



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

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# CORSICAN ROOT AND BRANCH

## An Interview with Josephine Antherieu

RTE: Josephine, you are from the island of Corsica and you had a rather classical education. Was that what led you to Orthodoxy?

JOSEPHINE: Yes. I was formerly a high-school teacher of philosophy and classical languages – Greek, Latin, and Old French. Later, I changed my profession and am now a city planner for Aix-en-Provence. I no longer deal with abstract ideas, but with buildings and streets, things physical and concrete.

My father died about twenty years ago and now I have my mother, Silouani, my sister, Annie, and her son, Christophe. My grandmother lived until just recently. Our family is from the island of Corsica, and we are the first Orthodox Christians on Corsica since the schism.

The way I came to Orthodoxy was like a fairy tale. One day I heard of a man who was said to be “spiritual,” and although I had never done anything like this before, I went to see him. He asked me, “What are you searching for?” I didn’t answer. He said, “You are fortunate you came to me because ten days ago I was on Mount Athos.”

“What is Mount Athos?” I asked. He said, “It is a place where monks are the real icon of Jesus Christ.” For me, it was finished. At that very moment I knew that I was Orthodox, and I felt within myself, “He has what I am searching for and he must give it to me.” Although I knew nothing I said, “Take me to a monastery.” Then I called my sister, Annie, and told her, “I’ve found what we’ve been searching for.” I didn’t know then that these words were from the Apostle Andrew.

Before this I had never read the Bible except once, when I was twenty years old and had been assigned to read the Greek text of the Gospel of St. John. I remember that as I held the first page open in my hand, “In the

beginning was the Logos...," I thought to myself, "This is truth. I cannot pursue this now because I am a student, but one day I will do only this."

RTE: Had you studied philosophy to find ultimate truths?

JOSEPHINE: Yes. When I was a child nothing in my life or in the world around me satisfied me. I always had the thought, "This is not enough. I can't live like this. It's nonsense." From the time I was five years old, I had tried to discover how to get out of this nonsensical world. Then, when I began to study philosophy at the university I said, "Yes, I understand. This is a joke, we are only playing with words." But in myself I was sure that words were not for play, that they could bring both life and death. So, I told myself, "I will finish the university, and then I must find truth."

RTE: Did your mother and sister come to Orthodoxy at the same time?

JOSEPHINE: No, I was first, but soon after I brought them to an Orthodox monastery in France, the monastery of St. Anthony the Great. It was Pascha, and Annie's small son, Christophe, who had never been to such a service before, cried because he couldn't take Holy Communion. When we explained he had to be baptized, he asked for it right then – he wanted it just as I did. I was sure I was Orthodox, but my mother and sister were not quite at home yet. After Pascha, when I asked my French spiritual father to baptize me he said, "My child, can you wait?" I said, "No, I don't want to wait. I want it now. If it is a problem for you, I will go to Greece." Then he said, "I will tell you something. All of your family will become Orthodox. Wait, please." I replied, "If that is so, then I can wait." Fifteen days later, without our talking about it, my sister called me and said, "I am doing the same as you. I have asked to be baptized." My mother decided soon afterwards.

Then my sister went to my grandmother, who was eighty-five, and told her that we were to be baptized. She said very few words about Orthodoxy, just that "It makes real sense. It is holy life." My grandmother said, "I will do the same." Then my sister said to her, "It will be a big scandal for your family, you will have trouble." She said, "I don't care. I want this." So we were baptized in a river in Corsica, all of us, although because of my grandmother's age, she was only chrismated.

Afterwards, she did have a long struggle with her family, they fought quite hard against her. For awhile she slipped away from Orthodoxy, but at the

end of her life she returned. The Mother of God gave her a very deep understanding of Orthodoxy, without much outward teaching.

RTE: So now you have a spiritual father in Greece. How has that formed your Orthodoxy?

JOSEPHINE: It is everything. I was very fortunate. The day I was baptized, the French priest suggested that I meet Geronda (Abbot) Dorotheos on Andros. So we went to Andros, but Geronda was in Switzerland for an operation. A year passed and then we went again. On the ferry from Athens I saw a monk climbing the stairs, and although Greece is full of monks and priests, I thought, "This is Geronda Dorotheos." Then, I thought, "No, he is too young." (I thought he would be a very old man.) But it was him, and we went with him to the monastery. After two days I asked him to be my spiritual father, and he said, "Since you have asked me, I will say yes, with pleasure." My entire family has taken him as their spiritual father. I must say that without the prayers of my spiritual father I am nothing. For me this is quite certain. Whatever good happens to me, it is through his prayers.

RTE: What would you suggest to Orthodox people who do not have the opportunity to be as physically close to a traditional Orthodox country as you are to Greece?

JOSEPHINE: I think that God sees what you truly want, and that He will give it to you when it is good for you. It is different for everyone, but when your will is serious and good there will be no problem. This is the only hope for anyone in any country – to have this good, serious will. God will see it and help.

RTE: You and your sister built a little shrine dedicated to St. John the Baptist on Corsica. What prompted that?

JOSEPHINE: My sister had a very grave illness, and after she recovered we built it in thanksgiving. You know, we have a great love for Corsica, and for us it was a natural thing to do. We also have a special veneration for St. John the Baptist because he is the patron of Porto Vecchio, the main town of Corsica.

It is sad now in France. Although most people are baptized Catholic, there is little reverence for the saints. When you see a relic case covered with dust, rarely cleaned, you understand that veneration has been lost. Most people have a general idea of God, like a mythos... but to discuss the saints with most French people is impossible.



*Josephine and mother, Silouani.*



*Abbot Dorotheos with Josephine's sister, Anne, and mother, Silouani.*



*Josephine at St. Nicholas Monastery, Pascha, 2003.*

We have such wonderful saints here – St. Genevieve, for example, who communicated with St. Simeon the Stylite and saved Paris from Attila the Hun, is the patroness of Paris – but you can hardly talk about their lives now because the “scholars” have disproved so much that people say that even miracles are fairy tales.

Orthodox Christians are trying to write and talk about the lives of early European saints, but it is difficult because of the rewritten translations and the fragmentary accounts. There is not much really substantial historical material. My idea, when I write a saint’s life, is that I must give details. When people are given details they understand everything, but when it is just a general idea, it isn’t a real picture for them. As for the older saints like St. Dionysios and St. Genevieve, it is difficult for us to do that. The oldest lives of French saints we have are already from after the schism and with them you feel that the mind has somehow changed.

RTE: What other relics do you have in France besides St. Genevieve?

JOSEPHINE: In Aix-en-Provence where I live we also have the relics of Saint Mitre, who came from Thessaloniki in the fourth century. He was Greek and Orthodox, of course, but no one knows anything about him and now he is almost completely forgotten. Once, however, a few years ago, I was in my office after work with my goddaughter who is also my secretary. It was St. Mitre’s feast day and we had been praying to him, when he suddenly appeared before us for a few seconds. It was a very great blessing.

In Paris, as I said, we have the relics of St. Genevieve in St. Etienne’s [St. Stephen’s] Church and also the relics of St. Dionysios in the church of St. Denis. In Notre Dame de Paris are part of the crown of thorns of the Lord

and pieces of the Holy Cross. In Chartres there is a portion of the veil of the Mother of God. There are relics of St. Martin of Tours in Aix-en-Provence but they are privately owned, and of course, as I said, St. Mitre’s relics at St. Mitre’s Cathedral, but they aren’t brought out for veneration any longer.

In the village of St. Maximan, seventy kilometers from Aix-en-Provence, were the relics of St. Maximan, a spiritual son of St. Mary Magdalene. During the time of the French Revolution the clergy divided the relics and gave them to the pious throughout the town, so that they would not be blasphemed and burnt by the revolutionaries. Now, many people still have them, and someone gave me a portion.

In this same village of St. Maximan, in the church, is the entire head of St. Mary Magdalene. It is complete. And this is the place where many of us, including myself, believe that St. Maria Magdalene reposed. St. Maximan’s life is a very old tradition.

RTE: St. Maximan was French?

JOSEPHINE: Yes. His being French (or Gallic then) and from the oldest traditions also being her spiritual son, is what makes me sure that she was here as well.

RTE: There is also an old controversy about whether St. Lazarus and his sisters were also in France. The Catholic tradition says that St. Mary Magdalene and St. Mary, the sister of Lazarus, were the same person, while the Orthodox tradition says they were different women. There were some medieval ideas that Lazarus and his sisters were here together, but the Greek Synaxarion doesn’t mention this. Do any of the very early Latin lives of saints speak of them coming to France?

JOSEPHINE: About this I am not sure. I don't believe that St. Lazarus or his sisters lived here. It is more likely that when the crusaders sacked Constantinople they brought the relics to France. I'm speaking, of course, of the relics of St. Lazarus. His head is in Marseilles, with one piece missing, which is in the Orthodox Church of St. Lazarus in Larnaca, Cyprus.

You know, everywhere we have relics. St. Anthony the Great's relics are here, but in a little church far from Aix-en-Provence, and they rarely show them for veneration.<sup>1</sup> I was very fortunate to have seen them. They give out a marvelous fragrance and all of his teeth are present, just as St. Athanasius says in his biography. He was over 100 years old when he reposed. I am very sure that they also were brought by the crusaders. We also have St. Hilarion the Great in the south of France.

RTE: Your country is a spiritual treasury.

JOSEPHINE: Yes. One summer I went with Geronda Dorotheos to Monaco to venerate St. Devota, the patron saint of Corsica. She lived as a hermit, like St. Anthony the Great, and was the first martyr of Corsica. As we were returning, near Aix-en-Provence I saw a sign pointing to the village of St. Zachary. I had never been there but felt immediately that I should go, so a week later I went and searched through all the churches. In St. Zachary's church I found the slipper of the Mother of God, brought to France by the crusaders. No one had told me it was there; it was just an inspiration.

RTE: Often we hear both believers and nonbelievers say that some of the relics in the West may have been "invented" during the Middle Ages by churches or monasteries who wanted to attract pilgrims. Of course even if the relics are not authentic, this in no way changes the response of the Lord or the saint to a sincere prayer from a believing heart, but you seem sure of the ones you've mentioned.

JOSEPHINE: Yes, I am sure. You know, sometimes I think you are given an inner affirmation when you pray. When I stood in front of the relics of St. Anthony the Great, I said, "Can this really be? My God, is this so?" At that moment my cross began giving out a very strong and beautiful fragrance. This cross is very remarkable.

<sup>1</sup> In 544, the relics of St. Anthony the Great were transferred from his monastery in the wilderness to Alexandria, and later, with the conquest of Egypt by the Saracens in the 8th century, to Constantinople. The relics were taken by the crusaders from Constantinople to a diocese outside Vienna, and in the 15th century to Arles (France), where they are enshrined in the church of St. Julian.

RTE: Does it still give out fragrance?

JOSEPHINE: Yes, It always gives fragrance, and sometimes, like now, it gives myrrh. I keep cotton around it in its silver box to catch the myrrh...This cross – it's a wooden cross – was given to me by the French monk who baptized me, because I asked him for one to wear around my neck. However, it was a little large to wear for everyday, so I put it before the icons in my bedroom. Once, when my spiritual father was in France, I gave him the apartment to use and



*Josephine's cross.*

stayed with my mother. After he left, I saw that the cross had begun to give myrrh. It has never stopped. There have even been miracles around it.

RTE: Yes?

JOSEPHINE: The first miracle was for a friend of mine, Claude, who is a Jew. I met him in my work as a city planner – he is a successful and wealthy businessman. One day he called me, and said, "Look Josephine, my brother Andre is dying in Marseilles. He has a fatal heart problem. You must come with me to see him." I asked, "Why? You are Jewish. Why do you ask this of me?" He said, "I don't know, but I will come to your home and get you and we will go together. I need you to do this." So, he came and I went with him to the hospital with the cross, but we were not allowed to see his brother. Finally, the doctor came out and said, "It is over. His heart has failed. In a few moments everything will be finished."

I stood next to the door of his room and read the Canon for the Dying, holding my cross. Then, I went to the car and tried to call my spiritual father in Greece, but we couldn't get through. Suddenly, I had a strong inspiration, an intuition, and I turned to my friend and said, "Your brother is alright. There is no more danger, we can go home now." He looked at me for a moment and then said, "I believe you. I feel that what you say is true."

In the morning Claude called me and said, "Andre is alive. No one knows why." The doctor said he was well enough for a short visit, so we went straight to the hospital. As soon as we entered the room, Andre said, "I know you." (I had never seen him before.) "I knew you were in front of my door last night and that I was saved by a cross which has a very beautiful smell and by St. Andre [Andrew] the Apostle." And you know, in my small relic

case, which I was also wearing the night I visited the hospital, I have a very small piece of the relic of St. Andre, but no one knew this. I gave him the cross, he kissed it, and said, “This cross brought me back to life. I was in hell and saw all of my family there, and this cross came and brought me to life again.” These were his words.

Afterwards, the brothers gave me a beautiful lampada for the cross. Andre did not become Orthodox, but my friend Claude said to me, “Later, perhaps, I will.” Now, I am not sure, for he is very rich, and has a successful, busy life.

RTE: But they both remember what happened?

JOSEPHINE: Yes.

RTE: Earlier you mentioned the French Revolution. Most people understand how terrible and destructive the 1917 Russian Revolution was, but they often don't know that the English “reformation” and the French Revolution were almost as devastating. It destroyed the remnants of our earlier common tradition as well as much of the piety of French Catholics. Because the American and French revolutions occurred within a few years of each other, Americans often think of it as a struggle for political freedom, but yours had a much deeper religious significance and stamped a secular mindset on what had previously been a pious country.

JOSEPHINE: Yes, they wanted to destroy the living signs of God's presence.

RTE: Contemporary Russians, who had no outward Christian influences around them, but who happened to live on holy ground, such as Valaam, have told me that “from the earth itself,” they became Orthodox.

JOSEPHINE: Yes. This also is our hope.

RTE: Do you find that modern French people are interested in discovering their early Christian roots?

JOSEPHINE: No. The Catholics and Protestants sometimes want to know about Orthodoxy, but only generally, so that they feel we have some unity. When they really study, they often become Orthodox.

RTE: How much of the French population are church-goers?

JOSEPHINE: Fewer and fewer, even in the Catholic churches. Perhaps even

less than ten percent of the French population go to church regularly. Now, in France, the largest group of people who are truly religious are the Moslems. When you speak with them, you understand that they have something very deep inside. Although it is a false religion, you feel their deep belief and sincerity. With the French Catholics and the Protestants you rarely feel this, and the same with many of the émigré Orthodox.

RTE: I read an interesting book a few years ago by an American feminist professor who went to Islamic countries in search of Moslem feminists. To Egypt, Iran, Iraq, the Arab Republics... and almost without exception these very professional, academic, and sometimes politically important women told her, “You are on the wrong path, you have to make God the center of your life, not your political rights.” It was striking to hear this Christian view of priorities from these successful Moslem women.

JOSEPHINE: I want to tell you a story. I have a friend who is a Shiite Muslim. Very strong. She is the only woman I know outside my family to whom I can speak about religion. Once, when I was in Athens, I went to the Monastery of St. Irene Chrysovalantou to venerate, and the nuns there gave me an apple as a blessing.<sup>2</sup> When I came back to France I found that this girl was having many problems finding work. She searched in several different cities, but would return home disappointed, and cry and cry. It broke my heart to see her like this, so I told her, “Please fast for three days and then I will give you something special to eat.” After the three days I gave her a piece of the apple.

A few days later I found a job for her in Paris, an impossibly perfect job, and Paris was just where she wanted to go. So, I said, “Now you are alright, but you must do something for Saint Irene.” She gave me money to have an icon painted of the saint. This is a Moslem woman, not Catholic, not Protestant.

RTE: Yes, there are many stories during the Turkish occupation of Greece,

<sup>2</sup> A much-loved pilgrimage point in the Lykovrisi district of Athens is the monastery named for Saint Irene Chrysovalantou. In the 9th century, on the way to Constantinople as a prospective bride of the Byzantine Emperor Michael, Irene was encouraged by a local hermit to turn aside and become a monastic in the Chrysovalantou Monastery of Constantinople. She became a renowned ascetic and miracle worker and tradition says that St. John the Theologian once appeared to her, giving her three fragrant apples from paradise. She planted the seeds and the blessing and cures from the fruit of these trees was known for centuries throughout Byzantium.

The original Chrysovalanton Monastery stood in Constantinople until the eleventh century. The monastery in Athens was built in 1930 and dedicated to St. Irene because of her miraculous intercession during its founding. On the grounds of the monastery is an apple tree, which the sisters say was grown from a descendent of one of the original heavenly apples given to the saint. Many Athenians go to the monastery to pray for healing, and the nuns still give out bits of the apples for blessings as their predecessors did a thousand years ago.

of Moslems helping to restore or fresco Orthodox churches and monasteries, in gratitude for help they've received through the Christian saints or the Mother of God. God doesn't leave anyone untouched.

JOSEPHINE: Yes. I think that when God sees a desire in someone's heart for Him, He will give them the chance to find the truth. If you are trying to be close to Him, He will show you the way. I am very sure of this, because I have seen how people are converted.



*Fr. Euthemios of St. Nicholas Monastery, Andros, with Nicolina, and son novice Daniel, and daughter, Anna.*

I have an Arab secretary from Tunis. Once, when I was working on an akathist to Saint Mary Magdalene, I left the office and forgot it. She saw it on my desk, read it and said to me later, "If you want, I will type your text because it is true." I said, "Alright, if you want to do it after work, it is alright with me." She typed many things for me after that. Later, when I gave her a service to St. Nicholas of Pelegrino, who was Greek, she began to cry as she typed it, and after this she asked to be baptized with all of her family.

RTE: Wonderful.

JOSEPHINE: Yes, they were all baptized together.

RTE: What are their names so we can pray for them?

JOSEPHINE: She is Nicolina. Her husband is Marcel, her little girl is Anna, and the son is Daniel, and he wants to become a monk.

RTE: What is the Orthodox church situation in France like?

JOSEPHINE: You know, it is difficult to talk about this because we have the French Orthodox, the Greeks under Constantinople, three Russian groups – the Moscow Patriarchate, the Church Abroad and the Russians also under

Constantinople – and now we have the Romanian Patriarchal Church, the only Orthodox church in Aix-en-Provence. However, most of these people are converts and they do not yet know the traditions. It will be long and hard for them to learn. The Greek immigrants have mostly forgotten their roots. They know the forms, but without the depth.

In Marseilles, the French Orthodox Church under Constantinople has about sixty people, and from nearby others are coming too. They have the liturgies in French and they are trying very hard to learn the traditions. It is a good parish.

RTE: About fifteen years ago I remember hearing that you already had all the service books, the General Menaion, the Triodian and the daily services in French. This was astounding because at that time we had so little in English. Even now we don't have everything, whereas you have had the full Greek and Russian (St. Dimitri's) Lives of Saints, the thirty volumes of Chrysostom, and full translations of many of the other patristic fathers for decades.

JOSEPHINE: Yes? How terrible for you. Yes, we have most of the patristic fathers translated in their entirety. The Catholics worked hard on this for centuries.

RTE: What are the characteristics of the French character that make it easy for you as a people to develop an Orthodox outlook, and what things make it difficult?

JOSEPHINE: The thing that makes conversion easy is our curiosity, and the thing that is very difficult is the French egotism and coldness.

RTE: Is this curiosity a general curiosity about all of life or particularly about religion?

JOSEPHINE: About everything.

RTE: So, that first impulse is what catches people's attention. What do you think the coldness is from?

JOSEPHINE: From egotism and rebellion. You tell me to do something, and I simply don't want to. So, I have to be very diplomatic. I do it like this: I say, "It is so difficult to become Orthodox that you cannot do it, but I will tell you a story anyway." Then, soon they are saying, "Ahh...."

RTE: That's why native missionaries are usually the best. They know how their countrymen think.

JOSEPHINE: Yes. I say, "Oh, you want the same, well, ask God. It's very simple." "But how can I ask?" they say. So, I give them akathists and prayers to say, and God always answers, always. Then they can say "Yes or "No", but they have already experienced grace if they want to use it.

RTE: Did the Russians who came to France after the 1917 Revolution plant any seeds of Orthodoxy that were available to you as a Frenchwoman?

JOSEPHINE: No, never. And you know, Greek people are the same. They come, but they don't talk about Orthodoxy, or if they do, only among themselves. Only the French converts speak about Orthodoxy – we have a good Orthodox radio program on Sundays in French.

RTE: In Russia, everyone knows about St. John Maximovitch. Do the Orthodox in France venerate him also? He belongs as much to the French as he does to the Russians, Americans, and the Chinese.

JOSEPHINE: I have told many people about St. John Maximovitch, and I give out the akathist. Little by little it gets around.

RTE: In the sixties, when St. John was in the U.S., young Americans were all interested in spiritual life, or at least they pretended to be, but now they are concentrating much harder on career goals and business. Do you find young people in France searching for something deeper?

JOSEPHINE: No. In France they are like little animals. They only want to have a job and money and it is enough. Only this. I had some young people working with me, and they were really like animals in a jungle, only money, a position, and a boyfriend or girlfriend. Perhaps American young people look for something deeper, but in France, no. It is rare.

RTE: What do you hope for the future?

JOSEPHINE: Nothing, only God's will.

RTE: Do you have any expectation that things might turn around spiritually for France?

JOSEPHINE: Nothing, I have no hope. Because I work in economics, I see and hear very much and I have no hope.

RTE: Although if God can raise children of Abraham out of stones, He can also raise Christians out of our contemporary societies.

JOSEPHINE: Yes...I say that I have no hope for France, but I do have hope for my native Corsica. Corsica had three woman martyrs: St. Devota, St. Julie, and St. Restitude. I have written akathists to all of them, as well as to St. Flores, a Roman hermit who lived on Corsica.

My mother, Silouani, says that the Corsicans are not like the French. She believes that they have something very deep inside to be close to God and His mother, but the clergy in Corsica are politically powerful and the people are generally alienated. Although Corsicans are traditionally Catholic, they rarely observe even the exterior forms of religion now, but I know that there is a deep root there and it is a great hope for me to slowly water this root.

RTE: Perhaps your prayers will be that water.

JOSEPHINE: Yes. When I said that I have no hope, I meant that I have no hope in men, but God's power is so wonderful, so vast, so incredible that, for me, this is the best hope. When you are desperate, when you have no strength, when you want to die because all is dark, then God comes and catches you. This is my hope. ✚