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Elder Joseph of Vatopaidi: Papoulakis, Saint Joachim of Vatopaidi (part iii)

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FORWARD TO ENGLISH EDITION SAINT JOACHIM PAPOULAKIS

It is good to guard the secret of a king, but gloriously to reveal the works of God.

Tobit 12:7

Once again we shall be speaking about the good testimony of the wonders of God, Who throughout the entire expanse of time has shown Himself to be “wondrous in His saints” (Ps. 67:36 LXX). In the illustrious Monastery of Vatopaidi, one of the monasteries of saint-bearing Athos, we find the spiritual birthplace of our blessed and newly-revealed father Joachim — whom we shall be extolling in these pages — whose luminous and marvelous life illumines our lukewarm and humanistic generation.

HIS ORIGINS

According to a brief narrative of the devout physician Panos Raftopoulos, a Christian gentleman in every sense, the amazing hero of our story came from Ithaki. He was born of pious parents in the year 1786 in the village of Kalyvia, in what was at that time the province of Polyktoria. His father was Angelos Patrikios, and his mother, who came from Preveza, was called Agnes. His father, a boat captain by trade, soon lost his first wife and married a second time -to the misfortune of little John (Ioannis -his name before becoming a monk). Young John's stepmother hated him and plotted against him.

From an early age, it was obvious that this young child had a good nature, and that he would reach a high level of virtue. He exhibited nothing childish or disorderly that would be characteristic of small children. For his cruel and loveless stepmother, however, this was another provocation and only increased her hatred toward the innocent John. With this venomous instinct as a basis, the depraved stepmother pressed her naive and good spouse to remove the young boy from their house, because supposedly he was preoccupied with things of the Church and was neglecting his household chores. Consequently, in order to spare young John the malice of his stepmother, he was taken onto his father's ship to work with the sailors. However, even here he was not left in peace until he was finally exiled far away on a foreign ship, where he remained working as a novice sailor. As acquaintances of his later related, while working on the ship, he did not neglect his spiritual life, and especially prayer, which he considered to be his primary duty.

Young John remained in this occupation until he was seventeen years old, and he visited various ports of trade of that time. He thus at one point arrived at Athos for business reasons. Specifically, they docked at the port of the great monastery of Vatopaidi, where the young sailor John found time to disembark in order to visit and venerate the Mon-astery. His devout predispositions and his entire spiritual preoccupation had matured him significantly, and he was therefore able to comprehend the monastic ideology. The various lives of saints that he had read fostered his yearning to live the monastic life. This desire was fulfilled, and moreover at a monastery on Athos, when a suitable opportunity and circumstances presented themselves. His entry into the Monastery, as he later recalled, enchanted him and literally took him captive. He completely forgot about his worldly concerns and affairs to the point that, if there were a way, he would never have to go back, but would be able to remain forever and stand in awe of the sublimity and sanctity of the place.

He was presented to the Abbot, to whom he made a reverence with contrition, and as a confession, humbly revealed to him his yearning and his purpose, beseeching

him to keep him there in the brotherhood and to tonsure him as a monk. The Abbot marveled at the decorum and the humility of the boy, as well as at his ardent desire. Having a discerning spirit, the Abbot accurately perceived his future progress and thus did not reject his persistent supplication.



Now a time of testing was beginning for John, who longed for his release from the vanity of the world and from the maritime adventures that came with his occupation. But when the boat's captain, George Hatzis — who was also the boy's guardian — looked for him and did not find him, he suspected that he might have left for the monastery and went there looking for him.

When he found John in his cell living as a monk, he confronted the Abbot and demanded to know why John was staying there, pointing out his young age and the reaction of his father, who would hold him accountable. With meekness and prudence, the Abbot replied, "Captain George, we cannot throw a man out of the monastery who freely desires to be a monk. We did not bring him here; he came of his own accord and, moreover, with tears and yearning.

The captain retorted that the Customs Authorities forbade minors to remain in the monasteries without the permission of their custodian. At this point, in the face of his supervisor's continued insistence that he could not remain, John himself felt the need to intervene in order to defend his position. "Captain George, I myself came here of my own accord with one purpose in mind. Almost since the time I was an infant, I have desired God's way in order to save my soul. And now you are going to stand in my way and take me back to the world to be lost? I am preordained for this way of life, and if you prevent me, you will see on the day of judgment that you will also have to answer before the dread judgment seat of God." In fact, the hour of grace had chimed for a favorable verdict for John; the captain's will softened — so much so, that he professed with emotion that the action of the young man was praiseworthy, and with his blessing, he left him to his new life.

Needless to say, his natural father was extremely sad when he was informed that his son had abandoned the worldly life, while, at the same time, his heartless stepmother was equally delighted to be rid of her stepchild forever, just as she had desired.

to be continued...