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Elder Joseph of Vatopaidi: Papoulakis, Saint Joachim of Vatopaidi (part iv)

[Ξένες γλώσσες](#) / [In English](#) / [Saint Joachim of Vatopaidi](#) / [Θαύματα και θαυμαστά γεγονότα](#)

ὁ ἅγιος
ὁ ἐξ Ἰθάκης

Ἰωάννης
ὁ Παπδακῆς





JOHN'S NEW WAY OF LIFE

John was now a novice at Vatopaidi. Although he was quite young, he was not ignorant of worldly vanity. He began working at a very early age and, because of his profession, had travelled about the various ports of trade of that time. He came into direct contact with life's realities; consequently, he had no juvenile and dreamy fantasies about the world like others his age. For him, this was a solid base for the beginning of his new life, because he had acquired many spoils that would be useful in the upcoming combat and battles of the invisible warfare that the monastic life entails.

By our experience, we are convinced that it is not only a good intent and an innocent nature that are conducive to a good beginning toward a virtuous life, but also a strict and practical life full of difficulties, and we find the sacred words of the Psalms appropriate in the case of our exceptional John: "You have enlarged me

when I was in distress” (Ps. 4:2). Both his good nature and his moral character played an important role toward this end. We learned that even when he was nursing as an infant, he kept the fast days. In general, for human life as a whole, restrictions and afflictions are of benefit, whereas ease is disorienting.

The young novice began his trial period with zeal and ardour, and his experienced guides, with equally significant circumspection and prudence, led him along the patristic lines of our sacred tradition. With the active life as a “rung toward theory**” as the fathers put it, the zealous spiritual athlete gave himself over to submission and obedience as a basis for a love of labour, by which the meaning of the Cross is conveyed. These qualities, as well as the ensuing prayer, which nurtures the continual remembrance of God, became for him his “bread day and night” (Ps. 41:4 LXX). His continual confession to his spiritual father, which, according to the Fathers, is a precise revelation of the secret thoughts of the heart, soon brought about the holy sense of mourning, by which the knocking on the door through the “unutterable groaning” (see Rom. 8:25) of the crushed heart and the noetic supplications of grace uphold those who mourn.

Under the ever-watchful supervision of the wise elders, the ardent John was not slow to produce fruit “like a tree planted by the rivers of water that brings forth its fruit in its season” (Ps. 1:3). And in fact, he did bear the utmost fruit — “a hundredfold,” to use the expression of the Divine Scriptures. With his vigorous nature, bright mind, and unparalleled courage, he quickly succeeded in proving himself in his life as a novice to be worthy of the monastic tonsure, and was advanced by his elder to the Small Schema** as a monk. His name was changed from John to Joachim.

According to the Scripture, “when a lamp has been lit, it is not put in a secret place, or under a basket, but it is set on a lamp stand” (see Luke 11:33). Thus Father Joachim, after he was judged fit for the monastic habit, no longer remained hidden, but took on various responsible obedience** for his holy Monastery according to his abilities, and he distinguished himself in these tasks, in the opinion of his elders. Because of this, he was advanced to the monastic Great Schema**, and he took on even more important and responsible positions in the administration of the Monastery, continuously satisfying the brethren and everyone else. Besides his eloquence and other charismata, he had such gifts of kindness and persuasion that he was loved and welcomed wherever he happened to be. His pure disposition, coupled with the innate compassion that he always cultivated, compelled him to sympathize with the pain of the people of God. And at that time, this sympathy of his was overflowing because of the subjugation and the accompanying misfortunes

that were afflicting our martyred nation. His unquenchable zeal and his exacting observance of the monastic rules, in which he was instructed from the beginning by the scholarly and very discerning fathers of his monastery, rendered him a spiritual instrument and a recipient of divine illumination capable of discerning persons, things, and situations when his monastery installed him as steward, overseer, and adviser in whatever concerned its management and administration.



We think it proper, as we continue, to mention the ongoing policy and actions of

this eminent Monastery — because the extent of its activities should not be overlooked by the Greek people — particularly during the entire period of the people's subjugation, when dangers extended to the whole nation and everything was handed over without resistance. Throughout the Monastery's lengthy history, there were almost always scholarly and educated monks living the monastic life within it. It was natural then, that this combination of education with piety and virtue should link together the two chief virtues of love of God and love of neighbour, in which the personhood and destiny of man find their fulfilment. In this holy Monastery, it appears that there always was felt the need to apportion the activities and duties between these two salvific poles — that is, of twofold love — and never did it cease to stand in solidarity, to the extent that it was able, with the needs of the Church and the nation. Erudite men, brothers of the Monastery, educated in the dual instruction both of Grace and of external wisdom, were installed as metropolitans, bishops, archimandrites, preachers, and spiritual fathers, not only throughout the Greek lands, but even in the countries along the Danube. They supported the peoples, upheld the banner of faith, preserved the morals, and, especially, as unshakable bulwarks, restrained the papal tempest that raged against our Orthodox Faith. Guardians and helpers in the poverty of our people, they stood together with them in their pain, safeguarded family life, and paid off the debts of communities and cities, which the insatiable Islamic dragon never ceased to threaten. What then can we say about the non-existent education that left the nation sunk in illiteracy?

Beside the fact that there were scholarly monks who by various means took on the education of the children throughout the land, in 1748 the Monastery's desire to found a school within the Holy Mountain became a reality, and moreover, within its own precincts, where today its ruins bear witness to its former glory. In this school, which was rather a Theological Academy, students were accepted from the entire Balkan Peninsula and our nation in general. The school's deeper aim, of course, was the regeneration of Romanity FN ** and the unity of all the Orthodox peoples within the Ottoman Empire. This outlook produced results, for the school also promoted the Greek language and a classical education; its fruits were splendid, and its harvest bountiful. Eminent professors and adept scholars taught there, with Evgenios Voulgaris at the top of the list. Once, however, this high purpose became evident, the powerful, as always, sowed their weeds and began their machinations; as their crowning achievement, they even destroyed the building. As a diversionary tactic, they created the theory of Pan-Slavism, which plagued and disturbed the peace of our nation.

The purpose of this slight diversion from our story of the Saint was simply to show

the long-standing social contribution of this sacred monastery, a policy that was continued by blessed Joachim Papoulakis, and, moreover, during the most apt times of upheaval. I repeat here verbatim the characterization of the Saint by his first biographer, the devout physician Panos D. Raftopoulos, who was well-acquainted with his life and work through eyewitness accounts.

“Having all his hope ever fixed in God, he never wavered before any danger. He walked tirelessly from place to place, and at a good pace; no one was able to keep up with him. Having great discretion and insight with regards to activities, he was appointed a counsellor for the Monastery by the Abbot, a position he held until he was sent out from it as a missionary for the liberty of the nation.”

The days of the revolution were drawing near, and the entire nation was in a state of preparation. The Church, with its clerics at the forefront, made her presence known. Emotions ran high at the monasteries, and all those initiated into the struggle — orators, priests, and monks — each took on his responsibilities in the area where his presence was needed. At that time, Vatopaidi Monastery provided both material and human aid, as in the case of the indefatigable blessed Joachim, “fervent in spirit” (Rom. 12:11) and an ever-ready supporter of our shaken people. Saint Joachim, the ascetic and diligent monk, the former steward of his sacred monastery, was re-assigned to the protection of the distressed population, and all his attention was given to the consolation and support of those living under persecution by the Turkish savagery.

This tireless labourer of compassion and love moved about from place to place, wherever our stricken people called him, and gave himself with zeal as a support and instructor. He consoled, he taught, and he constantly bolstered the morale of the people, especially of the non-combatant civilians, who were driven to wander about without food or shelter.

At times, he boarded vessels and served as a sailor, trans-ported food and other necessities to those who had fled the fierce carnage of the oppressors, who were trying with all the viciousness that characterized them to quell the revolutionary movement. In the Ionian Islands — the islands along the western shore of Greece — he rescued entire families from certain annihilation; more importantly, however, he raised the religious morale of the people, who were endangered by the lack of goods combined with the lavish promises and assurances of the Turks.

Once when he was just off the coast of the Peloponnesus, and within shouting distance of shore, a little after nine o’clock at night, he heard desperate cries from some people who were in danger from an attack by the Turkish army. The night

was dark, with only faint moonlight, and the situation was critical. There was no chance of help from others, and those imperilled by the enemy were mostly women and children. Aboard the vessel, Blessed Papoulakis was shaken by the frightful event. He appealed with faith and a wounded heart for divine help, particularly to our Lady Theotokos, whom he especially loved and revered from the monastery of his repentance, and rushed with all the speed at his command to the scene of the drama. The miracle of faith happened; even though the enemy turned their weapons toward the boat and the bullets were falling like rain, he managed to collect all who were there without anyone being lost. He took up one of the oars of the boat for defence, turning to flight — by the Grace of God — the thick ranks of the spineless enemy.

to be continued...