

FATHER PROCOPIUS

by

Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

At the time I was tonsured as a rassophor monk on the Holy Mountain, Athos, in August of 1963, we had the opportunity to visit the monasteries and sketes, and meet many eminent spiritual men.

One of the brotherhoods that Father Panteleimon, the founder of our monastery, wanted us to visit was located at the Skete of Katounákia. It was the brotherhood of the Elder Nicephorus, and he had a very remarkable monk, named Procopius, in his *synodía*.

This Procopius was born in Pontus of Asia Minor, in the city of Trepizond, on the coast of the Black Sea. Even from his childhood, it was evident that the grace of God was upon this little boy. All children have an innate innocence and trust, but in this little child, God's special favor was apparent right from the beginning, and the great faith and grace that he possessed revealed itself soon enough.

On one Sunday, his mother, still carrying him in her arms, took him to church. In the church's narthex, she obtained a small candle and gave it to her little boy so that he could light it before the holy icons, as he was eager to do. When her child lit his candle from the other candles and put it in the candle stand, suddenly, the entire candle blazed up! In an instant, the entire candle was consumed by a huge flame and was gone.

Everyone who saw this was astonished, and said, "What manner of child is this? Evidently, the offering of the child is pleasing to God, and He accepted it as a whole-burnt offering in one instant!"

As the child grew, his mother would read him stories from the Holy Scriptures and the Lives of the Saints. Among other things, she told him also that when the priests are serving the Divine Liturgy, the angels of God serve together with them. As a pure and innocent child, he himself witnessed this very thing every time he went to church. In fact, he saw it so often and he accepted this vision so matter-of-factly, it did not seem to him that what he was seeing was anything exceptional. He assumed *everybody* could see the angels.

After all, when you are in church, and you see the altar boys coming out of the sanctuary with the censer and the candles, do you begin jumping up

and down excitedly and shouting, "Look at the altar boys! Look at the altar boys!" Of course you don't, because you know (or assume) that *everyone* can see the altar boys.

Well, that is exactly what little Procopius assumed also. After all, his mother had told him that this happened at every Liturgy, so that was that! When something is so obvious, why create a scene in church? So, for the little boy, the angels in the Liturgy were so apparent, he never said anything to anyone about this.

This continued for years.

Finally, when he turned fifteen, he determined that he wanted to become a monk, so off he went to the Holy Mountain. There, he joined the small *synodia* of the Elder Nicephorus, an austere ascetic in the desert of the Holy Mountain. They supported themselves by carving prosphora seals.

Even there, his vision of the myriads of angels that serve in the Divine Liturgy did not cease. For Procopius, this awesome apparition was as normal as seeing the birds in the sky. Such was his purity and innocence.

Then, after some years, on a day when, because it was an important feast day, no work was permitted, some ascetics from the area came for a visit to the Kellion of Father Nicephorus. During the conversation, someone mentioned that, in times of old, there were certain fathers who saw our Saviour and the angels during the divine services. Whereupon, the young monk Procopius chimed in, saying, "Of course, everyone beholds our Saviour and the holy angels in the Divine Liturgy. They are always there."

"Deceived one! What are you saying?" exclaimed the Elder Nicephorus, and he gave the terrified Procopius an *epitimion* for speaking.

Later, when the visitors had departed, the Elder called the young Procopius and rebuked him austerely for speaking out of turn during the conversation. Then he interrogated him carefully about what he had said. The innocent and simple Procopius answered that he was surprised that the visitors had said that, of old, the fathers saw our Saviour and the angels in the Divine Liturgy on occasion. "Doesn't everybody see the Saviour and the angels at every Liturgy? Don't you see them also, Elder?" asked Procopius.

"Of course, we see them, deluded one!" answered the Elder "but we don't speak of it so as not to fall into pride. If I ever hear you say things like that again publically, I will give you an *epitimion* that you will never forget!"

After this episode, Father Procopius, for the first time, began to have thoughts that not *everyone* could see the angels.

From then on, his vision of the Saviour and of the angels began to diminish, lest he should be cast down by the demon of pride and lose his soul. Till the end of his life, he received consolation during the divine services, but the vision of the angels did not always appear.

Perhaps it was by the Providence of God that he was permitted to see them in the first place. We surmise this because, the fact of the matter is, his elder, Father Nicephorus, was an exceptionally severe man. He was a very virtuous and pure man, but *very* severe. So much so, that Father Procopius had decided on many occasions that he could not endure it any longer and had determined to leave the brotherhood.

The one thing that deterred him from leaving — aside from his great bond of love — was the fact that, when he was a younger monk, he had seen the angelic hosts in all their heavenly glory, again and again. So he knew that our Saviour's promises were true, and it was to his profit to endure all kinds of afflictions and sorrows — even death itself — for the sake of those promises.

And so, Father Procopius remained in Father Nicephorus' *synodía*, and that's how we got to meet him in 1963.

"He that endureth to the end shall be saved."
(Matthew 10:22)



Father Nicephorus is seated in the front. Father Procopius is standing, with the white prayer rope, at the far left.