

The Fragrance of Holiness (David Robles)

[Ξένες γλώσσες](#) / [In English](#)



*Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures
and the twenty-four elders fell down before the lamb, each
having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are
the prayers of the saints
(Rev. 5:8)*



Patmos – Cave of St. John

An amazing transformation happens in the minds and hearts of those who journey to Mount Athos in pilgrimage. Peace and freedom of cares quiet the soul making it possible to pray. As I walked passed the massive steel gate of the monastery of Philotheou and into the inner courtyard, it was as if I had never left. I could hear my friends, monks S. and D. calling me, but even as I greeted them, my inner being was still. “Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me”. The words come, continuously and effortlessly, “Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me” and the world behind me is forgotten.

When the talanton called us to Vespers, I entered the main church and was embraced by the darkness inside. Only a few lamps were lit and in the twilight of the candles, the icons of the saints appeared as living and terrible as an army ready for battle; their faces very holy and radiant but also, imposing in their steadfastness. I bowed down before the icon of our Panagia, the Sweet Kissing, and thanked Her for bringing me safely to Her Holy Garden.

The evening service was already in progress. I took my place among the faithful, as I silently prayed; “Let my prayer be set before Thee as incense, the lifting up of my

hands as the evening sacrifice.” Psalm 141:2

It was very difficult to move my eyes away from the faces of the Holy Warriors all around me. They seemed to call out with God’s words to Joshua, son of Nun:” Lo! I have commanded thee; be strong and courageous, be neither cowardly nor fearful for the Lord thy God is with thee in all places whither thou goest”. Joshua 1:9

After the evening services, Fr. S. asked me to follow him into the forest. He walked ahead silently until we found ourselves walking on a very narrow path. There was a precipice to our right and to our left a massive stonewall with sharp edges pushing us in the opposite direction and into the precipice. And the sight of the beautiful trees around us was conspiring into making me lose my step. Father S. walked ahead decisively and with confidence. I was not so sure. And without any superfluous words of introduction, the monk started to narrate for me from the lives of saints; “when the moment of death came for a holy monk and he was already experiencing the life to come; a demon appeared to the dying monk saying, “Now you have vanquished me, you have won”. But the holy monk, in humility responded, while I’m still alive, I fear a fall and I will be watchful! And the enemy vanished!” Throughout the duration of my pilgrimage, the urgency and seriousness of Father S.’s warning remained alive in my consciousness.

The next day I visited the osteophilakio with Fr. S. This is the house where all the bones of the departed monks of Philotheou are kept. Among them Fr. S. showed me the skull of Fr. Athanasios who was the brother in the flesh of Elder Joseph the Hesychast. I held his skull close to my heart and said a prayer for him. When I realized the significance of what was happening, I could only weep inside. And why is this blessing given to me, that I may hold elder Joseph’s brother in my arms? I cannot fathom these things.

Father D. showed me the garden under his care that day, sometime in the afternoon; after we were done picking green beans. And he told me that insects do not bother his crop. He never has the need to use insecticides so his vegetables are very healthy.

Miracles are a way of life in Mount Athos. They are received naturally, without affectation, as the familiar and even expected outcome of daily life. And alongside the extraordinary, the daily routine is lived out in humility and with courage.

And so, I followed the daily schedule expecting the ordinary but praying for a little gift of grace and mercy. Thursday morning, after the Divine Liturgy, monk S. and I left Philotheou and drove to Karyes where we visited a few of the holy sites. Among

them, the icon Agion Estin of the Theotokos is now in a small chapel near the Protaton, while restoration of the old church takes place.



St Gerasimos of Kephallonia

At St Andrew skete we venerated the skull of the Apostle Andrew which is very fragrant. The aroma seems to penetrate the depths of my being. It is very difficult to walk away. In this skete's main church there are many icons. Among them, there is an icon of St. Sergios of Radonez that has a piece of the holy man's coffin in it. There is also an icon of St. Seraphim of Sarov, which contains a piece of the rock upon which he prayed for many days. Fr. Ephraim explained to us that the rock exploded into many pieces during the glorification of the saint.

When we arrived at Vatopaidi it was almost time for vespers. After dinner we venerated some of the wondrous relics of the monastery like the Belt of the Theotokos, a large portion of the Cross, the skulls of St. Gregory the Theologian and St John Chrysostom and the arm of St. Panteleimon. Among the relics are the bones of St. Evdokimos, an unknown holy monk found at the monastery. When the relics were found, they were fragrant and their sanctity was manifest. Later on, the saint appeared in a dream to one of the living monks and revealed his name to be Savva, but he said that he accepted the name given to him by the monastery.

While we were at the guesthouse I had the blessing of meeting some pilgrims from Serbia. One of them, a student from Belgrade, showed me a book autographed by Justin Popovich, and offered it to me as a gift, but I thankfully declined.

The next day was Friday and we were in the main church for Matins. During the service, after the 6th ode of the Canon and the Magnificat, a relic of St. Silouan was brought out of the sanctuary in solemn procession, carried by a priest in the midst of incense and chanting. We all bowed to the saint and, one by one, offered our veneration. After Matins, some of us went to the chapel of the Holy Girdle of the Theotokos, for the Divine Liturgy. That morning Fr. S. and I went back to Philotheou.

On Saturday, after morning services, I helped the monks pick up and sort out apples. Even priest E. was there carrying baskets full of apples, like everybody else. It was a lot of fun to be out there, working with the monks. They all looked so content!

Sunday night we had the vigil for the Elevation of the Cross. It lasted over nine hours! And I was not tired! That morning, after the Divine Liturgy, I returned to Thessaloniki.

While in Thessaloniki, I revisited some of the places I enjoyed during my previous pilgrimages. Tuesday night I took the midnight express train to Athens. Athens is a modern and vibrant city with an excellent Metro (subway) train system. When I beheld the Acropolis for the first time, I could not believe my eyes! The Parthenon, the theater of Dionysius and all the ancient temples one reads about in history books, were really there, in all their awesome wonder! I learned that the Parthenon was used as an Orthodox Church for over a thousand years; much longer than it was a pagan temple.

Not too far from the Plaka is the Church of Panagia Kapnikarea. This is a thousand year old church in the center of Athens. The icons of the church were written (painted) by blessed Photios Kontoglou. Then I walked to the Metropolitan Cathedral where I venerated the relics of St. Philothei of Athens. The bones of the saint are visible through the glass that covers the reliquary. The reliquary of Patriarch Gregory V of Constantinople is there also. He was hanged by the Turks and thrown into the sea, but his relics remained incorrupt and floated on the water. They were rescued and enshrined in the cathedral in Athens, where they can be venerated today.

Then, I walked to a nearby little church where a priest received me. He was very kind and warm and gave me directions on how to get to the church of Papa

Nicholas Planas. I was not prepared for the sight that awaited me when I got to the Church of St. John the Baptist, where the relics of the holy priest are. The building is immense and very beautiful. The reliquary of St. Nicholas Planas is in the main hall inside, and the relics are visible through the glass. He appears dressed with the stole of a priest.

God has given us great gifts of Grace in His priests. My heart was overwhelmed with a sense of thanksgiving and all I could do at that moment was to pray for all the priests that in one way or another have touched my life, during my sojourn as an Orthodox Christian.

I did not have much time left, before my flight to Cephalonia but I had to go to Nea Makri to venerate St. Ephraim the newly revealed. A very nice old lady helped me take the right bus and asked the driver to drop me off at the park in the center of town. When I got to the monastery of the Annunciation, I heard a loud growl coming from a chapel by the main gate. A service of exorcism was being done on behalf of a poor woman possessed by a demon that was speaking through her with a male voice. It broke my heart to see her like this. It was also very frightening. Next to the main church there is a small building that houses the remains of the tree from which the saint was hanged.

Near by, there is also a water fountain that has healing properties. When I entered the main church I walked a few steps down and to the left, where the dwelling of the saint is preserved. The reliquary of St. Ephraim is in the nave, to the right of the church entrance and it is beautiful. It is made of carved wood with a glass cover through which the relics are clearly visible. And I was in tears as I begged the saint to free the demon-possessed woman from her torment. I will never forget the wail of her lament. That very night, I boarded a plane to the island of Cephalonia.

In the city of Argostoli, by the sea-shore; I was able to find a very cozy little room where to spend the night. Next morning, after visiting the town's church, I took a bus to the town of Omala. And what a nice road trip that was! The island is an earthly paradise, with wide canopy trees and flowers everywhere I looked. When I arrived to the Monastery of St Gerasimos, I was surprised to see a newly built church at the entrance of the monastery, which is dedicated to the saint. I walked inside and spent quite sometime venerating the newly painted icons adorning the murals of the cathedral. There were signs of work in progress all around, and the murals! Oh! I was speechless, what beauty, how magnificent, what holiness! Nothing less than holy tradition portrait in egg tempera and gold!

St Gerasimos lived in the sixteenth century and was of noble lineage, of the

Notaras family. After becoming a monk at the skete of St. Anne in Mt Athos, he traveled to Jerusalem where Patriarch Germanos of Jerusalem ordained him priest. Later he traveled back to his homeland, Greece, where he settled in the island of Cephalonia. There he founded a convent and restored the Church of the Dormition of the Theotokos. He lived a holy life and reposed in the Lord in 1579. The saint is particularly known because of the healing he offers to the demon-possessed. While remembering his life, I walked by the oak tree planted by the saint and into the little Church of the Dormition, where St. Gerasimos awaits the day of resurrection. The church is built over the two-room cave where St Gerasimos lived. I descended into the cave and wondered how could anyone live in that damp and desolate place!

When I climbed up the ladder back into the main nave of the church, I had the opportunity to meet Fr. Panagiotis, who is the priest of the monastery. He asked for my name so he could remember me during the supplicatory service to St Gerasimos. The service was about to begin. Within moments the abbess came and opened the reliquary, so that we could venerate the relics directly. While the priest chanted prayers for all of us, I made a prostration and with great awe and reverence approached the holy one that lay before my eyes.

He was intact and very fragrant! As I kissed his epitrachelion (stole), I reached out and touched his hand. It was warm and soft! And this is the power of the resurrection! Our Lord Jesus Christ is risen! And the bodies of His saints, though sleeping, already show signs of the life of the age to come!

And while the priest censed the sacred place, the words of Malachi the prophet were fulfilled, "For from the rising of the sun, even to its going down, My name shall be great among the Gentiles; In every place incense shall be offered to My name, And a pure offering; For My name shall be great among the nations, Says the LORD of hosts" (Malachi 1:11).

Source: [Finding the Way to the Heart](#)