

# The Holy Hieromartyr Seraphim, Archbishop of Phanarion and Neochorion\*

(Commemorated on December 4)

St. Seraphim hailed from Pezoula (Mp[B]ezela), Agraphon [in Greece].<sup>1</sup> His parents, Sopronios and Maria, raised him on the spring waters of the Faith from his earliest childhood days. Accordingly, they enrolled him in the [local] “school of sacred letters.”<sup>2</sup> The young Seraphim, even when he was not attending school but staying at his paternal home, spent the greater part of his time in the reading of Scriptures and the lives of the Saints, at the same time never being absent from Divine Services.



When he got older, he ceased showing interest in any of the matters of daily life and, seeking a place to pursue the ascetic life of hesychasm, ended up in the Holy Monastery of Our Lady the *Theotokos*, or the Holy Monastery of the Cold Spring (subsequently called the Monastery at the Crown),<sup>3</sup> where he remained and was tonsured a monk, eagerly imitating the most virtuous of his brothers. Over time, his fellow monastics, having seen all of his own virtues (fasting, watchfulness, humility, and love), proposed that the Saint, who accepted, be ordained, initially as a Reader, thereafter a Deacon, and finally as a Presbyter (Hieromonk).



The forests of the Agrapha area in Central Greece.

Such was the esteem in which the faithful and the monastics held his person, that after the passing of the Metropolitan of Phanarion and Neochorion,<sup>4</sup> Seraphim was elected as the new Bishop. The Saint, assuming the care and guidance of so many souls, redoubled his struggles, caring for his Flock and, indeed, frequently calling himself a lowly servant, all the while ardently keen to be found worthy of the crown of martyrdom, something that was not long in coming to fruition.

During this period, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Metropolitan of Larissa,<sup>5</sup> Dionysios the Philosopher,<sup>6</sup> was preaching revolution [against the Ottoman Empire] in the regions of Epirus and Thessaly, which met with no success, while the Metropolitan, as the one accountable, was in the end tortured to death by the Ottomans. Coincidentally with this activity, Seraphim travelled to Phanarion, Karditsa, to give the designated periodic tributes to the Aghas.<sup>7</sup> The Ottomans, believing that Seraphim was also participating in the incitement of revolution, attacked him, at first verbally, suggesting in particular that he renounce his faith, so as to escape punishment and to eliminate their suspicions. After the spirited denial of the Saint, the Turkish mob carried him off to Hamouz bey, who was the Pasha of Phanarion.<sup>8</sup>



A panoramic view of the Holy Monastery of the Crown, built by the Byzantine Emperor John II Comennos in the early twelfth century.



The main gate to the road leading to the Holy Monastery of the Crown, near the village of Mesenikolas.

The Pasha began in a calm way to speak with the Saint, saying that even if he had been deceived by the revolutionary Dionysios, he could yet be delivered by becoming a Moslem. The Saint defended the truth of his words, resolutely insisting that he had not involved himself in the revolutionary movement and that he had no intention of ever abandoning “my sweetest Master and God, Jesus Christ,” as his words are preserved *verbatim* in the *Synaxaristes*.<sup>9</sup> Then the brave Bishop continued: “For even if I were to suffer a myriad of deaths for His Holy Name, I would do so with joy and gladness. Therefore, O Sovereign, strike, cut, do whatever is in your power!”

Thereupon the Agha commanded that he be beaten mercilessly and that his nose be cut off. While the Saint was enduring all of this, he continually gave thanks to God that he had been deemed worthy to be martyred for His name. Afterwards, Seraphim was imprisoned for a day without food and water. In jail, he rejoiced and praised God, thanking Him for the sufferings that he was found worthy to withstand, to the glory of God, asking God for the strength to bear his approaching martyrdom. The next day, the Ottoman ruler ordered that Seraphim

be brought to him again. Hamouz, employing new threats, tried to change the Saint’s mind.

But St. Seraphim restated ever more definitively his decision not to deny Jesus Christ. So, the Agha ordered that he be beaten more viciously. The torturers continued their inhuman efforts, stretching his hands and feet with ropes, simultaneously placing a large stone on his abdomen, and cutting him continually with knives. Then they gave him water with dirt and bile to drink, yet the face of the Saint was radiant, as though he were taking part in some banquet instead of being tortured. Even his torturers looked on the Saint with admiration.

Near a cypress tree in the vicinity of the market place in Phanarion, the Saint gave up his spirit, mortally wounded in his entrails. (He endured martyrdom by impalement; i.e., they skewered his body with a stake). This was on December 4, 1601. The holy body remained there for some days, affixed to the stake with which he was tortured, but his body did not decompose. On the contrary, it looked like a live body and emitted an ineffable fragrance, producing wonderment and contrition among the faithful and consternation among the Ottomans. The



A procession in the village of Mesenikolas with the skull of St. Seraphim of Phanarion and Neochorion.

Pasha refused the request of the Christians that his body be released to them. After a number of days, he ordered that the head of the Saint be cut off and sent to Trikala,<sup>10</sup> along with other heads of revolutionary fighters aligned with Metropolitan Dionysios and common criminals, as well.

There, all of the heads were placed on poles, creating a macabre forest, in order to set an example for those of other religions (non-Moslems<sup>11</sup>) in the area. The Abbot of the Holy Monastery of Dousiko,<sup>12</sup> located near Trikala, gave a certain Albanian Christian fifty silver coins to steal the head from the place where it was under guard, with the goal of keeping it as a treasure in his monastery. The attempted seizure of the Relic was detected by the guards, who angrily pursued the Christian, who in turn quickly ran away with the Relic. Nearing a bridge on the River Peneios (Peneus), he saw that his pursuers were dangerously close to him. So he threw the holy Relic into the river and fled with haste from the Turks, who had stopped and were observing the foregoing scene. A short distance from the bridge, two fishermen, who had built a small dam in the bed of the Peneios, miraculously found



The reliquary holding the miracle-working skull of St. Seraphim of Phanarion and Neochorion.

the holy Relic and, because they knew him, reverently delivered it to the aforementioned Abbot.

Shortly thereafter, the Abbot of the Holy Monastery at the Crown asked for the Relic from the monks at Dousiko, since St. Seraphim had been a monk at their monastery, remunerating them the fifty silver coins that had been paid to the Christian who was sent to steal them. From that time on, the skull of the Saint has been kept there as a treasure, and to this day it is fragrant and frees all of those who seek the intercession of the Saint from every disease and adverse thing.

\* From the Greek website «Ἀκτίνες», 3 Dec. 2012.

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## Notes

(those of the translator, Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna)

1. Pezoula (Πεζούλα, or Μπ[Β]ezela (Μπεζήλα), is a small village in Central Greece, dating at least to the sixteenth century. To this day, the villagers support themselves principally by farming and raising livestock. The Agraphon or Agrapha (Ἀγραφών, Ἄγραφα) area, where it is situated, is now within the regional districts of Euvrytania (Εὐρυτανία) and Karditsa (Καρδίτσα). These districts are among the most mountainous and heavily forested parts of Greece. The name Agraphon derives from the Greek word “unwritten” and refers to the fact that its inhabitants, hostile to the Ottoman authorities, were never fully incorporated into the Ottoman Empire, many of them remaining unenrolled (hence, “unwritten”) in the imperial tax rolls.

2. The “school of sacred letters (learning)” has its roots in the catechetical schools of the early Church. By the seventeenth century they were, in Greece, essentially grammar schools, most often associated with monastic communities. It is certainly possible that St. Seraphim attended one of the “κρυφὰ σχολεῖα” (*krypha scholeia*), where, under the Ottoman Empire, Greeks maintained the Greek language and religion under the difficulties of Islamic domination. Today, making reference to the *stated* official policy of the Ottomans and in a spirit of portraying the life of the Greek millet (from the Arabic word “*millah*,” or “nation,” and applied to the captive Greeks as a distinct ethnic group—very often disparagingly) as reasonably benevolent, some scholars argue that Greeks were allowed to establish schools and instructional institutions and that these secret schools, as well as resistance to the education of females, were largely a myth. In fact, the infrequent funding of Greek schools under the Turkish Yoke (*despite* official policy), capricious policies of local imperial administrators, and the views of extremist Islamic circles impeded efforts by the Greeks to establish schools openly, to maintain their own language, and to catechize their children. In areas of Greek Macedonia, where Ottoman rule persisted into the twentieth century, many Greeks, and especially women, have testified to the fact that they were educated in secret schools, just as a great deal of oral history—not to mention a plethora of Martyrs—from the whole of the Turkish occupation of Greece suggests that the Islamic occupation of the country was far less “benevolent” than historical revisionists would suggest. The witness of the barbarity of militant Islamic extremism today also seems to support much of what putatively objective historians for some years dismissed as exaggerations of the deprivations and persecution that Greek Orthodox Christians often suffered under their Ottoman rulers.

3. This monastery, actually dedicated to the Birth of the Mother of God, is now called the Monastery at the Crown (Ἱερά Μονή Κορώνης [Hiera Mone Korones]), from the Greek “κορώνα” [*korona*], or “crown”), since, looking up at it from the plain of Thessaly, the monastery crowns the surrounding mountains. It is located near the small village of Mesenikolas (Μεσενικόλας), about 20 kilometres from the city of Karditsa, capital of the regional district of Karditsa. The monastery, still a place of significant pilgrimage by the local population, is said to have been founded in 1123 by the Byzantine Emperor John II Comnenos.

4. The town of Phanarion (Φανάριον), or Phanari (Φανάρι), and the village Neochorion (Νεοχώριον), or Neochori (Νεοχώρι), are in the regional district of Karditsa. Neochorion served, at the time, as the diocesan center of the Metropolitan See of Phanarion and Neochorion.

5. Today, the largest city in the region of Thessaly.

6. An erudite churchman who studied medicine and the sciences in the West (at the Universities of Padua and

Venice, in Italy) and in Constantinople, Metropolitan Dionysios was martyred in 1611, at the age of seventy, in Ioannina (a large city in north-western Greece). The Turks flayed him alive. According to his biographers, after his skin was removed, it was filled with straw and his effigy was paraded around the city in a barbarous sort of post-mortem *auto-da-fé*.

7. The Ottoman imperial officers to whom “gifts,” monetary and otherwise, were paid as a sign of submission by the captive Greeks, often exacted as a price for protection.

8. “Pasha” was a title given to government officials of important status. “Bey” (usually appearing after an individual's name and without capitalization) was likewise a title of honor for Ottoman officials of higher status.

9. The name given to the standard Greek collection (in numerous editions) of the lives of the Orthodox Saints.

10. Trikala is located in north-western Thessaly.

11. The Greek “γκιαοῦρηδες” is formed from the Turkish word for non-believers and the faithful of non-Islamic religions.

12. The Holy Monastery of Dousiko (Ἱερά Μονή Δουσίκου [Hiera Mone Dousikou]), or more accurately, the Holy Monastery of St. Bessarion (Ἱερά Μονή Ἁγίου Βησσαρίωνος [*Hiera Mone Hagiou Bessarionos*]), was founded in 1530. The nearby village of Dousiko (from a word of Slavic origin) lends its name to the popular appellation for the monastery.