

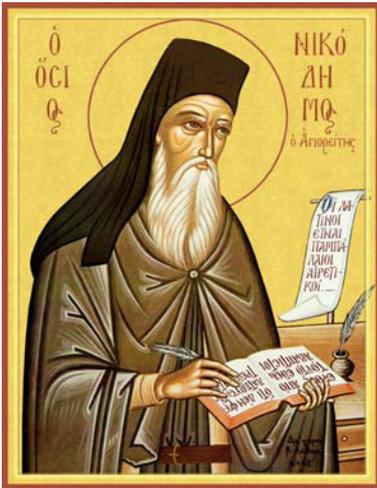


On the Occasion of the Bicentennial of His Blessed Repose

The Perennial Teacher of our Orthodox Faith, Saint Nicodemos the Hagiorite

by Bishop Klemes of Gardikion

Exactly two hundred years ago, at dawn on July 14, 1809 (Old Style), a truly multi-faceted diamond of Grace, the great and never-silent Teacher of Orthodoxy and the Greek Nation, Saint Nicodemos the Hagiorite, reposed in the Lord on the Holy Mountain, at the age of some sixty years.



A Grace-endowed teacher, who benefited and continues to benefit monastics and laypeople in both word and deed, the Saint avails us of the essential wisdom of the Holy Fathers.

Every teacher is first a pupil. Thus our Saint, who was born on Naxos in 1749 (his original name being Nicholas Kallibourtzes), was educated at a school on his native island and subsequently at the *Evangelike* School in Smyrna. Owing to his astounding acumen, love of learning, diligence,

and boundless memory, within a short time the classical education of that era became his inviolable possession.

At the age of twenty-six, he was secretary to the Bishop of his island, with a brilliant future in the Church marked out for him. Yet, it was precisely then that he began to receive instruction in the true philosophy according to Christ. He became acquainted with the Athonite Fathers Gregory, Niphon, and Arsenios, who had taken refuge on Naxos, and through them he came into direct contact with the sacred activity of wakefulness (νήψις) and unceasing prayer. His heart, athirst for God, was burning with the love of God. Thus, he sought refuge in Hydra with the *Kollyvades* Saint Macarios of Corinth and Elder Sylvester, who had been exiled from the Holy Mountain, so that he might drink of the Living Water. They initiated him into the meaning of authentic ecclesiastical Tradition and the true Hesychastic and Eucharistic life.

The future teacher could no longer be held back. He withdrew in 1775 to Holy Athos, the Garden of the *Panagia*, in order to combine—initially at the Dionysiou Monastery—cultivation of the inner man through asceticism with communion in the Holy Spirit through the Church's cycle of worship.

After only a few years, now as the Monk Nicodemos and still under instruction, the Saint began to teach others through writing. At the urging of Saint Macarios of Corinth, he edited the celebrated and classic works of Orthodox spirituality, the *Philokalia*, the *Evergetinos*, and *Concerning Frequent Communion of the Immaculate Mysteries of Christ*.

Although the Divine teacher became distinguished as a writer while still very young, he had, at the same time, an ardent desire to be taught by God. He was aware, from all that he had read and all that he had been taught, that such instruction could not be attained save through true obedience and mental prayer. Although he had tasted of these, he yearned for perfection. For this reason, when he learned that the Russian *Starets*, Saint Paissy (Velichkovsky), had a distinguished reputation in Moldavia as an unerring Elder to thousands of monks and a consummate teacher of mental prayer, he hastened with unrestrained zeal to meet him, so that he, too, might be num-

bered among the Elder's elect *Synodeia* and might enjoy the wisdom of his spiritual experience, a wisdom informed by the *Philokalia*.

However, after encountering obstacles on this journey, he returned to his life of asceticism, study, and writing on the Holy Mountain. By means of his prodigious literary oeuvre, which encompasses at least a hundred well-known works, he engaged in hermeneutics, theology, hagiography, and hymnography, codified the Sacred Canons, refuted heresy—especially that of the Latins—guided, admonished, and taught.

This blessed man became a magnet for clergy and laity, and yet he was disquieted, as he was impeded thereby both from writing and from mental prayer. Concerning this blessed and divinizing activity, he taught that which he himself put into practice:

Therefore, my brother Christian, when you withdraw your mind from all the things of this world—I mean pleasures, glory, and money—and bring it into your heart, and when, after finding there what is called the inward speech in the heart, you utter therewith this single-phrased prayer with fervent faith, hope and love—that is, ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me’—holding your breath a little; then you attain to the guarding of the mind. For that warmth, which is engendered by frequent repetition of the Holy Name of Jesus, scourges and mows down the demons like a two-edged sword and does not allow them to put their unseemly thoughts into your mind. Hence, St. John of the Ladder said: ‘scourge your enemies with the Name of Jesus’¹

In Saint Nicodemus, love for God functioned at all times in a harmonious and inseparable combination with love for the edification of his brother Christians—not only his contemporaries, but also those of future generations—through his precious writings.

Love, however, is put to the test. According to the Saints, Our Lord shows clearly, by the very structure of His Beatitudes, that when we attain to the perfection of virtue (see the first seven Beatitudes: St. Matthew 5:3-9), harsh external persecutions, reproaches, and temptations unfailingly follow as a test (see the final two Beatitudes: St. Matthew 5:10-11).

Since the Saint was a genuine Hesychast, who lived and breathed Christ, he could not but yearn to be united with the Lord unceasingly

¹ *Heortodromion* [Commentary on the Great Feasts] (Venice: 1836), p. 19.

in the Divine Eucharist. Consequently, he could not but strive with all of his might to suggest what is fitting, in general, for the plenitude of the Church and be solicitous to kindle the love of Christians for the Divine Mysteries. He wisely teaches that

Although Confession and satisfaction [the fulfillment of a rule (*kanonas*) given by a spiritual Father or Confessor—*Trans.*] can forgive sins, nonetheless Holy Communion is necessary for the remission of sins. Just as one first extracts the maggots from a malodorous wound, then cuts off the rotten parts, and subsequently applies ointment to heal it, since, if he leaves it, it reverts to its former state, so the same thing happens with sin: Confession extracts the maggots, satisfaction cuts off the rotten parts, and subsequently Divine Communion acts as an ointment and heals the wound of sin. For, if he does not receive Divine Communion, the wretched sinner reverts to his original state, and ‘the last state of that man is worse than the first.’²

Likewise, he teaches that

If someone deprives us for just one day of eating bodily foods, we become upset and impatient and it strikes us as being a great evil; but if we deprive ourselves of the spiritual and heavenly fare of the Divine Mysteries once, or twice, or for whole months, we do not consider it a bad thing. O the great lack of discrimination which today’s Christians make between bodily and spiritual things! For they embrace the former wholeheartedly, but for the latter they have no desire whatsoever.³

However, the ignorance, lack of education, evil habits, and also the animus of many who were opposed to the aforementioned Divinely-wise words of the Saint became the occasion for a great deal of harassment, slander, and persecution for him. Nonetheless, the Holy Nicodemos, forgiving, enduring, and praying, did not give way. On the contrary, he defended himself through his outstanding *Confession of Faith*—a confession of truth—thereby curbing the censorious attitude of his accusers

² *Concerning Frequent Communion of the Immaculate Mysteries of Christ*, translated in Hieromonk Patapios and Archbishop Chrysostomos, *Manna from Athos: The Issue of Frequent Communion on the Holy Mountain in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2006), pp. 125-126.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

After suffering further tribulations from false brethren, and also from illnesses, Saint Nicodemos reposed in the Lord with the beloved Bridegroom Christ on his lips, in his breath, in his mind, in his heart, and in the whole of his sanctified and Christified being. He continues to instruct and chasten us, in order to make us partakers of Christ's Heavenly Glory and Kingdom. Let us study him, heed him, and obey him. Amen.

Phyle, Attica
Monday, July 14/27, 2009
Commemoration of St. Nicodemos the Hagiorite

