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A WALKING TOUR OF CHRISTIAN ATHENS

by Mother Nectaria McLees

Discover the spiritual treasures of central Athens as the saints did: on foot and up close to holy sites from the first century of Christianity to the present. While this fascinating city is often passed over for more outlying locations, its intriguing Orthodox history and grace-filled churches, relics, and museums will engage and inspire.

Join us as we explore the Acropolis and the Christian Parthenon; the Areopagus and St. Paul; the Church of St. Demetrios Loumbardiaris; the Metropolitan Cathedral: Relics of St. Philothei, patron saint of Athens, and Hieromartyr Patriarch Gregory V; Site of St. Philothei's first monastery (Archdiocesan Headquarters); House of St. Philothei; Lycabetos Hill and the Chapel of St. George; the Church of Hagia Dynamis; the Church of Kapnikarea; the Byzantine Museum; the Rizarios Ecclesiastical School and St. Nectarios of Aegina; St. John the Hunter Church with relics of St. Nicholas Planas.

THE ACROPOLIS AND THE CHRISTIAN PARTHENON

For those of us who studied the Parthenon in school, there was never a mention of its Christian centuries, and the official fifty-page guide to the Acropolis affords them only two lines. But once you know the temple's amazing history, it draws like a magnet. Early morning, before the tourist buses arrive, is a wonderful time to climb the steep path leading from the cobbled streets of old Athens to sit atop the Areopagus, the rocky promontory where St. Paul preached so many centuries ago. The modern city falls away at your feet, and as the sun rises in the liquid reds and orange of a Greek dawn, the Parthenon, resplendent even in ruins, stands before you like a queen, arrayed in her history as one of the most sublime churches of Christendom.

Opposite: The Parthenon as seen from St. Paul's Areopagus hilltop.

The Acropolis, the large outcropping that overlooks Athens and the Aegean, has been used almost continually since 1300 B.C., first as a military fortress and later as a center of worship. In 490 B.C. the Athenians began construction of the precursor of today's hilltop Parthenon. It was still incomplete a decade later when the invading Persians leveled it to the ground. The temple was begun again in 447 B.C. under the patronage of the Athenian statesman Pericles, and finally dedicated in 438 B.C. during the 85th Olympiad.

Four of the original marble buildings still stand on the Acropolis – the foremost being the Parthenon, or Virgin's Apartment. Originally a Doric-columned temple, the central hall housed the famous forty-foot wooden statue of the goddess Athena Parthenos carved by the sculptor Pheidias and covered with gold and ivory plate. Outside, dominating the mount, was a second statue, "Athena Promachos," built on the proceeds of the spoils taken after an Athenian victory over the invading Persians. Also by Pheidias, the colossal bronze figure rose thirty feet from the bottom of the pedestal. Sunlight shining off the tip of Athena's spear could be seen by mariners off the Sunium coast, the southern-most point of Attica.

Also included in the Acropolis complex was the beautiful Propylea, the ancient entrance to the temple site; the smaller temple of Athena Nike, called "the jewel of Greek architecture," supported with ionic columns and housing a third statue of Athena; and the Erechtheum, a bi-level structure that contained several shrines and the beautiful statues of the caryatids – marble maidens who upheld the south porch.

The Erechtheum temple sheltered a fourth statue of the goddess that commemorated her mythical victory over Poseidon, the Greek god of the sea, over whom she won preeminence by planting an olive tree on the Acropolis. The statue was fittingly carved from olivewood. Another room of the Erechtheum was dedicated to Poseidon himself, and a third to the snake-bodied hero Erechtheus. The south side of the structure supports the caryatids, six columns in the shape of women. A short distance away was the Pandroseum, or Temenos of Pandrosos, where Athena's sacred olive tree grew.

One of the most striking things about the glut of literature by eighteenth and nineteenth-century European Hellenes chronicling their rediscovery of classical Greece is their almost complete silence about the Parthenon's Christian millennium. Invariably, they neglect to mention that although the Acropolis' great temple was used for pagan worship for 830 years, it was a Christian church for over a thousand.

Dedicated as a temple to Athena in 438 B.C., by A.D. 392, Byzantine Emperor Theodosius I had outlawed all forms of pagan worship and the fifth century saw the Parthenon consecrated as the Orthodox Cathedral of Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom). In 662 it was rededicated in honor of the Mother of God, “Panagia Atheniotissa” (Panagia of Athens), and remained so until 1204-5 when the Latins and the Franks annexed Athens. The Acropolis was then used as a fortress and palace, and the Parthenon as a Catholic church, (Santa Maria di Athene, and later Notre Dame d’Athène). Under the Byzantines, the Erechtheum was also consecrated as a church dedicated to the Mother of God, the Temple of Hephaestus became the Church of St. George, and the Propylea (probably used as the bishop’s palace) had a chapel dedicated to the Holy Trinity. A narthex was added to the west side of the Parthenon, and an apse to the east to hold the altar. The apse was decorated with a mosaic of Panagia Atheniotissa, and the walls covered with frescoes. To this day the Parthenon has a faded fresco fragment of the Annunciation high up on one of its inside walls.¹

The Christian Parthenon contained a wealth of church treasures. From records of 1390, we know that the relics of St. Macarius the Great and St. Helen’s own copy of the Gospels were enshrined there. Other medieval travelers recorded the presence of an icon of the Mother of God painted by St. Luke the Evangelist and a miraculous lamp whose oil never ran out. In the mid-fourteenth century, Pedro IV of Aragon described the Parthenon as “the most precious jewel that exists in the world, and such that all the kings in Christendom could in vain imitate.”

Athens was eventually occupied by the Turks, and in 1460 they turned the Parthenon church into a mosque, and the Erechtheum into the Turkish commander’s harem. The Acropolis garrison held out for two years after the defeat of the Florentine duchy and the fall of lower Athens in 1456, and it was only in 1458 that Sultan Mehmed (Mohammed) II was able to make his triumphal entry into the captured city. He fully understood its classical, Byzantine and Orthodox significance and, wanting to placate the Greeks as allies against the West, put the Parthenon church – the plum of classical Athens – back into Orthodox hands for the first time in 250 years. It was quickly reestablished as the seat of the Metropolitan of Athens. Unfortunately, a few

¹ In 1682, an Englishman, George Wheler, saw the apse mosaic almost whole: “The Roof over the Altar and Quire added to the temple by the Greeks, hath the picture of the Holy Virgin on it, of Mosaic Work, left yet by the Turks; because, as They say, a certain Turk having shot a Musquet at it, his hand presently withered.” (George Wheler, *A Journey Into Greece*, London, 1682.)



years later the city's leading Greeks were implicated in an abortive attempt to restore the duchy, and Ottoman toleration came to an end. The altar was ripped out, mosaics plastered over, and the Parthenon became a mosque.

During the Venetian siege of Athens in 1687, a shell hit the Turkish supply of gunpowder stored in the Parthenon and it was extensively damaged. Ironically, German Field Marshal Koenigsmarck, the Venetian commander whose troops shelled the Parthenon, had, as a student, written a Latin thesis lamenting the subjection of Athens by the barbarian Ottomans. His own philhellenism, however, did not stop him from ordering the mortar barrage that detonated the Turkish powder magazine. "The resultant explosion shattered the twenty-eight columns, blew out the wall of the *cella*, brought down the massive architraves together with a large section of the frieze and distributed most of them...over the surrounding countryside...The fire raged for two days and the Turkish garrison finally surrendered."² By a kind of supreme irony, the minaret added by the Turks remained untouched by the explosion. The Greeks did not regain what was left of the Acropolis until the 1822 War of Independence.

Greek temples often mean little to those of us who have only seen them in history books, but when one actually stands before a physical creation as marvelous as the Parthenon, the natural desire of every age to worship worthily springs to life, immortalized in stone. History aside, nothing can prepare the visitor for his first glimpse of the temple at the top of the Acropolis. Even as a ruin, it is extraordinary. One writer has rightly remarked, "Why can no picture or photograph ever succeed in portraying the Parthenon? It is not an easy question to answer. There is something about the balance of this temple, something purely Greek in its rejection of the unnecessary, which is almost impossible to convey on canvas, because it appeals not so much to the eye as to the mind...the Parthenon has a quality of life which suggests a bird alighting from the air, in that brief moment as it closes its wings and is still poised and balanced."³

For the Orthodox pilgrim, the Parthenon has a meaning that goes beyond the earthly admiration that is its obvious due. If we can judge by the classical literature that remains, and by the exquisite lines of the ruined temples, the pagan Greek search for Truth was generally an honorable one. Their

² Green, Peter, *The Parthenon*, Newsweek Books, New York, 1973.

³ H.V. Morton, *In the Steps of St. Paul*, Dodd, Mead, and Co., New York, 1936.

Opposite: The Parthenon, as seen from the southern edge of the Acropolis.

unfulfilled longing to worship the true God roused the Greeks to create an earthly beauty that has rarely been rivaled, and like the Magi's astrology, it led them to something greater. This was because Greek pantheism, although mistaken and idolatrous, was to some degree innocent – God had not yet fully revealed Himself and He allowed their early attempts at worship to be a preparation for the seed of a later sowing.

Neither can we forget that it was the Greeks themselves who turned their pagan temples into churches; the Parthenon of the goddess Athena was transformed into a Christian church consecrated to the Wisdom of God and the Virgin Mary. Within its walls the Holy Liturgy was celebrated daily for over a thousand years, longer even than at Justinian's Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. What else, then, can we call the Acropolis and the Parthenon, if not holy ground? And if Christians themselves do not remember, who will?

In his book, *In the Steps of St. Paul*, H.V. Morton, writing in the 1930's, gives a striking account of his first view of the Parthenon:

As I passed through the Propylaea, I saw before me a great space of rough rock rising upward, and on the summit of this rock the Parthenon stood against the blue sky. I thought that never in my life had I seen anything so beautiful. I was almost afraid to go any nearer in case I was wrong.... Lifted high above Athens, with nothing behind it but the blue sky of summer, far larger than I had ever imagined it to be, yet looking queerly weightless, the Parthenon, even in ruin, looks as if it has just alighted from heaven upon the summit of the Acropolis...

... I realised that my ascent of the Acropolis, and my approach through the Propylaea, was a preparation for this moment: and I remembered the words of Socrates, that a temple should be difficult of access so that men would approach it in purity of heart. You cannot come suddenly on the Parthenon: you must ascend to it.⁴

A unique way to experience the Acropolis are two annual liturgies on the feasts of the Mother of God of the Life-Giving Spring (May 3) and of Sts. Cosmas and Damian of Rome (July 1). Open to the public, these liturgies are served early in the morning halfway up the southern side of the Acropolis amidst the open ruins of a medieval Byzantine church dedicated to Sts. Cos-

⁴ Ibid. Morton, pp 267-268.

Opposite: Edge of the Parthenon. Athens.



mas and Damian. The ancient spring on the site, dedicated to the Life-Giving Spring, is opened and frequented on these days for its healing waters.

If you are in Athens on those dates, go to the ticket gate nearest the Akropoli Metro stop, and tell them you are there for the liturgy. They will direct you to a second gate for free entrance.

Directions to the Acropolis and the Parthenon: *Take the metro/subway red line to the Akropoli stop (one stop from Syntagma Square) and then walk up the winding streets to the Acropolis. If you have the leisure and inclination to walk to the Acropolis from Syntagma Square, go west on Ermou Street to Eolou. Turn left on Eolou and you will have a lovely view of the Acropolis as you walk towards it. When Eolou ends, just follow the winding streets uphill until you run into the paved footpath that winds to the right up the side of the Acropolis to the entrance.*

THE AREOPAGUS: ST. PAUL IN ATHENS

When St. Paul came to Athens, the city had fallen from its ancient splendour, a splendour as far distant from his own time as Elizabethan England is from ours. Here, for the first time, he approached the Gentiles on their own ground. When he had reached out to the Gentiles at Antioch it was through the synagogue, but Athens' role as a thriving commercial center had long since disappeared and the Jewish community had flocked to the newer colonies of Patras, Nicopolis, and Corinth.

Saint Paul was the first Christian missionary to preach in the celebrated intellectual stronghold of the Greco-Roman world. Indeed, Athens still reigned as the university of the empire; she lived on her reputation as the city of the philosophers, and her streets were filled with the arguments of Platonists, Stoics, and Epicureans. Other intellectual centers had arisen in Rome, Alexandria, Antioch and Tarsus, but Athens remained indisputably the queen.

Although faded in spirit she was outwardly more brilliant than ever, holding tightly to her antiquities and monuments, sacrifices and festivals. As St. Paul awaited the arrival of Silas and Timothy, he would have seen the temples blazing with gold and color, and the host of statues dedicated to both Greek and foreign gods, erected in temples, courtyards, public buildings and raised high on pedestals in the streets. He begins his famous address to the Athenians with the words, "Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye

are very religious. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD...”

H.V. Morton remarks that in appealing to their altars of the Unknown God, St. Paul’s teaching, as always, was tailored to his audience. He didn’t quote the Hebrew scriptures, which would have meant little to his listeners, but instead gave them something of their own.

It was an excellent beginning. It had the local touch, the right note of something surprising to follow. To everyone who listened to St. Paul, the altars inscribed TO AN UNKNOWN GOD were a commonplace. Everyone knew the story of the plague that visited Athens in the sixth century before Christ; and how, after sacrifices had been made to every known god and the plague continued, the services of the Cretan prophet, Epimenides, were requested. He drove a flock of black and white sheep to the Areopagus and allowed them to stray from there as they liked, waiting until they rested of their own free will: and on those spots were the sheep sacrificed “to the fitting god.” The plague ceased, and it became the custom, not in Athens alone, to erect altars to unknown deities.⁵

Descending from the temple mount through the ruins of the Propylaea – the ancient gate – you can see below to the right (separated from the temple mount by the footpath that winds up the northern side of the Acropolis from the Plaka), a large outcropping of rock overlooking Athens. An ancient hewn staircase of fifteen or sixteen steps leads to the polished and rutted top, where the rock was artificially leveled centuries ago. This is the Ares, or the Areopagus, the ancient meeting place of the famous assembly of Athenians to whom St. Paul preached the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Some think it likely that he addressed the assembly in the agora below, but local Orthodox tradition and many historians believe that it was on the Areopagus itself. If so, we know that St. Paul must have ascended these same stone steps, and standing on the rocky precipice with Athens spread out at his feet, declared to his listeners that God “dwelleth not in temples made with hands,” pointing, as he spoke, to the marble temples crowning the Acropolis behind him and the thirty-foot statue of Athena.

⁵ Ibid.



For the pilgrim, the best time to sit atop the Areopagus is early in the morning or late in the evening as the sun sets behind the Acropolis with a blaze of color, and St. Paul's words from Acts 17 take on a life of their own:

Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. Therefore, he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshippers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there. Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, "What does this babbler want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods," because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore, we want to know what these things mean." For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.

Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious: For as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you. God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshipped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.'

"Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising. Truly, these times of ignorance

Opposite: The Aeereopagus hilltop where St. Paul preached. The Parthenon is in the background. Photo courtesy N. Karellou.

God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.” And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, “We will hear you again on this matter.” So Paul departed from among them. However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

For Christians, St. Paul’s words ring in the ears like a wake-up call, but on the day he delivered them it may have seemed a failure, a seed dropped on rocky ground. One Parthenon historian remarks, “Intellectually sophisticated and with a keen eye for social pretensions, politically impotent, but honed to a fine edge by daily exercise in philosophical dialectic and oratorical tropes, the men of Athens whom St. Paul addressed in A.D. 54 must have been a formidable audience...no city resisted Christianity as long or with such a sense of intellectual superiority.”⁶ Out of all those thousands of worshippers, philosophers and orators, the apostle gathered only a handful of people who believed his words. Of these we know three by name: St. Dionysius the Areopagite, who, tradition tells us, was a judge on the nine-member council of the Areopagus, St. Hierotheos, who was also perhaps a member of the council and who would become the first bishop of Athens, and a woman named Damaris. Little did sophisticated Athens realize that within a few hundred years these vaguely heard and quickly dismissed words would bring her speculative philosophies tumbling to dust – and the golden spear of Athena supplanted by the life-giving Cross.

Saint Paul shares his feast with the Apostle Peter on June 29.

Directions to the Areopagus, where St. Paul preached: *From the Plaka District, walk towards the Acropolis and follow the footpath that leads up the north side of the Acropolis hill. As you reach the ticket booths you will see the Areopagus on your right – the large outcropping of rock with steps hewn into the side, and a bronze plaque commemorating St. Paul’s preaching.*

⁶ Green, *ibid.*

Opposite: The rocky Areopagus hilltop.



Alternatively, descending from the temple mount, you will see a large outcropping of rock overlooking Athens. An ancient hewn staircase of fifteen or sixteen steps leads to the polished and rutted top – the Ares, or Areopagus, the ancient meeting place of the famous assembly of Athenians to whom St. Paul preached the gospel of Jesus Christ.

CHURCH OF ST. DEMETRIOS LOUMBARDIARIS

This hidden gem is an unspeakable relief on a hot summer day after descending from the Parthenon. Tucked away on a stone footpath at the bottom of Filopappou Hill, the church provides a cool and welcome place to rest in the quiet woods behind the Acropolis. The small Christian temple is a single-arched ninth-century basilica, built to honor St. Demetrios the Myrrhbearer. Liturgies and vigils are served by a prayerful priest-monk and a small group of chanters whose quiet singing is conducive to prayer. Here, one senses a much earlier Athens.

Carrying on through the first two centuries of Ottoman occupation, Athenian Christians gathered at this small church in 1656 to celebrate the vigil of the Feast of St. Demetrios. The annual celebration of October 26-27 was strongly resented by the Acropolis' Ottoman commander, Ghioussouf Aga, whose intense hatred of the Greek Christians provoked him to secretly order that the cannons facing the church from the Acropolis' Propylaea be primed, including the largest, known as Loumbarda. He waited until the doxology was being sung by the congregation and then ordered the soldiers to fire. At this moment, a lightning bolt out of a cloudless sky destroyed the entire Acropolis power magazine, along with the cannons aimed at the church. The soldiers on the summit were killed, together with Ghioussouf Aga and his family. The Christians rejoiced over the intervention of God through St. Demetrios, and from that time, the chapel has been called the Church of St. Demetrios Loumbardiardis (the Bombardier). The incident was recorded two decades later by Jacob Spon in his *Voyage d'Italie, de Dalmatie, de Grèce et du Levant, fait aux années 1675 et 1676*.

Restored in 1955, but thankfully not modernized, today you can see early eighteenth-century frescoes discovered during the restoration, which were uncovered and cleaned between 1987 and 1992. Although the eyes of the saints in many of the icons were gouged out by Turkish Muslim spears, the figures are still distinguishable. On the iconostasis they include: The Lord

Jesus Christ, Panagia, St. John the Baptist, and to the left of the Mother of God under the arch, “St. Demetrios the Fragrant.” Under the arch can also be seen St. Spiridon and the Athenian brothers Sts. Sophronius and Barnabas who founded the famous fourth-century Soumela Monastery in Pontus (Turkey) after having a vision of the Mother of God in the Parthenon Church on the Acropolis.

At the back of the church’s apse is the icon of the Platytera (the Mother of God “More Spacious than the Heavens”) and on the left Archangel Gabriel, with St. Dionysios the Aereopagite below. On the right side we see the Theotokos again, with St. Hierotheos, the first bishop of Athens. Sts. Gregory the Theologian, John Chrysostom, Basil the Great, and Athanasius the Great appear in the lower part of the apse. The altar stone itself rests on an ancient column.

On the iconostasis, one can also make out a kontakion written in Byzantine Greek lettering from the Feast of the Dedication of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Doubtless, St. Demetrios’ Christians made it their own: “This holy church earned its name, Photinos Uranos (“the Light of Heaven”) by enlightening all believers. As we celebrate this sacred feast we rise and cry out, ‘Make firm the foundations of thy house, O Lord!’”

Among those clerics who served at St. Demetrios was the New Martyr Raphael, who tradition says was the parish priest here before moving to the island of Lesbos where he was martyred with New Martyrs Nicholas and Irene in 1463. Also believed to have celebrated liturgy here are St. Nektarios of Aegina, Papa Nicholas Planas, St. Panagis Basias of Cephalonia, and St. Porphyrios the New.

On the outside of the church, under the south corner of the frieze decorating the arched roof is a bas-relief of Elios (the nine-pointed sun, which symbolized eternity), while a lioness chases a deer through stone vine leaves. To the east is a pelican with its offspring, symbolizing the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. To the north is a lion, fish, and a remarkable cross on a cornerstone. Bas-reliefs on the pediments depict an eagle and a variety of crosses. Again, the chapel is a prayerful respite from bustling central Athens.

Although the tiny chapel has very limited seating and a small congregation, many Athenians come here on Pascha to watch the Paschal procession, some remaining outside through the night for liturgy. The crowd sometimes numbers several thousand and includes families that have been coming here for generations to celebrate the Feast of Feasts.



Directions from the Akropoli Metro stop to Church of St. Demetrios: *Take the paved pedestrian street uphill with the Acropolis and Parthenon on your right. After you pass the Acropolis, you will come to a small round roadway adjoining other streets where your walking street seems to end. Walk straight across the asphalted area and proceed down the smaller stone-paved footpath into the woods. The church will be about five minutes up the road on your right.*

THE METROPOLITAN CATHEDRAL

*(Relics of St. Philothei of Athens and
New Martyr Gregory V of Constantinople)*

The construction of this magnificent cathedral was begun with the ceremonial laying of the cornerstone on Christmas Day, 1842, by modern Greece's first king and queen: King Otho and Queen Amelia. The walls were constructed with salvaged marble from seventy-two demolished churches. The temple was completed in 1862 and dedicated by the king and queen to the Annunciation of the Mother of God. Within its walls lie the relics of two saints who were executed for serving their countrymen under the Ottoman yoke: St. Philothei of Athens and Patriarch St. Gregory V. To the right of the church is the tiny Church of St. Eleutherios, which served as a cathedral during the Ottoman period. At the opposite end of the plaza is a fine statue of Constantine IV (Paleologus), the last emperor of Byzantium.

Saint Philothei of Athens

Saint Philothei, the patron saint of Athens, was born in 1522 to the Benizelos family, sixty years after the Turks occupied the city. Her mother, Syriga, had been barren for many years, and prayed earnestly to the Mother of God that she be granted a child. One day as she knelt in church, Syriga had a vision of a radiant beam of light shooting forth from the icon of the Theotokos and entering her womb. She understood that this meant that her prayer would be granted, and not long after she conceived and bore a daughter, whom she and her husband named Revoula.

Opposite: Church of St. Demetrios Loumbardiaris.

The Benizelos family was well-off, and when Revoula was twelve years old a local nobleman, knowing that her father's entire estate would eventually descend to her, asked for her hand in marriage. Revoula did not want to marry, but the offer was a good social match and her parents insisted on her acquiescence. The young girl endured three miserable years with her tyrannical husband. His cruelty was a bitter weight; her efforts to soften him were unavailing, and she prayed fervently that God would relieve her suffering. Unexpectedly, the young man died and Revoula was able to return to her family home. Her parents tried to pressure her into a second marriage, but this time she held firm, refusing another unwanted alliance.

Having acquired her mother's piety (without Syriga's shortsightedness in contracting undesirable marriages), Revoula asked only to be allowed to serve God in her own way. In the tenth year of her widowhood her parents reposed and she began an austere life of abstinence, vigil and prayer. After some time, she had a divine vision of the Apostle Andrew, who directed her to build a monastery for women in his name. The monastery was erected near the site of today's Metropolitan Cathedral. Besides the church and the sisters' cells, it housed an orphanage, nursing home, and a hospital. Revoula used the income from her family's estates, including nearby farms and pasture lands, to support the monastery. Today, the property is the modest headquarters of the Archdiocese of Athens, and its small Church of St. Andrew was built on the site of the saint's original church. Her underground hermitage is still preserved under the floor.

When the richly endowed convent was complete, Revoula was tonsured a nun with the name Philothei, and appointed its first abbess. The other nuns were at first simply the numerous maidservants of her father's house. Eventually other women came as well, and the monastery flourished under the direction of its generous foundress. In her concern for the ill and needy of Athens the young abbess built many infirmaries and hostels, regularly ministering to the sick herself and consoling them with her own deep faith.

While the saint's generosity knew no bounds, the monastery's coffers did, and on one occasion the nuns began to complain that because of the abbess' open-handedness they lacked even the necessities of life. Abbess Philothei encouraged them not to become faint-hearted but to have faith in God, and within a few days two of Athens' wealthier Christian citizens came to the monastery to pray, leaving Philothei with generous donations.

Opposite: Restored house of St. Philothei Benizelos, Athens.



In Athens at this time were Christian slaves who had been abducted from remote parts of Greece by Saracen pirates and sold into captivity. These men and women were frequently persuaded by their circumstances, fellow-servants and Moslem masters, to convert to Islam. Education had declined among the Greeks during the Turkish occupation, and young, isolated slaves with only a rudimentary understanding of Christianity frequently apostatized when they saw the social benefits to be gained by embracing Islam.

When these newly-enslaved Christians arrived in Athens, Philothei reached out to them with sympathy and encouragement. It happened once that four female Christian slaves fled from their masters and took refuge with the saint. She received them willingly, hiding them until she could find an opportunity to send them back to their native towns. The women's masters soon learned what had happened and had the abbess arrested and brought before the governor. She was held overnight in a small cell, and the following morning, when the governor heard from her own lips that she refused to give up the women, he offered her the usual Turkish sentence for criminal cases: dying by the sword or converting to Islam. Philothei replied calmly that she would never renounce her Christian faith, and that the judge would benefit her immensely by sending her to the Lord earlier than her natural span of life would have allowed.

As the judge was about to pass sentence, several prominent Christians arrived, who pacified him with such convincing arguments (and undoubtedly a handsome bribe) that he allowed Philothei her freedom. The abbess then sailed to the island of Kea, where she had previously established a metochion, and prudently stayed there for some time before returning to Athens.

Miracles resulting from the saint's prayers were reported during her own lifetime. One well-remembered instance involved a young shepherd who had fallen into thievery and other vices. Finally, he became possessed and often wandered the countryside naked, having to be shackled when he became violent. When he was not so incapacitated, he visited nearby monasteries hoping for a cure and finally came to the abbess who implored God to release him from his demonic bonds. He was healed, and afterwards St. Philothei herself tonsured him a monk.

The monastery eventually became so burdened with the daily press of those seeking relief from poverty, sickness or spiritual grief, that the saint built a second foundation in what is now the Patissia district of Athens, where the nuns could go for solitude. Today, the site of the monastery is on

an abandoned-looking site, which is still accessible. There is a small church there dedicated to the Entrance of the Theotokos.

The saint herself often retired for solitude to a nearby cave, which is maintained as a beautiful shrine on a wooded hillside in the Philothei district of Athens. An early twentieth-century church dedicated to St. Philothei crowns the hill and contains the first icon ever painted of the saint as well as a relic of her arm.

In view of her many good works, it is not surprising that the evil one would have incited enmity against the fearless abbess. Four hundred years later we have no way of knowing the details that would help us to fill out her life: accounts of the sick and homeless she ministered to, the spiritually infirm she liberated through her prayers, and the slaves she helped to freedom – perhaps through her own “underground railway.” But we can guess whom this antagonized. And guess we must, for Philothei’s anonymous biographer, writing soon after her repose, left the motives and the details of the attack that hastened her death strangely unexplained, although he recorded the rest of the saint’s life with the lavishness familiar to us from Greek hagiography.

It is interesting, however, that in writing of the metochion on the island of Kea, the biographer refers to it as a place where those nuns resided who could not live in Athens, and states that Philothei herself went there shortly after her threatened martyrdom. It isn’t impossible that some of these Kean nuns were escaped Christian slaves, or even women who had converted to Christianity from Islamic Turkish families (a crime punishable by death), their flight directed and encouraged by St. Philothei. If this was so, none of it (with the exception of her arrest which was already a matter of public record) could be safely chronicled in the years following her death without risking reprisal against her monasteries and charitable foundations. It would also explain why, if there was a lack of direct evidence against the abbess, that local Turks finally took Islamic law into their own hands.

Local tradition supports this view, as I found out when I spoke with a young priest-historian at St. Philothei’s church. When I told him my theory, he replied, “Yes, among the old stories there is evidence that she not only helped Christian slaves to escape, but brought apostate slaves back to the Church, and converted young Moslems to Christianity.”

In any event, on the evening of October 2, probably 1588, when St. Philothei was in church for the all-night vigil for St. Dionysius the Areopagite, a band of Turks entered the downtown monastery and, after tying her to a pil-



lar, beat her severely; her biography offers no explanation why. The following morning her nuns moved her to the more secure cave-metochion where she recovered somewhat from her injuries, but remained bedridden until her repose on February 19, 1589, at sixty-seven years of age. Twenty days later, her tomb began to give forth a wonderful scent, and when her relics were uncovered a year after her death, they were found incorrupt and exuding fragrant myrrh as a token of her God-pleasing life.

Saint Philothei was canonized soon after her death, between 1598 and 1602. Her relics repose in the Metropolitan Cathedral in Athens. At the end of the 19th century, Metropolitan Germanos Kalligas tore down what was left of the original monastery complex on Filothei Street in the Plaka, and built a new archiepiscopal mansion and headquarters, as well as the small present-day Church of St. Andrew (Agios Andreas) over the site of the original church. On the grounds, to the left of the outside wall of the church, is the pillar where St. Philothei was beaten, and the original monastery well is on the ground floor of the archdiocesan building. The Benizelos family home has been extensively restored and is now open to the public at 96 Adrianou St. in Plaka.

Shortly before the outbreak of World War II, St. Philothei appeared to a group of children near a stream in the Filothei District of Athens, telling them that the Germans would occupy Athens, but that it would not be for long; to have hope because they would eventually leave. The site is marked by a small inscribed upright slab on the corner of Elefteriou Venizelou and Grammou Vitsi Streets.

Saint Philothei's feast-day is celebrated on February 19.

Directions to the Metropolitan Cathedral (Relics of St. Philothei and Patriarch Gregory V of Constantinople): *On Metropolitan Square (locally called "Metropoli"). Walk five blocks from the corner of Syntagma Square down Mitropoleos Street.*

The site of St. Philothei's original monastery and church dedicated to the Apostle Andrew: *Two blocks south of the Metropolitan Cathedral in the Plaka District at #19 Ag. Filothei Street, where it crosses Ag. Andrea. Near Syntagma Square.*

Saint Philothei's Family Home: *From the Metropolitan Cathedral, walk a few blocks toward the Acropolis to 96 Adrianou St. (Plaka). On the outside, it is advertised as "The Oldest House in Athens," which it may be.*

Opposite: St. Philothei's relics in the Metropolitan Cathedral. Photo courtesy N. Karellos.

The site of St. Philothei's second monastery: *Iakynthou & Eleftherias Streets in the Marousi District. An old chapel dedicated to the Entrance of the Theotokos stands on the overgrown site. Access by car or taxi.*

Church and cave where St. Philothei went to pray: *A small wooded hill crowned by the Church of St. Philothei on Voriou Ipirou St. in the Filothei District. The church enshrines a bone from her arm, and the cave-chapel where she prayed is a short walk away at the bottom of the hill. There is no metro stop in this district and buses are inconvenient, so a car or taxi is the usual option.*

The site of the apparition of St. Philothei to Athenian children in the Filothei District prophesying the German invasion of WWII *is a small inscribed upright slab on the corner of Eleftheriou Venizelou and Grammou Vitsi Streets.*

Patriarch Gregory V of Constantinople

Also enshrined in the Metropolitan Cathedral are the relics of the Hieromartyr Patriarch Gregory V of Constantinople, one of the most interesting and tragic figures of the Greek Revolution of 1821.

Born George Angelopoulos in Dimitisana of the Peloponnese, he was consecrated archbishop of Smyrna in 1785, where he witnessed the bitter retribution that fell upon the people of the Peloponnese after the failed Orlov Rebellion against the Turks. Many of the victims of the retribution fled to Smyrna, and, according to his supporters, this tragic period resulted in the extreme caution with which he later dealt with both the sultan's government and Greek revolutionaries. Known to be an ascetic and prayerful man, he was anxious for the spiritual and material well-being of his flock, and adamant in condemning revolutionary stirrings among the Greeks. He had seen first-hand the innocent suffering of thousands that was the aftermath of these failed attempts.

A rare and revealing picture of the archbishop during this period is an incident from his term in Smyrna. Realizing that he had made a mistake that was causing discord within his diocese, he descended the hierarchical throne during a service, and prostrating himself before the faithful, asked their forgiveness.

Opposite: Hierarchical throne of Patriarch Gregory V. Church of St. George, Istanbul.



In 1797, he was elected Patriarch of Constantinople and set to work putting the chaotic and inefficient church administration into order. Under Ottoman rule, the patriarch was not only the religious head, but also the civil ruler of the Greek millet or subculture of the Ottoman Empire. His political privileges, which exceeded those of the Byzantine era, were offset by his obligation to ensure the loyalty of the Greeks within the Ottoman Empire, a loyalty which every patriarch vowed himself to at his consecration. The patriarchate was often in a chaotic state under the Turks, with the sultan and his government raising up and deposing patriarchs at will.

Although Gregory V worked for greater administrative efficiency in the patriarchate, for a higher moral standard among his clerics, and for the growth of Orthodox schools and printing houses, the patriarch was less successful at quelling the growing revolutionary fervor among the Greeks. For this, he was exiled twice to Mount Athos, followed in a few years by re-election; his three terms as patriarch included 1797-1799, 1806-1810, and 1819-1821, the last ending with his martyrdom.

After his second exile to Mt. Athos in 1808, he was visited by Ioannis Pharmakis, a member of the *Etairia Philike*, the “Society of Friends,” which had been formed by three Greek merchants from Russian Odessa: Nicholas Skouphas, Emmanuel Xanthos and Athanasius Tsakalof, the first a member of another revolutionary society called “The Phoenix,” and the latter two freemasons. During Pharmakis’ 1814 visit, the ex-patriarch pointed out that it was impossible for him to swear an oath of unconditional obedience to the unknown leaders of a secret society. (To prevent infiltration and betrayal, the leaders did not disclose their identities even to members). Further, he was bound by oath to respect the authority of the sultan.

A year after Gregory’s second reinstatement as patriarch in 1820, he was warned by the Russian embassy that the build-up of revolutionary momentum could easily end in a charge of treason by the Turks and that his life was in danger. He replied to those urging him to flee: “Only a hireling leaves the flock in time of danger, whereas the good shepherd is willing to lay down his life for his sheep.”

Revolutionary fervor continued, and in the spring of 1821 the sultan ordered Patriarch Gregory to issue anathemas against Alexander Ypsilantes and Michael Soutsos, Prince of Moldavia, who had raised the flag of Greek Independence at Jassy, Romania. Ypsilantes and his brother Dimitrios, both officers in the Russian army, had crossed into Moldavia with their forces

on March 6, counting on the support of the Russian government for their incursion into Greece, but the support never materialized and the invasion aborted. In obedience to the sultan, the patriarch issued anathemas, vigorously condemning the insurgents. Some sources say that he and the synod of bishops secretly invalidated the decrees soon after they were published, but the patriarch's initial acquiescence to the sultan was undoubtedly motivated by the desire to avoid a bloodbath.

On March 25, 1821 (the feast of the Annunciation) the revolutionary movement centered in the Peloponnese met at Agia Lavra Monastery in Kalavryta, and Archbishop Germanos of Old Patras declared Greece's independence from Turkey. He administered an oath of loyalty to everyone present, and under an icon-banner of the Mother of God the revolutionaries swore to fight to the death for the liberation of Greece.

The retribution was swift and harsh. On Pascha, April 10th that year, after having served the Paschal liturgy and broken his fast with a little broth, the patriarch went to rest. At 10:00 a.m. he was summoned to the synodal meeting room where an Ottoman official read Sultan Mahmud II's sentence of deposition and exile.

Although it was reported that he had been exiled to Chalcedon, Ottoman authorities had another plan. The seventy-six-year-old patriarch was taken instead to the prison of Bostadzembashi and tortured to extract the names of those leading the revolution, after which he was offered his freedom in exchange for converting to Islam. Gregory replied, "You ask in vain, the patriarch of the Christians dies a Christian." He was taken back to his palace and hanged as a traitor on the gate of the patriarchal compound. At that very moment, his unwilling successor, Archbishop Eugenios, was being enthroned in the patriarchal cathedral. Gregory's two deacons were hanged nearby. Two archbishops and twelve bishops followed them to the scaffold. An Anglican minister, Rev. Robert Walsh, who was in Constantinople at the time, wrote about Patriarch Gregory's death:

The old man (he was close to eighty years old) was dragged under the gateway where the rope was passed through the staple that fastened the folding doors, and was left to struggle in his robes with the agonies of death. His body, attenuated by abstinence and emaciated by age, had not sufficient weight to cause immediate death. He continued



for a long time in pain which no friendly hand dared abridge, and the darkness of night came on before his final convulsions were over...⁷

There was a great outcry in the West over the barbarous act, but in the eyes of the Ottomans, the patriarch had failed to carry out his primary obligation of ensuring that the Orthodox faithful remained loyal subjects of the sultan. Incensed and frightened by the widespread Greek uprising, Turkish mobs rampaged through the Greek quarter of the Phanar; other clerics were also hanged, many Greeks were injured, and shops and homes were destroyed.

The patriarch's body remained suspended from the gate, guarded by Turkish soldiers so that passers-by could spit on, malign, and even beat the bruised corpse. After three days the authorities sold the relics to a Jewish mob for a small sum, even though the new patriarch had petitioned to ransom the body for burial. These Jews, who lived in their own ghetto, were described by Walsh as "ignorant and abject...They acted under the impression of terror and stupidity, and any exultation they showed was only to gratify their brutal masters who utilized the Jews when they wanted to do anything base to the Christians."⁸

The Jewish mob dragged the battered body through the streets until it was badly mutilated, then tied a heavy stone to the neck and threw the relics into the Golden Horn. Despite the heavy stone, the body was found floating in the Bosphorus by John Sclavas, the Greek captain of a Russian merchant ship. Never having seen the patriarch, Sclavas could not identify the corpse, but guessed from the uncut hair and beard that it was a murdered cleric. Positive identification was finally made by the former patriarchal chancellor, Sophronios, and the body was secretly taken to Odessa where Orthodox church leaders took possession of it. Although nearly a month had passed and the body was badly mutilated, there were no signs of corruption. Tsar Alexander I sent a full set of episcopal vestments for the burial and ordered a state funeral for the patriarch, which was celebrated on June 17, 1821 in Odessa's Greek Church of the Holy Trinity. The gate he was hung from at the patriarchate was painted black and has never since been opened.

In 1871, fully fifty years after his death, the relics were returned to Greece by Tsar Alexander III and enshrined with great ceremony in the Metropoli-

⁷ Walsh, Rev. R., *A Residence at Constantinople*, Vol I, London, 1826.

⁸ Ibid.

Opposite: Church of St. George in Constantinople where Patriarch Gregory served.

tan Cathedral in Athens. They were still incorrupt. Though recognized as a hieromartyr long before, the patriarch was officially canonized in 1921, a century after his death. There is a small museum dedicated to Patriarch Gregory in his family home in the village of Dimitsana in the Peloponnese.

His martyrdom is commemorated on April 10.

Direction to Metropolitan Cathedral (Relics of Patriarch Gregory V and St. Philothei): *On Metropolitan Square (called “Metropoli”), five blocks from Syntagma Square on Mitropoleos Street.*

LYCABETOS HILL: THE CHAPEL OF ST. GEORGE

From Syntagma Square, and many other places around Athens, one can see the top of Lycabetos Hill with its little chapel of St. George. In past centuries, the hill was a sheer, almost vertical ascent. In the 1600s, a chapel to St. Elias (Elijah) was built atop Lycabetos, but the hill was so difficult to climb that the chapel was left abandoned after its construction. In 1834, however, a monk named Emmanuel Louloudakis scaled Lycabetos, cleared the ruins and rebuilt the chapel, dedicating it to St. George. When he did not return, those who had known Fr. Emmanuel assumed that he had died during the climb. After three years, however, some Athenians noticed lights at the top of the hill and, climbing up to discover their origin, found that the monk had made a small paradise with gardens and a patio. Local people gave money to build a road and the little church began to be visited, especially on Pascha. Monk Emmanuel reposed in 1885 and his grave is on Lycabetos. Some miracles have occurred in the church there. The view of Athens from the top of Lycabetos is the best you will find anywhere in the city, although the restaurant on the top seems out of place.

Directions to Lycabetos Hill: *Today Lycabetos and the chapel are accessible either by walking up a gradual, well-marked path or by taking the two-minute funicular ride to the top. The funicular station is at the end of Ploutarhou Street. (From Syntagma, follow Vassilias Sofias St. down to Ploutarhou: on the left-hand side after St. Nicholas Church.)*

Opposite: Lycabetos Hill with central Athens in the foreground.



CHURCH OF HAGIA DYNAMIS

The seventeenth-century chapel of Hagia Dynamis (Holy Strength) at the corner of Pendeli and Metropolis Streets in downtown Athens is interesting because of its association with Pendeli Monastery and the 1821 War of Independence. During the Turkish period many of the Pendeli monastery archives and valuable church objects were hidden in a passageway under Hagia Dynamis. Unfortunately, the cache was discovered and plundered by the Turks. Later, with the approval of the Turkish governor Ali Haseki (1775-1795), the monastery's metochion was involved in making gun powder and bullets for the Ottoman defense of Athens. In the nineteenth-century, however, ammunition began to be smuggled out for the use of Greek revolutionaries through the underground passage below Hagia Dynamis Church to the house behind. On the night of April 25, 1821, the rebels, including some of the Pendeli monks, laid siege to the Acropolis where the Turks had fled, the monks reportedly offering some of their manuscripts to be used as stuffing to load the guns.

Interestingly, in the left-hand corner near the iconostasis is a very darkened image of St. Dionysios the Aereopagite, before which some Athenians pray when they need quick and certain help.

Directions to Hagia Dynamis (Holy Strength) Chapel: *From the corner of Syntagma Square, walk down Metropolis Street toward the Metropolitan Cathedral. The chapel is on the corner of Metropolis and Pendelis Streets, crouching beneath the concrete piers of the Ministry of Education.*

CHURCH OF KAPNIKAREA

Notable because of its age and location, in the precise center of Ermou street in downtown Athens is Kapnikarea, an 11th-century Byzantine church dedicated to the Mother of God. One of the oldest in the city, it was probably the guild church of Athenian fabric makers. The church is built in a cruciform style, with a dome resting on four columns. Later it was called Panaghia of Prendzas, after one of the 1822 revolutionaries who offered an icon of the Mother of God in thanksgiving for Greece's freedom. Now it is owned by the University of Athens and is easy to find as Ermou street divides into two to go around it. Inside are frescoes from the renowned early 20th-century iconographer Photios Kontoglu.

Directions to the Church of Kapnikarea: *Walk straight up Emou street from Syntagma Square. The street divides in two to go around the church.*

THE BYZANTINE MUSEUM

Inside a beautiful Florentine building on Vassilisas Sofias Street, near Syntagma Square, the Byzantine Museum has an excellent and extensive collection of Christian art spanning the fourth to the nineteenth centuries. The exhibits include icons covering the entire Byzantine period, early Byzantine sculpture and even a small early Christian basilica. There are beautiful reliefs done in bronze, silver and gold, and an entire wing featuring well-preserved mosaics and frescoes. Small but beautiful courtyards honeycomb the grounds and provide a serene retreat from the noise of Athens.

Directions to the Byzantine Museum: *From Syntagma Square, walk or take a bus down Vassilisas Sofias Street. The museum is two and a half long blocks down on the right after the National Garden, between Rigilis and Rizari Streets. You can also take the metro/subway to the Evangelismos stop, go out of the Vasilias Sofias/Rizias exit and walk back towards Syntagma Square for a few minutes.*

THE OLD RIZARIOS ECCLESIASTICAL SCHOOL

(Relics of St. Nectarios of Aegina)

A short walk from the Byzantine Museum at the Evangelismos subway stop is the old Rizarios Ecclesiastical School, directed by the beloved St. Nectarios of Aegina from 1894 to 1908. The building now houses the school's administrative offices, although the school itself has moved to the Halandri district. This ecclesiastical school is one of many that still exist in Greece where boys from twelve to eighteen receive an Orthodox education in church-oriented studies as well as in secular school subjects. For many students, it is a preparation for theology school and ordination. Next to the administration building is the Church of St. George, built in 1834, where St. Nectarios served liturgy for many years. Some of his personal possessions and a small portion of his relics are enshrined in the church, which is open daily.

Saint Nectarios of Aegina was born on October 1, 1846 in Sylyvria, Thrace, and baptized with the name Anastasios. The family's extreme poverty and



his own desire to study took him at age thirteen to Constantinople where he worked as an assistant in a tobacco shop. Emigrating to Chios, he was educated, tonsured a monk, and came under the patronage of Ioannis Horemis, a wealthy Chiote who sent him to study theology in Athens, and later to Alexandria, Egypt, where, in 1886, he was ordained a priest.

Three years later, Patriarch Sophronios of Alexandria raised him to the episcopal throne as Metropolitan Nectarios of Pentapolis and Vicar Bishop of Cairo. Greatly loved by both the patriarch and the people of his diocese for his virtue and modesty, the new metropolitan nevertheless had enemies among the clergy who were jealous of his quick advancement. Slanderous rumors spread that he was guilty not only of graft and immorality but was plotting to usurp the patriarchal throne. So persuasive were his enemies that the infuriated Sophronios cast the young hierarch out of Alexandria with neither an ecclesiastical trial nor a chance to defend himself.

Such is the inscrutable providence of God that for the rest of his life St. Nectarios unsuccessfully petitioned church hierarchs to clear his name. The defamatory rumors and an ambiguous letter from the Alexandrian patriarchate announcing his dismissal preceded him to Greece and, for a year after his return, the former metropolitan was unable to obtain even a modest position from the Greek Ministry of Religion. Sick and unable to support himself, he lived on the charity of his landlady until he was finally offered a post as traveling preacher to rural villages on the island of Evia.⁹ The slander from Alexandria followed him even here, and as the scandal spread among those whom he most wished to serve, he sorrowfully resigned. He later preached in a diocese west of Athens until 1894, when he was offered the directorship of the Rizarios Ecclesiastical School of Athens.¹⁰

Panagiotis Brasiotis, one of St. Nectarios' students who later became a theology professor at the University of Athens, recalled that the new director

9 In the Greek tradition, being ordained to the priesthood does not automatically give permission to preach. The ability to preach publicly, as well as to confess, is still often only given by the bishop once a young priest has proven himself, sometimes years later.

10 The Rizarios School of Athens: One of the Greek diocesan training schools, the Rizarios School takes students from twelve years of age through high school, giving them a regular school curriculum but concentrating on subjects such as church history, dogma, theology, and Byzantine chant. Young men who want to become priests can study a few additional years and be ordained without taking the full course of theology at the Theological Academy in Athens. These schools are often attended by priests' sons, boys interested in priesthood or monasticism, or those whose families simply want them to have the benefit of a church-oriented education.

Opposite: Rizarios Ecclesiastical School Chapel, Vas. Sofias Street, Athens.

quickly won the respect of students, teachers and administrators with his rich knowledge of philosophy and theology but even more by his holy life. In one well-remembered instance, instead of punishing two boys who had been fighting, the saintly director imposed a severe fast on himself, remarking sadly that he was responsible for not guiding the children well enough. Seeing this, the guilty ones tearfully repented, begging him to curtail his penance.

Another time, when one of the school janitors fell ill and was hospitalized, he was greatly upset because the prolonged absence would cost him his job. Knowing what this would mean for the man's family, St. Nectarios quietly did the janitor's work early in the morning before classes began. The day after the sick man was released from the hospital he rushed to work, fearful that he had lost his position, only to find the Metropolitan cleaning the school toilets as he had every morning of the janitor's illness.

Saint Nectarios was a theologian in the sense that not only was he able to expound theological principles, but theology was alive in his soul. He would have made a name for himself by his prolific writing alone, as dozens of books and tracts on theology, philosophy, apologetics, church history, and popular piety flowed from his pen. The saint's well-known volumes of hymns to the Mother of God are treasures of the twentieth-century Church, and today his writings are among the most popular and oft-quoted in Orthodox Greece. Such twentieth-century luminaries as Fr. Philotheos Zervakos of Paros and Father Amphilochius Makris of Patmos counted him as their spiritual father.

Many lay people also went to him for confession and for spiritual counsel, and among these were women who desired to become monastics. Told of a ruined monastery on nearby Aegina, the saint traveled to the island in 1904 with three of his spiritual daughters, where they found a chapel dedicated to the Mother of God of the Life-Giving Spring with two tiny cells. The small company held an all-night vigil, praying that if it was God's will, He would help them to rebuild the convent.

Saint Nectarios continued as director of the Rizarios School until 1908, when he resigned and moved to the monastery, which he dedicated to the Holy Trinity and organized as a cenobium that eventually housed thirty-three nuns. The first abbess was a blind nun named Xenia, one of St. Nectarios' closest spiritual daughters, who is now being considered for canoniza-

Opposite: Pilgrim at tomb of St. Nectarios of Aegina.



tion. Although there are only about fifteen sisters, the monastery continues to flourish with the help of the tens of thousands of pilgrims who come there every year.

In the last year of his life, St. Nectarios developed cystitis and suffered for months with severe pain. Towards the end of his illness, he was taken to the Aretaieion Hospital in Athens where he was admitted to the charity ward. After fifty days of severe illness, he reposed on November 8, 1920, at the age of seventy-four. The relics of St. Nectarios are in both the Rizarios School chapel and at his Holy Trinity Monastery on the island of Aegina.

The wealth of miracles attributed to the saint's prayers began the moment his soul departed from his body. The nurse who came to prepare him for burial removed his sweater and laid it aside on the bed of a man who had been paralyzed for many years. Within moments a wonderful fragrance filled the air and the sick man rose from his bed healed. The marvelous scent spread quickly through the hospital, and staff and patients alike crowded into the halls to ask where it was coming from. The hospital room was set aside as a chapel dedicated to St. Nectarios which can still be visited at 76 Vas. Sofias Street. The saint's body was taken back to Aegina where he was buried in the courtyard of his monastery.

The authenticated miracles that have occurred since St. Nectarios' death would fill many volumes. The sick and possessed are healed, others have been warned of imminent danger, and there have been numerous visions of the saint offering guidance and solace. He frequently appears to people saying, "Take oil from the lamp over my grave. Put it in holy water and drink it and you will be cured."

Saint Nectarios' feast-day is November 9.

Directions to the Rizarios Ecclesiastical School and St. George Church: *Take the blue line metro/subway to the Evangelismos stop and go out of the exit labeled Vasilias Sofias/Rizias. The school and church are next to the exit, and close to the Byzantine Museum. The Aretaieion Hospital room (now a chapel) where St. Nektarios reposed is one subway stop, or a few minutes walk away, at the Megaro Moussikis stop.*

CHURCH OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST “THE HUNTER”

(Relics of Papa Nicholas Planas)

One of the great joys of any contemporary English-speaking Orthodox Christian must be the first time he takes up the small, unassuming volume that chronicles the life of Papa Nicholas. Under the deceptively plain cover lies one of our Lord’s “pearls of great price” – a curiosity which one casually picks up to look over, only to find it exploding in the hand like a spiritual nova.¹¹

The historical outline of Papa Nicholas’ life is a simple one. Born in 1851 on the island of Naxos, he moved to Athens with his mother and sister after his father’s death in 1865. He married at his mother’s insistence when he was seventeen, but lived with his wife for only a very short time, until they had a child. She seems to have died soon after the birth, for he is spoken of as a widower early in life. In 1879 he was ordained a deacon, and in 1884 a priest at the age of thirty-three, after which he served daily liturgy without a break for fifty years.

His first church was St. Panteleimon’s in Neos Kosmos, at that time a small country chapel of thirteen families. Another priest, however, who coveted his place, conspired with the churchwardens to have Fr. Nicholas dismissed, and he was sent to the church of St. John the Baptist (called “the Hunter”) on the outskirts of Athens. Saint John the Hunter was even smaller, the parish consisting of eight families, and the priest’s salary was a piece of meat from the lamb of Meat-fare Sunday or Christmas. He spent his entire priestly life in Athens, never traveling, never breaking his routine of prayer, and finally reposed as quietly as he had lived, in February of 1932.

Although it is believed that he was secretly tonsured, Papa Nicholas never appeared in monastic garb, but always dressed as a parish priest. His whole life was bound up with prayer. He would arise early in the morning and go to one of the churches in Athens or the small chapels in the countryside to serve liturgy, where he would commemorate two to three thousand names at each proskomedia. During liturgy he would often read four or more gospels, simply because he wanted “to please the saints.” In commemorating the saints, rather than following the universal custom of saying a few names and finishing with... “and all thy saints,” Papa Nicholas would separately commemorate the name of every single saint in the Synaxarion. Following

¹¹ The excellent English translation of this life is the book by Nun Martha: *Papa-Nicholas Planas, the Simple Shepherd of Simple Sheep*: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Boston, 1981.



liturgy, he would serve a paraclesis, a supplicatory service to the Mother of God or a saint, then perhaps visit the sick, or do holy water blessings in the homes of those who requested prayers. If he had time, he rested a bit in the afternoon before serving vespers or keeping vigil.

On his way back and forth to church, Papa Nicholas carried two big cloth bundles next to his chest, one of names to commemorate the living and the dead, the second of relics. He referred to these bundles as his “invoices and contracts.” He served unflaggingly, and when his friends and family told him that he should rest, he would cross his hands over his chest and reply, “I will chant to my God for as long as I have my being.” Questioned once as to why he prayed so long each day, Papa Nicholas answered with his characteristic simplicity, “You, when you open your shop – don’t you sit inside all day? And for me, church is the same.”

Papa Nicholas’ biographer, Nun Martha Papadopoulos, who was also his spiritual daughter and chantress, writes:

For fifty years without a break, he celebrated Liturgy from eight in the morning till three in the afternoon, in snowstorms, in revolutions...Not even with the invasion of the English and French, which took place in 1917, did he interrupt the sequence of his Liturgies. In sun-drenched little chapels on the Acropolis, in cramped quarters, at two o’clock in the afternoon, in the month of July, he would celebrate in churches that had only a tiny door and all the sun coming in, and the sweat would settle like froth on the sacred vestments of this true laborer in the vineyard of Christ!¹²

The fruit of Fr. Nicholas’ life was evident in his own lifetime. A multitude of miracles and healings bear witness that his daily life was not lived on earth, but in heaven. St. John the Baptist, St. Panteleimon, Prophet Elijah, St. Philothei, Great Martyr Phocas, and even angels appeared to him at various times, and were often seen by others as well.

One night, not long after he had been sent to St. John the Hunter’s, he was walking along the road in great sorrow over his eviction from his first parish. On a lonely stretch he met a handsome young man who stopped him to ask why he was weeping. The simple priest replied that it was because he had

¹² Ibid. p. 4.

Opposite: Relics of Papa Nicholas Planas, St. John the Hunter Church, Athens.

been chased out of his parish of St. Panteleimon. The young man consoled him, and then, revealing himself as St. Panteleimon, disappeared.

Another time, on the feast of St. Panteleimon, Papa Nicholas, sick with a fever, leaned heavily against the altar as he endeavored to serve vigil. St. Panteleimon again appeared before him with a small vial of heavenly medicine, which he gave him to drink. The priest drank the sweet liquid, and immediately became well. He said afterwards that the taste of the medicine stayed with him for a week.

That Papa Nicholas lived with one foot in the other world is indisputable. Mrs. Constantina Bremou was in church one day with her eight-year-old son, who was serving as an acolyte for Papa Nicholas in the altar. Suddenly the little boy came running out to his mother, frightened and pale, crying, "Mama, Papa Nicholas is this high off the ground," holding his hand about a foot above the floor. His mother, a devout and sensible woman, replied comfortingly, "Don't be afraid, my child. All priests are lifted up from the ground like that when they serve liturgy." She afterwards told the story to Papa Nicholas' spiritual children.¹³

As the spiritual fruit of Papa Nicholas' life increased so did his parishioners, and later he had two assistant priests. Those who knew him held him in exceptional esteem, from friends of the Queen to the simplest day laborers. Along with his biographer Sister Martha, who tirelessly chanted for Papa Nicholas at his liturgies, he had a small synodia, consisting mostly of devout but uneducated women who kept vigil with him. His spiritual children also included two prominent Greek literary figures of the day, Alexander Papadimantis and Alexander Moraitides, as well as Philotheos Zervakos, the future abbot of Paros, and Photios Kontoglou, the well-known Greek iconographer. Papa Nicholas, uneducated by worldly standards, but a savant of the spiritual realm, drew all of those, educated and uneducated, who had "eyes to see."

Papa Nicholas was alive at the time the new (Gregorian) calendar was instituted. When asked his opinion he replied, "From conviction, the old, and from obligation, the new." Nevertheless, he was personally a staunch old calendarist and would leave the new calendar feasts to his assistant priests to serve, while he often slipped away to small chapels and private homes to serve according to the old calendar. This brought him both criticism and reproach

¹³ Ibid. p. 11.

Opposite: Apse of original St. John the Hunter Church where Papa Nicholas Planas served.



from the hierarchy, but Papa Nicholas quietly went the way of his conscience.

Synonymous with Papa Nicholas' love of prayer was his care for his neighbor. Virtually penniless, he gave the poor almost every offering that passed through his hands. Early in life he gave his sister half of the property which he had inherited as the eldest son, and soon after lost his own share in trying to secure the debt of a poor deacon. His time was as freely given as his money. Even in later years, when he had become frail and unsteady, after serving in a broiling chapel for six or seven hours he would go on foot to the homes of those who had requested prayers. Mother Maria wrote that he was sometimes so exhausted that he would drag himself down the street carrying the Holy Gifts with a spiritual child on either side to hold him up. Every petitioner, from the Queen's confidante to a leprous father and daughter who lived hidden in a neighboring alley, was treated with the same fatherly solicitude. Papa Nicholas' only concern was to pray.

Papa Nicholas reposed peacefully on February 18 (OS)/March 2 (NS) 1932, after an illness of several months. His last words were a blessing on his attendants' meal an hour before he died. Following his death, several people who were mentally or physically ill became well after being wrapped in his riassa. Women who had family quarrels often went and took a few small leaves from his grave. As they incensed their home, they added the leaves to the incense and the animosities would disappear. Papa Nicholas was canonized as a saint of the Greek Church in 1993 by the Patriarchate of Constantinople and his relics are in the Church of St. John the Baptist (the Hunter), where he served.

Papa Nicholas' feast-day is celebrated at the church on the civil calendar date, March 2 (Old Calendar February 18.)

Directions to St. John the Baptist (“the Hunter”) Church: *Take the red metro/subway line to the Agios Ioannis stop. You will exit into the courtyard of the church. Outside, to the left of the new church is the old apse of the chapel where Papa Nicholas Planas served.*

NOTES FOR THE TRAVELER:

The Greek National Tourist Office (GNTO) is near Syntagma Square at 2 Amerikis St., Tel: 210-322-3111. (From Syntagma Square, turn right at the top of Stadiou Street) where you can find free maps to any destination in

Greece as well as bus, ferry, train and plane schedules and phone numbers of embassies, hotels, and restaurants. They may be able to help you get to remote pilgrimage sites. There is also a privately-run information booth at the arrival hall of the airport terminal.

A good thing to remember about Athens is that taxis are relatively inexpensive. If you find yourself frustrated and lost in the midst of the city, take a cab. There are taxi stands along the streets, and in front of every subway entrance.

In the nearby neighborhoods surrounding downtown and mostly accessible by the Athens metro (subway) and buses are other marvelous churches. The Nea Ionia District is a treasury of relics including: the Church of St. Evstathios which enshrines the relics of St. Gregory of Nyssa, Sts. Theodore the Tyro and Theodore Stratilates, and New Martyr George of Neapolis); Church of the Dormition with the relics of St. Eleftherios; and the Church of Protomartyr Stephen with its relics of the First Martyr Stephen the Deacon. For those who love St. Porphyrios the New, the saint served for thirty years in the Athens Polyclinic at the corner of Socrates and Pireaus Streets, close to Omonia Square. The old polyclinic chapel, dedicated to St. Gerasimos of Cephalonia, is still open for prayer.

A little further afield, but still within easy reach are grace-filled monasteries including the ancient, wooded museum-monastery of Kessariani and Mt. Hymettus, twenty minutes from town by bus; the historic Monastery at Daphni with its marvelous mosaics; the Monastery of St. Ephraim of Nea Makri, who helps both the ill and troubled youth; the Monastery of the Transfiguration, founded by St. Melitios in Melisa, and the universally beloved Monastery of the Holy Trinity, built by St. Nektarios of Aegina, an hour's ferry ride from Piraeus. Most of these places also enshrine the saints' holy relics. ✦

For information on these and other sites throughout Greece see:

Evlogeite: A Pilgrim's Guide to Greece by Mother Nectaria McLees

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