

Elder Joseph the Hesychast



Monasticism recognizes several venerable people, monks, who, in their time, left indelible marks in the history of the Orthodox Church. We can rightfully say that one of those leaders of monasticism is the venerable elder, father Joseph the Hesychast from the Holy Mount. He is the reviver and the guide of present monasticism in the Holy Mount, as well as Greece and America. With his small brotherhood: Elder Ephraim of Philotheou, elder Charalampus of Dionysiou, elder Joseph of Vatopedi, elder Arsenios Spileot the Hesychast, and his disciple elder Ephraim of Katunakia he raised spiritual life in the monasteries in the Holy Mount: Philotheou, Dionysiou, Vatopedi, Karakalou, Xeropotamou, Konstamonitou and a lot of other monasteries under the guidance of those ones. Their spiritual experience has an influence in many other monasteries, sketes and cells in the Holy Mount and abroad. Today, according to His providence, God spread all his direct or indirect disciples all over the world, and his spiritual writings have been translated in many world languages.

Elder Joseph the Hesychast or Spileot was born in 1898 in the village of Lefkes on the Paros Island in Greece. He has been chosen to serve God since he was in his mother's womb. He lost his father when he was very young, and his mother, who was especially pious, took care of his education. Since his family was very poor, the young Frances, which was his name before he took monastic vows, had to labour from a very early age in order to provide the necessary things for the survival of his family.

When he was 18, he left his home to go to Pireea, where he lived and worked. He finished his military service in the navy and continued to work. He was a very strong, brave and clever young man, and working as a merchant he started to gain wealth very quickly. He started reading the books from the Holy Fathers when he was 23. Reading about the exploits of the Holy Fathers and spending more and more of his time in prayer and exploits, he slowly started to detach himself from the world and the disturbance and the noise in it. His heart did not strive for the vanishing and false treasures on earth, but he strived for the undecayable, eternal and priceless treasure of the gift of the Holy Spirit in the Church. He gave up everything he had; he dispensed it to the poor and headed towards the country of the Heaven and Earth, of the Heavenly Empress, the Mother of God, towards the Holy Mount Athos.

When he arrived there, he, firstly, walked across the whole Holy Mount in order to find an elder and a place for his exploit. Like a bee which goes from flower to flower collecting the sweetest nectar, so he used to go from elder to elder drinking the heavenly nectar of God's grace collecting their spiritual experiences in order to upgrade himself, to grow and be in a communion with God. On the feast day of the Holy Transfiguration he climbed on the top of the Mount Athos, where there was a small church dedicated to the Holy Transfiguration of Christ, and there he met father Arsenios, who later became his inseparable friend and co-struggler. From there they went to the renowned elder Daniel in Katunakia who advised them to choose (find) an elder, who does not need to be a renowned one and to subjugate themselves to him in obedience, since the road of the life in Christ is a tradition and a gift of the Holy Spirit and is passed on from an elder to his spiritual child, and without the blessing from the elder and without the impeccable subjugation and obedience there cannot be salvation and divinization. After that, they found elder Ephraim who lived in the cell of the "Annunciation" and submitted themselves to him in obedience. His craft was making wooden wine barrels. He was a simple, good-hearted, calm, quiet, unthinkably silent and meek old man. His happiness for the arrival of the young novice monks was indescribable. Elder Ephraim was the one who brought young Frances into monasticism in the cave of St. Athanasius giving him the name Joseph.

Being persistent in the exploit of searching and suffering to achieve a greater prayer in the constant uttering of the name of God i.e. the Jesus Prayer: God Jesus Christ have mercy on me, with all-night vigils and strict fasting, elder Joseph acquired the gift of pure heart and the continuous prayer of the mind in the heart very early

One day, being in a state of an especially intense prayer and cry, but also in a spiritual sadness for the fact that he could not find a place for his exploit, he experienced the revelation of God's grace. In one moment he looked towards the little church of the Mother of God, and there he saw a bright ray of light coming out of the church right above him in the form of a rainbow. In those moments he was totally changed, forgetting about himself. He was filled with light inside his heart and everywhere around him. He was not feeling his body. Then the Jesus Prayer started to flow out of his heart with no effort. It was a grace from God. From then on, the Jesus Prayer stayed in his heart forever, but with not as strong effect as the one at the first moment.

Later, when he took the yoke of the holy obedience, having the experience and the flame of the prayer, he never reduced his exploit. Every night, after sunset, he used to go to a lonely place, and sit on a wooden chair, uttering the Jesus Prayer continually for six hours, locking his mind in his heart. He measured the time of the prayer with an alarm clock, which he used to put away from him in order not to disturb his prayer, setting it to go off after six hours. One night, abiding in prayer he was illuminated by the uncreated Light from God which spread itself so much that it illuminated the whole place, similar to the Tabor Light, where Saint Peter told God "it is good for us to be here". Later, when he came to his senses, he noticed that the alarm clock had been ringing for a long time, without him hearing it. After this contemplation, the grace of the prayer inside him multiplied itself.

Because their hesychastic life was different from the typikon of the fathers in the surroundings, for which they showed resistance, and in order not to tempt them, they moved to the quiet place "Saint Vasilius". But they did not stay there for long, because after predicting his death, their spiritual father elder Ephraim rested in God.

They used to spend the winter period in their cell, in prayer and fast, and during the summer father Joseph, together with his co-struggler father Arsenios, lived roving life, having nothing earthly with them, as God said: take nothing, neither a stick nor shoes... and they used to go from one place to another searching advice from the holy fathers, zealots. When they walked, they impeccably held themselves to the silent way of life, threading in a certain distance one from the other in order not to disturb the beloved silence. They ate stale bread only. Father Joseph used to eat 75 grams of stale bread, and always after the ninth Byzantine hour. Every Saturday and Sunday they used to attend the Holy Liturgy in the monasteries where they received the usual meals like all the others. They spent eight years in this exploit.



Later on, they decided to retreat again in "Saint Vasiliius" and to spend most of their time in their cells, enjoying the reciting of the Jesus Prayer.

There they built a small church dedicated to the Birth of Saint John the Forerunner, and started to make small wooden crosses as an everyday monastic craftwork. Father Arsenios used to make the rough part, making the form of the cross, and father Joseph used to carve the Crucifixion on the one side and the image of the Mother of God on the other side.

There they live an almost prison life. It was the first time for father Joseph to experience a physical struggle which usually happens to the beginners, and he spent eight years in that difficult struggle.

The eagles gather where the corpse is. The God-seekers, the ones that yearn for exalted aims, gather where there are spiritual fathers, the bearers of the spirit, who like fire pillars and fragrant lilies radiate and scent with their holiness and spiritual beauty. At that time other monks and novices started to gather

around them. A lot of them came, but a small number of them stayed. The reason was that they could not endure their strict hesychastic typikon (rules, principles for living). Elder Joseph adopted the rule that he must not refuse anyone, but accept everyone with love until he wants to stay. Elder Joseph especially took care of the weak, the spiritually sick and the ones possessed with the devil, which if they only were obedient to him, because of his skill in the struggle with the passions, could be healed.

In search of a more lonely and peaceful life, in January 1938 they moved to some caves near the skete Small Saint Anna. There they fenced the yard space, made three cells from trees and mud, which were 1.80 metres long and 1.50 metres wide, in which they had nothing more than most needed things. In one of the caves they built a small church dedicated to Saint John the Forerunner, where they had a Liturgy once or twice a week in order to receive the Holy Communion.

Their typikon was as it follows: they worked until noon, then they retracted into solitude and instead of an evening service they recited their prayer on a rosary and did some reading. After that they used to gather for a meal and with the blessing from father Joseph they retracted again for some rest. After their rest they used to have praying vigil until midnight, everyone in his cell. If it was the day for a Liturgy, they had one after midnight, and if there was not a Liturgy the young monks used to read something or they visited the elder in order to confess or they continued with the Jesus Prayer. After that they had some rest again. When father Charalampus became a hieromonk, they used to have Liturgy every day, and they used to receive the life-giving and salvational Secrets as our most essential Bread every day.

At the time of the Lenten Fast their already difficult life was becoming unbearable. The young monks, with a lot of love, wishes and forwardness, tried to follow the exploit of their elder, but that sacrifice of theirs lead them to the end of their forces and exhaustion, so that in June 1951 father Joseph decided that they should move the New Skete (Nea Skiti).

There they moved into some cottages in a short distance from the skete. Since father Joseph could not walk because of his illness and because he could not stay without the Holy Liturgy or Communion, they built a small church there, dedicated to Saint John the Forerunner again. In Nea Skiti they continued with their strict prayer typikon. Elder Joseph did not give up his strict exploit but he even tried to make it harder. He went through two difficult illnesses, the first of which he did not even want to treat, hoping to have help from God and the Holy Mother. He got better after a year. His body became one wound but he did not give up his prayer rule. The illnesses, the strict and difficult conditions lead to a drastic worsening of his health. In the last forty days of his life on earth he barely ate something, receiving the Holy Communion every day and tasting a bit of watermelon.



His death was a death of a venerable person. He was informed in advance by the Holy Mother about his death, that he was going to be taken on Her feast day. On the day of the Dormition of the Holy Mother, he received the Holy Communion for the last time uttering the words "to have it on the way towards the eternal life". He gathered his disciples to bid farewell and to give them the last blessing. He only let elder Arsenios to stay in his cell and he peacefully gave his venerable and pure soul in the hands of the Most-Pure, for Whom he lived and yearned all his life.

He reposed in the sixty-first year of age, but he looked too much older.