

ATHOS NEWS

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Greetings to everyone in the new year! May 2021 bring you good health, peace, and joy wherever you are. Most of us continue to live under some form of lockdown, which means that our lives contain little in the way of spontaneity or adventure. We are also perhaps suffering from not seeing our friends and family and not receiving the spiritual nourishment of the sacraments or just a friendly hug. Access to the Holy Mountain remains difficult, but life for the fathers continues much as usual. And yet, they too miss seeing us, their friends and family. I thought it would be interesting to hear from them how they are finding life without pilgrims and what impact the pandemic has had on them. There follows first an interview that Elder Ephraim of Vatopedi was kind enough to grant me, and after that, by way of a change, a report on some interesting recent archaeological finds beneath the cemetery chapel at Pantokrator monastery.

Graham Speake

INTERVIEW WITH ELDER EPHRAIM OF VATOPEDI



Q *Your blessing, geronda. How does it feel to have no pilgrims in the monastery?*

Presumably, there are both pluses and minuses, but in general, it must feel very strange.

A Indeed, the absence of pilgrims at our monastery, and on Mount Athos in general, has been palpable, something we've never experienced before. We were accustomed to their presence, took them into our life, and accordingly made adjustments to our programme and our ways. And we do this because we consider hospitality to be part of our vocation, according to the apostolic mandates, 'Let brotherly love continue. Do not forget to entertain strangers',¹ and 'Do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.'² Besides, there's a deeper meaning and purpose to this particular 'community' between monks and laymen, where, according to the Fathers, 'neither the philosopher is removed from society, nor the doer of works from philosophy.'³ In other words, let not the philosophical spirit of the monks be unsociable, aloof from those in the world, nor the social element of the faithful in the world be unphilosophical, without the inspiration of the monks. This communion of monks and laymen, as members of the Church, even directs us back to the first Christian centuries and, in a special way, fulfils Christ's desire 'that they all may be one'.⁴

Beyond that, the absence of pilgrims does not cause sadness or dejection in a proper monk, as if he were dependent on this, as if their presence were a consolation for him. He knows that external human comfort casts out divine consolation. And when the pilgrims depart from the monastery – even those who are close and like family – he is not saddened, as this would indicate an inner emptiness. Nor, however, does he feel a great relief, as if their presence were a burden for him, a drudgery. He turns both situations to advantage spiritually. Their presence, on the one hand, is an opportunity for service and an expression of love in practice to the 'little ones and the least' of the Lord's brethren, whereas, on the other, their absence is a challenge and opportunity for freedom from cares and a turning inward, to 'the hidden person of the heart'⁵ within, which will also be of benefit to the pilgrims as members of the one body of the Church.

¹ Heb. 13:1-2.

² Heb. 13:16.

³ Gregory the Theologian, *Oration 43 – Funeral Oration on St Basil the Great 62, PG 36, 577B.*

⁴ John 17:21.

⁵ See 1 Peter 3:3,4.

Consequently, we could not directly ascribe a positive or negative character to the event. But, in accord with the aforementioned observations, we can say that, since God has allowed this, there is certainly a commensurate spiritual gain to be found, if one confronts it spiritually. For the pilgrims, once their deprivation of the Holy Mountain has passed, it will make them appreciate it more, seek it more, and use it to their good advantage.

Q *What impact has the pandemic had on the spiritual life of the brotherhood?*

A This pandemic has truly encompassed the entire world, and it has left no one unaffected. And the monks are no exception; to a certain degree, we have been affected too. There have been some hindrances in our movement and circulation that pertain to the external works of the monastery, renovations and such, and even to our departure into the world for reasons of health or for other affairs of the monastery.

I can say, however, that for the moment, by the grace of Christ, we've passed through and are passing through this trial in the least distressing way that one could imagine. We have not lived through the restrictions of the lockdown like our brethren in the world. By God's grace and through the bit of attention we have given to the issues of protection and prevention, we have not had a single case of this deadly disease within the monastery. And I can say unreservedly that, were it not for the relative notices and updates, and for the services of supplication and the prayers for this, many monks, perhaps most of them, would have not been aware of the events.

As usual, the weight and the responsibility was shouldered by those responsible for such things at the monastery, leaving most of the monks to carry on as before, in relative freedom from cares, tending to the 'one thing needful'.⁶

The comprehension, however, of the problem as a trial and temptation that the Lord has allowed could not have been without the commensurate spiritual benefit, as I mentioned in the previous answer. And I in my position of responsibility am aware of this in the brothers, both on a general and on a personal level. This tribulation became a call to the brothers for more prayer, both generally and specifically for particular cases of those who become ill. It became a cause

⁶ Luke 10:42.

to be aware of the mortality of man and the remembrance of death, which, according to the Holy Fathers, constitute 'a good above every good'.⁷ It also became another reason for greater trust in God and a challenge to an overabundance of self-reliance.

Q Has the brotherhood felt frustrated that it could not carry out its mission to the world? Or has it found new ways of doing so, e.g. with virtual events on Zoom and YouTube? If so, are there perhaps some long-term benefits?

A What is the mission of the monk to the world, his offering, his service? How is he able to be of benefit to it? These are questions that one must approach and confront with much care and discretion. Christ directed His disciples: 'Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.'⁸ The monks were fulfilling this command of Christ, even before the appearance of these types of virtual events that you mention, which are of course good and blessed and edifying. These are used within the freedom of monasticism in order to share its presence within the modern world and to help faltering mankind. The real offering of the monk, however, is to be found in his personal perfection, something that pertains not only to himself but to the entire body of the Church.

His prayer, his personal struggle, a sigh, a good thought – as St Paisios used to say – in addition to the celebration of the Divine Liturgy, or even the participation in the mystery with all his being, help the world in the most essential way. His withdrawal from the world and his sharing in Christ's crucifixion 'outside the gates'⁹ of the world, his sanctification, make him an unseen missionary and a great benefactor to the world.

These virtual events, as you call them, within the world were one way that our monastery was able to enter into the 'frequency' of modern man and to help him spiritually. The obstacles that came up in the implementation of this purpose, by way of this massive pandemic, certainly have not caused any frustration for the brotherhood, since we know that it can help the world

⁷ St Neophytos the Recluse, *Τυπική Διαθήκη 1*, αγίου Νεοφύτου του εγκλείστου, *Συγγράμματα*, vol. 2, Holy Royal and Stavropegic Monastery of St Neophytos, Paphos, 1998, p. 27.

⁸ Matt. 5:16.

⁹ Heb. 13:12.

without these events when its members become the ‘light of the world’¹⁰ and the ‘salt of the earth’.¹¹ Moreover, our monastery was not slow to adopt the idea that, with the vehicle of modern technology and new methods, it could continue its mission within the world in the form of the events you’ve mentioned. This use of technology was something that St Porphyrios both encouraged and mobilized. He quipped that if the enemy was using it for the destruction of humanity, why shouldn’t we also use it to build up humanity spiritually?

We have seen the tele-conferences and tele-meetings that the monastery has offered via the internet to the beleaguered people serve as a balm of consolation in their souls, reminding them that the monks have not abandoned them in this tribulation but continue to ‘care’ for them, just as God cares for the world.¹²

I’m certain that there will be a long-term benefit, since the circumstances have made us creative in order to continue our mission by introducing these new methods of spiritual service, which until then we had left unutilized. Truly, as they say, every cloud has a silver lining.

Q When we return as pilgrims (as we hope we shall be privileged to do), what differences shall we notice in the monastery or the fathers?

A Externally, I don’t think you’ll notice any changes – just as we ourselves don’t notice anything – since the monastery continues to function smoothly and normally, as before. Of course, I don’t know if this pandemic, even when it has become a thing of the past, will leave some remnants in the form of after-effects, which may require some measures of protection and prevention. But those are the human things, which a person always needs to handle with prudence and discretion.

The change that I believe – or rather hope and pray – that you will see in the fathers will have to do with their spiritual improvement and progress, because trials – and this has been an immense trial – always become beneficial and salvific when faced spiritually. They mature and strengthen us spiritually. And we have experience, both on the personal level and as a brotherhood, of the great benefit that the various tribulations and adversities of

¹⁰ Matt.5:14.

¹¹ Matt. 5:13.

¹² See Acts 20:28.

life have brought us. So come again with our good wishes, whenever God allows, and I pray that you will prove me right!

Q Geronda, please offer a word of advice for the people who are suffering in many ways from the pandemic that has spread all over the world.

A Though I believe the topic you've asked me to answer has been summarized in the answers to the previous questions, taking the opportunity I would like to highlight courage and trust in God, which I encourage everyone to cultivate. This is a principle, a lesson, that that our blessed Elder Joseph of Vatopedi insisted upon. Since we know that 'God cares for us'¹³ and that our life is overseen with a special interest – to say it in a human way – by God, where then is there room for discouragement? In His all-salvific providence, God knows how to instruct us through circumstances, trials, and tribulations, reminding us of His own words, 'In the world you will have tribulations',¹⁴ but at the same time giving us courage, knowing that He Himself, as the one who overcomes the world, 'will with the temptation also make the way of escape, that we may be able to bear it'.¹⁵

With this ordeal, I believe that our good God is showing that He didn't want us to remain 'without chastening',¹⁶ which seals our sonship before Him. We ourselves are not people of a different nature from those of previous generations who endured diseases, famine, earthquakes, wars, poverty, and exile. Let us look at this ordeal in this way, and especially let us take spiritual advantage from it. Just as St Paisios used to say simply and with grace, 'When the enemy throws a stone at you, take it and use it to build your house.' We do not reproach the one 'by whom'¹⁷ it has occurred, according to the Fathers, but we examine our own culpability, our own guilt, and how these became the cause for God to allow this ordeal for our correction. With the tool of self-reproach, with deep humility and broken-heartedness, we beseech God to take this trial from us.

¹³ See 1 Peter 5:7.

¹⁴ John 16:33.

¹⁵ See 1 Cor. 10:13.

¹⁶ Heb. 12:8.

¹⁷ Abba Mark.

We admit that ‘we have sinned, we have committed iniquity, we have behaved unjustly’ and that ‘in true judgement’ the Lord ‘did bring all these things upon us because of our sins’.¹⁸ Within this difficulty, let us see the fatherly love of the God who chastens us ‘that we may not be condemned with the world’.¹⁹ Let us look at it as a ‘penance’ for our own negligence and, even worse, the absence of repentance. They are the ‘unforeseen tolls’²⁰ that appear, as our Elder Joseph would say, wherever there is negligence and an absence of repentance. Let us see God behind all of this, as the perfect teacher who will instruct us with His rod as well as comfort us and support us with His shepherd’s staff.²¹

God is the ‘Good Comforter’ and the source ‘of all comfort’.²² Let us take as an example the openness children have with their natural father, and let us have the same, but even more so, before the ‘Father of mercies’,²³ because He alone is ‘able to save’.²⁴ Even though we may feel unworthy, let us direct ourselves alone before Him, let us take His mother and ours as our mediator and, as intercessors, our great brethren, the saints, who have become like Him. This is what the ancients did, who had more faith, which enabled them to endure their tribulations. The difficulties and vicissitudes of life are not tragic according to the degree that man is united with Christ.

Speaking of an Old Athonite Cemetery Chapel

by Phaidon Hadjiantoniou

Dedicated to St Athanasios the Athonite, the old cemetery chapel of Pantokrator monastery stands on a steep cliff overlooking the sea, outside the monastery’s precinct. It is a simple building with double-sloped roof, rectangular in plan, and developed at two levels. The ground floor is divided into two rooms: the nave with the sanctuary, and a smaller narthex. On the lower level the two-lobe ossuary corresponds to the nave of the chapel, without extending beneath the narthex.

¹⁸ See Daniel 3:28-31.

¹⁹ 1 Cor. 11:32.

²⁰ Abba Mark.

²¹ Psalm 22:4 (LXX).

²² 2 Cor. 1:3.

²³ 2 Cor. 1:3.

²⁴ Heb. 5:7.



St Athanasios chapel, from the south-west. All photos © by the author.

The chapel has no painted wall decoration, but there are several marble architectural members of the eleventh or twelfth century in the building. For a long time they were thought to be in second use. However, during recent research and restoration work, it was realized that the chapel is of single construction prior to the founding of the monastery itself, and the existing marble members are *in situ*.

St Athanasios ceased to be used as a cemetery chapel when a landslide, caused by an earthquake in 1765, dragged down the cliff that part of the ground together with the graves that existed before the entrance of the chapel. A new cemetery chapel was built west of the monastery in 1771. Since then, St Athanasios has been used as a simple chapel, while the old bones remained in its ossuary.

During restoration work carried out over the last fifteen years at Pantokrator, it was found that serious problems in various buildings of the precinct today, as in the past, are due to faults in the rock on which the monastery was built. Special research done in the soil revealed a dense network of cracks that extends throughout the rock. The marginal condition of the rock and the serious erosion of the masonry, which was found by exploratory sections, made it necessary to

strengthen the chapel with a series of interventions to the stone masonry, until the rocky subsoil was stabilized with a large-scale fixation surgery.

It was during these preliminary phases of the work that interesting elements of the history of the chapel appeared. Three sections in as many parts of the existing stone pavement in the nave brought to light two previous floors, of which the older was about 40cm lower. In the north-west corner of the nave a stone slab was discovered *in situ*, used to close an opening to the original pavement, where after exhumation the bones of dead monks were dropped down to the ossuary. And in the corner, a small earthenware vessel, 15cm high, with a 90° opening, full of sand, which descends below the surface of the original floor, communicates with the ossuary. I did not find anything like it in the literature related to the architecture of cemeteries, nor in other Athonite cemetery chapels. I thought it might be related to death rituals of particular anthropological interest, i.e. offering wine at memorials, an ancient Greek custom, which passed into the Byzantine and Ottoman periods and is still performed today in many parts of Greece.

Another section in the corresponding south-west corner of the nave revealed one more opening to the south lobe of the ossuary, which, however, is built. That is, it may have been closed at an earlier time than the one in the north lobe. The two corners of the nave, being of particular interest for this mid-Byzantine cemetery chapel, which in fact is Pantokrator's oldest building still in use, remain visible and accessible by superimposing two opening glass plates, specially designed and ordered.



Two opening glass plates at the north-west and south-west corners of the nave.

During research made in the narthex, human bones appeared, scattered under the pavement, the upper layer of which was entrapped already inside the pure lime mortar fixing the floor stone slabs. The bones came from exhumation and were transported to the spot, placed in jumbled fashion, and irregularly scraped. But why had these bones not been placed together with the rest of the dead monks in the ossuary? The answer might be that they do not belong to monks but to civilians related to donor activities in the monastery.

Over the main entrance on the west wall of the chapel, a sixteenth-century graffito of a sailing boat was discovered, sketched with pencil on an older layer of plaster. Correlating the date of this sketch with the old construction technique and the type of materials used in the narthex, we conclude that the stone floor in this particular room dates back to the sixteenth century. The same goes for the transportation and deposit of the bones in this area.



A sixteenth-century sketch of a sailing boat in the narthex.

The most important event in the building history of Pantokrator, after its mid-fourteenth-century foundation, is the extension of the original enclosure to the south, which gave the monastery its present area and volume, about twice that of the original, in the second half of the fifteenth century and in the following century. This extension was made entirely at the expense of Romanian rulers and senior officials. Their names, both male and female, are written in the *parresia*, a wooden board kept in the sanctuary of the katholikon, on which all benefactors of the monastery are recorded for commemoration in the liturgy.

The bones from the narthex were carefully collected for laboratory examination, which started but was temporarily halted, as was the research in the chapel, due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, before the lockdown, four bones from different individuals, a small sample of the whole, were radiocarbon-dated to a period between the second half of the fifteenth and the early seventeenth century, which enhances the likelihood that the bones from the narthex belonged to the above-mentioned Romanian donors.

We expect that, by continuing the scheduled laboratory analysis and the anthropological examination of the findings, we shall expand our knowledge of this important building, and also of the burial practices and customs on Mount Athos.