

The Life and Works of Our Holy and God-Bearing Father Neofytos the Recluse

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Bless, Father.

Saint Neofytos, 'presbyter, monk and recluse', as he calls himself, was born in the village of Lefkara, in the Larnaka region of Cyprus, in the middle of the year 1134

A. D., which is why he is praised as 'the glory of Lefkara and the boast of Cyprus'. His father was called Athanasios and his mother was Evdoxia. She became a nun after the death of her husband. His family were poor farmers and there were a lot of children- eight in all- and they were also very devout. Their Christian upbringing is apparent from the fact that two of the boys followed the monastic life: Neofytos, at 18, and Ioannis, a little later. The latter became the Abbot of the Monastery of Saint Chrysostomos.

Neofytos was entirely illiterate, because of poverty. He engaged mainly in farming, which is why, in the first years of his renunciation of the world, he was occupied with viticulture, nursery gardening and agriculture.

When he was 18 years old Neofytos, who was a popular favourite, was encouraged to marry by his parents. He himself, however, had other designs. The fear of God, the vanity of life in the world, the notion of death- which he often encountered and saw all around him- dominated his innocent soul and he resolved to renounce this world. He decided to leave in secret. Having fled, in order to avoid the reactions of his family, he arrived at the remote Monastery of Saint Chrysostomos, on Mount Koutsoventis, in Pentadaktylo. He thought they wouldn't find him there, but this was not the case. He returned home and persuaded his family that his desire was godly and sincere. So they allowed him to leave without further ado.



He returned to the Monastery of his repentance and, in less than five years, was deemed worthy to don the angelic habit of the monks. The saint wrote: 'In my opinion, no bridegroom's attire ever enthused a man as much as the monastic raiment did me. My joy was such that I kissed the edges of my habit and begged the Lord to help me keep it pure and spotless until the end'.

Abbot Maximos assigned him to the duty of looking after the monastery's vineyards, at a location called Vouppais, and he remained there for five years.

It was in these years that he learnt his first letters, doubtless from his innate sharpness of mind and through divine illumination, though he does not mention

from whom nor in what manner, so as not to seem ambitious. By himself, with his excessive zeal and tireless efforts, he not only learned to read, but was also able to recite by heart the whole of the Psalter. This was a real achievement for an illiterate farm boy, who heard narratives of Scripture for the first time. The saint wrote: 'The Psalter contains un hoped for riches and its study is pure joy. With the psalms, we praise God, we overcome the demons, we seek salvation and we declare Christ in His first and second coming. Anyone with any sense sees the psalms as a blossoming, attractive meadow, as a plant which gives us all its fruit'.

In these five years of service, he made progress in the study and understanding of Scripture. He was particularly moved by the first chapters of Genesis, which refer to the creation of the world.

His rapid progress in the monastic way of thinking earned him the love and respect of the community. The Abbot relieved him of the task of looking after the Monastery's vineyards and appointed him to the duty of deputy ecclesiarch, where he served for two years.

With great strictness and divine passion he maintained his attention, his appetite for the spiritual fray and his introversion, cultivating his desire for the solitary, hesychast life. The Abbot did not give him a blessing to pursue this course, however, because he was still a young man. With patience and humility he waited to be given a sign by divine Grace. He submitted to the judgement of his spiritual fathers and, after a year of uncomplaining service, the new Abbot, Effrosynos, granted him his much-desired permission and blessing to put his decision into practice. He began a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, where he intended to live the ascetic life, if he were given the chance.

After a fraught voyage, during which the ship was in danger of sinking because of a violent storm, our merciful God heard his prayer and saved not only his soul but also his life.

'Teach me, Lord, the path in which I should walk, for I have lifted up my soul to you', he repeated as he made his way around the Holy Land. He went first to the Tiberias region, as far as the desert where the Lord blessed the five loaves. He continued on his way to the hills near the small town of Magdala and Mount Tabor. After venerating the Holy Sepulchre, he made his way into the desert of Souka, the region around the Monastery of Saint Savvas, the Jordan, as far as the great monastery of Chozeba and elsewhere, in the hope of finding a 'peaceful and solitary man' whom he could follow.

After searching for six months, he still had not found what he was looking for, and God revealed to him that he should not stay there any longer, but should find another place, where 'the heavenly king would descend and help him build a church'. So he went back to the area around Mount Koutsoventis, in the hope of finding a location that suited him. This was not where God wanted him, however, and the leading monks of the monastery were also not in agreement with him, so he left and went to the fortress of Paphos, with the aim of travelling to Asia Minor and finding a hermitage on Mount Latros, which was a flourishing centre of monasticism.

When he reached the harbour in Paphos, looking for a means of departure, a curious event befell him. The late Elder Iosif the Hesychast always used to say that 'when your patience is exhausted, that's when God's will makes itself known'. It was, indeed, at the end of this trial that the saint was guided to the place which God had prepared for him, even before He had called him.

As the Saint himself relates it, the harbour guards in Paphos arrested him as a deserter. They locked him up for a day and night and took the two coins he had with him to pay for his voyage. Fortunately, some devout people intervened on his behalf and he was set free. 'But I was at a loss to know just where this place of rest which God had promised me would actually be'.

From this troublesome affair, Saint Neofytos concluded that the setback was no accident, but God working in a mysterious way, saving His servants and attending to their requests.

Through this correct interpretation of his setback, the saint achieved the revelation of the location of his future habitation, so that he could find rest and become holy, as he desired. His church and homeland would also have his paternal presence and providence for ever.

He began his search for a hermitage in the heights to the north of the harbour of Paphos. Behind Melissovouno, where today his holy monastery is situated, in a verdant and quiet valley, he came across a small cave near the edge of a cliff. This served as home to wild birds, but was destined to be his permanent dwelling-place, the wrestling-ground where he would carry out his great struggles. His victory in these contests would bring riches to the whole body of the Church.

In 1159, he discovered the place where he would live as a recluse, on June 24, the feast of the Birth of the Honourable Forerunner, which meant a great deal to him. His soul loved this deserted and peaceful cave and he considered it a gift and

blessing of God's love. Once he had confirmed that the location was not frequented by other people, he settled into the cave without further ado. In order to make it habitable, he began to hew it out and to knock down the parts which were ready to collapse. He finished by the feast of the Elevation of the Precious Cross. At that time, Saint Neofytos was 25 years old.

He dedicated the cave to the Precious Cross, on the one hand because that was the day he finished it, and, on the other because from now on the Cross would always be with him, giving him strength to wage his titanic struggle against the evil demons. Holding high the Cross, he would make his way towards his meeting with the Bridegroom. In this way, he was 'a monk of the Precious Cross'.

In the tiny, narrow space of his retreat, he tried to ensure that he had everything he needed for his ascetic life. His bed was a long, narrow hewn slab, just off the floor, and this also served as a seat. Higher up there was another marble slab, which was both his table and his desk. He hollowed out niches in the walls of the cave for his books and other necessary items. But before all else, he dug his grave and said to himself: 'Even if you manage to become Lord of the whole world, in the end, all that will remain to you is this grave'. The most important thing Saint Neofytos constructed in his hermitage was the 'altar for divine rituals', as he himself says. In other words, the prerequisite 'so that he would not 'be estranged from the divine communion of the Body and Blood of Christ'.

Very early on he furnished the church with holy icons- both portable and wall-paintings- with sacred vessels, spiritual books, other than those he wrote himself, with holy relics of martyrs and saints and with a piece of the life-giving Cross. All of these things he acquired in the fifth year of his enclosure, which numbered thirty in all. He decorated them as appropriate and recorded them in detail in a special book of his belongings, which he called the book of remembrance [i.e. names of those whom he would commemorate].

He himself called the cave his 'enclosure' from the beginning and referred to himself as 'enclosed'. He lived there continuously, conversing 'alone with God alone'. Grounded in unshakeable faith and fervent love of God, he began his new engagement, which would reveal him as a great man and an enlightener of the whole world.

A few years after he had first retired as a recluse, he learned that this was truly the will of God. 'Unworthy though I am, after a short time I heard an unusual, strange and mellifluous voice telling me three times: "Remember what was revealed to you in the desert - that you would move to another place, where, after the King had

descended, He would enable you to build a church”’. Thereafter, when centuries had passed and the tears of the saint had become unshakeable foundations in his holy hermitage, the prophecy was fulfilled. The revelations and mystical acts of grace seen in this small cave are too many to recount. Apart from the previous prophecy, the saint said ‘there are also some others which I don’t need to reveal’. In this way, he concealed in his humble soul what happened there. His holy enclosure became a locus of Theophany, a place where God walked and the recluse saw Him. The grace of the Holy Spirit seized his mind with revelations and told him the mysteries of God.

After a few years, God revealed to him how many years he would live as a recluse. ‘I had a vision that I went up Mount Olympus, opposite Lefkara, in order to venerate the Precious Cross and I heard a voice saying to me: “In fifty days”, and then, a second time, “In sixty days”. The meaning of the words was not then clear to me’.

It is obvious from what happened thereafter that the days of the vision were the years he lived as a recluse and that the inscrutable will of God extended from fifty to sixty years his earthly journey heavenwards, no doubt to lend greater support to His Church.

At the time when the saint was trying to enlarge his cave, a strong earthquake occurred one night, shaking the hermitage and the whole Paphos region seven times. The next day, some people who were interested in his well-being hurried to see if he had survived, because they feared that the unsafe cliff would have collapsed on him. They saw, however, that the hermitage was undamaged. The saint explained the cause of the earthquake: that it was due to the sins of the people, which drew the ‘glower of God, which creation was unable to bear and so trembled. Had the Creator not restrained it, everything would have been destroyed from the mighty trembling of fear’. 14 churches in the Paphos region were destroyed by these tremors.

When he first acquired the hermitage, Saint Neofytos sought to find the first book of Scripture, that of Genesis. He remembered with great awe and love the divine words regarding the creation of the world, from when he had first heard them at the Monastery of Chrysostomos. When he found the book, he learned it by heart. Years later, he wrote 16 homilies interpreting Genesis.

At this point, we shall refer briefly to his prolific literary and poetic work. He began writing at the age of 36 and quickly acquired a reputation as a God-inspired author of panegyrics for feasts of the Lord and of the sweetest of praises for the saints. As he himself says, he wrote 16 books. His first was a ‘Brief Interpretation of the Lord’s

Commandments' This was followed by 'An Interpretation of the Song of Songs', three 'Panegyrics', three volumes of discourses for a variety of feasts, two books of letters and ascetic chapters, a small book with 'Verses of Compunction', the 'Interpretation of the Six Days' and 12 discourses of 'Interpretations of the Psalms', the 'Interpretation of the Canons for the 12 Feasts of the Lord', in which there is an encomium to Our Most Holy Lady, the Mother of God, the 'Book of Catechisms', and the 'Regulatory Testament' (i.e. the Monastery Rule). We can see from this list of books that he also engaged in poetry. Apart from the verses of compunction, he also wrote iambic triameters in twelve-syllable verses and poems with fifteen syllables. By the most conservative estimates, they were written on at least 2,200 sheets of parchment, that is they make up more than 4,400 pages. His works are available today, after their publication by his monastery.

Ten long years passed, involving fierce struggles and strict withdrawal from other people. Bishop Vasilieos (Kinnamos) of Paphos, who was acquainted with the recluse and marveled at his great virtue, insisted that he should ordain him to the priesthood and that he should accept a disciple to live with him. The saint resisted the bishop's wishes, out of respect for the office of the priesthood and also because he did not wish to give up his total isolation and freedom from the cares of life. The bishop persisted for four years and, in the end, Neofytos accepted 'the great office of the priesthood', and, thereafter, disciples. He now entered the holy of holies, became an initiate and priest of the divine mysteries, concelebrating with the angels, whose equal he was. Previously, he had offered himself as a pure sacrifice to God, whereas now he offered the acceptable, reasonable and dread sacrifice of the Precious Body and Blood of Christ.

After his ordination, the saint founded a monastery, so that other monks could live close to the hermitage, as disciples, and so that they could enjoy the benefits of the monastic life within the context of a coenobium.

The church at the hermitage had a narthex and sacristy added, while a kitchen, refectory and store-rooms were also built. At the entrance to the monastery, there was an area with seats for the visiting guests. This place, however, was quickly dismantled, on the orders of the saint, as soon as he realized that it was being used improperly. He had another place constructed, further off, narrower and without seats. The whole of the grounds were enclosed within wooden fencing.

As regards the description of the other buildings and rooms in the monastery, it can readily be understood that all the necessary apartments and accoutrements would have been installed, in accordance with the tradition of our Church. It is clear that the saint's most paternal prudence always directed all things, within the

restraints of frugality and moderation which characterize devout and diligent monks.

Although the general way of life in the monastery was that of a coenobium, it was not far removed from the hesychast, burden-free outlook. Seven years after the foundation of the monastery he drew up and implemented the 'Regulatory Arrangement or Regulatory Testament', a Rule through which he organized the details of its life. In this Rule he declared that the number of monks should be few, because he believed that 'ten sheep were preferable to fifty goats'. He said: 'I have learned from experience that bringing together a lot of uneducated, undisciplined complainers gives rise to a great deal of noise and scandals. For this reason '15 suffice, or 18 at the most'.

Initially, the saint accepted only 10 disciples. Under pressure, he admitted another four, who did not prosper, but began to act independently, to disregard their obligations and caused other scandals. By divine providence they were removed and peace was preserved. With this experience, he refused any increase beyond ten, and it was only after great pressure that, under duress from the well-educated men who came to see him, that he agreed to increase the brotherhood to fifteen or eighteen, who were to be 'peaceful and calm'.

After twelve years of successful implementation, Bishop Vasileios of Paphos confirmed the Regulatory Testament 'in the presence of many participants'. By a hand-written signed note, Vasileios' successor, Vakkhos, confirmed that he found 'what is in it to be good and pleasing to God'.

When the saint was 49 years old, he set about having wall-paintings executed for the hermitage by the iconographer Theodoros Apsevdis. The whole undertaking was completed under the watchful eye and the instructions of the saint, with long-lasting colours painted onto the very firm plaster covering the walls of the holy cave, which is why they have been preserved in quite good condition. Four wonderful wall-paintings depict Saint Neofytos. In one, he is standing at prayer, with arms crossed, in between the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, who are holding him by his upper arms. In another, he is kneeling before the throne of Christ, with the Mother of God on the right and the Forerunner on the left. In the two other wall-paintings, within the church and above the grave of the saint, Christ, having proclaimed salvation to all the departed, is rising from the dead and, with His right hand and is raising, the saint. The scene is being followed with joy by David, Solomon, other prophets and hierarchs. Such was Saint Neofytos' devotion to God that in the Deposition, it is he who is shown as taking down the undefiled Body; at the Washing of the Feet, he is depicted as Peter; with Christ washing his feet, while

in the Hospitality of the Angels, he takes the enviable position of Abraham.

These wall-paintings present Saint Nektarios as a novice, of average build, with thick hair and a triangular beard, a broad forehead and slightly blue eyes. His whole persona is informed with sweetness and most becoming dignity.

The saint's reputation spread throughout Cyprus and the influx of visitors increased daily. This was troubling, especially for a strict ascetic. No easy solution was to be found, for two main reasons. Escape, such as we find in the Lives of other saints, was out of the question for him, because he was anchored to his hermitage; nor was total isolation from the people of God, because he embraced them with particular affection and sympathy. Another very important reason was the critical conditions of the times, with natural disasters and political turmoil blighting Cyprus. Added to this was a prevailing corruption, both moral and material. Suffering alongside the people of God, our most saintly father, who was full of grace and love, sacrificed his strict ascetic rule, as far as this was permissible, in order to offer support to those who were floundering.

Demands multiplied, however, and his much-desired quietude was invaded, and so his enlightened mind devised another solution. After forty productive years of pure living within his holy hermitage, when he was now 65, the saint decided he would move higher up from his cave, 'to the upper rooms of the enclosure', where the demanding visitors would not be able to trouble him. He wanted not to lose the benefits of 'beloved withdrawal and the quietude that brings knowledge of God'.

After he had made an opening, he began patiently to hew out the rock, by himself, as he had done earlier in creating his hermitage.

With a prayer full of compunction, written by himself, he began the preparation for his retreat. Every morning, after the end of the Liturgy, having kissed the Precious Cross and the holy icons, he made the sign of the Cross, went up and began to hew, praying all the while. This demonstrates how our pitiful and weak human nature can be empowered to surpass its normal bounds by drawing strength from faith. According to his biography and various other sources, the saint was small in body, very thin, to the point of emaciation, because of his strict abstinence and other hardships. For all of thirty years he ate no cooked food other than soaked legumes, and even then sparingly. So how was it natural for him to find the strength for such hard and prolonged labour? The answer is provided by Saint Paul, who tells us that 'God-bearers can achieve anything with the power of Christ'.

When this exhausting work was finished, with no sign of danger, while the saint

was praising and thanking God in a most heartfelt way, at noon on 24 January 1199, the feast of Saint Xenia, by divine dispensation, a terrible event almost overtook the saint. He nearly fell from a great height to a miserable death, but was saved by God, Whose help he called upon. He celebrated his escape every year on that day until his death. He also composed suitable hymns and prayers in the form of a service. He gives a first-hand account of his dreadful trial and of divine aid in 'A Sign from God'.

The saint called his new cave 'New Zion', 'that is a Godly watch-tower gifted by Him'. The name of the new hermitage and its explanation are no accident. The scrupulous father hinted at many things with his 'Godly watch-tower', since he had achieved blessed stillness, a rest from his labours. He welcomed within himself the Grace of the Most Holy Spirit, living in quietude, and, having crossed the Red Sea of the passions, reached the promised land which flows with the milk and honey of the knowledge of God and the unending delight of the saints.

Above the main church of the holy hermitage, on the south side, he hewed out a small cave, which he finished with a wall in front. This was to be used as a 'place of sanctification and apprehension'. He would leave 'New Zion' and enter this small cave. Seated there, when his disciples celebrated the Divine Liturgy below, he would listen to and follow the service via a hole he had made in the floor of the little cave, through to the roof of the church in the hermitage. It was in this way that he also received the precious gifts and took communion, since the priest would mount a ladder and pass them through to him.

55 years had already passed from the day he had settled into his beloved hermitage. He was now 80 years old and felt that the time for him to depart this world was approaching. As a caring father, he began to prepare his spiritual children, supporting and encouraging them in the monastic life. He wrote the second and final Regulatory Testament. He called it 'Regulatory Testament, by God's Grace', because in it he expresses his final wishes: 'No mortal has escaped the arrow of death and I certainly will be unable to do so. But Christ, You Who voluntarily died for us, bless me with Your Grace that death may find me not as an arrow, but as sleep with You'.

He urged his disciples to be loving among themselves and to be diligent in their observation of the appointed prayers, day and night. He appointed Hieromonk Isaïas as his successor and urged all the others to be obedient to him. All his successors as Abbots of the holy hermitage would have to be recluses. After their election and ordination, they were to be enclosed, having already prepared themselves for this beforehand. They were to concern themselves with the spiritual

life of the brothers and not neglect to teach them.

The hermitage was to remain strictly out of bounds to women. Fasts were to be observed meticulously and no-one was to own anything. The monks were to avoid comforts and also contacts with secular people, particularly their relatives. He stressed that the holy hermitage should 'remain as more of an oratory'. It was not a common cell, which is why some who wished to stay there were not allowed to. He recalled how he 'had received the enclosure as a gift from God the Lord. He gave it to me empty and adorned it as He wished. And, through His all-powerful assistance, I pass it on'.

He made an enigmatic prophesy regarding the future of the hermitage, as a pilgrimage shrine and an adornment of the Church.

After the saint had, in human terms, arranged everything he considered necessary for the salvation of the brothers and the future of his hermitage, he commended them and his monastery to Our Most Holy Lady the Mother of God and the Precious Cross, after God.

He reached the age of 85 and was ready and waiting for the call from heaven. He had spent all of 60 years in the enclosure. He had struggled valiantly and was victorious. The vision he had seen at the beginning of his withdrawal was about to be realized.

'After 60 days', the journey ends and he goes to venerate Christ's Precious Cross. His heart leaps at the prospect of a 'person to person' encounter with his Beloved. Sixty-seven years of harsh monastic struggle awaited him. He did not turn back even once, and this is why he was now 'welcome in the kingdom of heaven'. He had withstood the burning heat of the day and the burden of the night without complaint.

He was told the day of his death. His gaze was now ever on the place where he would meet the Bridegroom.

He ordered his disciples not to weep too much over his death, because nothing contrary to human nature was about to happen to him. After the funeral prayers, they were to conceal his relics in the grave he himself had hewn out of the wall of the hermitage. They were to clothe him in the 'funeral rags' he had woven himself and place him in the coffin he had made with his own hands out of three woods- cedar, cypress and pine- in imitation of the Cross of Christ. He then gave orders to build on the grave and to paint something on the wall, so that, over time, all trace of the grave would be lost. This was to be so because, 'just as this small body

received quietude as a gift from God, so, in death, he preferred to preserve it until the general resurrection’.

In confirmation of his paternal affection and concern for his disciples, he blessed them with this short prayer: ‘May God our Father, Who has invited you into the eternal kingdom and glory through His only-begotten Son, our beloved Saviour Jesus Christ support you all and instruct you, my brethren, in His all-holy and redemptive will. May He grant you remission of sins, through the intercessions of the spotless Mother of God, the venerable Cross and all the Saints’.

The longed-for day arrived. On 12 April, 1219, the Lord called His beloved athlete to Himself. Our blessed father entered heaven ‘faithful unto death’ and received the crown of life.

In accordance with his wishes, his holy relics remained concealed and unknown. Hundreds of years passed and no-one knew the location of the grave. On 27 September, 1750, a monk realized that part of the wall of the hermitage was hollow. He was unable to resist the temptation. One night, he dug away at the wall and found the tombstone. He made to lift it but was repelled by divine force. When he recovered, he went to Abbot Athanasios and reported the incident. Together with other monks, the Abbot hurried to the spot and lifted the slab. The place was immediately filled with an ineffable aroma and they gazed upon the holy relics of the saint. They took them at once in procession, with incense, into the church, where they lie to this day, giving off fragrance and working miracles for those who approach them with faith.

The Monastery of Saint Neofytos was declared Stavropegic and administratively independent.

The saint is commemorated twice a year: on 24 January, the day he was saved from falling over the cliff; and 28 September, the day when his holy relics were discovered. This is in place of the date of his demise which falls within Great Lent.

Through his holy prayers, Christ our God, have mercy upon us and save us.

Amen