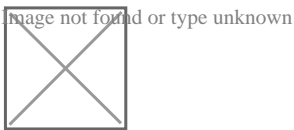


Saint Maximus the Greek, the tireless preacher of Patristic Tradition

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



During its long historical past the Great Holy Vatopedi Monastery has proved to have played a double role in its spiritual activities. It pursued both a hesychastic life and freedom from worldly care, that are the basics to achieve theosis, and it also sent its saintly children out on missionary work to be the living examples of the Orthodox Athonian Tradition and thus support the people of God, something not alien in the life of the Church through the centuries. We can here say that it excelled in this role so much that the lot of missionary work fell on it not only within Greece but out of it too.



St. Maxim Vatopedinos, known as “St. Maxim the Greek”, was one of the most erudite monks, who stood out as a theologian, philosopher and poet during the first half of the 16th century, and became known as “the illuminator of the Russian people.”

He was born in Arta, a town in the northwest of Greece in 1470. He came from a well-to-do, illustrious and God-fearing family, and his name was Michael Trivolis. His parents sent him to school in Arta and then to Corfu. At the age of twenty he went to Italy, where he studied at the universities of Venice, Padua, Ferrara, Florence and Milan for fifteen years. E. Golubinski, one of the most reputable of St. Maxim’ biographers, states that if he had decided to stay on in Italy, he would have become one of the most eminent professors at any one of those universities at the time.

But St. Maxim began to search in earnest for the authentic way of Christian life, because he realized man’s poverty without God’s grace, after having a taste of the Renaissance Humanism in Italy where it was at its peak just then. He saw that moralism had turned people towards the irrational passions of hypocrisy, greed,

inhumanity and vice. He happened to hear about the monastic community of Mt. Athos and, fervently wishing to reach the highest human achievement that of theosis, after having a first hand taste of the futility of all kinds of human glory and wisdom, he decided to become a monk and dedicate himself to God. So he went to Mt. Athos, this renowned cradle of Eastern Orthodox Tradition, and finally settled at the Great Holy Vatopedi Monastery.

An Anchorite in Mt. Athos

At the Vatopedi Monastery he lived a life of asceticism for about 10 years. He practised the fundamental virtues of obedience and abstinence, which helped him overcome all human passions actually, because he cut off his own will, desire, greed and pride. His unquenchable desire to acquire virtues and his admirable application of them, made him reach the high virtues of humility, poverty and love. These virtues turned him into a man of constant self-sacrifice towards his fellow ascetics and fellow men. At the same time, by practising constant prayer, he merged his soul with God and turned it into a temple of the Holy Spirit.

The extensive library of the Monastery offered spiritual food to the saint. He never stopped taking delight in its books. His studying of the rare manuscripts of the library, helped him harvest the wisdom of the preceding hosts of Orthodoxy, while the example of the other scholarly fathers of the monastery was the signal-light and guide of his angelic monastic life.

The other fathers of the brotherhood soon became aware of his cultivated and rich in virtues and charismata soul, and they entrusted him with some necessary jobs outside the monastery walls. This gave the saint the chance to help our orthodox people who were suffering because of their illiteracy, the Turkish yoke and the heresies from the West.

In 1515, the Tsar Vasilius Ivanovitch, asked both the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the "Protos" of Mt. Athos to send him an experienced scholar and virtuous monk to translate various ecclesiastic texts into the Russian language and also to emend the incorrect translations and copies of the Holy Bible and the Patristic texts in existence. Monk Savvas from Vatopedi was initially chosen, but he declined because of his advanced years; then the lot fell to the eminent monk Maxim.

His going to Russia

Maxim left Mt. Athos in 1516. The Moscow Metropolitan Valaam and the Tsar Vasilius Ivanovitch welcomed the Athonian monk and his followers on behalf of the Russian people. Unfortunately, during that time the Russian nation was suffering

because of various newfangled ideas that had also found their way into the orthodox ecclesiastic books maybe not inadvertently. Maxim worked hard and wrote many books of spiritual content, translations, emendations and hermeneutic works. His upright and virtuous behaviour soon attracted the Tsar, the Metropolitan and the simple people together with some prominent men that saw in him the wise monk, who- with God's help- could solve, by his wise teachings and advice, the many and various problems of people from all walks of life. In this way he began his advisory work mainly towards the Russian ruler and the Metropolitan, who governed the state and the church.

It is worth mentioning here that St. Maxim Vatopedinos was the first to introduce the Russians to the ancient Greek philosophy and literature due to his long scientific studies in Italy. He was also the first to introduce printing in Russia, having close ties with the famous scholar and printer Aldus Manutius. In general, the illuminator and isapostle Maximus worked wisely in various ways, taking care to educate as many people as possible, who in turn continued the colossal work of the Orthodox enlightenment of the Russian people for the glory and joy of the Church God. All these cultural activities of St. Maxim underline the various and beneficial efforts of the Saint, that prove him to be not only a missionary but also a civilization worker for the Russian people, at a time when Russia was in a state of illiteracy and ignorance.

St. Maxim missionary work lasted for eight years. His confessional work, though, resulted in a heavy cross he had to bear, or, to put it in other words, the Devil, the enemy of all truth tried to destroy Maxim's work but he failed, because the grain of seed ' fell into the good ground, and grew, and brought forth fruit a hundredfold' (Luk. 8. 8)

Conflict with the state and church authorities

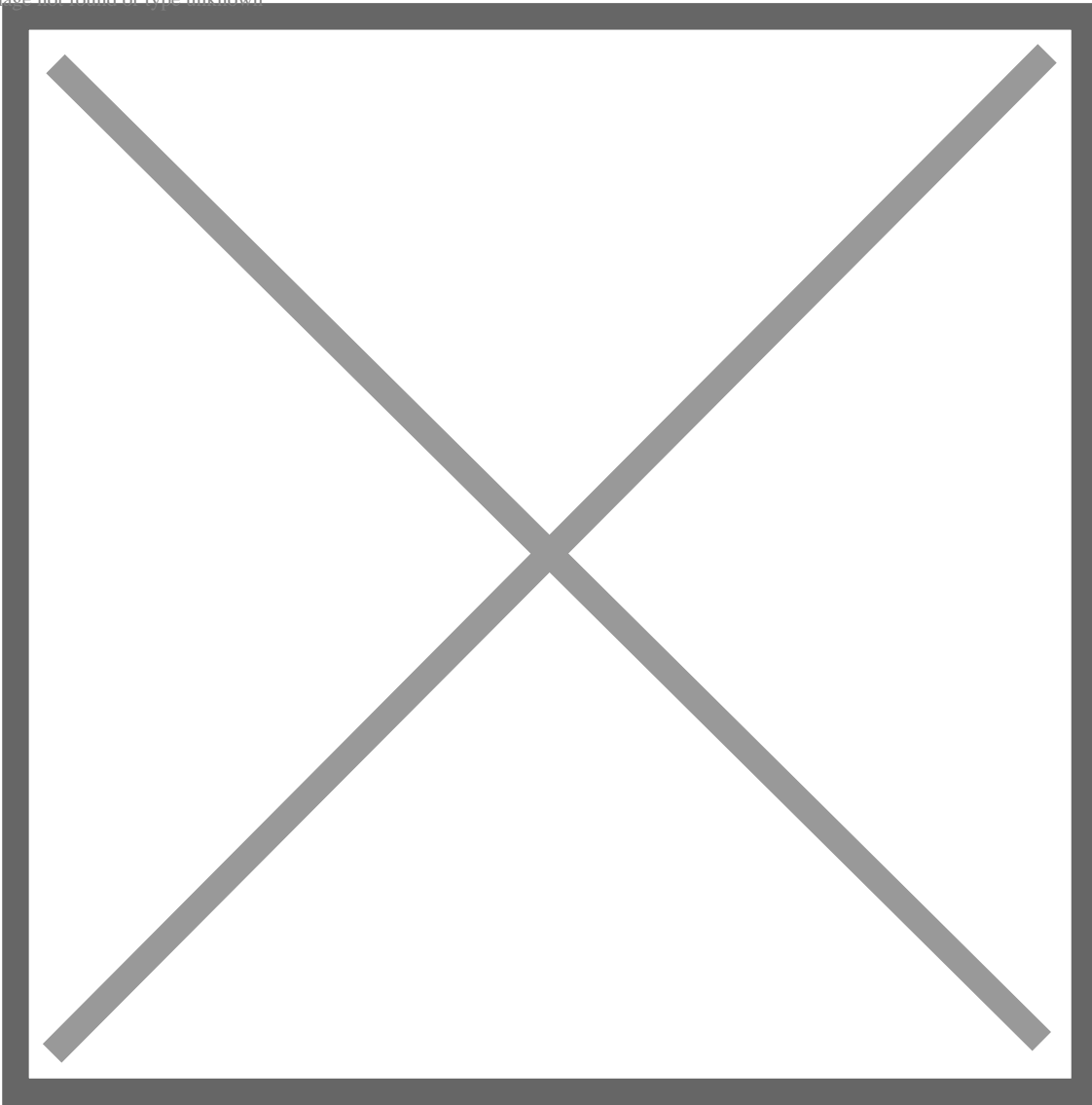
We have to make it quite clear here that because of the many wrongdoings of certain political and church people- which sometimes happened because of ignorance- the Athonite Father had to protest and castigate some people, based on the teachings of the Bible and according to the authority bestowed upon him by the Russian Church and the Emperor. Unfortunately, this, instead of helping ameliorate things, it bought him the enmity of the people concerned. Among them we find the Tsar himself and the new Metropolitan of Russia Daniel, who did not understand the real concern of the saint for the salvation and the adherence to the right dogma of the Russian Church.

From this point on there begins for the saint a difficult and painful journey with a

heavy cross to bear. This would take him through imprisonment to his death. But all these difficulties perfected Maxim spiritually and today he is considered to be one of the most renowned children of the Vatopedi Monastery and the Eastern Orthodox Church in general, being an isapostle, a confessor, a martyr and a hosios. He is one who - through holy calling- combined all the above charismata and names to such a degree that none is considered to be an exaggeration.

St. Maxim criticized church authorities about their inappropriate (for monks and priests) way of life as well as their behaviour towards the people. At the same time he criticized some political authorities about the same, and - as a new St. John the Baptist who was beheaded because he dared castigate the king for committing adultery- St. Maxim became a confessor, defending the right way of life and criticizing anyone who happened to live immorally, never stopping to take into consideration the high office they might be holding. He never showed pride because of the high honours bestowed upon him by the Tsar, not even when he was the first Councilor of the king and sat at the same table with him for eight years as if he was a prince. He never forgot that he was an Athonite monk who had been summoned by God to set upright the ethos of the Russian people. He disregarded completely that he would lose the high regard that the Tsar and the Church held him in, because he dared point their misdeeds out to them.

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The Great Lavra of St. Sergius

Imprisonment

He was falsely accused of being a heretic and given a life sentence in prison in chains. They excommunicated him too. He was forbidden Holy Communion and the rest of the sacraments and he was held incommunicado from the rest of the faithful. All this befell him because, as we mentioned, he dared criticize his accusers of living immorally and not according to the Christian teachings. They also forbade him the writing and receiving letters, as well as the reading of books. This last was the most difficult to bear because he was a scholarly monk, and a philosopher and his spiritual food consisted of reading and writing books.

The Metropolitan Daniel, who was the instigator of Maxim's incarceration, had put him in the hands of two inhuman jail keepers who tortured him mercilessly for six consecutive years; as Maxim himself wrote later on to Moscow Metropolitan

Makarius, ' I was kept locked and in chains and tortured to death by the use of cold, smoke and hunger'. His biographer Curbiskyi, writes that "he suffered grievously from being kept in chains for years in horrible dungeons", "...suffering terribly both in body and spirit for six years..." Because of such tortures there were times when Maxim lost consciousness so completely that he appeared to be dead. Once, in an effort to comfort the pain of his soul, he used a piece of charcoal and wrote a canon to the Holy Spirit on the prison walls, since he was not allowed to have paper and writing materials. Living under such horrible conditions, he did not even once complain or speak against anyone! Close to the end of his earthly life St. Maxim wrote characteristically in a letter, where he prays for the main instigator of his countless tortures, Metropolitan Daniel: "Let God not weigh heavily this sin against him!"

During his first imprisonment in the Volokolamsk Monastery and then during his second term at the Ostrots Monastery, he was kept incarcerated in an underground damp and dark dungeon without light or heating, deprived of all human comfort that is the right of even the worst criminal. But who can guess and write about his sufferings especially the agony of the excommunication interdict? Only one who has come to know the love of sweet Jesus can describe this torture. Despite his remonstrances against the heavy and unjust penalty imposed, and despite his constant begging to be at least given permission to receive Holy Communion, the clerics of injustice did not rescind their interdict for eighteen years! He kept begging them, saying in deep pain: " ...I beg you to let me receive the life-giving Holy Communion, after being banned from it for seventeen years ...Grant me, I beg of you, this favour ... save my lost soul..." "I appeal to your philanthropic feelings...", "... I am asking for mercy and philanthropy...", " mercy, I beg your mercy, and may God grant the same mercy to you...". They, nevertheless, kept him without Holy Communion for eighteen years! And, as we mentioned before, his sufferings grew worse because of his being chained for so long: for six years in the Bolokomsk Monastery, and then the first eight years of his imprisonment in the Ostrots prison cell. All in all he was kept in chains for fourteen years (1525- 1539) and he was kept in prison for twenty six years.

His trials and how he faced them

St. Maxim bore his terrible ordeal in patience and forbearance; he never blamed those responsible for his sufferings. He did not ever overstep the limits of polite behaviour and meekness. This was due to his humility. Following in the steps of the holy Fathers before him, he denounced the accusations that he was a heretic and a blasphemer, but he accepted the sufferings as God-given because of his sins. So he

wrote to Metropolitan Daniel: "I appeal to you about your accusing me of being a heretic and that you have not allowed me to partake of the Holy Sacraments. As for the rest, my sins are so many that I dare not even open my mouth; yet I must not despair but hope in the endless mercy of God..." In another place he says: "God, the just Judge, Who wants to save all men, has granted me these sufferings because of my countless and terrible sins and not because of my heretic ideas or blasphemies..."

The patience of the Saint stems from heavenly succour too. Here we have the realization of the psalm: "In the multitude of my doubts within me Thy comforts delight my soul." (Ps.93. 19).The comforts of the Holy Spirit were such, that not only compensated for his sufferings, his pain from torture and his tears, but they also filled his heart to overflowing with the love of God, which became his "bread day and night". The hosioid father was blessed with a vision of a holy Angel who visited him in prison and brought him the body and blood of Jesus Christ; this miracle and mind-surpassing vision inspired him to compose and write on the walls of his cell the above-mentioned ode to the Holy Spirit which begins: "He who with the Manna fed Israel in the wilderness...", and then goes on "with your incorporeal ministering spirits, I will sing too", implying the holy vision of the Angel, who brought him the Holy Communion.

Yet who can know and narrate the other holy visions and heavenly help he might have had? God, through this hard road, led him towards perfection. We know this from the words of the holy Angel who appeared before him and said: "Maxim, be patient in these sufferings so as to escape the horrors of eternal Hell". In this way, St. Maxim through holy intelligence, fully understood that he was fulfilling God's will, when he was forsaken and considered an abomination by all, a stranger in a strange land. Keeping his spirit in a state of extreme humility, he held in his heart that he was the lowest of the low on this earth, aware that God, in His grace, allowed all his sufferings, because, through extreme humility, He wanted to lead him to spiritual perfection. An internee and a hesychast, he constantly prayed laboriously with inexpressible sighs, repeating ceaselessly deep in his heart the name of sweet Jesus. So, through his sufferings, when God in due time took away his heavy cross, the saint had become perfect in Jesus, having achieved apatheia and becoming a sweet-sounding psalter and guitar of the Holy Spirit and a temple of the Holy Trinity.

St. Maxim was one among the few hosioids who struggled spiritually without a guide or supporter. He had no spiritual father to strengthen him and lighten the burden of his cross. He fought alone without the support of: "brother helping brother as a

strong and fortified city". "Battles raged outside", as "he was kept incarcerated and in chains and was tortured to death by cold, smoke and hunger", but inside too "fears raged" lest he complain against God because of his many trials, or transgress God's commandments and rouse to anger against all those who treated him unjustly, or curse them or feel bitter towards them. He had to fight hard to keep at bay all the swarms of passions that attacked him on all sides. The battle the saint waged was of gigantic proportions and the fighting conditions beyond our comprehension; yet he prevailed, having the Lord who loved him as his ally; the Lord who sacrificed Himself for all of us. St. Maxim saved the Church of Russia from all kinds of superstition and heretic beliefs that were prevalent all over the land at that time.

His sentence is lightened

During his imprisonment at the Otrots monastery from 1531- 1551, Metropolitan Acacius of Tver, by God's consent, gave Maxim relative freedom of communication so his light wouldn't remain hidden but "shine before men" (Math. 5, 15). So he went on tirelessly- and for a long time still in chains- in a dark damp cell, to write and translate in the Russian language holy texts, write anti-heretic homilies and other texts for the benefit and enlightenment of the Russian people. He also began again with fatherly love to preach and comfort all the Christians who sought him in the prison asking for his advice and his prayers on their behalf.

A few years after the imprisonment of Metropolitan Daniel, the Metropolitan of all Russias Makarius rescinded the unjust excommunication interdict (1543) that had lasted for eighteen years (1525- 1543).

Several times in the course of the passing years he had begged to be set free to return to his home Monastery in Athos, but to no avail. When Ivan the Terrible ascended to the throne, the Greek monk repeated his petition, but the result was negative again. The Patriarch of Constantinople Dionysius (1545), the Patriarch of Jerusalem Germanus, the Patriarch of Alexandria (4- 9- 1545), as well as the Vatopedi Monastery petitioned the Tsar to set St. Maxim free but nothing came of it. In one of his letters to the Tsar Maxim writes: "In the name of God, show mercy to poor me. Grant me permission to see Mt. Athos, the heart that prays for the whole world; let me go back to the hosii fathers and brothers who pray for my release to you; accept their begging and tears on my behalf; do not turn deaf ears to the Ecumenical Patriarch who is petitioning for my release", and in another letter he says: " Check, please, if I should be hated because of all the things I put to rights, or if I was justly defamed as a heretic and interdicted from the Holy Communion for so many years... So, if I am telling the truth, show to poor me your

goodwill and mercy, as god-fearing and fair judges, and deliver me from the unjust defamation and suffering of so many years... grant me, I beg you, my return to Mt. Athos to have my bones buried there, where- since my youth- I laboured both spiritually and in the flesh in the hope of salvation." And in another letter: "Most devout Tsar, let me go back to the Holy Vatopedi Monastery devoted to the most holy Mother of God; gladden the spirits of the hosii monks who dwell there, your servants and constant well-wishers; do not grieve them any longer." It is worth mentioning here that, in every letter the saint wrote, asking for his being granted permission to return to Mt. Athos, he repeated the phrase 'so that my bones may rest there in peace.' His sufferings went on though. The Tsar and the Church deemed his return dangerous because he knew all the dark secrets of the political and ecclesiastical life in Russia and they were afraid that he would expose them to the public. They were also afraid that he would reveal their cruelty towards his person.

Suspension of his sentence

In 1551, the new Tsar, reviewing the matter with some of his councilors, who insisted on the saint's vindication, ordered Maxim to be transferred to the famous Lavra of St. Sergius, suspending the imprisonment sentence which had lasted for 26 consecutive years, but the saint was not permitted to go back home to his monastery for the above mentioned reasons.

St. Maxim, old in age and in poor health because of his many hardships during his imprisonment, died on the 21st of January 1556, on the day the church commemorates his namesake St. Maxim the Confessor and at the Holy Vatopedi Monastery the fathers and brothers also commemorate, according to custom, the day of Panagia of Paramythia/ the Comforter. On this very day, St. Maxim gave up his soul in the hands of the Lord to be comforted by Him for his labours and sufferings.

When he died in 1556, he was about 86 years old and he had served to the death the Church of Russia and her people for thirty- eight years. Twenty- six of those years were spent in prison. The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople canonized St. Maximus the Greek in 1988. During the same year and at the celebrations for the Millennium of the Orthodox Church in Moscow, he was canonized by the Russian Church too. The removal of his relics took place on 21st June, 1996 (Julian/ old Calendar) at the church of the Holy Spirit of the St. Sergius Monastery, where his reliquary is kept, while a part of his relics was given over to the Holy Vatopedi Monastery, the monastery of his repentance, on 8th July, 1997 (Julian/old Calendar), to be kept at the church of Panagia of Kazan, by Alexius

Patriarch of Moscow and all the Russias. On 14th July, 1997 (Old Calendar), the Vatopedi Monastery held celebratory services for the transport of the holy relics.

St. Maxim's example should encourage us. His Christian instruction did not annihilate him, but through faith, prayer and the practice of virtues he drew strength from Heaven and was able to exercise patience through his indescribable temptations. We narrate the lives of the saints as examples to help us stand fast and approach- through proper behaviour- God by church-going, confession and partaking of the Holy Sacraments. Each of us will carry, according to one's strength, the cross of one's own Resurrection. The knowledge of the way towards the holy Transfiguration is necessary, especially for us Greeks, who with our wise men, the isapostles and the saints have guided many other nations to the true knowledge of God.

We hope and pray that our Triadic God that "is still working", will always send saintly workers to His vineyard, such as the tireless St. Maxim, for the salvation of all people. We also hope that God, through the mediations of this hosios father, will grant His grace for the safekeeping and the unity of the Faith and love in the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church of Jesus.