

ATHONITE FATHERS
OF THE 20TH CENTURY
VOLUME 1



Athonite Fathers
of the 20th Century
Volume 1

CELL OF THE RESURRECTION
The Holy Mountain



UNCUT MOUNTAIN PRESS

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Volume 1

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Cover Design by George Weis.

Front cover: the Sacred Monastery of Karakallou.

Back cover: Elder Philaret of Karoulia.

Scriptural quotations from the Old Testament are translated from the Septuagint; from the New Testament, quotations are primarily taken from the King James Version. Some quotes have been emended to better reflect the Greek text.

Translated from the Greek text *From the Ascetic and Hesychastic Athonite Tradition*.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Cell of the Resurrection, Athos

Athonite Fathers of the 20th Century: Volume One – 1st ed.

ISBN: 978-1-63941-012-5

I. Christianity - Eastern Orthodox

II. Spirituality - Eastern Orthodox

“Many were persuaded to choose the solitary life; and so henceforth there arose monasteries even in the mountains, and the desert was made a city by monks coming out from their own and enrolling themselves in the heavenly citizenship.”

— From the *Life of Saint Anthony*



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*Prolegomenon
to the Greek Edition*

The Holy Mountain of Athos is a symbol of love, of the monks' total dedication to God, and of the piety of the faithful Roman emperors, who endowed it with self-governance, inaccessibility (*abaton*), and many other related privileges. It still remains a living remnant of the sometime mighty and brilliant Roman "Byzantine" Empire. Its spiritual contribution throughout the ages has been immense and incalculable.

Despite the trials that it has undergone, the Holy Mountains remains unchanged, and in fact in our days it becomes more well-known and attracts more pilgrims. "In the last days the mountain of the Lord shall be conspicuous"; because the world has need of it, it is preserved by the grace of God and by the intercessions of the Lady Theotokos.

During its history the Holy Mountain was shaken by pirates' raids, by centuries-long barbarian occupation, by a lack of men, by a lack of material goods, by nationalistic conflicts, by theological and dogmatic controversies, and countless other sufferings. Today by the grace of God all these have vanished and the only danger threatening the Holy Mountain is a lack of fidelity to tradition. This living ascetical and hesychastic Athonite tradition, which is experienced as a way of life, of asceticism, and of worship for so many centuries, in every form of monastic life and by so great a multitude of monks, renders the Holy Mountain unique and unrepeatable.

Yet unfortunately today this so valuable Athonite tradition is going through a great crisis and is in danger of becoming changed by the worldly mindset and the many worldly comforts and influences.

There are traditions of many kinds on the Holy Mountain: architectural, musical, typical (of the typicon of the services), iconographical, et. al. They are all respected and considerable, but here we are referring to the lived experience of the ascetical and hesychastic tradition. This does not depend upon external manners and places nor is it exhausted in them. In other words, as many as live in the desert are ascetics and hesychasts, since asceticism and hesychia are mainly a spiritual state, achievement, and struggle. As many as are violent toward their nature and have watchfulness and prayer live this tradition, regardless of whether they exercise asceticism in a cell or in a cenobium. That is why this book does not present the tradition of one elder,¹ of one cell, or of some monastery, but the one, single, continuous, living, and variform tradition of the entirety of the Holy Mountain.

This lived Athonite tradition and the monastic schema make us similar to our predecessors and spiritually connect us to the holy Athonite fathers. This good, ascetical leaven remakes our earthen dough unto sanctification, since “asceticism is the mother of sanctification”.² This is what gives us wings that we might rise spiritually. The Athonite tradition is the underground water which secretly irrigates and nourishes Athonite monasticism. It is the clear oxygen that quickens it. It is the unifying power that supports the Athonite

1 A note on the word “elder”: In the present translation we have followed the English rules of capitalization, which do not always correspond to the Greek usage. The reader ought to bear in mind that “*geron*,” “*geronda*,” and especially the combining form “*gero-*” (all of which are rendered herein as “elder”), besides the reverential meaning of one spiritually advanced or a spiritual guide, also have the much more literal sense of “old man” (which is also the literal meaning of the English “elder”) and are often so used to refer to an older monk, without necessarily implying an elevated spiritual state. So “*gero*-Macarius” on p.185 has been translated as “Elder Macarius” but could equally have been “Ol’ Macarius”. —ED.

2 The Ascetical Homilies of St. Isaac the Syrian, Ch. 16.

republic. It is the guarantee that we are on the right path. It is the continuation of our monastic life.

The monastic, traditional spirit with the ascetical way of life have the ability to restore monasticism and show forth new holy fathers. Without this life-creating spirit we are bones dead and lifeless. Likewise, if the buildings and relics are preserved but the monastic tradition is lost with the confinement of worship to a formal act, the Holy Mountain will have become a remarkable museum with cassock-wearing keepers.

Of course, the most honourable relics that exist on the Holy Mountain are the “living relics”, the virtuous ascetics who are the bearers and expressors of the Athonite tradition.

The monastic life is like unto some Athonite flowers. They flourish in waterless places, they sprout between the stones of the benches and even high up on the towers of the monasteries, where there is not a drop of humidity, and yet, when they bloom, their fragrance is intoxicating. Many took seeds and cultivated these flowers out in the world in fertile gardens, watering them and fertilising them abundantly, but unfortunately they lost their fragrance. The same also happens with the monks. As much as they are deprived of worldly things and comforts, so much they become rich in spiritual things. As much as they live ascetically in the disconsolate desert without earthly and human consolations, so much are they nourished and fed by the heavenly and divine ones. That is why they are then fragrant with virtue and holiness. When we seek to turn the roughness of asceticism into smoothness and the strait way into a wide one, then we monks shall also become like unto the flowers that have lost their fragrance.

The old fathers, eponymous and anonymous, important and obscure, newer and older, who are mentioned in the following pages, had received little education or were even wholly illiterate, and some of them became monks out of incidental renunciation. Some of them were orphaned from a young age, became widowers in marriage, or found themselves in danger in the war and vowed, if they were saved, to become monks. And yet they not only became proper monks and followed a strict ascetic life, but some even managed to ascend to the peak of the theoretical life, to the vision of God (*theoptia*), and to see

already from this life the glory of God, that is, the uncreated light. These illiterates became chosen vessels of grace and obtained gifts.

And all this, because they were assimilated by the spirit of the older fathers and they struggled following in their footsteps.

In the old times you would find elders with the prayer-rope in hand and a backpack on their back travelling long distances through the rugged trails. Their bodies were dried out by many years of ascetic struggle, their eyes were deep hollows from the vigils, and their mouth was parched from continually fasting till the ninth hour. Some old ascetics were recluses in their cells. They would not go to Karyes or to Daphne for provisions, but God would send angels of love, monks, who would help them. They had not human consolations and worldly comforts, but they themselves felt self-sufficient, without needs, and were completely free of cares. Other reverend elders, who lived patiently in a cenobium and were whitened in obedience and in the obediences, breathed God and Elder and reached measures of dispassion.

Many old ascetics, dry from asceticism, concealed within them spirit and life. Externally they were unwashed with old, filthy, and torn robes, but in this unkempt vessel they were hiding the precious treasures, the divine grace which they acquired by so great contests and day-and-nightly struggles. They were strangers to the world but familiars of God. They were ignorant of worldly developments but knew well “the way that leadeth unto life everlasting.” They endured hardships and prayed for them that live in luxury and ease. They kept vigil for them that sleep. They shed tears and repented for them that laugh. Although far removed from the world, they felt all men as their brothers and embraced them all in their prayer.

The old fathers had simplicity in their way of life but also in their character. They did not consider themselves spiritual. They had knowledge of their weaknesses and lived in repentance. They wished to each other “a good repentance and a good end.”

You cannot easily find these sanctified elders which exist up to this day, because they know how to hide themselves artfully. But even if you were to meet them you must have spiritual sensors to be able to recognise them and to communicate with them. Many fathers did

not reveal their experiences nor their Godly-wise teaching. They took them with themselves as a mystical offering to the Lord who sets the contests. Others, however, wishing to help younger monks, would give advice or reveal some of their experiences, while other things were allowed by God's *economia* to be perceived by a third person. These known achievements of theirs become occasions for ascetic struggles for the youngers, tangible examples of the presence of God and refutation of those who delegate them to the past. Each generation has its own God-pleasing present which then becomes past.

Thorns and weeds have never been absent from the Garden of the Panagia, but in older times there were many virtuous strugglers in the cenobia, in the desert, and even in the idiorrhymic monasteries. Thus there was good encouragement for spiritual things. Discussions were always about miracles, ascetic feats, and salvation. The Holy Mountain at that time was far from the world, more hesychastic, more secret, quieter, more ascetical. The old Athonites especially had more respect for Tradition, for the principles, and for the institutions. They respectfully kept whatever they received from their predecessors. They had great reverence for the Panagia and trust in her providence. They were patient in illnesses, in temptations, and in trials, and they would not forget the purpose of their renunciation, the salvation of their soul. They were real pilgrims; their life was woven together with labour. They were deprived of material goods and avoided comfort. They had simplicity and not rationalism, experiences and not barren knowledge; they had a monk's ethos.

So from these men that do violence³ to their nature and desire the Kingdom of the heavens, by coming to know their persistent and variform ascetic struggles, their watchful (*neptic*) ascents, their simple and unadulterated ethos, and their total giving of themselves to God,

3 See Mt. 11:12: "the kingdom Heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force." The difference between this violence and the one of which worldly men speak, which makes this one necessary for salvation and that one conducive to damnation, is that this violence is exercised upon oneself for to fulfil the commandments of Christ, while that one is exercised upon others for selfish and ungodly ends. —ED.

we, too, can receive incorruptible fire that our zeal may be ignited unto struggles and prayer.

It is our honour that the grace of God has enrolled us in the monastic order and that we belong to the great Athonite family. It is our debt and duty to respect the Athonite monastic tradition, to follow in the footsteps of the older fathers, to attempt to live as they lived and to do their deeds.

All the things that are mentioned in this present book are deeds (ascetical feats or falls) and practical teaching of Athonites. They are written down so as to move us to repentance and imitation of their ascetical way of life or to make us cautious by their stumblings.

Morphologically this book has been divided into the following parts:

A. *Synaxaria (Lives of the Saints)*. We refer to the lives, the ascetical achievements, the divine assistance, and the teaching of elders about whom enough material has been found for the composition of a summary synaxarion.

B. *Incidents*. This unit records miracles, appearances of saints or demons, falls or delusions of some monks with the purpose of instruction. The names of those deluded are intentionally omitted.

C. *Apophthegms (Sayings)*. We mention elders in alphabetical order with brief instruction and ascetic struggles in a condensed, apophthegmatic form. Many of them are well-known, while some of them have books written about them, but all apophthegms herein mentioned are unknown and unpublished. The apophthegms are short but very potent because they come from the practice and struggles of Athonites and express the old spirit. Perhaps in some of these apophthegms there might appear to be some contradiction; e.g. one recommends saying the Jesus prayer during services, while another recommends paying attention to the hymns. The fathers speak simply, from their own experience, how they themselves were helped and not dogmatically.

D. *Sayings and Narrations of Elder Païsius*. Elder Païsius narrates concerning some old monks whom he came to know and mentions various incidents. He himself speaks generally about the spiritual life and especially the monastic life, expressing various counsels and apophthegms. Intensely evident is his respect for the Athonite tradi-

tion and his interest in its continuation, while his observations and counsels constitute useful aids for our monastic struggle. Because of the extensiveness of the material it is a separate unit.

E. *The spirit of the old Athonites.*

This can be seen in the other parts of this book as well, but in the fifth section it is emphasised through the various narrations of the fathers. Thus the difference of the spirit and way of life of the old Athonites from those of us moderns can be discerned. It is natural for the general arrogance and corruption of our age also to influence the contemporary monks who are its children. With the lack of men on the Holy Mountain before the millennial celebration a gap was created and the tradition was weakened. The Panagia arranged so that new living material arrived. Perhaps, however, the old spirit was not sufficiently assimilated. For this cause we see spiritual deficiencies. Perhaps our judgements today should be more clement. Maybe in the eyes of God the little that the young monks do counts as much. Yet it is indisputable that in the old days there were many virtuous, hallowed elders who kept monasticism and had a monk's mindset. Their ascetical struggles and their supernatural experiences evoke wonder. The views of reposed fathers are given with their names, while those of living fathers, anonymously. Nevertheless, all of them speak with respect and nostalgia for the old, authentic Athonite spirit.

Here some explanations are in order:

—While we do mention well-known fathers, we do not mention things published by others, as far as we are able to know. Only in the synaxaria, lest there be a gap, we have written some well-known incidents, e.g. the appearances of the Panagia to Papa-Andrew, the abbot of Saint Paul's, et alia.

—We mention apophthegms and contests of renowned fathers but also of fathers "not very exceptional in asceticism." Some who had come to know these fathers with their human imperfections might perhaps disbelieve or have some other estimation of them. These things are written to benefit and to move the readers to repentance and not to justify the fathers. "It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth?" We are not trying to make saints of the fathers, for thus we would be degrading the saints. Some of them had deficiencies, but

we emphasise their contests and their virtues for our benefit. They were bearers of the old monastic spirit of the Athonite tradition. The things written down are few and only representative, due to the lack of preserved information.

—We emphasise the value of the Athonite tradition and bring out of its treasure things new and old. We mention fathers that lived longer ago but also contemporary ones (anonymously) who are still alive, since the tradition is living yet without judging the present situation.

The pieces of information were collected with much labour and attention, either from immediate observation and personal hearing or from the narrations of other elders about older ones, and, once they were checked, they were recorded as much as possible simply, honestly, and without exaggerations.

Infinite thanks are owed to all those who entrusted us with various pieces of information (and they are many), and to all the others who helped this present publication in secret, in whatever way.

May the fathers herein mentioned forgive me for daring to publish their achievements. They no longer have need of praises and acclaim, but for us these things are instructive and salvific, because they are our models and our guides.

May the good God also forgive me because, although I came to know virtuous elders, yet not having healthy spiritual sensors I did not understand the divine grace that they hid inside of them, with the result that I was not benefitted. Due to my pride I underestimated them and contemned them, judging from the externals. Let the readers at least be benefitted, and let them pray for the unmonkish monk that laboured, who only sings the praises of the Athonite fathers and unfortunately does not imitate them.





View of Athos from Lakkoskiti



The shelter “Panagia” as seen from the peak



Father Gregory the Confessor

Father George the Confessor was born in the historic town of Messolonghi and was a child at the time of the heroic Exodus from Messolonghi in April 1826. His surname was Manolatos, indicating that his family probably descended from the island of Kefalonia. As an adult, he became a monk and priest in New Skete, residing in the monastic cell of Saint Spyridon. Due to his exceeding virtue, the fathers of New Skete recommended he be transferred to the presiding monastery of Saint Paul, where he became a spiritual father. During these years he also resided in the monastic cell of Saint John the Forerunner in the community of Saint Anne.

In about the middle of the 1840s he moved to the community of Little Saint Anne in order to strive for a deeper spiritual life, and he decided to live in the cell of the Dormition of the Theotokos. His small circle of followers consisted of the hieromonks Father Kosmas and Father Damian.

Their kept their rule of daily prayer and services rigorously and celebrated the Divine Liturgy every day. On Sundays they prayed the vigil with the fathers from the neighboring communities, sometimes in one cell, and sometimes in another. The area in which the community of Little Saint Anne was located was very isolated, deserted, and barren. However, the zeal of the fathers for the ascetic life overcame all these difficulties. Father Gregory and his fellow monks made woven undershirts, woolen socks, and garters, and lived off what little money they made from selling them. They also planted a small garden, so that they could grow the necessary fruits and vegetables for their sustenance.

They lived a hesychastic and ascetic life, without busyness or distractions. The few visitors that made it all the way to their cell came to confess to Father Gregory, who already had a reputation for being a virtuous and discerning spiritual father with strict principles. He excelled in this role. He viewed the fellow monks who confessed to him through the prism of the ascetic ideal, and the reason he was strict was precisely because he sought this exactness and perfection. He had spiritual power and knowledge. He fasted so strictly that he would not permit himself any oil, not only on Wednesdays and Fridays, but also church feasts and Bright Week. As a person, he was meek, quiet, and imposing, but the joy of his soul always brightly radiated through him. He was not a scholar by any means, but through continuous study of the Scriptures and ascetic writings he acquired a wealth of spiritual knowledge.

He was very experienced, bringing every difficult situation to a suitable conclusion, providing appropriate spiritual medicine like an experienced physician. He even had a certain heightened spiritual discernment with respect to the thoughts and visions of the fathers.

There was a time when Father Daniel of the cell of the Holy Archangels visited Father Gregory for confession, sharing with him that he saw the three hierarchs in a vision. Immediately he rushed to venerate Saint Basil, but the “saint” extended his foot, telling him to venerate his big toe. When he heard this, Father Gregory with his spiritual insight discerned the delusion and told the monk: “You venerated a great devil, brother. If it were truly Saint Basil in your vision, he would never have told you to venerate his toe.”

The hesychast Callinicus also confessed to Father Gregory. At one time the feast of his hesychastic community was drawing near, and he asked his spiritual father if he was allowed to serve oil at the meal, since the feast fell on a Wednesday. Father Gregory answered: “Ascetics always fast, whether or not it’s a feast.” Obeying these instructions, they celebrated the festal meal without oil.

Elder Callinicus had a disciple, and this disciple often went to Daphne¹ to retrieve his elder’s correspondence. For this reason, he

1 The main port for the Holy Mountain. —TRANS.

frequently needed to do the prescribed church services with his prayer-rope while he was on the road. However, at one point he began to question whether his praying in this way really “counted” as a service. He confided this to their spiritual father, Father Gregory, who, in his practical way, asked the disciple:

“If you found a wallet on the road to Daphne, and you took it, would that count as theft?”

“Well, of course”, he answered. “It would be a sin and I’d have to confess it.”

“So, since this evil thing that you would have done on the road counts as evil and would harm your soul, the prayers that you do on that same road with the prayer-rope don’t count? Of course they do, and you shouldn’t let thoughts like this trouble you.”

With this answer from his spiritual father the disciple was comforted and was no longer troubled by this temptation.

Another time, a notorious criminal, “*Kapetan Georgakis*,” showed up at the Iviron monastery. He wanted to receive Holy Communion, threatening to burn down the monastery if the monks refused him. The fathers found themselves in an awkward dilemma and decided to call Father Gregory. With his placid manner and spiritual grace, the elder pacified the robber and then proceeded to counsel him. Georgakis listened to the father’s advice, first confessing to him and fasting, and then later on receiving the Holy Gifts and completely changing his way of life.

Once, Father Gregory went to the market in Karyes² to sell his handiwork. He laid it out in front of him, then lowered his monk’s cap, and bending his head down started saying the Jesus Prayer. At that time, the exiled Patriarch Joachim III was passing by there. He saw the elder at the awning of the cemetery holding his prayer-rope with his gaze fixed downward. It made an impression on him, and he asked to learn who that monk was. Finding out it was the renowned spiritual father, Gregory, he was overjoyed and drew near, saying, “Father, do you not advertise your handiwork? You must look up if you want to find customers to whom to sell it.”

2 The main town on Athos, at around the center of the peninsula.—TRANS.