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THE GREAT-GRANDMOTHER: A CHILDHOOD ON AEGINA

by the Rev. Dr. George D. Dragas, Ph.D, D.D

Protopresbyter George Dragas, Professor of Patristics at Boston's Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, recalls the Aegina of his youth and his great-grandmother, Areti Tzavaras, as his first teacher, spiritual head of the family, and a friend of Saint Nektarios of Aegina.

I've often thought of writing something about my life because it has gone through such varied stages, and more importantly, a wealth of relationships. The earliest period was my childhood and my studies, which involved my great-grandmother, grandmother, mother, father, godfather, friends, and teachers. They are always in front of me, and it is of them that I write now.

When I was last on the island of Aegina and went to my great-grandmother's grave, I found another grave nearby—a relative who had taken part in the war with Turkey in 1880 as a decorated cavalry officer. After the war he became a monk and later the abbot of Megisti Lavra on the Holy Mountain. His monastic name was Athanasios after St. Athanasios, the founder of the monastery. Athanasios is also my saint—in fact, both Athanasios of the Holy Mountain and Athanasios the Great, patriarch of Alexandria, because the Athens parish church where I was baptized was dedicated to both of them.

The most important person in my life, though, is the great-grandmother—Areti, my mother's grandmother from Aegina. Not that my mother isn't also important, she's the same, but the great-grandmother came first for the entire family. Her daughter, my grandmother, married my grandfather and raised eight children, one of whom is my mother. I still speak to my mother in Greece by telephone every day, and the great-grandmother comes up in

Opposite: Areti Tzavaras, great-grandmother of Fr. George Dragas.



most of our conversations. I don't know much about her early life, but I do know that she was my first and best teacher in Orthodoxy.

I remember when I was very young in the Aeginean village of Agoi Asomatoi, the Holy Incorporeal Ones (that is, the angels). We always stayed in the great-grandmother's house, which was built of stone with a wooden floor.¹ A little separate from the big house was a small one-room house where her mother-in-law had lived. Areti's house was just four great rooms; one for herself and the others for her children and grandchildren.

Barba Mitso Yelathakis

Our village was very old, and opposite the great-grandmother's house lived a family of nine sisters. Every morning on our way to church, there were discussions and sometimes arguments between the great-grandmother and their father "Theo" about what was good and what was bad. (In Aegina and other parts of Greece, everyone you meet is "Theo" or "Theia," either uncle or auntie. Theo means "uncle," but it also means "divine," there is something interesting about the word.) This uncle, Theo Mitso or Barba Mitso Yelathakis, was the church cantor and also second cousin to the great-grandmother.

Barba Mitso built his own house opposite my great-grandmother's, in the shape of a basilica. The ceiling was of large beams, finished with clay and small branches and my grandfather's was the same. The roof beams were fragrant wood from the cedars of Lebanon—most of the old houses in the Aegian had acquired their cedar frames and roof beams from Lebanon. Once the house was framed, small branches were woven closely together to fill the gaps and on top of that they would put the famous Aegina clay. The island was known from classical times for its famous red and white clay pots. At the end of the house above the kitchen was a flat roof, a *liakó*, which means something that is exposed to the sun (*elios*).

On top of his flat roof Barba Mitso constructed a sort of cave, which he made into a cell. He would climb up to the roof with a rope-ladder and then pull the ladder up behind him. Downstairs was the *gyneconites*, the women's quarters. The girls and their mother and grandmother would stay down there and Barba Mitso would sit on the roof. Once he had gone up to his cell, he wouldn't come down. You could call him and call him, but he wouldn't come until he was ready, and I've always felt sure that he was up there pray-

¹ Because Areti Tzavaras was the head of the family, Fr. Dragas and his relatives often use the honorific "the" in referring to their great-grandmother, as we would say, "the queen," rather than "my queen".

ing and chanting. The cell is still there, decorated with the icon mosaics he made, and one of his daughters lives in the house.

Barba Mitso was an iconographer and a mosaicist, and I regret that I didn't come to know him better. I was the first of the great-grandchildren and he asked my mother many times to allow him to adopt me as a spiritual son; he had no son of his own and he wanted me to learn his trade. As a child I often went to a nearby monastery with four of my "aunts," Barba Mitsos' girls who had become nuns and revived the little ruined monastery of *Panagia-Faneromene* (The Mother of God Who Appeared).

First Light

The great-grandmother was the first person to go to bed in the evening and the first to awake at dawn. She went to bed at sunset and awoke at first light with the rooster signaling the morning, even before the priest rang the church bell to awaken the village for services. If there was a liturgy, she was already in church. If there wasn't a liturgy, she would already have said her prayers and incensed the house and the yard before the first bell rang. This was a country house with a tremendous variety of trees planted by her son-in-law, my grandfather. It was a small paradise, with grapes all year around, even the ones we call *sitherites* ("iron-grapes") for winter. There were hard and soft almonds and different kinds of fig trees; she would collect the figs and prepare them for winter. During the fasts she took all of her food from the garden.

I also remember the flowered *kanatia*, the big brightly-painted Aeginian pots that I used to paint when I was a boy. In those days there were no refrigerators, you just had a block of ice delivered when you could, and because the great-grandmother couldn't afford ice she had these *kanatia* by the window, and the breeze from the sea would keep the water cool. Up on the mountain, the sea-breeze kept everything fresh and pure. It was all so pure, and when I think of her I think of the purity of the island.

Aegina, the Island

Aegina still has a tremendous purity about it. Wherever you stand, you can count several churches, and if not churches, crosses on the tops of hills where people have made vows to build a church. On Aegina there are many private churches and family chapels; in my family's village there is one dedicated to

St. Matrona, built by the grandfather of my first cousin. The whole island was pure, but the most pure element in our family was the great-grandmother.

The great-grandmother was frugal because she was poor. Even after my aunts and uncles were old enough to work and help her with money, she never threw away so much as a single crust of bread, but toasted anything extra and wrapped it in towels to keep as rusks. The bread she made herself was so good that it never went bad. It lasted more than a month, and we would often ask, “How does she do it?” It was a sourdough bread—*zemoto*, as we say, kneaded by hand. I still remember these big loaves, so fragrant and dense that when you cut a slice you didn’t want anything else. She would wrap the bread in a cloth, tying up the corners in a certain way, and we would take it with us to the mountainside. Water from the well and a piece of bread dipped in olive oil with a salad—we didn’t need anything more.

Great-Grandmother’s Marriage

Marriage was the first great event in Areti’s life, and this marriage was imposed on her. In those days Aegina was famous for sponge diving and when she was sixteen it was arranged that she marry a diver from the island. She was told that this was the best young man on the island—the *protopallikaro*, the chief among all of the young sponge divers. Areti herself was a beauty, blond with blue eyes and an extraordinary face; even in old age, her eyes were striking. The match-making was done by discussion among the older relatives, and she had no say in it. She didn’t wish to marry as she was very religious and wanted to be a nun, but her wishes weren’t consulted.

When Areti was told by her mother that she was to marry Stilianos Tzavaras, she ran to the mountains and hid in a cave used by shepherds as a winter shelter. She prayed that they wouldn’t find her and that she would die there if this marriage was not the will of the Mother of God because she had made a personal vow to be a nun. Saint Nektarios (of Aegina) was living on the island at that point, and although they knew each other, I don’t know if he had anything to do with this vow. However, Areti must have been found and taken back to the village because she married soon after. Three months after the wedding my great-grandfather died at sea. She had only lived with him for a few weeks, but when he died she was already pregnant. The sixteen year-old widow put on black as soon as she received the news and, as was the custom, wore it for the rest of her life. With a black *mandila* [kerchief], she always looked like a nun.



Sophia and George Kamanaos, grandparents of the author.

At the end of her term she gave birth to my grandmother, Sophia, whom I never met. How did she raise her child? She supported her by lace-making, with the help of St. Nektarios who sometimes visited her. (There was a stool in the corner of the house and the great-grandmother would always tell me, “This is where he sat.” No one was ever allowed to sit there afterwards, because this was the seat of the saint.) Knowing that Areti was a young widow, the saint sent many rich women from Athens to buy lace from her. This Aeginian lace was called *copanelia* from *copanao*, “to hit two things together” in Greek. She worked the lace on a cushion on her lap or a table, with dozens of little bobbins of thread hanging down in front of her. As she tied the knots, the bobbins would knock together and make a noise. Lace-making is a very intricate and developed craft on our island, and my mother also knows it, having learned from the great-grandmother who was a real expert.

Areti’s daughter Sophia grew up and married my grandfather, George Kampanaos. They had eight children, and it seems that my grandmother must have had a premonition of what was to come, because she carefully trained my mother, the second daughter of the eight children—four boys and four girls—to act as a second mother to her brothers and sisters. My grandmother was a beautiful, healthy woman, but with the birth of the eighth child, something went wrong. The hospital made a mistake and she died of

blood poisoning, leaving my grandmother and my mother as the two pillars of the family.

They had the same name: the old Areti and the young Areti and I believe that my mother was always closer to the great-grandmother than were her brothers and sisters because she carried her name. Because she has had so much responsibility from such a young age my mother is very assertive, while my father, Dionysios Dragas (also a very unusual person) was more passive. My mother is now the oldest person left and the head of the family, but actually, she fulfilled this role from her youngest years with the help of my great-grandmother.

The Island in Vacation

When I was young, all of us, grandfather, parents, aunts, uncles and cousins, went to the island whenever we could. The children all slept on the flat roof of the house and just being together was exciting. The great-grandmother was the center of everything in our family. I was an Athenian boy, but in Aegina I knew a pure, different Greece. To leave the big city and go to Aegina was a great blessing, especially when I went with my grandfather. He was a wonderful, deeply religious man who remained a widower after my grandmother's death. When we awoke in the morning, even before washing, he would read the psalter aloud and then say his prayers.

When we came to Aegina, Grandfather often took me up the steep mountain behind our village. There was no path, and he was the only one who knew how to make the ascent. We had to forge a little brook that became a torrent in the winter, with only one place to cross. It was a wild, primitive life, but a good one. From this mountain you could see the hills where St. Nektarios' lived, and you had a panoramic view, not only of the island, but of the Peloponnese and as far as the Bay of Corinth. For me, these hills became a pilgrimage place, where one could meet God in a special way. As soon as I was old enough, I went to the hills on my own to pray.

On church feast days, our shops would close and the priest would put out loudspeakers so that the services and the liturgy would resound through the entire village. Whether or not you wanted to be, you were a part of it. This was particularly so in Great Lent, on the Fridays of the Akathist to the Mother of God when the whole village rang with chanting. As a child I recall sitting and copying out the akathist in calligraphy.

In those days, the villagers would meet at the community well to tell stories and trade news. There was also a tavern there, and the bishop of Aegina had a house on a corner not far from our own. It was the best house in the village, and had been passed down to him from a previous bishop, a friend of my grandfather. My grandfather was a critic of many things that he saw were wrong and the bishop was always saying, "Well, you come and be the priest." But Grandfather had a large family to raise.

"Ask Questions and You Will Learn"

As I have said, my relations with the great-grandmother were of the first importance and I learned from her how to inquire about things. She would say, "Ask questions and then you will learn." Technically, she was illiterate because she couldn't read or write, but her language and outlook were very unique and she used words that you wouldn't hear from anyone else. She had many nice, unusual names for us, her grandchildren, and once my Aunt Sophia even made a dictionary of the great-grandmother's unique names and words.

I was the eldest great-grandchild and the great-grandmother took me to church with her at every service. She would awaken me at 5:00 in the morning by calling me with the loving expression, *Yorgula mou*, or *Carouto mou*, "my little carrot". I would protest that it was too early, but she always insisted that we get up, and we would be there even before the priest. When he arrived he would say, "Eh, Theia Areti, you are first again," and great-grandmother would answer, "*Papa mou*, you do your job and I'll do mine. I didn't say anything to you, why are you talking to me like this?" Even as a child, she impressed me greatly with her knowledge of the services, and at home she often asked me to read the *Lives*



Rev. Dr. George Dragas.

of the saints. Although she couldn't read, she had a tremendous memory. She knew many long passages by heart, and if there was a feast, she always knew the troparion of the day. She sang them all.

The great-grandmother taught me our church customs before I ever learned the theological reasons for them. For example, in those days we always lit two candles, a white one and a brown one, paraffin and beeswax, for the living and the dead. When I'd ask, "Why do we light candles?" she would say, "We are like wax, and this light is life, and we burn down but there is still light as we decrease. When we go to church we don't have light, but we take our light from the church. We light ourselves up when we go to church. When you take the light, make your bows and kiss the icons, this is your repentance."

As you entered the village church, you first went to venerate the two icons in the narthex and then those before the iconostasis. These were not just simple bows, but great metanias, repentant prostrations all the way to the ground. Although she was already old, the great-grandmother would kneel and touch her forehead to the ground forty or fifty times. I remember counting them one day, "Another, another, another...." and when she had finished I said, "you did fifty!" She answered, "Yes, that was fifty psalms and now we've done one-third of what we should do." One-third of what? One third of the psalter, which is 150 psalms. Although she couldn't read, she made a prostration for each psalm.

Another time, I saw her weeping in church, and I asked, "Why are you weeping?" She said to me, "*Matia mou*," "my eyes" (she always called me "my eyes"). Pointing at the cross, she said, "How can we leave this mother weeping alone over such a Son? And what a Son! All of us human beings must weep with her!" This was stupendous, a simplicity of faith so profound! She knew that even if the whole world weeps, it is not sufficient for what happened there. To mourn an event that is so dramatic that nothing can compare to it—now this is profound theology.

Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy

For the great-grandmother, performing an action was a way of communicating things, and in this she was right. Orthopraxy is Orthodoxy. If you do right things, you will think right things because you think with your body and your actions. Take icons for instance—the books of the illiterate. Veneration is important because it is intimate; it involves the whole human be-

ing. When we make two bows and cross ourselves in front of an icon, the first veneration is for the sins we have committed with our body. The second is for the sins we have committed with our mind.

According to St. Maximos the Confessor, when you put Christ in your mind, you put Him on the altar of your heart, in the center of your existence. St. Maximos says that anyone who sorts out his actions is a deacon; anyone who sorts out his thoughts is a priest; and anyone who has the mind of Christ, who can truly say, "Christ lives in me," is a bishop. This is the priesthood of all believers. The ordained priesthood is a reminder of the general priesthood. And who is worthy to be a priest or a bishop? No one. Anyone who claims, "This is my right," is mistaken. You can't separate the ordained priesthood from the priesthood of all believers because the one serves the other and, in a mysterious way, the liturgy takes place inside of every human being. Saint Maximos himself never became a bishop, nor did he allow himself to be ordained a priest. Although he was one of the greatest theologians, he remained a simple monk. He said that the ordained priesthood is a ministry that must be appointed by Christ.

Unfortunately, we clergy do sometimes behave as if we are more important than others. This however, was the greatness of St. Nektarios. Although a bishop, he served everyone in the most incredible way. He humbled himself, he was persecuted, he was thrown out, yet he served everyone. This is Orthodoxy at its best, the general and the ordained priesthood together, and you see this in my great-grandmother and in St. Nektarios.

The Great-Grandmother and Saint Nektarios

I was only six years old when I was sent by my mother to stay for a week with Sister Salome, one of Barba Mitzi's daughters, at the small Monastery of *Panagia Faneromene*. My memory of the monastery is very faint, but there are two things that have been indelibly engraved in my mind. The first was the solemn procession of the nuns every evening carrying the Holy Cross. The other is the name of St. Nektarios. Both the veneration of the Holy Cross and the name of St. Nektarios were perhaps the most common features in the spirituality of the great-grandmother. I remember her telling me of his luminous personality, his good deeds, and especially, the deep impression that he exerted on her and her friends. She described him as a man of august simplicity, whose presence brought with it an indescribable divine beauty. It was as if God Himself was seen in his eyes! There was a divinely personal

atmosphere about him which she found both imposing and inspiring. It was the atmosphere of “*eusebeia*” (genuine piety) which unites God and man in perfect communion. As I grew up, I came to realize that my great-grandmother’s “*eusebeia*” had been bequeathed to her from St. Nektarios. I also came to realize that not only my great-grandmother but the entire island populace of Aegina was stamped with the memory of the Saint, whose grace extended beyond the boundaries of the island and even beyond the boundaries of Greece.

Another thing I remember very well about the great-grandmother is the way she prayed at home. Every day, when the church bells rang morning and evening, she would pray and incense the house, the yard, the chickens, the flowers, and even the sky, because of the “evil things” the devil had done there. For her, airplanes were evil because they made such noise and polluted the air. At that time planes to Athens flew over the island and the only answer in her mind was to take the censer and exorcise them. Recently, however, they’ve built a new airport and the planes take a different route, (*smiling*) so it seems that her prayers were stronger than those of the air traffic controllers.

I remember once when my aunt, the youngest of the eight children of my grandmother Sophia, brought a bar of Nivea, a perfumed soap that was being sold in Athens, and asked the great-grandmother to smell it. “Horrible! What is it?” Aunt Sophia replied, “Grandmother, it’s not horrible, it’s perfumed soap.” The great-grandmother said, “It’s the devil’s deceit, isn’t it? There’s only one purpose for this—to attract men and, therefore, to engage in all kinds of things you shouldn’t.” When this same aunt came once in shorts, this was also an abomination, as were mascara and women wearing trousers. I lived through all of these scandals; the great-grandmother’s house was like a monastery.

Once, on the Feast of the Beheading of St. John the Baptist in the summer, a strict fast-day, my mother sent me to the port with two empty baskets to get fish from our fisherman uncle who had nine children. Very early in the morning, I took the little winding footpath to his house by the sea. He filled my two baskets with fresh fish and I returned, but because this was a fast day, the great-grandmother wouldn’t have anything to do with the fish. She kept every fast very strictly. In the family there were all kinds of debates over this, influenced by the modern way of life, but the great-grandmother was like a bishop, telling everyone what to do or not to do, what is right and what is not, and she would never compromise. So that day, although the rest of us

ate the fish soup my mother had prepared, the great-grandmother refused.

But something else happened that day. As I said earlier, uncles and aunts would give the great-grandmother money, but as we learned after her death, she never kept it for herself, but gave it away to other poor people. On the eve of the feast of St. John the Baptist my Uncle Stylianos had come from Athens and had given her a huge gift of money, 500 drachmas. She was excited about it, and the next morning she told my mother, “I’m going out this afternoon.” My mother asked, “Why?” “I have to do my business.” “Business, what business?” “That’s none of your concern, it’s my business.” I overheard this conversation and asked mother, “What is the great-grandmother doing?” She replied, “I’m sure she wants to give that money away somewhere.” I said, “Well, let her do it if she wants to, but how do you know?” Mother said, “You’ll see.”

So, the great-grandmother had her afternoon rest and then got up early and dressed in her best dress. (She had only two outfits, a Sunday best and a daily one that she’d made from cast-off clothes. She made all of her own clothes, including her shoes.) But instead of leaving, she was soon hurrying back and forth, obviously upset. She’d tucked the money away and now couldn’t remember where it was. We searched all over the house.

Finally, she went to her room, changed from her best dress to the old one and came to my mother, saying, “Areti, put some of that soup out for me, and a glass of wine.” My mother said, “What! Soup? Don’t you know what day it is, Grandmother?” She replied, “Do it. I’ve made up my mind!” She sat there eating the soup with great energy and enjoyment, and then drank all of the wine and made the Sign of the Cross over it, saying, “My Saint John, you pleased me and now I pleased you.” You see, she was punishing St. John the Baptist for not showing her where the money was by eating the fish soup. Then she said to my mother, “Make a cup of coffee, I’ll go next door and lie down a little.” Within five minutes she was back, saying, “Don’t make coffee—I don’t want it, I’m going out!” She’d found the money, and afterwards she made a great many prostrations before the icon of St. John.

Throughout her life, the great-grandmother was the center of the family. When we passed through her room it was like passing through a church. She had an elaborate icon corner, and the icons seemed alive as they glittered in the light of the ever-burning *candili*. Everything in that house was alive, the saints were alive.

The Presence of the Great-Grandmother

Even now, if someone dies on Aegina the church bell is rung in a certain way, and people all over the island know that someone in that particular village has died. When the great-grandmother died I was in Edinburgh, Scotland, reading late at night in my room, very high up in the center of the city, next to the castle. We were so far north that the sun never completely went down in the summer. On the horizon, you always saw light, and at night I would look out at this line of light as I said my prayers.

At two o'clock in the morning something strange happened. I felt that my room was losing its solidity. As I glanced out of the window, it was as if I was looking not at a real landscape but at a picture—as if space first disappeared, and then filled again with the presence of the great-grandmother. At that moment I felt that there was no difference between Greece and Scotland, that all of this distance had been completely swallowed up by her presence. It was something I had never felt before. Although I didn't see anything, I was absolutely sure that great-grandmother was there. I went on my knees and I thanked God for this experience; it was as if we were together again, as close as always. For a long time I was absolutely happy that she was there with me, and then it crossed my mind that she might have died and had come to see me. So I told her that I loved her and I thanked God. It was like a conversation between me, her, and God in prayer. It was an extraordinary experience. Then I slept.

In the morning my mother phoned me and said, "I have news." I asked, "Is it about the great-grandmother?" "How do you know?" My mother then told me that about ten o'clock the evening before she had been asleep and seen in a dream that there was a wedding in the village below St. Nektarios' Monastery. According to the old custom, the bride was taken to church with music and bell-ringing, and people lined the path to see the bride, some even incensing as the procession passed. In her dream my mother was watching the scene when one of my cousins on the opposite side of the road cried, "Areti, Areti, come out! There's a wedding, and you haven't yet seen the bride." So Mother ran out with the other villagers, and while trying to make her way through the crowd, came face to face with the bride—the great-grandmother!" "Oh," she said, "Grandmother, is it you?" "Yes, *Matia mou*, don't you think that my time has come? I've waited for this all of my life." Mother awoke then, with such a vivid impression that she woke my father saying, "I've seen a dream. Something is happening to the grandmother."

At that time Areti was ill in the hospital in Athens. My parents visited her every day and although she had seemed alright when they left that afternoon, when mother awoke him my father said, "Well, if it is the grandmother, we will hear soon." Sure enough, although it was the middle of the night, in a few moments the phone rang. It was a nurse from the hospital saying, "Your grandmother says, 'Call Areti, and gather all of the grandchildren to come to me. It's urgent.'"

So, the whole family went, and the great-grandmother told them how to arrange her funeral in the traditional Orthodox way: "You have my blessing, but my blessing will become a curse if you don't follow my instructions. I don't want to be buried in the polluted soil of this city with all of its evils. I want to be taken to the village, the holy place. In the morning take me to the church. The priest knows he must keep me there for twenty-four hours so that people can see me and I can see them.

Who were these people? Her relatives yes, but also, all of the people she had helped over the years. She had no money of her own, but all of the money that her grandchildren gave her, she had given away and lived on what she gathered from the garden. Many island people whom she had helped came to her funeral, and that was how we came to know about her good deeds.

She also told the family how to ring the bells so that the other villages would know, and then said to my mother, Areti, "Come close. I've seen everyone, but I haven't seen the one I love best, the one who is closest to me." "Who is this, Grandmother?" "You don't know? It's your son, George." My mother, trying to comfort her said, "I know you have a special closeness to him, and I'm telling you, you will see him again..." "Yes, I'll see him again, don't worry about that. He isn't here, but I'll go to him. When you talk to him, give him this message." "What message?" "That I will see him again."

I've never wept for the great-grandmother. I can't, because every time I speak or think of her, I'm happy. She is always with me. I still have her coffee pot, her censer, cross, and some of her handwork. My daughter, who is also Areti and who teaches literature in England, has written a novel of these three generations of Aretis: herself, my mother, and the great-grandmother. She tells the story, "Spiraki's Dream" from the viewpoint of a small village donkey. Three generations with the same name, a name that means virtue. And how true it is for all of them. For me this is the real dowry of the great-grandmother of eternal memory, one of the unknown saints who is well-known to me and to the Lord. ✦