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*A cobble-stoned lane in the town of Skiathos.*

# A VILLAGE EASTER

## MEMORIES OF CHILDHOOD

*By Alexandros Papadiamandis*

Uncle Milios never spoke a truer word, when he said the good Christians living outside the town might end up having to celebrate Easter that year without a liturgy. In fact no prophecy was ever closer to fulfilment, for it almost came true twice – but happily God made the authorities see the light, and in the end the poor villagers, local shepherd-farmers, were judged worthy to hear the Word of God and eat the festive eggs.

The cause of all this was the busy little coaster that (supposedly) linked those unhappy islands to the inhospitable shore opposite, and which twice a year, when the season changed in spring or autumn, would almost invariably sink, and as often as not take the whole crew down with it. They would then put the post of captain up for auction, and each time some poor wretch, undaunted by the fate of his predecessor, was found to undertake this most perilous task. And on this occasion, at the end of March, as winter was taking its leave, the coaster had gone down again.

The parish priest, Father Vangelis, who was also the abbot (and only monk) of the small monastic establishment of St. Athanasios, had been appointed by the bishop to take charge of the villages on the opposite shore. Though already an old man, he would take the boat across four times a year, during each of the main fasts,<sup>1</sup> to hear the confessions of his unfortunate parishioners – the ‘hill-people’ or ‘mountain-scarecrows’ as they were

<sup>1</sup> There are four fasting periods during the liturgical year which begins on 1st September: Advent, preceding Christmas, which lasts forty days; Great Lent, preceding Easter, which lasts six weeks; the Fast of the Holy Apostles, beginning on the moveable feast of All Saints and ending on 29th June; and the Fast of the Dormition of the Holy Theotokos, from 1st to 15th August. These fasts reflect the ascetical practices of the Orthodox Church implying a restraint from the utilitarian exploitation of the natural world and its God-given resources through abstention, on the material level, from animal foods – meat, eggs and dairy products – and also from fish, wine and oil on other days, coupled with spiritual preparation and contemplation, prayer and confession of sins.

called — and give them some spiritual instruction, before he hastened back to his monastery (if it was during Lent) to celebrate Easter there. But that year, as we have said, the coaster had sunk, the islands were cut off for several days, and Father Vangelis was reluctantly obliged to stay and celebrate Easter on the far shore of the billowing, storm-tossed sea. It seemed as though his little flock in Kalivia, whose homes clustered around the monastery of St. Athanasios, would end up not having any liturgy at all.

Some of them thought they should take their wives and children down into the town, to hear the Resurrection proclaimed and attend the liturgy there, but Uncle Milios, the village elder of Kalivia, wished to celebrate Easter the way he always had; Sevenmonth (so called because he had been born premature) did not want his wife being stared at by the townspeople; and Uncle Anagnostis, an old villager who knew the Easter service by heart, but could not actually read a word of it,<sup>2</sup> longed to chant ‘Receive the body of Christ’ himself. All three insisted (and many agreed) that at all costs they must get one of the priests in town to come up to Kalivia and celebrate the liturgy for them there.

Everyone felt the best choice would be Father Kyriakos: he was not of a particularly good family (he was even related to one or two of the villagers himself) and he didn’t look down on them. He was even said to have some Albanian blood in him. He certainly wasn’t stand-offish —in fact it was rumoured here and there that the priest had a habit of ‘finishing off the husband’s procreation duties’ with his female parishioners. But that was just the idle talk of mischiefmakers and grudge-bearers, and only fools paid any attention to it. Like most of the true clergymen of the Greek Church (with one or two exceptions), the priest was by and large of blameless character.

Though this is true, the fact remains that married priests are usually out of pocket and out of luck, and, being forever burdened by the need to feed their offspring, they can appear to be grasping individuals, who do not even trust their own colleagues fully. This was the case with Father Kyriakos, who was perfectly willing to go and celebrate Easter for the villagers, as he had a generous heart and would have liked them to enjoy Easter and the arrival of spring along with everyone else, but he had his suspicions about the other parish priest, and was reluctant to leave him in charge of the parish, especially on that day. Father Theodoris, the other priest, who was known as ‘the Whirlwind’, urged him to go, saying it would be a pity to lose

<sup>2</sup> Anagnostis means reader; it is not only a Christian name but also the first office in the ecclesiastical order.

the income from Kalivia, and suggesting that they share the receipts from the parish and the village equally between them.

This did not reassure Father Kyriakos at all: in fact it made him even more suspicious. However, as he had already more or less made up his mind to go to Kalivia when he asked his colleague for his opinion, he told his son Zachos — who pulled a face and grumbled — to stay in the church sanctuary as a spy, collect his half of the offerings and the priest’s fee, and only come and join him in Kalivia at sunrise, when the liturgy had ended.

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It was four hours before dawn, and the Evening Star was already high in the night sky. Uncle Anagnostis woke the priest, and before they entered the little church of St Dimitrios he improvised a bell out of a solid piece of walnut wood and a stick, and walked through the village, banging noisily to wake the sleeping inhabitants.

One after another the villagers arrived, accompanied by their wives. All were dressed in their best clothes.

The priest gave the blessing.

Uncle Anagnostis began to recite from memory, beginning with the preliminary prayer and the canon, ‘On the wave of the sea’.

Father Kyriakos appeared at the sanctuary doors, chanting ‘Come, receive the light’.

When they had all lit their candles, they filed out into the open air to hear the Resurrection gospel.<sup>3</sup> A sweet, contemplative Resurrection, amid the blossoming trees, the fragrant bushes swaying in a gentle breeze, and the white flowers of the wild clematis, ‘neige odorante du printemps’.<sup>4</sup>

They sang ‘Christ is risen’, and all went back into the church. Men, women and children: no more than seventy souls, all told.

Uncle Anagnostis began to chant the Easter canon, and the priest himself (as there was no one else to do so) gave the responses from the sanctuary.

<sup>3</sup> On the eve of Easter Sunday the faithful congregate at church for the celebration of the service of the Resurrection which commences with a short vigil service, the *Pannychís*, and the chanting of the canon ‘On the wave of the sea’. When the canon is completed all the lamps and candles in the church are extinguished and silence reigns. Then the Royal Doors to the sanctuary are opened from within and the priest emerges, clad in white robes and holding in his left hand the Gospel and in his right the burning paschal candle, chanting the words, ‘Come, and receive the light from the inextinguishable light, and glorify Christ who has risen from the dead.’ The faithful rush to ignite their candles from the light offered by the priest, then all file outside, following the priest, for the reading of the Resurrection Gospel and the continuation of matins.

<sup>4</sup> ‘fragrant snow of spring’: V. Hugo, *Les Orientales*, xxxiii, 10.

He was about to come out and say the preparatory prayer, kiss the icons and begin the liturgy, when a rather tall twelve-year-old boy, flushed and panting, followed by two other boys of about the same age, suddenly walked, or rather burst, into the church. It was Zachos, Father Kyriakos's son. He rushed into the sanctuary, gasping for breath, and began addressing the priest. Though the congregation could hear his voice, they could not make out a single word of it.

This is what he was saying:

*'Papa, papa!* (the children of priests also usually address their father as *papa*). *'Papa, papa!* . . . Father Whirlwind . . . by the back door. . . the oblations. . . from the sanctuary. . . his mother-in-law. . . and his wife . . . carrying . . . by the back door. . . the oblations . . . I saw them . . . by the back door. . . the oblations . . . from the sanctuary. . . and his mother-in-law . . . and his wife . . .'

Father Kyriakos was the only person who could have made any sense of his breathless son's disjointed words. He understood from them that Father Theodore, the Whirlwind, the other parish priest, was stealing the collection and passing it out to his wife and mother-in-law through the back door leading from the sanctuary.

Perhaps things were not exactly as Zachos suggested. Like all young boys, he loved the countryside and he loved having fun, and he had found it very difficult to obey his father's orders and stay behind in the town. He would have jumped at any excuse to get away and set off on a nocturnal jaunt to Kalivia, especially as he had not had any difficulty finding some friends to come along with him.

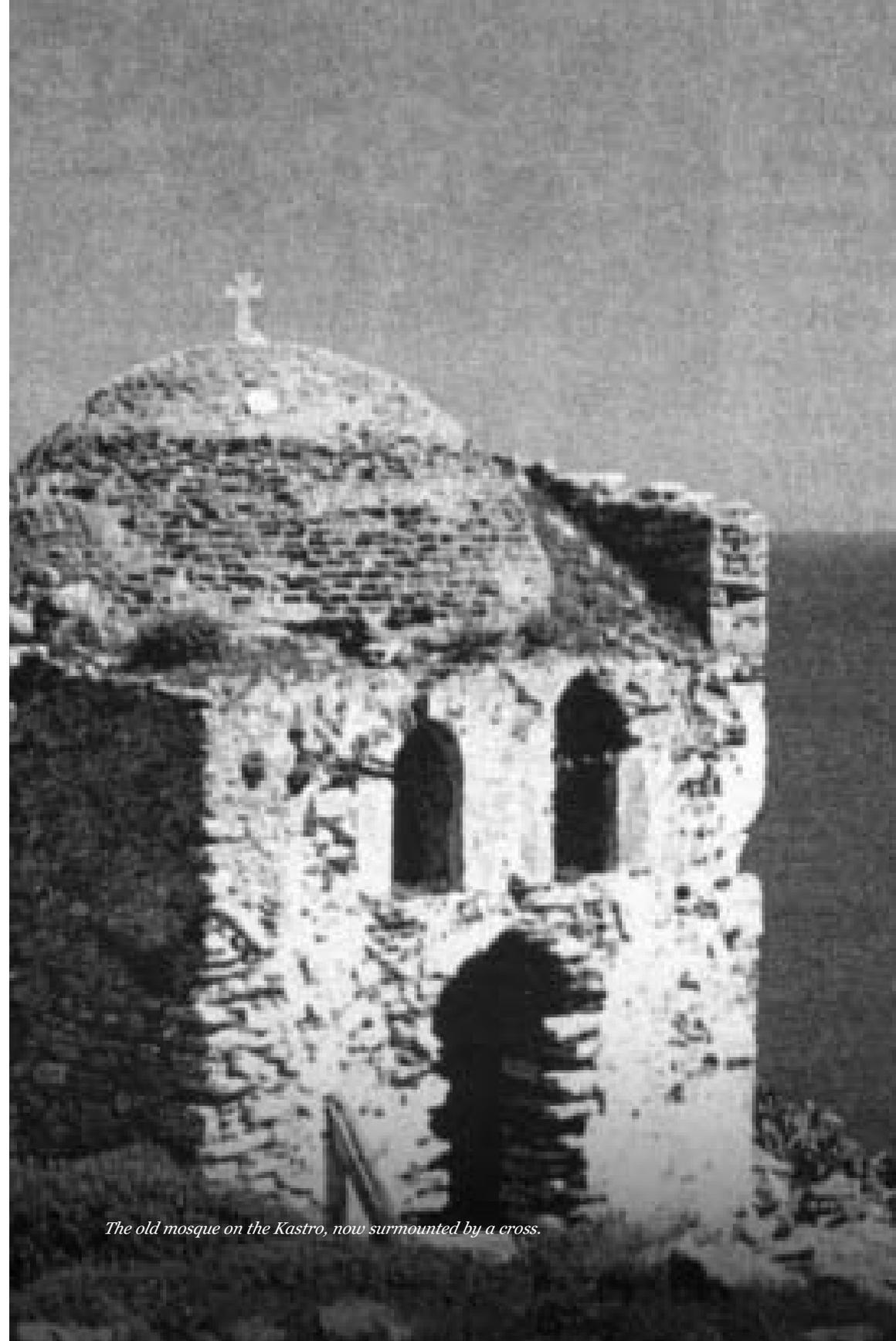
But Father Kyriakos did not stop to think. He went red and flew into a rage. In a word, he sinned. Rather than giving his son a good box around the ears and calmly proceeding with his duty, he immediately stripped off his stole, removed his surplice and strode down the nave and out of the church — averting his eyes from his wife's face as she stared at him in alarm.

Uncle Milios, however, had an idea about what might have provoked this behaviour, and went out after him. A short distance from the church, between three trees and two stretches of fencing, the following conversation took place:

*'Papa, papa, where are you going?'*

*'Don't worry — I'll be right back.'*

He didn't know what to say. The fact is that he had resolved to go back down



*The old mosque on the Kastro, now surmounted by a cross.*

to the town and confront the other priest about the theft. He honestly believed he had enough time to get back and celebrate the liturgy before the sun rose.

‘Where are you going?’ insisted Uncle Milios.

‘Get Anagnostis to read the Acts of the Apostles. I’ll be right back.’

He had forgotten that Uncle Anagnostis couldn’t read anything, unless he already knew it by heart.

‘After all, I’m leaving my wife here!’ he added, unable to think of anything else to say. ‘I’m leaving my wife here with you!’

And with these words he was gone.

Uncle Milios walked gloomily back into the church.

‘I knew it,’ he muttered to himself.

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In the church great astonishment held sway. The villagers stared at each other in bewilderment. Some were whispering. The women were asking the priest’s wife to tell them what was going on — but she was even more at a loss than they were.

Meanwhile, the priest ran and ran. The cold night air cooled his brow a little.

‘And how am I supposed to feed all these children? Eight of them, God forgive me: the wife makes nine, and me — ten! They’ll rob you as soon as look at you! . . .’

Five hundred paces from the church the path began to descend, and led down into a lovely valley. There was a watermill standing on the slope, by the side of the road. As the priest listened to the gentle murmuring of the stream and felt the cool breeze against his face, the fact that he was going to celebrate the liturgy (let alone how or where he was going to celebrate it) was swept completely from his mind, and he stooped down to drink. But his lips had not yet touched the surface of the water, when he suddenly remembered, and realized what he was doing.

‘I have to celebrate the liturgy,’ he exclaimed, ‘and I’m drinking water. . . ?’<sup>5</sup>

And he did not drink.

Then he pulled himself together.

‘What am I doing?’ he said, ‘Where am I going?’

He made the sign of the cross.

‘I have sinned, Lord. I have sinned! Do not hold me to account!’

<sup>5</sup> All communicants, including the celebrant, refrain from both food and drink prior to communion.

He resumed: ‘If he is a thief, it is for the Lord to . . . forgive him. . . him and me. I must do my duty.’

He felt a tear run down his cheek.

‘Oh Lord,’ he exclaimed with all his heart, ‘I have sinned, I have sinned! You gave yourself up for our sins, and in return we crucify you daily!’

He turned around and hurried back up towards the church to continue the service.

‘And I was actually going to drink water! I am not fit to celebrate! But what can I do? I can’t take communion! I shall say the office without taking communion — I am not worthy! “Behold the first fruits of the vine!”<sup>6</sup> I am not worthy!’

He re-entered the church, and the villagers greeted his return with joy.

He celebrated the divine mystery and administered the Holy Communion to the faithful, taking care that every last drop from the chalice passed through their lips. He himself abstained, vowing to tell all to his confessor — and ready to accept whatever penance he might impose.<sup>7</sup>

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Around noon, after the service of the Second Resurrection,<sup>8</sup> the villagers laid out the feast under the plane-trees by the cooling spring. For a carpet they had the grass and the meadow flowers and for a table they used ferns and rushes. The cool breeze rustled in the trees, while Sevenmonth responded with sweet sounds from his lyre. The lovely Xanthe, his wife, sat between her mother Melachro and Aunt Kratira, her mother-in-law, taking care to keep her cheeks partially covered with her headscarf and staring pointedly at the trunk of the great plane-tree so that the men would not look at her and arouse her husband’s jealousy.

<sup>6</sup> John of Damascus, canon for the Sunday of Easter, ode 8, 1st *troparion*.

<sup>7</sup> In normal Orthodox liturgical practice, the priest first partakes of communion at the altar, and then turns to the faithful and calls them to come and receive the Holy Gifts, which he dispenses to each from the chalice with a spoon. At the end of the liturgy the priest carries the liturgical vessels to the oblation table and there consumes from the chalice whatever is remaining of the Holy Gifts and recites the concluding prayers of thanksgiving.

<sup>8</sup> On Easter Sunday, the vespers of the Second Resurrection, so called because the Resurrection gospel is read again in several languages to reflect its universal message, is celebrated. It is also known as the Vespers of Love because the kiss of love is exchanged between brethren amidst joyous exclamations of ‘Christ is risen!’ In Papadiamandis’s time it was sung earlier than a normal vespers service, at around noon, to allow the Easter day festivities to continue uninterrupted. This service is especially attended by children wearing bright garments and holding their decorated Easter candles.



*Skiathos town from the sea.*

Her sister, Atho, fifteen years old and still unmarried, without a care in the world and no less of a beauty herself, kept teasing her, saying: ‘Silly girl, what did you see in him? I wouldn’t have him if you offered me the heavens and the stars . . . I’d rather be a nun!’

It was true that Sevenmonth was not much to look at in terms of appearance or size, but he made up for these shortcomings with agility of body and mind, and a cheerful and good-natured disposition.

Father Kyriakos presided over the feast. His wife sat opposite him, an irreproachable dark-haired woman, stocky and roundfaced, who once a year, almost without fail, would innocently hatch out another little priest-child — without bothering with all those herbs (whether for getting a child or for preventing one) that fill the minds of other women.

To the right of the priest sat Uncle Milios, the village elder, and devoted servant of his little community. He knew better than anyone how the lamb should be roasted, carving it carefully so that everyone got his share, and proposing toasts as he tucked into his food. His toasts were unrivalled. After the priest had made a short formal toast of his own, Uncle Milios, clutching an enormous sevenoka cask, stood up and began to greet the company one by one:

‘*Christos Anesti!* Christ is risen! Truly the Lord is risen! He lives and reigns throughout the ages!’

After this preamble, he got down to business:

‘Health to us all! Good health! Prosperity! Good cheer! Papa! May your vocation bring you joy!’ And to the priest’s wife: ‘May your husband and all your little ones bring you joy! Cousin Thodoris! Long life and happiness! Godfather Panayiotis! Just as you baptized us with oil, may you also crown us with wedding wreaths of vine.<sup>9</sup> Kratira, my in-law! May God grant you a fine husband for your daughter! Yorgis, my nephew! May you make an honourable marriage, and may we rejoice on your wedding-day! Aunt

<sup>9</sup> At a baptism it is the godparent who represents the Church and brings the child within its fold, which also includes everything within the natural world. This reality is epitomized by the godparent’s offerings of oil (the ‘oil of gladness’) with which he or she anoints the child during the sacrament of baptism, the cross, the pristine white clothes in which the child will be dressed after the sacrament, and the offerings of bread and wine for the subsequent liturgy when the child will receive its first communion. Traditionally, the godparent will also be the best man (*koumbáros*) or woman (*koumbára*) at their godchild’s wedding when they will crown the couple with wreaths. In ancient Greece the victors of athletic competitions received crowns of victory, wreaths made of olive branches; in a Christian context the martyrs, athletes fighting for the faith, received their crowns of martyrdom from God. The crowns received by the married couple were traditionally made from the grapevine, recalling the blood of Christ, an understanding reinforced by the fact the couple drink from a cup of wine — the cup of salvation — immediately after their crowning.

Kyparissou! May your son marry a good woman, and gladden your heart!  
Raise your glasses! Cheers! Here's to us all! Your health! Cousin Xanthe!  
May good omens accompany the birth of your child! Your health! Here's to  
us all! May life be good to us, now and always!

And the amount he drank depended on whom he was toasting.

Little Sevenmonth also wanted to propose a toast, but a more tender one.  
He hoped to touch his wife's heart and make her answer him:

'What's up?'

'Drink up, and pass the cup!'

'What, with wine?'

'I drink to you, O darling mine!'

When he had drunk, he passed the cask to his lovely Xanthe, and she  
moistened her lips.

Then they began to sing. First of all 'Christ is risen', followed by popular  
songs. When Uncle Milios tried to sing 'Christ is risen', it either became a  
slow Anatolian lament, or else a heroic ballad, but the most original singer of  
all was Uncle Kitsos, an aged gendarme from Northern Epirus — an old reg-  
ular, who had been left stranded on the island since King Otho's reign.<sup>10</sup> He  
wasn't even sure whether his name was still in the official register — some-  
times he received his pay, and other times he did not. He wore an  
opensleeved tunic, short knee breeches and greaves around his shins. The  
mayor (there was also a mayor, alas!) had sent him to Kalivia for Easter, sup-  
posedly to maintain law and order, although there was not actually any need  
for it to be maintained. The truth is that he had sent him off to enjoy himself  
with the good-hearted country people, whose company Uncle Kitsos liked,  
even though he would call them 'poor wretches' or 'tinkers'. It is also true  
that if he had stayed in the town, the mayor would have been under an obli-  
gation to entertain him, for Uncle Kitsos had been spoilt by the previous  
mayors and treated to cakes and eggs at Easter. What customs . . . !

After kissing the cask three or four times, Uncle Kitsos began to chant  
'Christ is risen' after his own fashion, as follows:

*Crisis lads, Crisis risen  
from the dead by death  
chomping down death*

<sup>10</sup> Otho of Bavaria was appointed as the first king of independent Greece by the European powers after the Greek War of Independence. He reigned from 1832 to 1862.

*and to those, those in the tombs  
life most blessed!<sup>11</sup>*

And yet, despite its singularity, no one ever sang a sacred song with more  
Christian feeling and enthusiasm, with the possible exception of that worthy  
old Cretan, long-famed in Athens, who sang the 'Dumb are the lips of the  
impious' with his own interpolation: 'Dumb are the lips of the impious and  
profane, *the scoundrels!*, at your revered image. . .'.<sup>12</sup>

Ah, the true Orthodox Greeks!

As the shadows lengthened, the men began to dance the *klephtiko* (the  
women waited till Monday and Tuesday before dancing the *syrtos* and the  
*kamara*),<sup>13</sup> and Father Kyriakos, his wife, and young Zachos, whom his  
father had let off in view of the special day (he had decided that his son was  
actually to blame for all the confusion), took leave of the company and went  
back down to the town.

Father Kyriakos gave his fellow priest his full share of the collection from  
Kalivia, and did not even bother to raise the subject of the supposed theft.  
As it was, Father Theodoris himself told him that his share of the parish  
receipts was in his own (Father Theodoris's) house. He had thought it best,  
he said, to take both shares out through the back door of the sanctuary, so

<sup>11</sup> The correct rendering of the 'Christ is risen' (Christoās Anésti) tropáion is:

*Christ is risen from the dead  
trampling down death by death  
and upon those in the tombs  
bestowing life.*

<sup>12</sup> A hymn sung in the service of Supplication to the Theotokos; the full tropáion is:

*Dumb are the lips of the impious  
who are not venerating your holy icon, the Hodegéttria,  
the one painted by the Apostle Luke,  
the most venerable.*

The *Hodegéttria*, meaning the one who leads the way, was a famous icon at Constantinople attributed to the Apostle Luke. It subsequently became a 'type' much copied, especially in Russia.

<sup>13</sup> The *kléptiko* dance takes its name from the 'klephts', or robbers, the legendary marauding bands of resistance fighters who were active during the Ottoman domination of Greece, living in the mountains and plundering village communities. The *syrtó* and the *kamára* are traditional cyclical dances that commemorate events which have marked the life of the community. The week following Easter Sunday, called *Diakainisimos* — 'Renewal' or 'Bright Week' — a festive week marking the eighth day of the new Creation, the new life that Christ brought into the fallen world by His Resurrection, is celebrated with daily liturgies in the chapels scattered throughout the countryside followed by communal feasting, singing and dancing.

as to keep them from the eyes of gossips with nothing better to think about, who might otherwise kick up a fuss about all the money priests receive. 'On the rare day,' he said, 'that we actually get something in the collection box, everyone has plenty to say about it — but they never stop to consider all the weeks and months that go by without harvest!' So that was why Zachos had got it wrong.

[1890]

*Translated by Andrew Watson*

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*The monastery of the Annunciation, Skiathos.*