

The Truth of Our Faith



THE TRUTH OF

Discourses from Holy Scripture

Elder Cleopa

Preface by Archimandrite Joseph
Abbot of Xeropatmou Monastery,
Mount Athos

O U R FAITH

on the Tenets of Christian Orthodoxy

of Romania

Translated from Greek and
Edited by Peter Alban Heers

Uncut Mountain Press
Thessalonica, Greece
& London, Ontario

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ISBN: 906-86778-0-7

Cover Photo: From the dome of the Catholicon of
Xeropotamou Monastery on Mount Athos, Greece.

Back Cover Photo: Elder Cleopa Ilie,
Sihastria Monastery, Romania.

All Scriptural quotations are taken from the King James Version, unless otherwise
noted. The translator to better reflect the original Greek text has emended some
quotations. All citations of the Psalms are taken from *The Psalter According to the Seventy*,
translated from the Septuagint Version of the Old Testament by the Holy
Transfiguration Monastery, Brookline, MA.

This translation has been made from the Greek edition of this work entitled
Αντιαιρετικοί Διάλογοι and published by *Orthodox Kipseli*, Thessalonica.

To all those who, with pain of heart in a spirit of devotion,
seek, ask, and knock at the Door of Truth incessantly,
until their patient endurance is duly rewarded with
the Pearl of Great Price.

“What do you have to say about today’s world?”

“As evil as it is, God has love. If His love were to cease, the world would be destroyed. The love of God gives birth to mercy, and with His mercy He covers the whole world today. ‘God’s compassions are over all His works.’ All that God has created He loves. He does not love sin, for He is not the cause of it, but He loves men even when they sin.”

- Elder Cleopa

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Elder Cleopa visits with Archimandrite Joseph during the latter's 1992 tour of Romania with the largest piece of the True Cross of Christ, which is treasured at Xeropotamou.



PREFACE

*by Archimandrite Joseph
Abbot of Xeropotamou Monastery, Mount Athos*

*What is more to be desired than a true father – a father in God?
Saint Theodore the Studite (759-826)*

In Orthodoxy spiritual authority derives from experience – experience of the Uncreated. For this experience one has to look in the ascetic and mystical environment of solitude, discipleship, fasting and liturgical, as well as mental, unceasing prayer. This is the milieu of monasticism since the dawn of the fourth Christian century. For the Orthodox Church, monasticism represents its eschatological and prophetic spirit, without which it is found quickly in the perilous straight of becoming a perhaps “exotic” but otherwise secularised “tradition,” stripped of its otherworldly credentials.

It is for the most part in Orthodox monasticism that you find those grace-filled spiritual leaders – hermits, abbots, cenobitic monks – who have the gift to guide monastics and laypeople alike through the three stages of Christian perfection: *purification, illumination* and *deification*. They are generically called *elders* (*gerontes* or *staretsy*), and they play a

pivotal role in maintaining the Church in the expectant and eschatological spirit that prevents our gaze from turning earthward.

In the Orthodox Church the person of the *elder* occupies a central and authoritative position. According to Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia,

There are in a sense two forms of apostolic succession within the life of the Church. First there is the visible succession of the hierarchy, the unbroken series of bishops in different cities, to which Saint Irenaeus made appeal to at the end of the second century. Alongside this, largely hidden, existing on a 'charismatic' rather than official level, there is secondly the apostolic succession of the spiritual fathers and mothers in each generation of the Church. – the succession of saints, stretching from the apostolic age to our own day, which Saint Symeon the New Theologian termed the 'golden chain.'

God has never ceased in providing every generation, including our own, with such God-bearing prophet-elders. In Romania, where east and west, monasticism and society, Greek and Slavic Orthodox church tradition have harmoniously converged for the last five centuries, we meet a figure most saintly and unique: the great *staretz* of the Romanian people, the blessed Archimandrite Cleopa Ilie (1912-1998).

He was a rare spiritual personality with the gift to guide souls as well as to instruct the faithful – a gifted confessor as well as a beloved Orthodox enlightener and teacher of

Ware, Bishop Kallistos, 'The Spiritual Father in Saint John Climicus and Saint Symeon the New Theologian, Forward to Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East by Ireneus Hausherr. Cistercian Pres, 1990, pg. vii.

people from every strata of society – people spiritually oppressed by the long decades of communist-atheist rule and tempted by the allure of heterodox creeds, like the papal-inspired Uniatism, and the Hungarian and German Protestantism in Transylvania.

The nation-wide appeal of Elder Cleopa had as a precondition the apparent “monastic-consciousness” of Romanian society, which itself is derived from the pro-monastic climate of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the Romanian Principalities had many spiritual ties to Mt. Athos, the Holy Land and Mt. Sinai.

It is no coincidence that this modern-day Moses arose out of a monastic-loving family and lived the *hesychia* of the forest monasteries and hermitages of Moldavia from his youth. In the rolling hills and tree-covered mountains of Moldavia the monk Cleopa travelled into the timeless sphere of Holy Scripture having the Holy Fathers as his guides and instructors. Following the example of ascetic writers and teachers of ages past – Isidore of Pelusium, St. Nilus the Ascetic, St. John Damascene, St. Theodore the Studite, St. Nicodemos the Athonite and St. Paisius Velichkovsky – he turned the sword of his intellect, sharpened by years of study and contemplation, on the life-threatening heresies of our day.

His authority derived not from academic titles, but from Holy Scripture and the age-long Orthodox patristic tradition. A confessor and sufferer under the iconoclastic communist regime, the Elder took every opportunity to preach and present an exact exposition of the Orthodox Faith to his contemporaries. A monastery builder and for a time a fugitive cenobiarh, he made *Sibastria*, the monastery of his repentance, into the *Studion* of Romanian monasti-



Elder Cleopa.

cism. For almost forty years thousands of inquiring souls found answers to their questions in front of the monastic ambo of his cell's porch and in his writings and letters. He was relentless in his struggle to bring relief to the spiritual plight of the faithful, who by necessity and the communist yoke were deprived of the liberating wisdom of the Holy Fathers. Remaining for almost fifty years the spiritual father of practically all the Moldavian monasteries, Elder Cleopa had a strong desire to see the patristic and hesychast legacy revived in letter and in deed in Romanian monasticism.

He successfully instilled in those who came to him the consciousness of their Orthodox identity and its meaning

for their lives. The simple people, the flock of Christ, found in his words an echo of the timeless voice of Holy Tradition. His visage became a national icon of who they were as Orthodox Christians, and his words became the light-house they needed to transverse the rough seas brought about by the western, materialistic way of life.

The pages that follow, translated accurately into English by Peter Alban Heers, an American convert and student of Orthodox theology at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, record a series of encounters between Elder Cleopa and his Protestant-discipled inquirers.

Unlike most exchanges between Orthodox and Reformed academy-trained theologians, the guidelines of this discussion are clear and the nature of the Church is delineated from the start. Here you will find no false pretensions as to the presuppositions of the discourse: the Church is One, She is the “pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15), and She possesses the Apostolic Tradition in its fullness, without which all human attempts at coming to know God fall short. Clarity of thought and freedom of expression enable both seeker and guide to arrive quickly to their desired goal – the Truth: “Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (Jn. 8:32).

May the good-willed seeker approach the venerable counsels of Elder Cleopa in a spirit of discipleship, asking from the Lord eyes of faith and the will to follow Him whatever the cost. And may the pious Orthodox Christian be benefited and built up in his Faith through the attentive study of the elder’s teachings contained herein.

Archimandrite Joseph
Xeropotamou Monastery, Mount Athos



Photograph courtesy of Theodoru Doru Vancu. Taken May 1975, Sinaistra Monastery, Neamt, Romania

ELDER CLEOPA ILIE OF ROMANIA
1912 - 1998

END OF PREVIEW

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