

Elder Anthimos of St. Anne's Skete, Mount Athos.

The Theophaneou Brotherhood

Elder Anthimos of St. Anne's Skete

(1913–1996)

In this issue we present the Life and teachings of a contemporary Greek elder, Archimandrite Anthimos of St. Anne's Skete on Mount Athos. Beloved by both monks and laymen for his spiritual wisdom and practical knowledge, Elder Anthimos spent almost sixty years on the Holy Mountain. For many years he labored in obscurity, gathering the Grace of God within him, but by the end of his life thousands of visitors had come to his simple cell to receive counsel and refreshment from him. Another great elder of our times, Fr. Paisios the New of Mount Athos, said of Fr. Anthimos, "When Papa Anthimos speaks, keep notes. His words are wise, pure, full of Divine Grace."

I. CHILDHOOD

ELDER ANTHIMOS was born in the high mountain village of Kallianoï in the Peloponnese on November 5, 1913. His pious parents Charalambos and Vasiliki Zapheiroopoulos gave him the name Constantine in Baptism. His parents transmitted their love for God and virtue to Constantine and his younger brother Anastasios, their only other child. His mother, having fulfilled her duty of instilling godliness in her children, reposed when Constantine was only seven years old.

The warmth and love of the family home was suddenly transformed into a nightmarish existence for the two boys when their father, Charalambos, decided to remarry. Their stepmother showed no care for

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the boys, beating them mercilessly and even attempting to burn them alive after they crawled into the oven to warm their frozen bodies.

Unable to endure his stepmother's abuse, Constantine decided to depart Kallianoï and seek a better life elsewhere. Out of all of his belongings he took only two changes of clothes and a piece of bread. He tied them up in a cloth and secretly left. After arriving in the next village of Nemea, he found a job in a grocery shop, which provided him with food and shelter. In Nemea he became acquainted with an Athonite elder who eventually took him to Athens.

In Athens he was able to attend and finish primary school. During this period he developed a great love for reading, constantly visiting libraries to feed his insatiable hunger for learning. In the Greek capital Constantine also came into contact with a virtuous spiritual guide, Fr. Jerome of the Monastery of St. Paul. Fr. Jerome was a great ascetic and an experienced practitioner of the Jesus Prayer. When he eventually lost his sight, he received the gift of foreknowledge, having exchanged the light of the world for the light of heaven. In time Fr. Jerome's health began to decline, and so he sent Constantine to the Athonite father Michael the Blind, who lived in the small hermitage of the Holy Archangels in Vyrona.¹ For twenty years Fr. Michael had lived in St. Anne's Skete on the Holy Mountain, laboring in the *Kalyve*² of the Entry of the Theotokos with his brother Gabriel. There he lived as a model of the monastic life, and only when he became completely blind did he finally leave the Holy Mountain. He moved to Vyrona, where he became renowned as an outstanding confessor and counselor, bringing countless souls to repentance.

Under Fr. Michael's influence, young Constantine developed the desire to visit the Holy Mountain. His great love for reading further prompted him to travel to the rich libraries of the great monasteries of

¹ Vyrona is a suburb of the northeastern part of Athens.

² *Kalyve*: a monastic dwelling, usually small, sometimes with a chapel attached, and either independent or belonging to a skete.

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Athos. And so Fr. Michael sent Constantine off to the Holy Mountain at the age of seventeen.

2. ARRIVAL AT ST. ANNE'S SKETE, MOUNT ATHOS

In 1927 Constantine arrived on Mount Athos. In later years he would say: "I did not come here with the desire to become a monk, but to read books from the inexhaustible libraries of the coenobia and sketes of the Mountain."

He traveled to St. Anne's Skete, where his spiritual father had spent twenty years in ascetic toil. The Church of St. Anne, the center of the skete, lies high above the Aegean Sea. Scattered on all sides of the church, over fifty kalyvae cling to the precipitous mountainside. All the supplies had to be carried up from the dock far below the steep incline (at that time no animals were used to carry provisions), thus preventing the fathers from burdening their spiritual life with excess material comforts. In the 1920s the skete numbered 270 monks, who supported themselves with their handicrafts: woodcarving, iconography, calligraphy, bookbinding, and making prayer ropes. Living in small groups, each with its own rule of prayer, the fathers would meet in the *kyriakon* (main church) on Sundays and feast days. It was into this atmosphere that Constantine arrived.

At the Kalyve of the Entry of the Theotokos, Constantine met the righteous elder Fr. Gabriel (Lambi) and his disciple, Fr.



Iconographers of St. Anne's Skete:
the Kartsonaioi Brotherhood.

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Theophilos. Fr. Gabriel was the brother in the flesh of the aforementioned Fr. Michael the Blind. Fr. Gabriel was a well-known spiritual father, who had been chosen by the Ecumenical Patriarch to be the confessor of the Great Church in Constantinople.

The examples of Frs. Gabriel and Theophilos kindled a spiritual zeal in Constantine that slowly overcame his attraction to the material delights of the world. His initial reasons for coming to the Holy Mountain faded in importance, and he began to dedicate his attention to prayer and a life of asceticism. On November 21, 1930, the feast of the Entry of the Theotokos into the Temple, Constantine received the monastic tonsure from the hands of Elder Gabriel, who gave him the name Anthimos. During this period he learned the art of iconography, but labored in this only enough to obtain the necessities to sustain the kalyve.

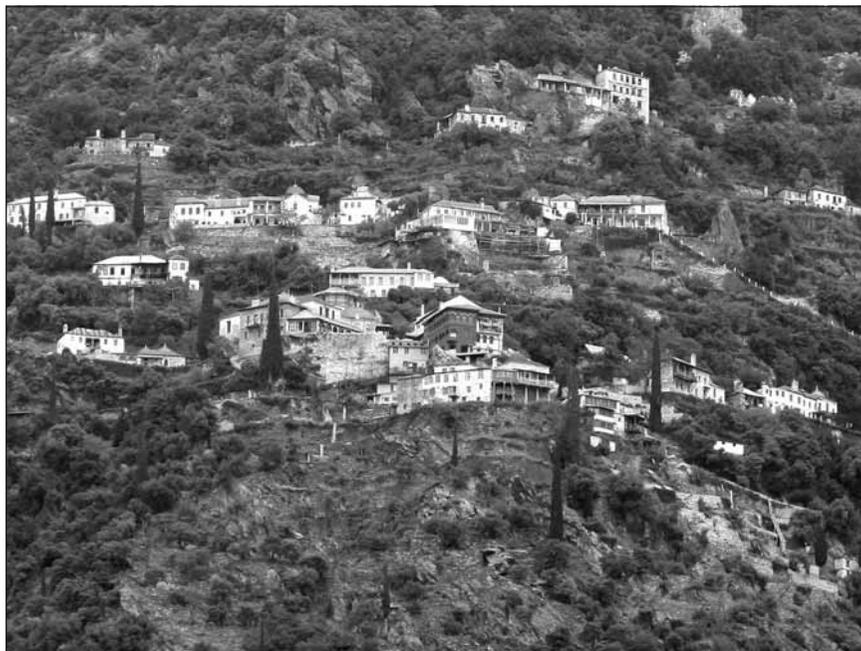
3. ORDINATION AND ELDERSHIP

Seeing his rapid progress in the spiritual life, Elder Gabriel had Fr. Anthimos ordained to the diaconate within only a few years of his tonsure. At the ordination, on April 13, 1933, Fr. Anthimos was granted a vision: the ceiling of the Kyriakon of St. Anne's Skete suddenly dissolved and the heavens were opened to his vision. The Churches Militant and Triumphant were joined together in the joy of Fr. Anthimos' ordination.

Three years later, on August 24, 1936, Metropolitan Hierotheos of Miltoupoleos ordained Fr. Anthimos to the priesthood. At this time he was granted another vision. Fr. Anthimos saw a Divine Light bathing the priests who were concelebrating at the Liturgy; only one remained bereft of the light. Sadly, that particular priest was later defrocked. Fr. Anthimos' vision was one of the first examples of the elder's clairvoyance, which would so often aid his spiritual children.

In his thirst for spiritual knowledge, Fr. Anthimos would retreat to the library of Xeropotamou Monastery. There he studied the Holy Scriptures, the writings of the Holy Fathers, liturgical books, and the

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Giorgos Boutovinos

St. Anne's Skete.

Rudder.¹ He absorbed everything he read so thoroughly that he was later able to draw on these life-giving sources at appropriate moments to enlighten his listeners. His knowledge, however, was not limited to spiritual matters. He was also well versed in philosophy, medicine, astronomy, mathematics, and history. Even scholars and professors were amazed at the depth of his wisdom. It is reported that Elder Paisios once told a pilgrim, “When Papa Anthimos speaks, keep notes. His words are wise, pure, full of Divine Grace.”

Up until the repose of Elder Gabriel in 1959, Fr. Anthimos remained in complete obedience to his spiritual father. Obedience to a spiritual father was of the utmost importance to Fr. Anthimos. He often said, “Obedience is the tomb of our own will, from which, however, the

¹ The Rudder (*Pedalion*) is a collection of the Canons of the Orthodox Church.

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all-fragrant lily of humble-mindedness sprouts.” Equally important to Fr. Anthimos was the revelation of thoughts to his elder: “If we don’t confess our thoughts, they will become snakes and beasts and will eat us up. The farmer who found a frozen snake and put it next to his breast was unfortunate. As soon as it warmed up, it cast off its sleep and bit him. Thus, if we don’t confess our thoughts, they will become acts, *and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death* (James 1:15).”

Fr. Anthimos lived an exceedingly simple life. His personal possessions consisted of one set of plain vestments and a small cross from Jerusalem. A sack served as his mattress, and a few small pieces of necessary furniture completed the contents of his cell. He loved being a non-possessor and wished for nothing superfluous.

He saw every day as his last, mourning his lack of repentance. Nevertheless, he remained diligent in his labors. He would say, “We must prepare as if we are dying now and work as if we will never die.”

After the repose of Elder Gabriel, Fr. Anthimos took on the heavy yoke of eldership. Everyone who came to the kalyve he received with love and humility, and his message to everyone was love for God. His qualities as a spiritual father were described by His Beatitude Archbishop Christodoulos of Athens and All Greece:

In an excellent and skillful manner, he combined fatherhood with discretion. He was a wise elder in the full meaning of the word. He knew and respected eldership’s measure, its limits, its use. For this reason whoever sought his advice was completely satisfied. Judicious, practical and simple as he was in his life, he was the same in his words. He laughed spontaneously and frowned with meaning. His behavior possessed nothing pretentious or false. He was genuine.

Because he was strict with himself, he acted with leniency to others. In his gaze you could distinguish the ascetic of the wilderness.... His kalyve often became a refuge for sacred souls. Many who were “burdened and heavy laden” found comfort and consolation near him. He spoke from his deified experience, and for this

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reason his words were remarkably convincing. When he celebrated the divine services, you could say that he soared to the heavens. He seemed to be all spirit after every Divine Liturgy. His heart and mind would be elevated to heaven. He considered the saints to be both Christ's friends and his own. He spoke to them with simplicity. The Lady Theotokos he revered exceedingly. He reached the boundaries of *theosis* [deification], and for this reason God granted him the gift of foreknowledge. He used it only to the glory of God and never for his own advancement or glory.

At about this time Fr. Anthimos was elevated to the rank of archimandrite by Metropolitan Panteleimon I of Thessaloniki. His fame as an elder grew and even the great lights of Athos such as Hieromonk Ephraim of Katounakia, Abbot George of Grigoriou, Archimandrite Aimilianos of Simonopetra, and Archimandrite Alexios of Xenophontos called him their spiritual father. He also had spiritual children outside of the Holy Mountain and would visit them, consoling the men and women who could not come to his kalyve.

His strictness in keeping the Canons of the Church was renowned. He always kept a copy of the Rudder next to him, and he could recite even the footnotes on any topic. When away from the Holy Mountain he never performed any of the Holy Sacraments or even served the Blessing of the Waters without first receiving a blessing from the local hierarch. His obedience to the Church extended even to the problems of the New Calendar. Once, when one of his spiritual daughters wanted to go with an Old Calendarist group, Elder Anthimos scolded her, saying: "Go the way your Church goes. We on the Holy Mountain follow the Old Calendar, but we have spiritual communion with the official Church and we don't have tendencies to break off. We might protest those things that are badly done, but we are in the bosom of the Church and from our place we struggle to correct them. Whoever is outside the walls of the Church is exposed to the various wolves in sheep's clothing, who seek to tear them apart."

The elder filled the entire day with prayer and labor. As part of his



Processional Cross of St. Anne's Skete
painted by Elder Anthimos.

cell-rule he did three hundred prostrations every day without fail, completing additional prostrations for all who had asked him to pray for them. He was a lover of the Jesus Prayer, and conscientiously applied the knowledge he gained from the Patristic books to his noetic labors.

Elder Anthimos had special reverence for the church services. When chanting he never sat down—even in old age—out of respect for God and His saints. When he served the Divine Liturgy his hands would tremble during the consecration of the Holy Gifts, and he would be

touched by the Divine Fire. At the end of the Liturgy, he would emerge from the altar transfigured by the Grace of the Holy Spirit.

Fr. Anthimos had a special love for the All-holy Theotokos. When he would chant "It is Truly Meet," tears of joy would spring from his eyes. The elder would say: "The Lady Theotokos not only defies us, but also daily protects us and frees us from every danger, especially today, when we are exposed to so many dangers. The only thing we can offer is our ceaseless hymnody and glorification for her favor toward us. This hymnody, of course, is always accompanied by fervent supplication that she safeguard us unceasingly and protect us, since as a human being she knows our problems and weaknesses. We here on the Holy Mountain, who have her as a provider and refuge, receive from her aid and guidance to wholeness and theosis."

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The elder was also renowned for his hospitality. Twice he was elected *dikaios*¹ of the skete. His responsibilities included not only looking after the administrative and spiritual welfare of the skete, but also the reception of the guests. He greeted everyone who came to the skete with traditional Athonite hospitality: ouzo, loukoumi (Turkish Delight), and coffee. Often he would eat a meal with them, seasoning the food with words of spiritual wisdom. With love he would guide them around the skete, speaking to them about the ancient icons of the Theotokos and St. Anne, and about all the miracles that had taken place there. In everyone he saw the image of God and thus rejoiced in the opportunity to serve visitors. He would repeat to the brothers: "Do not forget hospitality. You don't know what this hospitality might render! Abraham was granted to offer hospitality to the Holy Trinity beneath the Oak of Mamre, and Lot to angels before the destruction of Sodom."

5. THE REPOSE OF THE ELDER

In 1995, a year before his death, Fr. Anthimos foretold his repose not only to his disciples but also to lay people from off the Holy Mountain. Then in his eighty-second year, the elder had become quite frail. Nevertheless, until his last day he asked that his disciples chant for him the service to the saint of the day. In addition, he continued to labor in the skete and counsel the visitors that came seeking a word from the elder. During his last days Fr. Anthimos repeated with joy to his disciples, "*The time of my departure is at hand* (II Timothy 4:6)."

In June of 1996 Fr. Anthimos celebrated his final earthly Feast of the Ascension. It was noticed then that the elder did not have his characteristic vitality, which had supported him through so many church services. From that time on he did not venture out of his kalyve, but continued in prayer, not omitting anything from his rule.

On June 26, still zealous to maintain the good order of the

¹ *Dikaios*: the superior of a skete. In St. Anne's Skete, elections took place every year on May 8.



A relic of Elder Anthimos preserved at Valaam Monastery in Russia.

kalyve, the elder attempted to tie off the branch of a vine that was climbing up from the garden fifteen feet below, so as to support it. In doing so he lost his balance, falling from the kalyve yard to the garden below. The fall resulted in a number of fractures and damage to the spinal cord which paralyzed him. Nevertheless, he retained his mental faculties and was able to call upon his disciples for help. His disciples tended his wounds and with great caution transferred him up to the kalyve. He immediately asked to receive the Immaculate Mysteries. And,

although in great pain, he was able to receive them from the hands of his spiritual son Hieromonk Cherubim.

The next day the elder's condition grew worse and he was taken by helicopter to a hospital in Thessaloniki. His disciples gathered around him to receive final spiritual counsels from their beloved father. To each he gave an appropriate word which would guide them through the sea of temptations of this present life to the calm harbor of salvation. With his earthly labors completed, the elder lifted his eyes to heaven and repeated the words of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ: "*Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit* (Luke 23:46)." With these words he closed his clear blue eyes and reposed in the Lord.

The Grace-filled body of the elder was returned to the Holy Mountain to be greeted by monks from every part of Mount Athos

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and laymen from all over Greece. In order to receive a blessing, everyone who was able took a turn carrying the sacred remains of Fr. Anthimos up the steep path to the Kyriakon of St. Anne. There, according to the elder's direction, a simple, non-hierarchical funeral service was served. Afterward, he was buried in the skete cemetery in accordance with Athonite custom.

At his forty-day memorial service, the elder's memory was glorified once again. This time both the Metropolitan of Demetriados, Christodoulos (now Archbishop of Athens and All Greece), and the Metropolitan of Ierissos and the Holy Mountain, Nikodemos, officiated at the service. At the memorial his disciple Hieromonk Cherubim gave a moving eulogy that included these words:

He left us orphans and departed to our eternal homeland.

He left corruption and ascended towards incorruption.

He set on the world and dawned in heaven.

He came out of the vain life of the world and settled in the Jerusalem above.

He left the vanity of life and came to the blessedness above.

He left the winter and the storm of the world and arrived at a calm port.

He left the vain shadow of this world and ran to the Sun of Righteousness, Christ.

According to custom, the remains of Athonite monks are exhumed after three years—to be placed in the monastery or skete ossuary to await the Second Coming of Christ. On June 15/28, 1999, Archimandrite Anthimos' grave was opened and his bones were released from the earth. Their golden hue indicated the favor that the elder had found with God. With due reverence Fr. Anthimos' holy relics were transferred to the chapel of the Entry of the Theotokos Kalyve to be honored and venerated at the place where the elder had labored for over half a century.