

BISHOP SPYRIDON OF TRIMYTHUS

(1888 - 1963)

In His loving providence, God often permits many trials and temptations to come upon those that love Him. Saint Isaac of Syria writes: "Affliction willingly borne brings to light the proof of love."

This "proof of love" is twofold. It is a proof of God's love for us, for "the Lord disciplines him whom He loves and chastises every son whom He receives" (Heb. 12:6). Likewise, tribulations test our love for God. "That is why the saints were proved by tribulations for Christ's love, and not by ease," says Saint Isaac. This is how Job triumphed. This is how the martyrs prevailed over their tormentors. This is how the confessors of true piety and Orthodoxy won their crowns and gained eternal glory.

In this life, there can be no other way for those who love God. Saint Paul is very emphatic about this: "If ye be without chastisement...then ye are illegitimate offspring and not sons" (Heb. 12:8).

Even in our own perverse and unbelieving generation, God has given us splendid examples of individuals who have suffered afflictions and calumny for the sake of truth and righteousness. In the Soviet Union, how many millions were sent to the death camps cynically accused of engaging in "anti-Soviet propaganda" — that is, preaching a sermon, or chanting a church hymn? Saint Nectarios of Aegina, too, is an example of a remarkable and holy hierarch who even in his old age became the victim of the very basest sort of slander.

Bishop Spyridon of Trimythus, also, is such an example. He was born in 1888 in Cydonia of Aetoloacarnanía. His name in the world was George Pasios, and his parents, Spyridon and Maria, saw to it that their gifted son was reared "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." In 1907, at the age of nineteen, George departed for the Holy Mountain. After a short time, he joined the brotherhood of the Monastery of Xenophon. With the passage of the canonical trial period of three years, he received the Great and Angelic Schema and was re-named Gideon monk.

Very quickly, the fathers of the monastery came to esteem the young Father Gideon, who impressed all with his modesty, obedience, humility and self-denial. In time, he was ordained to the priesthood, and then, after fourteen years in the community, upon the demise of the abbot, Father Gideon was chosen by the brotherhood to be the new superior. Thus, at the

age of thirty-three, in the year 1921, Father Gideon took upon himself the yoke of spiritual fatherhood.

He did not remain abbot for long, however. In 1924, the Ecumenical Patriarchate sought to coerce the Athonite community into changing to the Gregorian calendar, even though this calendar had already been condemned by three Pan-Orthodox Councils. Seeing that the secular authorities were determined to force the monasteries to commemorate the innovating Ecumenical Patriarchate, Father Gideon submitted his resignation as abbot. He withdrew to the Skete of Kafsokalývia, where he remained for three years. Then, seeking greater solitude for silence and prayer, he went to the wilderness of Saint Basil and the hermitage of Saint Peter of Athos, where he remained for another seven years.

By this time, the persecution against the old calendarists had reached fever pitch in Greece. Unleashed by the new calendar church authorities, the police openly harassed, jailed and even physically beat both clergy and laypeople. There were even incidents where Orthodox Christians, including a young mother, were clubbed to death in Christian Greece. Their crime? Attending a service held according to the traditional ecclesiastical calendar.

At the invitation of the priest-monk Matthew (later to become Archbishop of the "Matthewite" old calendarists), Father Gideon came to Athens to help strengthen and encourage the Christians. This was in 1934. It was during this period also that the old calendarists began organizing their monastic communities. The convent at Keratéa was established and eventually came to have some 500 nuns. At about two hours walking distance from the convent, in Kuvará of Attica, the men's monastery of the Holy Transfiguration was founded and, at its peak, had some ninety to one hundred fathers in its brotherhood. It was in this monastery, on May 31, 1941, that Father Gideon was elected to the abbacy.

But here, too, his tenure as abbot lasted only a short three years.

What happened?

One day, in the spring of 1944, a group of monastics appeared at Archbishop Matthew's residence at the convent. The head of the group, Father Victor Matthew, one of the senior fathers of the monastery, requested an audience with the Archbishop concerning a "serious matter."

Archbishop Matthew welcomed the fathers into his quarters and asked them the purpose of their visit.

"Your Beatitude, we wish to speak to you about Father Gideon," replied Father Victor.

"What about Father Gideon?"

"It's a very serious matter, Your Beatitude. All of us here are ready to testify, in writing if necessary, that Father Gideon is immoral. He has an unbecoming and perverted fondness for young men."

Archbishop Matthew was thunderstruck. He had always revered Father Gideon greatly, and knew him for his strictness in fasting, his vigils in prayer, and his spiritual diligence. The charges were incredible. Indeed, they were preposterous.

"No, Your Eminence, everything we are saying is true, and we are willing to swear on it and put it in writing.

The Archbishop found himself in an impasse. On the one hand, he knew and loved Father Gideon and respected him for the strictness of his life and his steadfastness in matters regarding the Faith. On the other hand, the witnesses were many. Furthermore, they were senior members — the pillars, so to speak — of the monastery. They had neither run away from the monastery, nor stolen anything, nor done anything dishonorable. They were evidently in their right minds and, at least from a canonical point of view, could not be esteemed as untrustworthy or unreliable. In fact, the head of the delegation — Father Victor Matthew — was the one who later was to print the monumental series of the Lives of the Saints (*The Great Synaxaristes*) in fourteen volumes.

Archbishop Matthew now found himself in a very difficult position. After the others left, he summoned Father Gideon to question him concerning these grave charges.

"What do you have to say to these accusations, Father Gideon?" asked the Archbishop.

"Holy master, the only thing I can say is that I have many sins; but I am not guilty of these particular sins of which I am accused."

"But the witnesses are many, and they are all responsible members of your monastery."

"What more can I say, holy master?"

Archbishop Matthew was left with no other course of action: Father Gideon was defrocked and sent into exile away from the monastery.

Unperturbed, and at peace with himself, Father Gideon — now a simple monk — packed up his shoulder bag and headed for the mountains. He found himself a quiet spot and began to build a small hut. To this structure, he added a little chapel where he could chant his daily office in peace and quiet.

From time to time, shepherds passed through the area grazing their flocks. They noticed the little hut and often saw the black-robed figure tending a small garden of herbs, vegetables and greens. Moved by curiosity, they came to investigate. Father Gideon greeted them in a kindly manner and spoke with them briefly. A little later, when their flocks were again grazing in the area, the shepherds went out of their way to visit the monk. Father Gideon spoke to them from the parables of our Lord, from the lives of the Saints. He spoke to them of the things they understood — of flocks, of good pastures, of wolves that seek to devour the sheep, of the Good Shepherd. He told them of the rocky earth, of thorns and thistles that choke out the grains of wheat, and he spoke also to them about the good earth. They were simple men of the mountains, and so they understood these simple things which he told them. They themselves were men of the earth, the good earth, and so Father Gideon's words began to take root.

On returning home, the shepherds told their wives of the kindly little father they had met in the mountains. They related how the father spoke to them about how they should be pious, and kind, and fair in all their dealings, and about how they should love God and man, and be faithful to the Orthodox Faith.

Naturally, the women felt they had to check out everything that their husbands had told them.

Hence, they too began hiking up into the mountains to visit Father Gideon. Of course, their *philótimo** precluded them from going empty-handed. So, loaded down with packs of food and bottles of olive-oil ("for the icon-lamps, little Father"), these sturdy little women trekked up to Father Gideon's hermitage.

As he spoke with the men, so did Father Gideon speak with the women also. He told them many parables and accounts from the Lives of the Saints. He told them about prayer, about fasting; he admonished them how to struggle in the life of piety, and also how to cope with their husbands.

* An all-encompassing Greek word that includes the principles of common decency, good manners, generosity, plus a personal sense of honour and self-respect.

On returning home, the women began to spread the good word. Thus, in a short time, the footpath to Father Gideon's mountain retreat became well beaten with the feet of tens, and then of hundreds of pilgrims.

As the numbers of Father Gideon's new spiritual children continued to increase, many of them began to wonder why they could not have a parish nearby which followed the Church's traditional calendar and usages.

"Father Gideon, you have explained many things to us about the spiritual life, and about Orthodoxy, and about the church calendar," said his faithful disciples. Then came the big question: "Why don't *you* become our priest?"

Father Gideon cleared his throat, looked here and there desperately. "Well . . . the matter is difficult," he hedged.

His new flock — almost all of them former new calendarists — were not put off. It was obvious, they said among themselves, that Father Gideon was being evasive only because of his humility. They would write directly to Archbishop Matthew, requesting that the good Father Gideon be ordained to the priesthood for them.

On receiving their petition, Archbishop Matthew was astonished. It was evident that a very great a number of people had returned to traditional Orthodoxy thanks to Father Gideon's teaching and example.

The report of these doings eventually reached the men's monastery of the Holy Transfiguration also. Pricked by his conscience this time, Father Victor Matthew — the leader of the group that had originally accused Father Gideon — again made his way to the Archbishop's office once again.

"Your Beatitude, I must speak with you."

"What do you have to say, Father Victor?"

"I have a confession to make to you. All those charges that we brought against Father Gideon some four years ago. . ."

"Yes, what about them?"

"They were false — all of them."

"False?" exclaimed the Archbishop. "In God's name, what prompted you to do such a thing?"

"He was too strict! — what with his unrelenting fasts and his incessant work hours — he even had us working in the olive groves during the Great

Fast while we had to keep the fast of the Ninth Hour! The fathers said that if we didn't get rid of him, he would kill us all!"

According to the holy canons, if Father Victor and the other accusers had been priests or deacons, then *they* would have been subject to defrockment for slandering another.

However, Father Gideon agreed to come back to the monastery only if his accusers were not punished.

He was re-instated to the priesthood, and on September 1, 1948, Matthew ordained him to the episcopate and gave him the name Spyridon. His diocese was Trimythus of Cyprus, and thus he became "Spyridon of Trimythus."

Even though his stay in Cyprus lasted only two years, the new Bishop Spyridon ordained many clergy, established monasteries, convents, and parishes, and, in general, completely organized the church life of the traditional Orthodox Christians.

The British government authorities in Cyprus, however, felt that he was too active and too popular. Therefore, at the urging of the new calendarist hierarchy, the British exiled him back to Greece.

During this period in Greece, the traditional Orthodox Christians were weathering terrible new persecutions from another Spyridon — the new calendarist Archbishop of Athens. Nonetheless, Bishop Spyridon of Trimythus remained active for another three years, until the repose of Archbishop Matthew in 1953.

Then, immediately after Archbishop Matthew's funeral, Bishop Spyridon disappeared. He simply vanished into thin air without a trace. For ten years no one had any idea what happened to him.

In fact, Bishop Spyridon had gone into seclusion. Just below the convent in Keratéa, by the sea-side, there is a village of the same name. An old-calendar family living in the village had agreed to receive the bishop into their home secretly. There, in a storeroom of this home, Bishop Spyridon established a secret hermitage, and for some ten years no one knew of his whereabouts.

The fact of the matter is that Bishop Spyridon had come to have grave reservations about the manner in which he had been consecrated bishop. In complete defiance of the holy canons, Archbishop Matthew alone — without any other bishop assisting him — had raised Spyridon to the episcopacy. The

holy canons specify that at least two, and preferably three, bishops must be present to consecrate another bishop.

Bishop Spyridon had been the first to be consecrated by Archbishop Matthew in this uncanonical and lawless manner and, therefore, he felt a very heavy responsibility — not only for agreeing to be consecrated in this way, but, what is worse, for going on to consecrate others also together with Archbishop Matthew. Hence, for ten years, he went into a self-imposed exile, and never again served as bishop.

About one year before his repose, he came down with cancer. Bed-ridden for most of this time, he patiently endured the terrible agony of his malady without once complaining. Together with the righteous Job, he cried out, "The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away. As it seemed good to the Lord, so hath it come to pass. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

He was determined, however, to make one last pilgrimage. Many decades before, he had been tonsured rassophor at the Skete of Saint Anne on the Holy Mountain. Now his last wish was to visit the Skete church — the *kyriakón* — so that he could venerate the icon of Saint Anne there in the very church where he had made his monastic renunciation.

He never got there.

He reached as far as Daphne, the "second capital" of the Holy Mountain. As he was waiting to transfer to another boat to take him down the coast of the Athonite peninsula, someone recognized him and immediately reported his presence to the local police. Alarmed that an old calendarist bishop was trying to enter the area of the Holy Mountain, the gendarmes ran to the harbor and quickly arrested Bishop Spryidon.

"You must leave immediately. The Holy Mountain is under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and you have no right to be here."

"My children, I am close to death. I have no purpose for coming here except to kiss the icon of Saint Anne in the Skete church where I was first tonsured. If you do not believe me, come with me. You may even hold me by the arms if you wish. My only wish is to venerate the Saint's icon and to return to my hermitage to die."

"Didn't you hear what we said to you? You are going no further. You must leave immediately under guard."

Broken-hearted and dejected, Bishop Spyridon, now accompanied by a gendarme, returned to the mainland and slowly began to make his way back to Keratéa.

He had to pass through Thessalonica. When he arrived at that city, he was again recognized. . . The report spread like wildfire: "Spyridon of the Matthewites is here in the city!" Immediately, great numbers of the faithful began to gather — including those of the other Old Calendarist jurisdiction. Everyone wanted to receive his blessing, to kiss his *panagia*, to venerate the hem of his rassa, to kiss his hand, to touch him.

Finally, with great difficult, he made it back to his little hermitage. There, after a few weeks, he peacefully reposed in the Lord on February 18, 1963.

Of course, even if Bishop Spyridon's enemies had not recanted, it would have made no difference, for God knew the innocence and guilelessness of his soul. Even if they had continued to denounce him — even as the enemies of Saint Symeon the New Theologian continued to denounce him until his death — Bishop Spyridon would have suffered no harm from them.

Few people know that Saint Symeon the Theologian — who is one of the Church's greatest monastic fathers — was on one occasion violently attacked by thirty of his monks when he was abbot of the Monastery of Saint Mamas in Constantinople. If they had been able, those monks would have killed him — such was their malice against him. The reason? The saint had repeatedly rebuked them for their wrongdoing. As it says in Proverbs:

Rebuke a wise man,
and he will love thee.
Rebuke a fool,
and he will hate thee.
(Cf. Proverbs 9:8)

This was not the only grief that Saint Symeon suffered during his life. Several bishops of the Ecumenical throne nurtured a very profound malice against him. Thanks to their jealousy and hostility — which was cloaked in the guise of "spiritual" love and politeness — Saint Symeon spent the last thirteen years of his life in exile.

The saint accepted this injustice because, although the bishops of his day were spiritually corrupt and led astray by their passions, they were, nonetheless, Orthodox. Had his bishops been faulty in their faith, however, the saint would have been under no obligation whatsoever to obey them.

Saint Athanasius the Great, Saint Maximus the Confessor, and Saint Gregory Palamas are examples of Church fathers who were slanderously accused of many misdeeds and who fought back — for in their case, it was not a matter of vindicating themselves, but of standing up against bishops who for reasons of expediency had strayed from the Orthodox Faith.

Yet, here is the irony: despite the fact that Saint Symeon — like Saint Nectarius and Bishop Spyridon — suffered untold slanders and calumnies, what Orthodox Christian today does not deeply honor him? And who remembers the names of his implacable enemies? Indeed, who is not deeply moved at reading his spirit-soaring poetry? And who can restrain his tears when reading his compunctionate prayer in preparation for Holy Communion?

Truly, as David the Psalmist says, "Many are the tribulations of the righteous, and the Lord shall deliver them out of them all." We know that Saint Symeon rejoices now with the choirs of the Saints eternally. But where, indeed, are the bishops and the thirty monks who calumniated him?