

27 Σεπτεμβρίου 2016

## **Observing thoughts and guarding the senses. On the feast of Saint Sabbas the Sanctified (Elder Joseph of Vatopaidi)**

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)





*One of the great spiritual figures of monasticism, St Sabbas, is honoured today. Yet he is not well known here on the Holy Mountain. This great guiding light is a great consolation to us. In the way he lived we are able to find the most essential elements of our monastic capacity. We will refer to some of these.*

*He started his life with absolute devotion to the Lord, enforcing the prophetic verse 'Blessed is he who carries the yoke (of the Lord) from a young age'. Even though his parents were wealthy they placed no obstacles in his path towards monasticism. He arrived in the East to become a monk. He excelled as a novice and ended up in Palestine, where he joined the Lavra of St Euthymius. He became subordinate to some of the greatest fathers honouring the eastern region in his day and was proven to be not only a perfect monk but also a great reviver of monasticism.*

*Those days organized monasticism was unknown in Palestine but in Egypt the monks of St Pahomios, the renowned Tavnennisiotes, were well acquainted with it. In his case an angel revealed to him what organised monasticism was all about. In such coenobium, known as 'Lavras', the monks had common treasury and liturgical services and were dependent on their spiritual fathers; they had some freedom only as to the particulars of asceticism. Namely, the monks received the blessing of their spiritual fathers to struggle as hard as they could manage.*

*St Euthymius placed St Sabbas amongst the youngsters because of his age. A reverent elder, Abba Theoktistos was their spiritual teacher. Young Sabbas demonstrated his genuine love for the Lord. How wonderful it is for someone to begin loving the Lord and devote himself to Him even from the time of his diapers! In St Sabbas' life we are able to discern his absolute submission and dependence and particularly his love and genuine interest in others. In his biography it is written that once he put himself in danger because of his love for his brothers. Once, the baker of the monastery placed his drenched garments inside the oven to dry because it was winter and the sun was covered by clouds. He forgot them there. A day later, some monks, among them St Sabbas, started working by the oven to bake bread. The baker saw the smoke and remembered where he had placed his clothes. He became upset and anxious since the flames were huge and the oven was very hot and none of the elder monks dared get inside, fearing they would burn alive. St Sabbas, who had witnessed his brother's sadness and because of the genuine love he felt for him, jumped in the blaze and rescued the clothes without him or the clothes suffering any harm. The blaze of true love won over the physical flames.*

*However, he had performed an even bigger accomplishment earlier than this. Despite his age he had already figured out what the spiritual law was about. He already knew that spiritual consent precedes the deed. Unless one consents spiritually to a deed, it is impossible to perform it. Once, he was working at the monastery's gardens and wished to eat a beautiful apple. His wish led him to cut it off from the tree. Then he reasonably thought: 'It is not bad to eat it since I am working here'. He cleaned it and put it in his mouth. Then the fighter in him woke*

up and reminded him to check upon his deed as he used to: 'How am I going to eat this? If I do, will I not be eating behind my elder's back? How did I arrive at such acquiescence? How come I didn't recognize the desire when it first manifested itself with the initial thought: 'take it and eat '?' How come I did not react then? This is a defeat for me. It must not happen again. If I get accustomed to such defeat more than once, I will not be able to become a monk. Therefore, I will never eat an apple, ever again as a penance '. Thus he threw it on the floor and stepped on it and alongside he crashed the dragon of desire without being defeated from self love and the love for pleasure. Tradition has it, that he never ate an apple again in remembrance of this minor submission to his desire.

Even though he was young, he realized what it means to be a monk and a spiritual person. He also grasped that one may become a genuine spiritual person if one guards himself against the excuses which strike against him as thoughts and trick him. Sin never presents itself plainly to someone, telling him: 'you must commit a sin'. This does not happen. The devil is sly. He acts like a fisherman who hides the hook underneath the bait. The fish, not realizing that there is a hook, take the food, eat it and die.

This great spiritual figure taught us that the monk must never do anything unless he tests it out first. One must test every excuse which drives him to do something. In the Old Testament we learn that whenever Joshua was to meet a stranger, he would ask him: 'Are you one of us or do you belong to our opponents?' We must also do this. When a monk has a thought, he must ask: 'Are you one of us or do you belong to our opponents?' Then the thought will be exposed straight away. It will either depart or it will be forced to reveal that it acts in the name of a specific passion or desire.

There was also another instance where he demonstrated how vigilant he was with his thoughts. Once he was walking on the road linking Jericho to the Jordan River accompanied by one of his disciples. The Saint wished to test his disciple whether he had learned to guard his senses. On route they met a group of people, among them a young woman. The young monk was looking at them curiously. Thus, in order to teach him a lesson and force him to tell the truth- since we often lie when we are embarrassed- he asked him: 'Who is this young girl who passed us by and had only one eye?' The monk replied: 'No, elder. She has both of her eyes intact'. The elder went on: 'you have been deceived my child. She has only one eye.' Then the monk started assuring him that he knew very well that she had both of her eyes. And the Elder asked him: 'How can you be so sure?' 'I watched her closely and she has two good eyes'. Then the Elder reprimanded him: 'Did you forget the advice to not let your eyes roam around and focus on things? Are you now making a point in looking at and describing the faces of other people and

especially of women? You are not to accompany me ever again until you learn to guard your senses'. Thus, he sent him to Kastellio- a monastery used as a disciplinary centre for monks. The monks remained there until they learned to guard their tongue and eyes and anything else which makes people curious and careless.

*Did you see how the holy fathers paid attention to the detail? Whether one progresses or stalls depends on such things. Just as no act is performed unless one consents to the thought first, similarly no major transgression occurs unless a minor one is performed first. When one does not guard his mouth and talks constantly, he will start telling jokes and then objecting to others, seemingly for a good purpose. Then he will become harsh and succumb to anger; this will then be followed by obstinacy, arguments and fighting.*

*It is up to us to concentrate in applying what our holy fathers have so diligently conveyed to us. The foundations not only of monastic life and idea but also of the entire tradition of our Church have been laid out at St Sabbas' monastery. The set of rules and the liturgical order of the Church began from this monastery. St John of Damascus lived and excelled here. He was the one who created the Eight- tone liturgical hymns and other parts and hymns of our Church. St Kosmas, Bishop of Maiouma, also excelled as a hymn writer. The two brothers, Saint Theofanis and Saint Theodoros, the so-called 'writers', also lived here. The ecclesiastical tradition and the liturgical order were taken from here and perfected in Constantinople by the monks of the Studion Monastery. This same order is observed at the Holy Mount Athos, ever since Saint Athanasios, the founder of the Great Lavra Monastery, copied it from the Studion Monastery.*

*This is what I wanted to remind you of today, so that we should all of us eagerly pray to our holy father, St Sabbas, to strengthen us through his mediation to the Lord since he has found favour in Him, so that the patristic spirit is also passed on to us. This spirit is the spirit of self-denial, of precision in our spiritual struggle; the spirit of inwardness and fear of God. Let us pray to this great spiritual figure to help us accomplish our goal. Amen.*

source: Translated by Olga Konari Kokkinou from the Greek edition: Γέροντος Ιωσήφ Βατοπαιδινού, Διδαχές από τον Άθωνα, Εκδόσεις 'Το Άγιον Όρος', Θεσσαλονίκη, 1989.