

A Note of Optimism

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In his article [***The Church, the Authentic Interpreter of the Scriptures***](#) , Kostas Nousis makes some very valuable and telling points. What may not be clear to readers unfamiliar with Modern Greek history is the background to some of those points.

After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, and the subsequent occupation of the imperial lands by the Turks, Orthodoxy was kept alive partly by the official Church, but largely through the faith of ordinary people, particularly those living outside the cities, who were under less pressure to compromise or, indeed, convert to Islam. An example in recent years, from outside Greece, would be the family of Elder Cleopa (Ilie) in Romania, whose house, in a village, was essentially a home church. Similarly, Saint Silouan was born into a God-fearing family in a village in Russia.



Another very important support was the new martyrs. Today (3 December), for example, we commemorate, among others, the martyrs Gavriil (1659) and Anghelis (1813). Seeing people who were prepared to die for their faith (as opposed to other 'martyrs' today who are anxious to kill for theirs) was a great boost to the morale of other Christians and helped them remain firm in the face of oppression and barbarism.

A third force was the Holy Mountain, where there was a revival of hesychasm: traditional, Patristic, Orthodox asceticism as advocated by Saint Gregory Palamas in the face of pressure from Western humanists. Other aspects of this traditional Patristic Orthodoxy were: the Kollyvades fathers; the compilation of the *Philokalia* by Saint Nikodimos the Athonite and Saint Makarios of Corinth; and the 'internal mission', to Greeks, particularly in villages, by Athonite monks, the most famous of whom was Saint Kosmas Aitolos.

Gradually conditions ripened for a revolution to cast off the Turkish yoke and, after a few unsuccessful attempts, in 1821 an uprising beginning in the Peloponnese, i.e. miles away from large concentrations of Turkish forces and interests, was finally successful. There were, it is true, a number of Philhellenes involved. The Napoleonic Wars had not long ended and there were a large number of inactive former military men rattling around Western Europe with not much to do. Lord Byron also made a contribution, by writing inspiring poetry. He did make it to Greece, but caught a chill which developed into a serious illness and this carried him off before he could become engaged in any actual fighting. The contribution of the Philhellenes to the eventual success of the revolution was minimal, however. The Greek irregulars, guerillas as we would now call them, had little interest in lining up in serried ranks and being shot at by the better armed Turks. They very wisely preferred to ambush contingents of the enemy and then disappear into the mountains. It was these tactics which eventually brought success, though it must be admitted that the destruction of the Turkish and Egyptian fleet at Navarino by the irascible British Admiral Codrington, preventing the reinforcement of the Turkish forces, played an important part.

Once the revolution was a *fait accompli*, the Great Powers had to decide what to do. Obviously, the country couldn't be left in the hands of the Greeks themselves, since they were very much inferior. The Philhellenes, for example, attempted to speak to the natives in Homeric Greek with the Erasmic pronunciation they had learned at school and were horrified when they couldn't make themselves understood. Either their own education was at fault, or the modern Greeks were mere country yokels, unlettered and uncultured. Since the first premise was demonstrably false, the second must be true and someone else would have to be found to govern them. Clearly, this elevated person couldn't be from any of the Great Powers, since that would give that Power an unfair advantage, so they finally came up with Otto, the second son of the King of Bavaria. To cut a long story short, he was generally so hopeless that he was eventually deposed, but not before some very important features had been imposed on the country.

The first was the name: Hellas, a deliberate reference to Ancient, classical, pre-Christian Greece. At the time, a Greek would probably have referred to himself proudly as 'Romios', a 'Roman', since he lived in the lands of the Roman empire, but this quickly, under Western influence, became a derogatory term. New Rome began to be known as 'Byzantium', which was in fact the name of the small, pre-Christian settlement converted by Constantine the Great into his imperial capital. This was a deliberate ploy to undermine Orthodoxy by pretending that New Rome,

and all its Patristic theology, its glorious liturgies, its rich monastic tradition, had never existed. Another was the language. A group of Westernizing Greeks insisted on the introduction of '*katharevousa*', an artificial construct which means 'purifying'. In other words, the language was supposed to purify the people, by getting them to stop using Turkish loan-words and sound more like 'proper' Greeks. The only result this had was to give Greeks a massive fixation with the nature of their language, which has still not been fully resolved. A further effect was the creation of a Westernized bourgeoisie, of which more later. Worst of all, though was the introduction of 'reforms' based on the Western outlook of the Bavarian officials who were imported along with Otto. The machinery of the State, such as it was, was organized on the Bavarian model, as was education. And there was a distinct anti-monastic, and therefore anti-Orthodox attitude in many of the 'reforms'. Some indicative examples are: the activities of monasteries as regards their land-holdings were restricted (1833); annual accounts and budgets were imposed (1846); the movements of monks had to be accounted for (1853); monks were no longer permitted to study at Secondary Schools and the University of the capital (1855); abbots were limited to a five-year term (1858); and the completion of the 25th year as the earliest date for when a monk could be tonsured was imposed (1848). Women's monasticism fared even worse. In 1834, King Otto ordered that: all convents were to be closed, except three, or four at the most; any convent with fewer than 30 nuns was to be dissolved; nuns who had not attained the age of 40 were to be invited by the local bishop to abandon the monastic life; and those over 40 were free either to cease to be nuns or move into one of the remaining convents.

Nowhere was this anti-monastic attitude reflected more forcefully than in the rise of the 'brotherhoods'. These were para-ecclesiastical organizations which admired Western, particularly Protestant, moralism and pietism. What is interesting is that they were largely an urban, middle-class phenomenon, because a certain amount of 'academic' education was necessary in order to enter their spirit. They were puritanical, superior, referring to monastics as 'deserters' who had taken the easy way of abandoning the hardships of the real world. They even held liturgies on their premises attended only by their members. At their best, they represented an effort to introduce a serious view of the responsibilities of being a Christian at a time when the fortunes of the Church were at a low ebb; at their worst they were narrow-minded, intolerant, and against the Orthodox, Patristic tradition.

Matters were exacerbated a hundred years after the revolution. Greece was defeated in the Greco-Turkish War of 1919-22 and the resulting settlement called for an exchange of populations. Thus over a million Greeks were expelled from lands their ancestors had inhabited for over three thousand years and were forced

to settle in Greece. Among these were Saint Arsenios the Cappadocian and the child who was to become Saint Païsius the Athonite. Although many of them were highly cultured, it was a culture of the old east, of New Rome, that they recognized, not the Westernized, Protestant-leaning mindset of the Greek bourgeoisie. They spoke a different kind of Greek, in some ways (slightly) closer to Ancient Greek; their music was different, influenced by Turkish, though this was, in any case, influenced by 'Byzantine' music; their cuisine was different, more spicy and aromatic; their dancing was scandalous to those just becoming accustomed to the tango; they were decidedly less 'respectable' in bourgeois terms; their traditional piety was very different from that of the brotherhoods; the bourgeois were genteel, the refugees boisterous. This led to conflicts which to some extent have persisted to this day in terms of what it means to be a Greek.

This, then is the background to Kostas Nousis' article and you may well ask where I find a note of optimism in this generally bleak narrative. Well, yesterday Pemptousia published an article on four modern Elders whom we commemorate on 2 December. What is striking is the similarity in their background. None of them was from the urban, educated, sophisticated bourgeoisie. They were all born into devout, poor, village families and were exposed to traditional Orthodox monasticism at an early age, the Bavarian regulations concerning the age of tonsure having fallen into disuse. They were attracted to the monastic life by the example of others or by reading the lives of the saints, not by, say, 'learned' articles on the significance of the number of fish (153) recorded in the miraculous draught in the Gospel of Saint John. And they were not alone. Elder Iosif the Hesychast and his disciples, such as Iosif Vatopaidinos and Efraim Filotheitis (now in Arizona) were also from similar backgrounds.

What is remarkable is that these elders led a revival in traditional monasticism and hesychasm. The Holy Mountain is flourishing again, and many of the younger monks are now from urban, educated backgrounds. Not so long ago, their zeal may well have found an outlet in the brotherhoods (which are in sharp decline, by the way), but now they are attracted to monasteries. Many of them have, indeed, attended university, but professors, such as Fr. George Metallinos and George Mantzaridis have been outstanding examples of a combination of excellent scholarship and a profound Orthodox outlook.

This is not to say that the root causes of the problem have died out. How far Greece is a Western European state, how much influence in its internal affairs other countries should be allowed to exert, the position of the Church in society today are all issues which have not been fully resolved and which may never be. On a personal level, though, I look at the state of the Church in Greece today compared

with when I first came to know it forty years ago, and, by and large, it seems healthier and more confident in its Orthodoxy than it did then, largely because of the revival in traditional, Patristic theology and outlook.