

SAINT NEOPHYTUS: STOP TURNING IN YOUR GRAVE!

by
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In 1987, after we had finished our pilgrimage to the Holy Land and Greece, we made a short trip to Cyprus also. Unfortunately, we could not visit many ancient sites because of the Turkish Occupation of the island's northern regions, for instance, Kantara, where many Orthodox monastics had been martyred by the Latin Inquisition. Nevertheless, in the limited time allotted, there was plenty to see. The nuns of the Convent of Sfalagiótissa were our "tour guides," and we were able to venerate many holy shrines, and see many marvelous historical sites. It was as though the narrations of the Saints were coming to life before our eyes.

We visited ancient churches, the second tomb of Lazarus, the friend of Christ, at Larnaca, the venerable Monastery of Stavrovouni (founded by Saint Helen, the mother of Saint Constantine the Great), the Monastery of Kykkou, the Monastery of Maherá, and finally, the famous Monastery of Saint Neophytus the Recluse. We climbed the sheer limestone cliff to get to where the Saint had dug out a cave for himself.

As we know from the Life of Saint Neophytus (+1219), he lived during the period when the Latin Crusaders had seized control of Cyprus (1191-1571). During those years, the Latin bishops who followed the armies of the Crusaders tried doggedly to convert the Orthodox Catholic faithful to the Latin religion by force, if necessary. In order to accomplish this, one of their tactics was to banish all the Orthodox bishops from the island! That way — so the Western bishops reasoned — the Orthodox clergy and the laypeople would be forced to commemorate the Latin bishops in the Divine Liturgy, and also, as the older Orthodox clergy died, the young candidates for the priesthood would be obliged to seek ordination from the Latin hierarchy.

It didn't work.

One of the primary reasons this tactic didn't work was Saint Neophytus the Recluse.

Secluded in his cliff hermitage, the Saint wrote letters — *thousands* of letters — exposing the errors of the Latins and exhorting the Orthodox faithful to remain steadfast in Orthodoxy. Other letters from the Saint

explained the Sunday Gospel readings, and these letters were read from the *ambo* in the place of sermons in hundreds of the parish churches. You see, the Saint had many, many scribes and couriers at his disposal and all of them stood ready to copy his sermons and convey them to the parishes throughout the island.

By the grace of God, this is how Cyprus was saved for Orthodoxy during all those grievous years of occupation and persecution.

So, here we were, standing in the very cliff-side cell where all of Saint Neophytus' labors had taken place!

Afterwards, we made our way to the adjacent monastery building near the base of the cliff, and we were offered the typical monastic hospitality, in the form of refreshments in the *archontaríkion* (the monastery guest room).

The priest-monk who was hosting us was aware that we were guests from America who follow the Church's traditional calendar and who have expressed ourselves quite forcefully against the errors of Ecumenism and syncretism. Therefore, he felt the need to justify his hierarchy's contemporary *espousal* of this new heresy.

"Our bishops are involved in the Ecumenical Movement, as you know," he said, addressing us. We all nodded to indicate that, yes, we were aware of this.

Then, we responded further as follows: "Isn't it ironic, Father? Here in the very monastery where Saint Neophytus, your founder, struggled so zealously to save the Orthodox people of Cyprus from the errors of the Papacy, you, the clergy of this monastery, have now espoused Ecumenism, which encourages you to *unite* with the Papacy!"

"Well," responded the priest-monk, "the Roman Catholics have changed now."

In two senses, he was right.

Many of us have many dear friends who are Roman Catholic and we cherish their friendship. Today, many of us live in nations where there is freedom of religion and toleration of religious diversity. But this is only a recent development in the "West." In many nations, this is *not* true. But, here, in our country, we can live side by side with our heterodox friends in relationships of genuine friendship without the rancor or animosity of times past. And this is the way it should be.

The priest-monk at Saint Neophytus' Monastery was also very correct about how Roman Catholicism "has changed," in another sense.

Since Saint Neophytus' time, *many* doctrinal changes have taken place in Roman Catholicism. Indeed, there have been very significant changes even since the time of the Council of Florence in the fifteenth century, when Saint Mark of Ephesus was sent to the West in order to patch things up with the Papacy (and, as we know, that attempt failed). Even since *that* time, the Papacy, in 1869, officially added the greatest innovation of all time: the doctrine of papal infallibility!

As the Jesuit scholar, Malachi Martin, writes:

On July 18, 1869, the [Roman Catholic] bishops declared that the pope was infallible and that he was the titular head of *all and any* Christianity that might exist on the face of this earth.... Papal infallibility means that a pope, when teaching matters of faith and morals for all the faithful, cannot err and is to be obeyed. Papal primacy means that *no* other bishop in all Christianity and *no* gathering of bishops or theologians — much less of lay folk — can supersede or set aside the teaching authority and jurisdiction of a pope [*emphasis added*].*

Saint Gregory the Great, Pope of Rome (+604), Saint Photius the Great, Patriarch of Constantinople (+891), Saint Neophytus of Cyprus (+1219), and Saint Mark of Ephesus (+1443) would have had something to say about *that*!

So, as we told our new calendar, ecumenistic priest-monk at the Monastery of Saint Neophytus: "Yes, Father, you are correct. From a doctrinal point of view, Roman Catholicism *has* changed. Now, it is much, much *worse* than it ever was before"!

But we still value and love our many Roman Catholic friends.

* *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Church*, New York, Bantam Books, 1983, p. 208.