

Nikiforos Theotokis (15 February 1731-30 March 1800)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



Nikiforos Theotokis was born on 15 February, in the year 1731, in the town of Kerkyra [Corfu]. The fourth child of seven, his parents, Stefanos and Anastasia Theotokis, gave him the name Nikolaos at his baptism.

His first teacher was the hieromonk, Ieremias Kavvadias, one of the most outstanding teachers on Corfu at the time. He had a great effect on the personality of young Theotokis and afterwards maintained spiritual ties with him.

In December, 1748, despite the fact that he was only 17 years old, he was ordained deacon in Lefkada, by Archbishop Chrysanthos Psomas of Lefkada and Ayia Mavra, since there wasn't an Orthodox bishop on Corfu. His ordination was in flat

contradiction to the canons of the Church, which state that a man has to be 25 years old before he can be made a deacon. On 8 July, 1749, Sakellarios Halkiopoulos, forbade him to serve in church until his twenty-fifth birthday. Nikiforos then left to study in Italy, and remained there from 1749 until 1752. He studied philosophy, mathematics and physics at the universities of Padua and Bologna. It appears from his references in Elements of Physics that among his teachers were Giovanni Poleni (1683-1761) and Eust. Zanotti (1729-1782). Other than this, we know nothing of his stay in Italy and the studies he pursued there.



On his return to Corfu, he was ordained priest and, for about four years, occupied himself with the education of his young fellow-townsmen, having seen for himself their lack of learning. He taught without charge and, at his own expense, founded a school in his family house. The large numbers of students who came from poor households, however, forced him to attempt the foundation and organization of a

‘Common Seat of Learning’, together with his teacher, Ieremias Kavvadias. The community agreed to the proposal for the foundation of the communal school and approved the cost of renting a building for two years, since the lessons (in grammar, rhetoric, philosophy and the natural sciences) would be given without charge, morning and afternoon.

The ‘Common Seat of Learning’ was near the church of Saint John the Forerunner, where he was parish priest, and began operations in 1758. In the church of Saint John, Theotokis began preaching in simple language and people flocked to hear him. From 1763 until 1765, he interpreted the Gospel and Epistle readings. His sermons on Great Lent, which were published in 1766 in Leipzig, showed him to be one of the greatest preachers at the time of the Turkish Occupation.

Theotokis fought to retain, strengthen and cultivate the Greek and Orthodox mindset of the people of Corfu, who were under Latin occupation. He was beloved of his fellow-citizens, who considered him exemplary in terms of his attitude to the Church. His school was regarded with suspicion by the Church of Rome and was kept under surveillance. The Latin archbishop, Antonio Nani, complained to the authorities in Corfu, that the school taught Theotokis’ book ‘On the procession of the Holy Spirit’, as this is accepted by the Orthodox Church. From then on, the Latins began to intervene and create difficulties for the school, which continued to function until 1767. Theotokis left Corfu for Constantinople, at the invitation of Ecumenical Patriarch Ioannikios (1761-1763), in order to take over the headmastership of the Athoniada School, which had ceased to operate for a short time, after the departure of Voulgaris. The person who intervened to ensure that Theotokis was given this post was none other than the Fanariote ‘prince’ Grigorios Ghikas, the patron of the other great scholar of the time, Evyenios Voulgaris. On the intervention of the former Patriarch Serafeim, who was living as a monk at the time on the Holy Mountain, these plans were shelved, for whatever reason. Be that as it may, Theotokis left Corfu and went to Constantinople, where he was a guest in the home of Ghikas, together with his fellow-countryman Evyenios. He worked closely with Grigorios Ghikas and, through the latter’s generous donations, was able to publish his works.

We don't know how long he remained in Constantinople. What is certain is that when, in 1764, Grigorios Ghikas was appointed ruler of Moldavia, Theotokis went for a short time to Iași, in order to take over the directorship of the state academy, which was then being restructured. But we also know that, in 1765, Iosip Moisiiodaca was appointed director of the academy. Theotokis therefore remained at his post there for less than a year and left, for unknown reasons, to go to Leipzig.

While there, he published three theological works. In 1769, he published the *Golden Essay of Rabbi Samuel the Jew*, aimed at bringing Jews into Orthodoxy. The next year, he published and edited the work *Isaak the Syrian and the extant Ascetic Writings*. This book is a companion directed to monks of all communities, the aim of which was to be 'the best instruction in every ascetic lesson'. Finally, in 1772, he completed his literary editing of the Patristic commentaries on the first eight books of the Bible, which he published in two volumes as *A series of fifty-one commentaries on the Octateuch and on the Reigns*.

In 1772, he was invited by the Greek community in Venice to settle there as Archbishop of Philadelphia, a position which, in the end, he refused because the Venetian authorities were reluctant to grant him total independence from the Pope and the Catholic Church. He returned to Iași and undertook the directorship of the Academy for a second time. A year earlier, his friend and patron Grigorios Ghikas once again became the ruler in Iași and Theotokis' return would certainly have been linked to Ghikas' presence there.

At the end of 1775, Nikiforos was in Vienna, where he worked as a private tutor in order to make a living. In the same year, he published, in Halle, his work *Response of an Orthodox person to another Orthodox concerning the Dominion of the Catholics [sic] and concerning the various Secessionists, Schismatics and Separated*. The aim of the book was to counter the Uniate propaganda of the Catholics and it was addressed to the Greek-speaking populations living in various cities in Italy and Central Europe.

In 1777, Ghikas was assassinated by the Turks, and after this murder, Theotokis was invited to Russia by Evyenios Voulgaris, Archbishop of Slaviansk and Cherson. Initially he appointed him to the archiepiscopal council of Poltava. When Voulgaris resigned from his throne, he was succeeded by Theotokis, who spoke Russian, and he was consecrated on 6 August, 1779. He was an archbishop for ten years, initially in Slaviansk and Cherson and thereafter, in 1787 in Astrakhan. We have little information concerning the life of Theotokis in Russia. We know that, politically, he held the same views as his friend Evyenios Voulgaris. Russian scholars recognize

his considerable pastoral activity. He managed to bring back many schismatics (raskolniki) into the Church and converted not a few Muslim Tartars to the faith.

He resigned from his office on 16 April, 1792, to go and live as a monk in Moscow, in the Monastery of Saint Daniel. It was here that he prepared for publication what is perhaps his most important work, the *Kyriakodromio*, a commentary on the Epistles and Gospels read on Sundays. In this we see the mature and solid thought of the man who lived and was brought up on the texts of the Scriptures, with which he also desired to nourish his flock. 'My aim' he wrote, 'is the benefit of my Orthodox brethren, not praise or glory'.

At the age of 69, without any previous warning, he met his untimely death on 30 March, 1800. He was buried in the monastery where he'd been a monk and the epigraph on his grave was written by Evyenios Voulgaris, his elder compatriot and companion.

In one of his sermons he refers to the responsibility of parents to their children: 'What we become used to as children is what we want and follow for the rest of our lives. It is clear, then, that our salvation or perdition depends on our childhood. We are therefore unfortunate people. Does our salvation or obliteration depend on an age when we have not perfected rational thought nor have proper discernment?

Those who raise us, those who set our moral values, those who have knowledge and discernment lead us towards either good or evil. Permit me, then, to address you as fathers, as mothers, or others who have been granted by God the commission of raising children. You must bring up your children with good words, good works and good example. Because their salvation or perdition depends on your words...'.

In another homily he refers to the value of virtue:

Virtue, my brethren, has its starting point with God. The essence of the transessential divinity is the source from which virtue springs. Love, justice, goodness, patience and mercy and every other virtue are fruits borne of the creative nature. This is why, when we work at achieving the virtues, we really do become a living image and likeness of God, since we were fashioned by Him. Do we have the image of God? Does God have free will? So do we. Is God provident? So are we. Is God mind and spirit? We have a mind, speech and spirit. In this way, we are an image of God. And if we become caring, just, good, patient and merciful, if, as I say, we manage to cultivate these virtues, then we're not a still life, different from Him, but we are living and like Him. Then we become gods by Grace. 'I said, "You are gods; you are all sons of the Most High"' [Ps. 81, 6].

This is how Nikiforos Theotokis talks about Christ in his sermon 'On the word':

'Sweetest Jesus, no-one doubts that your word, the word you taught, which we sinners preach, is truth. And since virtue is truth, the one truth buttresses the other. Your word is light and, since virtue is light, the one light makes us always want the other. Your word is bread, which strengthens our soul. Your word is wine, which gladdens our hearts. Your word, Son and Word, have great likeness. Having been born, You showed the path of salvation. By expressing your word, you have established [us] in every virtue and have granted us bliss'.