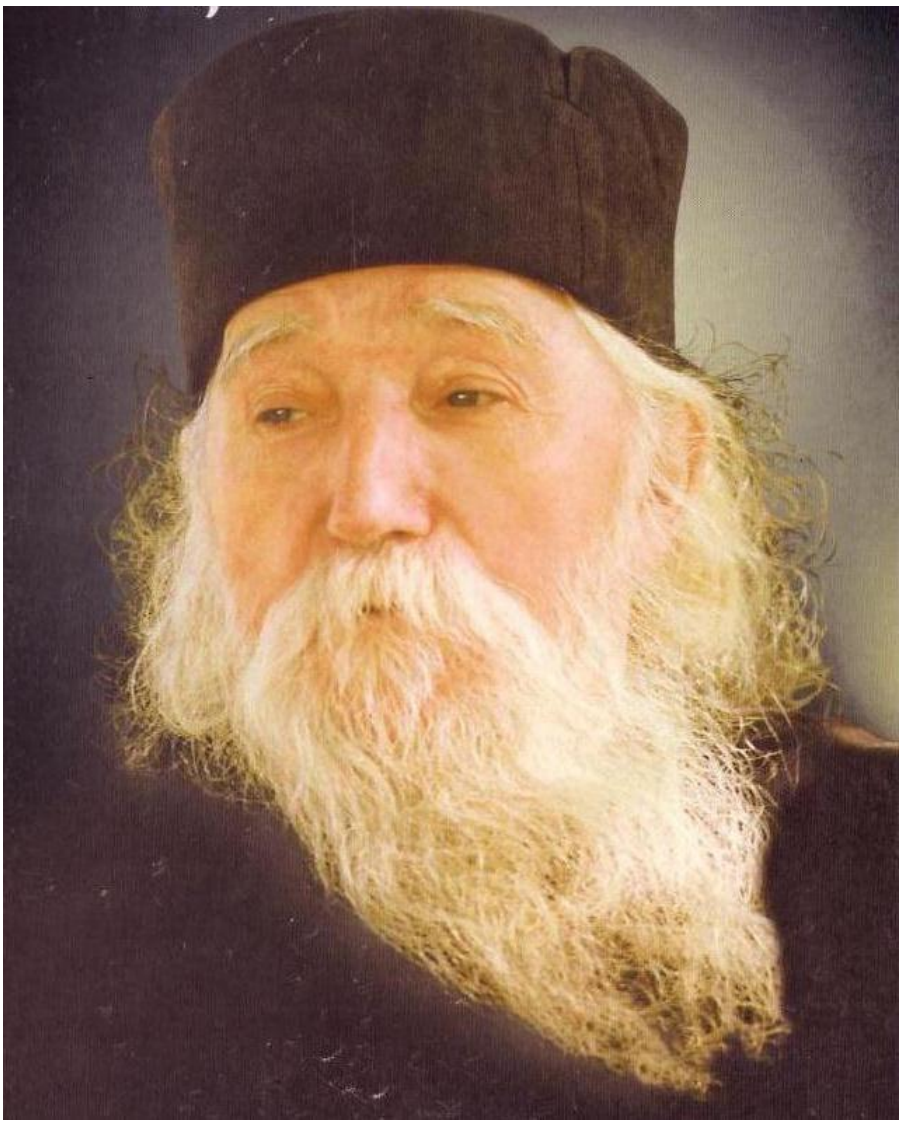
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Father Cleopa: The Elder of Romanian Orthodoxy

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Prologue from The Truth of Our Faith: A Discourse from Holy Scripture on the Teachings of True Christianity,

by Elder Cleopa of Romania

The name and personality of Elder Cleopa Ilie of Romania is today known not only in his homeland but also throughout the world. Father Cleopa was born in 1912 in the town of Soulitsa and district of Botosani into a pious village family and named Constantine. His parents were called Alexander and Anna and he was the ninth of their ten children. The religious upbringing that he and all his siblings received from childhood as well as their great inclination toward the monastic life were so strong that five of the ten children, along with their mother in her later years, took up the monastic life and were clothed in the monastic Schema.

His spiritual formation was owed first of all to the Great-schema hieromonk Father

Paisius Olarou of the Kozantsea-Bodosani skete who was for many years the Spiritual Father of his entire family. While spending his childhood years shepherding the family's sheep around the forests of Sihastria, the young Constantine, together with his two oldest brothers Basil and George, was being spiritually raised by their spiritual father hieromonk Paisius.

In the spring of 1929 the three brothers departed their father's house and entered the struggle of the monastic life in the monastery of Sihastria which at that time was under the spiritual direction of Archimandrite Ioannicius Moroi, considered one of the greatest and holiest of spiritual fathers in Moldavia at the time. After seven years of trials the young novice Constantine Ilie was tonsured a monk in 1936 with the name Cleopa and continued for a number of years his beloved service of shepherding sheep as the student of a virtuous monk, Fr. Galaction.

The more than ten years of beloved service close to the sheep and in the midst of the natural beauty of the mountains and forests of Moldavia was for Father Cleopa a veritable school of spiritual formation and advancement in humility, stillness and prayer. Surrounded by the majestic Carpathian Mountains, the breeze of silence gently blew across the hillside above the fertile valley of Sihastria, whispering to the aspiring hearts of the young brothers Basil and Constantine a reminder of the presence of the Creator. Day flowed into day as time passed imperceptibly. The brothers rarely left the fold and did not even perform the customary cycle of services. Rather, they sought the altar of God within themselves, continually raising their mind's eye to God through the sacred Prayer of the Heart.

It was here at the sheepfold that the soul of the future guide of the Romanian people would be formed. Elder Cleopa would later remember his nostalgic beginnings:

"In the years that I was shepherd of the skete's sheep together with my brothers, I had great spiritual joy. The sheepfold, the sheep – I live in quiet and solitude on the mountain, in the midst of nature; it was my monastic and theological school."

"It was then that I read Dogmatics by St. John Damascene and his Precise Exposition of the Orthodox Faith. How precious this time was to me! When the weather would warm up, we would put the yearling lambs and the rams in Cherry Meadow which was covered with green grass and surrounded by bushes. They would not stray from there. 'Stay put!' I'd say to them, and then I would read Dogmatics.

"When I would read something about the Most Holy Trinity, the distinctions

between angels, man and God, about the qualities of the Most Archimandrite Ioannicius Moroi, or when I read about Paradise and hell – the dogmas about which St. John Damascene wrote – I would forget to eat that day.

“There was an old hut in which I’d take shelter, and there someone from the skete would bring me food. And when I would return to the hut in the evening, I would ask myself, ‘Have I eaten anything today?’ All day long I was occupied with reading… When I was with the sheep and cattle I read St. Macarius of Egypt, St. Macarius of Alexandria, and the Lives of the Saints in my knapsack when I first arrived at the monastery. I would read and the day would pass in what seemed like an hour…

“I would borrow these books from the libraries of Neamts and Secu Monasteries and carry them with me in my knapsack on the mountain. After I had finished my prayer rule, I would take out these books of the Holy Fathers and read them next to the sheep until evening. And it seemed as if I would see Saints Anthony, Macarius the Great, St. John Chrysostom and the others; how they would speak to me. I would see St. Anthony the Great with a big white beard and in luminous appearance he would speak to me so that all he would say to me would remain imprinted on my mind, like when one writes on wax with one’s finger. Everything that read then I will never forget…”

In this university of obedience and silence, Father Cleopa read about one hundred theological and other works, starting with the theological, moral, liturgical, and hagiographic and ending with the patristic works of the great saints of our Church, not to mention, of course, the Horologion and Psalter. The most beloved book of all, however, was Holy Scripture. In addition to Scripture, Father Cleopa loved the lives of the Saints, the sayings of the desert fathers, The Ladder of Divine Ascent by Saint John Climacus, the ascetical works of Saints Isaac and Ephraim of Syria, as well as the writings of Saints Maximus the Confessor, Gregory Palamas, Symeon the New Theologian and others.

As he was endued with special reverence and much zeal for the divine, penetrating insight and comprehension of divine mysteries, and a powerful memory, in a short amount of time Father Cleopa was revealed as self-taught and unequalled among the monks of Romanian monasticism. In addition to these gifts of God, he was given the ability to teach and the strength of eloquence. In the beauty of the Moldavian ecclesiastical dialect, with the semi-archaic diction of an elder, and by means of preaching from Holy Scripture, selected patristic texts, and instructive ethical stories of all kinds, he presented the Truth to the people of God.

In 1942 Father Cleopa, although still a simple monk, temporarily assumed the governing of Sihastria in place of the ageing Abbot Ioannicius Moroi who was confined by sickness to his bed. In January of 1945 he was ordained deacon and priest and named abbot of Sihastria, serving in this capacity as the shepherd of souls for four years. In this short amount of time the Elder gathered around himself eighty monks and novices, built inside the walls of the monastery new housing for the monks, erected a winter chapel, restored the monastery to its original cenobitic status, organised it according to the traditional order of hesychastic monastic life, elevated important spiritual fathers and made many missionary journeys for the salvation of the faithful.

In 1947 the soviets occupied Romania, forcing King Michael to abdicate, and a communist dictatorship followed immediately. Monasteries were closed, coutless hierarchs, priests, monks, nuns and other faithful Orthodox were imprisoned, tortured, and murdered.

Thus far Sihastria had remained untouched in its remote location near the Carpathian Mountains. And although Abbot Cleopa was only thirty-six years old, he had already become a nationally known spiritual leader of the Christian faith. Now that he had been joined by his spiritual father from his youth, Elder Paisius Olaru, and had the support of Fr. Joel Gheorgiu, Sihastria was fast becoming the spiritual center of Orthodoxy for Romania and thus a threat to the communist government. By the grace which flowed from the eloquent mouth of Fr. Cleopa, a living faith was imparted to those who has ears to hear. The government now sought to dam the flow of faith by stopping Fr. Cleopa from speaking.

In May of 1948, on the feast of Ss. Constantine and Helen, Father Cleopa delivered a homily in which he said, “May God grant that our own rulers might become as the Holy King and Queen were, that the Church might be able to also commemorate them unto the ages.” The next day the state police took him to prison, leaving him in a bedless cell without bread or water for five days. After being released Father Cleopa, upon good counsel, fled to the mountains of Sihastria, where he lived in a in a hut mostly underground. There the elder prayed night and day seeking the help of God and the Theotokos.

During this time the elder was visited by the grace of God in the following way. Fr. Cleopa told his disciples that when he was building his hut, birds would come and sit on his head. The first time he served Liturgy on a stump in front of his hut, as he was communing the Holy Mysteries, a flock of birds came and gathered, such as he had never seen before. As he gazed upon them in astonishment, he noticed that

each one had the sign of the Cross marked on it forehead.

Another time, after the preparation for Liturgy and having read all the prayers, he set the Antimension on the tree stump and began the Liturgy with the exclamation, “Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto the ages of ages!” Again the birds appeared, and as they perched in the branch of the tree they began to sing in beautiful and harmonic voices. Fr. Cleopa asked himself, “What could this be?” And an unseen voice whispered to him, “These are your chanters on the cliros.” These signs and others encouraged the Elder immensely during his time of exile.

In the summer of 1949 Father Cleopa moved to the monastery of Slatina with thirty monks who were advanced in virtue, intent on renewing the spiritual life there as well. His interaction with the pious Christians living in the region of northern Moldavia increased his pastoral experience and missionary activity and gave him the opportunity to work with great zeal for the aims of the Gospel of Christ. In particular, his preaching, personal counsel and spiritual direction, compassion and love spread his renown throughout the country. Through these and other struggles for the salvation of men in Christ, Father Cleopa became the most celebrated and respected Abbot of the monasteries of Romania and a spiritual father with pre-eminent spiritual authority. Villager and intellectual, monk and layman, young and old, healthy and sick, bishop and priest – everyone found in Father Cleopa a true Spiritual Father. Father Cleopa was a model of life for all, ready to offer to everyone whatever he could, to counsel and give rest and lead all to Christ with amazing conviction and authority.

During this time the Metropolitan of Moldavia asked Father Cleopa to assume the spiritual guidance of most of the monasteries in the region: Putna, Moldovita, Riska, Sihastria, and the Sketes of Sihla and Rareau, according to the prototype of Slatina

In 1952 Father Cleopa was arrested briefly for a second time by the secret police. Having been released again, he and a monastic brother travelled once again to the mountains of Moldavia until the situation normalized. There in the mountains the elder battled the demons, lived side by side with wild animals and prayed night and day, receiving confession and communion from his co-struggling monastic brother.