

Archimandrite EFREM OF VATOPEDI, *Elder Joseph of Vatopedi – A Smile from Eternity*, Bonifacio Publishing House, Romania, 2021, 607 pp.

In 2021, a long-awaited book appeared at Bonifacio Publishing House, namely the extensive biography of Elder Joseph of Vatopedi, the one who was, is, and will remain the Spiritual Father and the one who renewed Vatopedi Monastery, a book signed by the biographer and his direct disciple, Elder Efrem of Vatopedi, the one who inherited the monastery from the hands of the pious Joseph mentioned above. The book presents in detail, in 607 pages, the whole life of Elder Joseph, respectively the years of his childhood; the seeing of The Living Christ; being tonsured as a monk at Stavrovuni Monastery; moving to the Holy Mountain of Aton at the Hermitage of Saint Anne the Little, then to the New Hermitage; the spiritual revival of the Cutlumuş monastery; the departure to Cyprus (*the Island of the Saints*), where he spiritually strengthened the monastic life, due to which he had great temptations which he overcame in Christ; the return to the Holy Mountain; the spiritual and administrative reorganization of the Vatopedi Monastery; and his pious coming asleep in the Lord.

From the outset, we must emphasize that the main charism of Gheron Joseph of Vatopedi was the *charism of theology* (he not only knew academic theology but moreover, embodied it in everyday life, being in this way an empirical model for his spiritual sons, monks and not only), along with, of course, the gifts of clairvoyance, before-sight, prophecy, discernment, and other. In the following, I will briefly present some aspects related to the *theology* of Elder Joseph of Vatopedi.

In regards to the divine *grace*, as a result of recounting his spiritual experiences, which he presented not to boast, but only to strengthen the monks in *the unseen war*, we find that

“He seldom mentioned his spiritual experiences. He always had as guide his spiritual Father (St. Joseph the Hesychast or the Spileot) or the Holy Fathers.¹ He said, «It is difficult to distinguish divine grace, but it is even more difficult to conceal it». Therefore, he emphasized: «Our fathers were not like us (from humility and nobility he said, *us*, referring to himself also), who as soon as we experience a small spiritual endearment, we trumpet it. Although they were at so high stature, they knew that these things were God’s, not theirs. Theirs were the other». By the words *theirs were the other* he understood the human passions and weaknesses, which they had overcome by prayer, by askesis and by acquiring the holy virtues” (p. 174).

The pious Joseph fulfilled until his death the virtue of *alienation*, understood as the non-attachment or non-clinging to any person or thing. By this, he sought that the whole heart to be given entirely to God, to the Mother of God and to the Saints. Therefore,

“as he had learned from St. Joseph and the Holy Fathers, he did not cling with his heart to anything or anyone. Thus, he avoided keeping in touch with relatives, even though their family was united by a deep love. But he rejoiced greatly when he heard of them living in watchfulness, conducting a Christian way of life in America, where they had settled ”(p. 175).

Discernment was a great virtue for Elder Joseph, which he practiced in regard to his life, but also in regard to the very useful advices he offered to his spiritual sons. Relating to this, in a letter dated October 8, 1959, he wrote about the care of physical health:

“And I feel that you are suffering a lot and that you have lost a lot of weight. Why are you doing this and not taking care of yourself at all? Do you not know that your body will become weak and you will then lose your spiritual work also? Our body is a weapon. If we break it, we will be taken as slaves, because

¹ From here we understand that the whole life of the Pious Joseph of Vatopedi was ecclesiastically and patristically founded.

we will no longer offer any resistance. There are many of us here, and if one falls, the other will take care of him; but of you, who have no place of your own yet, who will take care of you there? Don't be indifferent to your health, later you will realize that this is also a lack of measure! I remember the stories of Saint Nectarius, who told and wrote to the nuns (from Aegina) how to take care of their health, following the advice he gave to his flock. From this advices had taken great benefit our forever remembered Elder (it is about Saint Joseph the Hesychast) and so he was convinced to receive medical care. But it was too late when he read them"(p. 176).

Academic theology was much appreciated by Elder Joseph. In this sense, his disciple, Elder Efrem, characterized him on this point, saying: "Elder (Joseph) was not indifferent to the academic (theological) knowledge that those who serve the Church as clerics *have the duty to possess*. With the enlightenment and spiritual openness that characterized him, he saw *the benefits of sound academic theological knowledge*" (p. 305). Proof of Elder Joseph's appreciation of academic theology is evidenced by a letter dated October 30, 1979, addressed to Father Athanasius (the current Metropolitan Athanasius of Limassol in Cyprus, one of the most well-known and beloved spiritual Fathers today, globally) letter in which we can read:

"I try, through our metropolitan here, to convince the Sinod to decide *the practical existence* of the Theological Academy, because without it, unfortunately, nothing will be done here, on our island. (...) At least the young people who want to deepen their theological studies will not have to endure hardships by going to abroad Universities, and some of them may even be wrongly educated "(p. 306).

From here we see the fact that Elder Joseph of Vatopedi insisted that an Orthodox Theological Academy be established in Cyprus, he being the main spiritual founder of this great desideratum.

The spiritual *theological experiences* he had, make us understand that Elder Joseph of Vatopedi († July 1, 2009) was a Saint of our days.

Regarding spiritual experiences, he would humbly state the following:

“I am not proud that I have acquired something, because I have been negligent in my monastic life². However, by His grace, The Lord gave it to me, and I tasted from all the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven, which our Lord speaks of when He says, «The kingdom of God is within you» (Luke 17, 21). If I didn’t say that, I’d be lying. We have seen and felt life that supercedes nature, as we see those under the senses and undoubtedly believe in their existence. I lived next to holy man at Stavrovuni Monastery. Then I was an apprentice in the Holy Mountain at the feet of this great brave man (Saint Joseph the Hesychast) who is, in my opinion, the one responsible for the renewal of contemporary Eastern monasticism” (p. 373).

Regarding the virtue of *obedience* characteristic of the spiritual life and at the same time its foundation, he would confess:

“The whole world does not have as much power as the blessing of your spiritual Father. Did you receive your Father’s blessing? Don’t be afraid, wherever you go. He who obeys his spiritual Father follows Christ, Who has obeyed His Father. And The One who is followed, Christ, is obliged to bless the one who is following Him. (...) If a certain thing is God’s will, it will be told to you by your spiritual Father. The mouth of your Father is the will of God. Many times we, as spiritual Fathers, can even make a mistake. But for you, who are obedient, it will work out for the good. It will not work out to a bad ending. Out of obedience, it will never spring out something bad, because to be obedient is to follow Christ” (pp. 451-452).

On the *fight against evil thoughts*, the Pious Joseph confessed:

“When we are attacked, let us immediately bring the mind to its place, thinking of our calling. All these attacks come to mind as an image, to lure us, to arouse us, to provoke us. We grab the

² He said this out of humility. In reality he was a contemporary Holy Father.

thought that is foundational. Which is this? That we are built *in the image and likeness* (of God). As people we belong to the likeness of God. We are the image and likeness of the One Who built us and Who now receives to be named and to Whom we say, and to prove to be our Father. Now we know. With this as a foundation, we will grab any bait that hits the screen our imagination and say: «Wait! You're ours or you're one of our opponents?»» (p. 522).

From the above we observe that Elder Joseph of Vatopedi (the one whose bodily face smiled a few hours after his's coming asleep and until the moment of his burial) was not only a lover of *academic theology*, but also it's supporter and defender when it was needed. Moreover, he lived *theology* in an existential way, as a charism received from God as a result of his aschesis which superceeds nature. As such, for Elder Joseph of Vatopedi *theology* was not something only theoretical, *it was his way of living in Christ*.

Ph.D. student Ionuț MÎLCOMETE