was made a monk by him around 1512.

St Maximus was lucky enough to have lived at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> and beginning of

the 16<sup>th</sup> Centuries, which is regarded as the period when monasticism was flourishing in Greece. His communication with the saints of his time, like St Nifon, the holy martyrs Makarius and Iosafat, St Theophilos , the Myrr-Streamer, St Dionysus of Olympus, the holy martyr Jacov and his disciples, holy martyrs Dionysus and Jacob and his successor St Theonas, must have greatly contributed to his accomplishment of a mighty spiritual state. Maximus did not learn about the Patristic life from the books, but was initiated into it and received it from the living saints, the Hagiorite Fathers. Thus he acquired a genuine monastic mindset, a genuine hagiorite conscience. What a great blessing this was, is only appreciated by someone who has met pious and virtuous Elders in his lifetime.

By adhering to the monastic promises of obedience, chastity and indigence and through the practice of the mental prayer, St Maximus must have quickly accomplished the purity of his heart and become a vessel of Grace; that is the reason why the leaders of the monastery in their discretion had given him great and necessary missions outside the monastery. He had assumed apostolic missions in Macedonia, the Aegean islands and in many other areas under Turkish occupation at the time, where he was supporting the orthodox uneducated and enslaved people against western heresies. At the same time, he was collecting money to support the monastery financially, because at the time there was terrible financial hardship in all Hagiorite monasteries, caused by the heavy taxes imposed by the Turkish rulers. He says: "I was giving sermons on our Orthodox faith openly and without hesitation even in front of the Turkish officials with the assistance of the Grace of the Holy Spirit. In other words, wherever the Holy Great Monastery of Vatopedi sent me at the order of the Fathers, with God's Grace I gave sermons on the immaculate orthodox faith and they would let me return to the Holy Mountain with the proper honor".

Because of his relationship with the First Gabriel as well as with St Nifon, St Maximus was visiting the hegemonies of Vlachia and Moldova as well as the wider area of Achrida and Meleniko where the monastery had metochia. In addition, he spoke the dialect (Slavonic) of those territories. In his letter to the Great ruler Basil Ivanovits the 3<sup>rd</sup>, the abbot of Vatopedi, Anthimos does not mention that Maximus does not speak Russian, since he knew how to speak the Slavonic dialect of the Balkans. The abbot inferred that it would have been easy for Maximus to learn Russian. His assigned task in those areas is also proven by his preoccupation with the saints of Achrida. As we have already mentioned, he composes a liturgy in honor of the holy martyr Erasmus of Achrida, while he studies the biographies of Slav saints, like St Clement of Achrida, as it was cited in Vatopedi codes.

Despite these missions and because of the fact that they were the result of obedience, St Maximus' mind was always at the monastery, even though he was personally absent. He did not wish to exit the Holy Mountain on tours or take trips. He loved his monastery and therefore when in Russia he was not happy with the honor awarded to him initially, and the only thing on his mind was to finish his assignment and return to the monastery. He loved the life and the system in the monastery; he described them with such grace and detail in his speeches. He loved the services, which last a long time in the Hagiorite monasteries. He liked the hymns and the hymn writing of our Church. He was a bearer of the living liturgical tradition and therefore he not only learnt very quickly the rites of the services but also how to write hymns.

He started writing mainly while in Russia and not out of his own volition but because it was necessary. It is well known how tightfisted the hagiorite fathers are with writing. During his stay in the Vatopedi monastery he has left some examples, mainly lyrical, of this writing charisma; we believe it was out of obedience. Apart from writing the Service to Saint Erasmus at the instigation of the First Gabriel, he also wrote a Parakletiko Canon to St John the Baptist, because there was none at the time and it was needed for the service. In addition he also wrote six epigrammata, one for the Patriarch Joachim the First, one for the great Orator Manuel and three for Saint Nifon the Second, Patriarch of Konstantinoupole.

Maximus was raised at the Vatopedi monastery, the fountain of hagiorite tradition. His ten year residence at the Holy Mountain was enough for this bright and amenable person to be educated in Christ and to be injected with the centuries- old spirit of the Hagiorite Fathers. As a hagiorite, he was distinguished for "his deep humility and his respect for the Fathers of the Church, his proper beliefs about asceticism and monasticism, his dogmatic sensitivity, his veneration for the Most Holy Lady, his love for the Hagiorite rites, his opposition to humanism, his pride for monasticism and open admission of being a hagiorite. But we would also like to add the following:

St Maximus had the spirit of obedience and was imitating the first One Who showed obedience, Christ, so much that he would command the trust of his superiors at the Vatopedi Monastery who would assign external missions to him, even to Russia. As an example, we will point out two passages from two letters, where both the Vatopedi Abbot and the Ecumenical Patriarch indicate their trust in Maximus. In his letter to metropolitan Barlaam, Abbot Anthimos of Vatopedi says that monk Savvas will not be able to accept the invitation because of his age, but he would send "monk Maximus of Vatopedi, who is worthy of respect, has experience in the Holy

Scriptures and translates all kinds of books, both ecclesiastical and the so-called Greek books, since he was raised reading them and was disciplined by them in virtue, and not like others who had only read them". The Moscow envoy to Konstantinoupole, Andrey Karompof in a presentation to the great Russian ruler Bail Ivanovits writes: "Then (after monk Savva's inability because of old age and illness to visit Moscow) the Abbot of the Vatopedi Anthimos and the First of the Holy Mountain have chosen monk Maximus as the only suitable candidate after monk Savva to accomplish your assignment, as your Highness must have realized. He has a good grasp of the Scriptures and is a very competent translator both of secular and holy books. He has studied in Italy for many years and as the most holy patriarch Theoliptos the First has assured me, he is very well educated and well acquainted with spiritual tendencies in the world and the problems of the Eastern Church. His Eminence has shown a holy zeal and the Church of Konstantinoupole has taken very seriously the posting of such a persona to Moscow".

Saint Maximus was a direct man with fondness for the truth; an honest man with fervent, divine zeal and brave mindset. He had no association with diplomatic maneuvers and double-face attitudes. That's how he was trained by his Elder and teacher, Saint Nifon. When Maximus learnt that the great ruler Basil Ivanovits had illegally abandoned his wife Solomoni to marry someone else, he could not cover up this trespass. He gave advice to the ruler and reprimanded him just as Saint Nifon had done with the ruler of Vlachia, Radu. He did not compromise in the property dispute between the Iosifites and the Zavolgi monks neither did he accept their preoccupation with such issues. He insisted that monks be indigent and without concerns over material things even though this had not been received very well by some people in the administration of the Russian Church.

St Maximus was a hesychast who had empirical knowledge about niptic work and the practice of Jesus prayer during his residence at Vatopedi. He wrote: "You must bear in mind that the pure and incessant prayer, which is always received by the Mighty Lord, is the one which ignites the heart through holy compunction; it is caused by the charcoal of humility which burns up passions. This particular prayer guides the mind to the very Gate of Heaven and as soon as it arrives there, it places it in front of the heavenly Throne" (St Maximus Grekos: Writtings). In his effort to undermine St Maximus' theological aptitude, Bernhard Schultze describes him as a follower of Palamas. The German Jesuit monk and professor did not realize that instead he was praising St Maximus with this allegation.

St Maximus was a fervent herald of repentance both during his stay at Vatopedi and during his missions in the world as well as in Russia. His speeches are



brimming with the spirit of repentance, the need for one to perceive his sinfulness, his encouragement for repentance coupled with one's hope for God's mercy, the memory of hell without despair and the remembrance of the Final Judgment (See above St Maximus).

He was especially fond of the monastery and his only desire was to return to it. In a letter to Metropolitan Makarius he wrote: "Please make it your pleasure in the name of the Lord to grant me, the miserable, this wish. Let me see the Holy Mountain again, which is praying for the whole world; hand me over to those who respect you so much". In his letter to the great ruler Basil Ivanovits he wrote: "Let us return again safely to the Great and Holy Monastery of Vatopedi, which has long been missing us and is waiting for our return like the hen is waiting for the chicks it had raised, so that we are not deprived of our years of struggle, hoping to end our lives there in Christ". In his letter to Tsar Ivan the Terrible in which he again asks for permission to return to his monastery, he stresses that he has been missing the peaceful abode at the Holy Mountain which has been contributing to his salvation; the place where he had launched spiritual fights and made strenuous efforts for ten years and where he had also hoped to leave his bones. The fact that he loved the monastery so much is also verified both by his efforts inside the monastery as well as by his struggles for the monastery's benefit; he did not begrudge these but did everything with pleasure; thus he remembers those efforts fondly and with nostalgia.

However, God had other plans for St Maximus. He wanted him to end his life in Russia as a consolation for the Russians and to mediate for their salvation since he had found favor in the face of the Lord. Such favor had immediately been demonstrated after his death. One of his loving friends, Fr Theodore from Slounza, who had not made it to the Saint's funeral and was upset, saw St Maximus in his dream after saying his prayers, who told him that he would soon take him with him. Indeed, eight days after the Saint's death, Fr Theodore also passed away.

Exactly 450 years have passed since St Maximus, Greko's death, but his presence is still so vivid! "The righteous shall live in eternity" (Solomon's Wisdom 5,15). Ten years ago, it was God's will to unearth the holy relics (?) ( ανακομιδή λειψάνων) of the Saint, and parts of which arrived at Vatopedi. Lo and Behold! St Maximus, famous to the Russians but unknown to the Greeks, is starting to be venerated by the Greeks as well. Shortly, he will become even more famous when his writings will be published in Greek by our Monastery.

However the Vatopedi Monastery, as St Maximus' spiritual nurturer, regards him as one of its most beloved and eminent children; as a result there is a small chapel

devoted to him inside the monastery. In addition, at the end of every liturgy his name is remembered and his mediation to the Lord is requested. The priests ask the saint to become the envoy, the mediator in Christ for the deliverance of the world, for the unity of the Orthodox people and especially for the harmony between the Russian and the Greek people. These days when globalization has demoted and rendered subjective most values and institutions to benefit those “who rule the world” and those who wish to level to the ground all religious, cultural and political values specifically target Orthodoxy and wish to cause its alienation and division, we need more than ever the mediation by the Saints in order to be saved and preserve the experience of our deification and our spiritual unity in Christ.

Saint Maximus, pray for us sinners!

*Translated by Olga Konari Kokkinou from the Greek edition: Αρχιμ. Εφραίμ Βατοπαιδινού Καθηγουμένου Ι. Μ. Μ. Βατοπαιδίου, Αθωνικός Λόγος, Ιερά Μεγίστη Μονή Βατοπαιδίου, Άγιον Όρος 2010.*