

Saint Maximos the Greek, an outstanding figure in the 16th century

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Saint Maximos the Greek (21 January)

Saint Maximos Vatopaidinos, known in Russia as Maxim Grek, was a shining figure in the 16th century.

Mihaïl Trivolis- who later became Maximos the Greek- was born in Arta, in 1470, to rich and devout parents, Manouil and Irini. Mihaïl learned his first letters through home schooling with his parents and a succession of exceptional teachers. He then went to Italy where he was a brilliant student of the Classics. In Florence, he was an enthusiastic follower of the religious and spiritual renewal inspired by Savonarola, a movement which ended tragically when its leader was condemned to death. After

the completion of his studies, he became a monk at the Monastery of Vatopaidi, taking the name Maximos. A humble and discreet monk, he spent most of his time reading and studying. After ten years he left, in 1516, to go to Russia, at the invitation of Grand Prince Vasilij Ivanovich, the purpose of his mission being to translate the commentaries of the holy Fathers on the Psalms into Slavonic.



He completed his task with such success that he was obliged to stay in Russia in order to correct the imperfections of the translations of the Scriptures and the liturgical books, as well as to enlighten people with his preaching. Maximos acquired great fame, which made certain Russian monks jealous. He unwittingly became involved in the conflict over monastery possessions and, having later been charged with complicity in a plot against the prince, was condemned as a heretic by an ecclesiastical court (1525). At the Monastery of Volokolamsk, where he was exiled, he suffered terribly from the cold, hunger and all manner of hardship. Dispossessed of all necessities, barred from holy communion and deprived even of any books, his only support was prayer. God did not abandon him, however, and one day an angel appeared to him and said: 'Be patient. With the hardships of the present world, you'll be saved from eternal torment'. Out of gratitude to God for

this heavenly consolation, Saint Maximos composed a poetic canon in honour of the Holy Spirit. Since he had no paper available, he wrote in charcoal on a wall in his cell. Six years later, at a new trial, he was condemned to life imprisonment at the Monastery of Tver for being a supporter of the primacy of the Ecumenical Patriarchate over the Russian Church. Despite his imprisonment, he continued his theological work and maintained an extensive correspondence.

Successive representations on the part of the Patriarchs of Constantinople and Alexandria to the Tsar had no real effect, and it was only towards the end of Maximos' life (1551), that the prince agreed to respond positively to the requests of devout boyars and the Abbot of the Lavra of Saint Sergius. Saint Maximos was received with honours in Moscow and moved into the Lavra of Saint Sergius, where, since he now had greater freedom, he was able to continue his literary work. One day, Tsar Ivan IV ('the Terrible') came and visited him in his cell and, after expressing his admiration for Maximos, declared his decision to go on a pilgrimage to the Monastery of Saint Cyril of the White Lake. He refused to follow the advice of the saint, who tried to persuade him to deal instead with the victims of the Tartar occupation of Kazan. Maximos then told him that, if he persisted, his young son, Dimitri, would die suddenly.

This did, indeed, happen and from then on the Tsar showed the deepest respect for the holy monk, not only as a scholar, but also as someone with the gift of foresight. The next year, Ivan wanted to convene a synod to denounce Matvei Bashkin, who had introduced the Calvinist heresy into Russia. He invited Maximos, but the latter was exhausted and unable to travel. He did, however, send a wonderful essay to the Synod, rejecting the heresy. It was the final ecclesiastical act of this confessor of the Orthodox faith. He fell asleep in the Lord on January 21, 1556, at the age of eighty-eight, having been tried and tested for thirty-eight years for his devotion to the truth. A short while after his demise, he began to be honoured as a holy martyr and 'the enlightener of Russia'.