



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

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LIVING FAITH AND UNSUNG SAINTS

Memories of a Holy Island

An interview with Lesvos-born Archimandrite Raphael Pavouris, who serves Edinburgh's pan-Orthodox Community of St. Andrew (Archdiocese of Thyateira and Great Britain). Fr. Raphael's stories of the grace-filled islanders of his Lesvos childhood are an authentic and moving glimpse of a generation just now passing away.

Early Life in Greece

RTE: Fr. Raphael, you've said that one of your earliest childhood memories is of waking in the middle of the night on a blanket on the earthen floor of a country chapel in your native Greek island of Lesvos, with your mother and other village women holding an Orthodox vigil around you. Can you tell us more about your childhood?

FR. RAPHAEL: Yes. I was born in the village of Petra on the island of Lesvos (Mitilene) in the Aegean Sea, not far from Turkey. It is called Petra because there is a huge rock in the middle of the village. When I was a child, it was common for the devout women – earlier perhaps it was everyone – to go to country chapels to keep vigil. Sometimes the priest would come and they would have a proper vigil, or if he couldn't come, they would do a reader's vigil by themselves. These were wonderful vigils because they didn't keep to a strict typicon – it was just prayer after prayer: one akathist or paraclesis after another, the “*Heretismoi*” to the Mother of God, the small or great paraclesis for the saint of the day, or for the saint to whom the chapel was dedicated. Then they would sing all of the hymns that they knew, just to spend

Opposite: Small chapels at the Monastery of St. Ignatios, near the town of Kalloni, Lesvos, Greece.

the night in prayer. They would have brought a little bread, a few olives, and some water to have in the morning after their vigil. It was wonderful, especially during an island summer.

I remember one occasion when my grandmother, my mother's mother who was very devout, wanted to keep vigil for St. Kyriaki, one of the summer feasts. She and some other women from the village of Kleio, my mother's birthplace, decided to go to a very old chapel high up on a mountain. I was about thirteen and I wanted to join them, but my aunt and uncle wanted to keep me with them for supper. They said, "This is too much for you, you are here on holiday," but I loved my grandmother very much and was attracted



Archimandrite Raphael Pavouris.

to this kind of devotion, so she said, "Well, stay with your aunt and uncle and have something to eat, but later if you want to come, climb up and bring us some water."

I loved this adventure and late that evening set out climbing uphill. Soon, I couldn't see well and as it got darker and darker, I thought that surely I would be lost on the mountainside. Finally, I saw the flickering light of the oil lamp though the trees, and then I heard singing. The women had brought small rugs on which they knelt, and I stayed and sang with them as far as I could follow. My mother joined us during the night, and after awhile I was so

tired that I fell asleep. When I woke in the morning they were still singing. Now these were all elderly women, and my grandmother must have been in her mid-eighties at the time. She was on her knees all night holding a dripping candle, praying and singing.

I remember seeing a small red fox as we left the chapel, and just then the sun rose across the strait, over the mountains of Asia Minor. If you have read the novels of the iconographer Photios Kontoglu, the memory of that sunrise brings to life his stories of the Asia Minor coast with its rocky mountains and Christian hermitages. Kontoglu himself was from the coastal city of Kydonies, just across the strait from where our chapel was. Kydonies is now called

Ayvalik in Turkish, but before the 1923 Exchange of Populations between Greece and Turkey it was an entirely Christian city.

Kontoglu was a very prolific painter and writer, and beautifully captured the spirit and piety of those times. In *Ayvali Patridomu*, he writes about my own birthplace in Petras, and about St. George of Chios, the island next to Mitilene. Threatened as a youth during the Ottoman reign, St. George temporarily converted to Islam, and when he later returned to Christianity he was arrested by the Turks. When he was thrown into prison and sentenced to death, the entire town fasted for the young man who was confessing Christ.

This was the piety of the people. The Church was not part of their life, it was all of their life, and it wasn't a religious regime, it was joyous. My mother tells me that her favorite pastime was to go with her friends to visit the chapels in the mountains and light the oil lamps. Of course, the countryside on a big island is full of chapels everywhere, and they loved going from one to another, singing the *troparion* to the saint of the place. For them it was a great joy. Some of these chapels are now in ruins, but people still light the oil lamps. In the Cyclades islands, south in the Aegean Sea, families have their own private chapels and on the saint's day they invite everyone to the feast.

RTE: How has life changed over the past decades?

FR. RAPHAEL: During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, there were many devout people for whom the Church remained the setting of their lives. But from 1822, the time of its independence from Turkish rule, Greece was on a course of indiscriminately adopting what they thought were Western values. This was followed by an influx of Asia Minor Greeks in 1923 during the Exchange of Populations, and after WWII and the Greek civil war, secularization speeded up. By the 1950s and 1960s, there was already a strong wave of secularism. You could see it coming.

The islands that appealed to tourists, including Lesvos, were eroded by this spirit quicker than other places. The people of Santorini and Mykonos were among the most devout of all and the little islands of the Aegean – Kalymnos, Rhodes, Santorini, Paros, and Naxos – were basically Christian communities. The Church was not a part of them, they were the Church. In most of the villages, including my own, life was arranged around the church calendar. There were no secular celebrations. All feasts were religious feasts, and we had plenty of feasts. We didn't need to invent holidays as we do today.



Lesvos' coastline.



Top: Chapel at an island harbor, Lesvos.

Bottom: Taxiarchis Church at Mantamados.

RTE: Even Greek Independence Day is celebrated on the Feast of the Annunciation, purposely chosen in the Peloponnese as the day they declared independence from the Turks.

FR. RAPHAEL: Yes. It's very odd that today in Greece there is talk of the separation of Church and state; there has never been a time when the state was not united with the Church. It's the Church that gave birth to both the Byzantine Empire and to modern Hellenism. People who fought for Greek independence fought primarily for the right to worship Christ without hindrance. Most of the fathers of the modern Greek state were devout people who thought this should be a Christian polity and said, "We fight first for the faith." Their banner depicted the Cross, and the preamble to the first Greek constitution began by invoking the Holy Trinity. In the not so distant past, even private business agreements between individuals were based upon Holy Scripture – they called upon Christ, "Who is with us when two or three are gathered together." All of daily life was based upon the faith, and clergy were not only spiritual, but also national leaders in the War of Independence from the Ottomans. The Greek nation, cities, towns, and villages were grounded in Orthodoxy.

Aphrodite of Mitilene

RTE: Can you tell us about some of the Christians you knew while growing up on Lesbos?

FR. RAPHAEL: One person whom I remember was a friend of my mother, a very devout woman named Aphrodite. Aphrodite married very young, as was the custom then, and her husband was already in poor health at the time they married. Shortly after their son was born, the husband died and Aphrodite was left a poor widow with a young boy and a little *periptero*, a tiny Greek kiosk like an upright box with just barely room to sit, where people sell things. This was a common sight in the cities and larger villages where you could buy confections, school supplies, tobacco, newspapers. My father also used to run a *periptero*, and our whole family lived from it.

So, Aphrodite had to take over this *periptero* to make a living in the city of Mitilene, but she was young and very innocent. She glowed with such pure goodness that you almost thought she was a child. She looked like a child even into her seventies and until her death she had this air of innocence

about her – and she didn't have the slightest idea of how to run a *periptero*. She would let people buy on credit, but when they didn't pay their debts, she wouldn't ask for it, and soon she wasn't making any profit at all. To make things worse, some of the news agents brought worldly magazines for her to sell. Now you can imagine, this was in the sixties, so compared to what they sell today, the magazines were very modest, but to her mind, these magazines were not good. She wasn't well-trained in the faith, but she had a deep folk belief and she felt this wasn't right. In addition, she wasn't making any money and was under pressure from her family. She told me later, "All my hope was in God and I started praying in my little kiosk, 'Lord, help me. What am I to do? How am I going to raise my child?'" She did have a Bible, so after praying she opened the Bible and began reading it, and then she came to a decision.

She told the news agents, "Don't bring me any of these magazines. I don't want people to see them, let alone buy them. I'm not going to hang them on the pegs." They said, "Well, if you don't take the magazines, you won't get newspapers either." She replied, "Then I don't need the newspapers. Don't bring them." But not having newspapers meant that she lost most of her custom. Most people would come to buy newspapers, and then something else, but if she didn't carry newspapers they would go elsewhere.

Now, when she found a scripture passage she liked while reading the Bible, she wrote it on a piece of cardboard and pegged it outside the kiosk to replace the missing newspapers and magazines. Obviously, this became a spectacle. People began making fun of her, and of course, economically she went from bad to worse, but she kept praying, "Lord help me. You won't abandon me to the end."

One day, a man from the diocesan cathedral – the brother of our metropolitan, in fact – was organizing a visit to the local prison, and when he saw these cards with Biblical passages hanging on the pegs he said, "We would like to buy things for the prisoners. We will buy your whole inventory, everything that you have in the kiosk, to give as gifts." Everyone was amazed that this woman, who was not making any money at all, now all of a sudden had made a bit of money. She was very encouraged and told me later that she had prayed to God and to our local saint, New Martyr Theodore, the patron of Mitilene, whose relics lie in the Church of St. Athanasius.

Few people remember that this church is really dedicated to St. Athanasius, and everyone calls the church "St. Theodore's" because of the prominence of



Top: Small wayside chapel, Lesvos.



Bottom: Lesvos coast.



An old-style periptero, such as Aphrodite would have owned.

his relics. Aphrodite didn't know that this was St. Athanasius' church either, but one night before the metropolitan's brother came, she saw a dream in which she was at the bottom of the steps of the cathedral. At the top of the steps was a bishop and this bishop said to her, "Aphrodite, do not weep. You asked for help and I will help you. Don't be discouraged by your sufferings, look at what I have suffered..." She saw him pointing to a thick book, "...my exiles, my troubles." She said, "But who are you, *Despota*?" He said, "I am Athanasius of Alexandria." Of course, we are not encouraged to believe in dreams, but it was a good dream, and it encouraged this poor woman. He said, "Don't worry. Just remain faithful and I will feed you," and the next day, this man came from the cathedral and bought the entire stock. After getting to know Aphrodite, he and other church members understood that this woman was not meant for selling things, so they employed her as the church caretaker, where she remained for many years.

Later she moved to Athens to live with her son, and in her last few years of service, she worked at the church where Elder Porphyrios served, the hospital chapel dedicated to St. Gerasimos near Omonia. She told me many things about Fr. Porphyrios, and I learned that Aphrodite herself went to bed early, arising at one-thirty in the morning to pray through the night. Even her son didn't know about her secret prayer life. Along with her night vigils she used to make prosphora, and all of the priests who knew her wanted to use her prosphora for the Holy Liturgy. When she died, this pure and devout woman of God received Holy Communion, took the antidoron, went back to her pew, and gave up her spirit, having just received the sacrament. My mother and brother attended her funeral, and afterwards my brother said, "I have something to tell that you will find very hard to believe; I wouldn't have believed it myself if I hadn't been there. When we began to lower Aphrodite into the grave, a white dove came and flew around and around her body. It wouldn't leave. Everyone at the funeral and the gravediggers were right there, but the dove wouldn't stop flying around the grave until they had covered her completely." Aphrodite left me her Bible, the one that she used to read in the kiosk, and I've asked her son to also give me the cardboard scripture passages.

Elder Porphyrios (Bairaktaris) of Kafsokalivia

RTE: May Aphrodite pray for us, as well. Did you also meet Father Porphyrios?

FR. RAPHAEL: Yes, the first time was in 1983. I was young and this was my first encounter with a living holy person, where you could feel the holiness even in the surrounding countryside. I remember that he was lying in bed in his cell, already very ill and there were many people waiting to see him. I only kissed the cross that he held.

Some years later, in 1989 or 1990, my brother, my cousin, a friend who is now a priest, and myself visited a monastery outside of Athens for the Christmas vigil. It wasn't far from Fr. Porphyrios' skete and the next morning, Christmas Day, we thought, "We should go to Fr. Porphyrios now. There won't be many people there because it's Christmas." So we went, and indeed there was no one there except his attendants, who said, "Yes, you can see him." We couldn't believe that we would have Fr. Porphyrios all to ourselves, so we went in and he said to us, "You've been to the monastery for vigil." We said, "Yes," and he said, "Good. Now since you are studying theology (three of us were theological students) can you sing the *apolytikion*, the Christmas dismissal hymn for me? Of course we knew the *apolytikion*, but when he saw that we were a bit nervous to sing it in front of a holy elder, he began singing himself so we could join in. Then he said to us, "What is this "light of knowledge" that this hymn speaks of? We said, "Father, you tell us." (We were not very cooperative.) He said, "I think that the knowledge of the existence of God is everywhere, and naturally implanted." Then he used a phrase that sounded like a quotation I later found in St. John of Damascus' *The Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*. "The knowledge that God exists is embedded everywhere. If you have pure eyes you can see it." He spoke to us individually also, and he gave us each wonderful counsel. He died in 1991, the following year.

I have another story about Elder Porphyrios which is not mine, but it is very impressive. I heard it from Professor Kroustalakis, who taught at the University of Athens and was a devoted spiritual child of Father Porphyrios. There was a man who came to the elder from Thessaloniki in great trouble because he and his siblings had inherited property, but he had not received his share of the inheritance. Sad and upset, he traveled to the monastery to ask Fr. Porphyrios for advice. Fr. Porphyrios said to him, "My brother, I will pray for you. Go in peace."



Top: Elder St. Porphyrios of Kafsokalivia

Bottom: Archimandrite Photios Lavriotis



Archangel Michael (Taxiarchis) Monastery, Mantamados, Lesvos.

The man departed even more disappointed because he had hoped for some practical advice to help prove his claim to a share of the property, but now he faced a court case in Thessaloniki with no evidence. He left very heavy-hearted and walked down the dusty road from the monastery to wait at the crossroad for the bus to take him to Athens. It began to rain and a man in a private car, seeing him in the rain, stopped to offer a lift. (This was the usual practice in the Greek countryside, that people would give you a ride without your asking.) After a bit, the driver said, “You look rather sad.” As the man began his story of having gone to Elder Porphyrios, the driver interrupted him saying, “I’m not into this business with elders,” but after hearing the entire story he pulled over and stopped the car to make the sign of the Cross. His passenger asked, “Why then are you making the sign of the Cross.” The driver replied, “I haven’t made the sign of the Cross for many years, but now I believe you and I see that prayer works. If this man said that he would pray, I can assure you that he did pray for you.” “What do you mean?” “I can’t tell you, but you will find out.” In two weeks when the man went to the courthouse in Thessaloniki for the hearing, he saw that the driver who had given him the lift was the very judge who was hearing his case. In the meantime, of course, the judge had taken a special interest in researching the details of the case. He understood that the man was right, awarded him his part of the inheritance, and now they say that he is one of the most devout judges in Greece.

Archimandrite Photios Lavriotis

In my opinion, and that of many others, another saintly native of the island was Archimandrite Photios, who lived in a village near Plomari and reposed recently in 2011. He was a wonderful, extraordinary person, a hieromonk from the Great Lavra on the Holy Mountain – which is why he was called Photios Lavriotis. As a hieromonk on the Holy Mountain he had looked after Papa Tikhon, the Russian hermit, whom the monks said was a “living angel.” Papa Tikhon was also the spiritual father of Elder Paisios, who took over caring for Papa Tikhon after Fr. Photios. Before the Second World War, Fr. Photios went to Jerusalem where he served as a guardian at the Holy Sepulchre, and then returned to his island as a parish priest in his native village.

He also designed and built a church that turned out to be one of the most beautiful on the island. He named it after New Martyr Loukas of Pamfila, whom he revered. For many years it was a common sight to see this elderly

priest carrying a little cloth sack through the streets of the town with a stone, a brick, a piece of marble, or a tile. He recycled everything that he thought he could use to build the church.

Father Photios was a great ascetic, absolutely fearless, and many people thought he was a fool-for-Christ. He witnessed for Christ and wasn't concerned about the consequences, saying, "I'm a monk, I don't care, let them do what they like." He was neither afraid of the authorities, nor of being beaten or starved. He often walked long distances across the island, and although he would accept a lift if it was offered, he was always happy to walk, often with shoes but no socks, and sometimes barefoot. His clothes were tattered and he had an old battered *kalimafki*, a clerical hat in which he carried his documents – passport, letters, and correspondence were all in that hat. For some people, his behavior was curious, but for those who could detect holiness, Fr. Photios was a saint.

My mother knew him well and revered him, and I remember visiting him in his little room. He could be very abrupt and might shout at people if they didn't behave properly, but then, at the same moment, he would turn around and smile at others to whom he wanted to pass a message. He could appear very hard and strict, but at the same time he had such love and care that he attracted many spiritual children.

In his old age, Fr. Photios lived in Pamfila, but he would often appear completely unexpectedly in places where he was needed. In our village, which is very far from Pamfila, my mother one day went downstairs. Opening the door she found Fr. Photios, almost barefoot, sitting on the door step. "Father, what are you doing? Why didn't you knock at the door?" He said, "Can you give me a glass of water? That's all I need." He drank the glass of water and left.

One day my mother was on the ferry going to Athens and Fr. Photios was there. "Oh," my mother said, "It's a gift from God that you are here. I want to ask you to pray for my husband because he has a stomach illness." He replied in his usual abrupt manner, "There's nothing wrong with your husband, there's something wrong with you. Your hands are painful and you neglect them. Come and I'll bless your hands." Indeed, she'd had pain in her hands but didn't want to make a fuss about it. After that blessing her pain went away.

On another occasion, one of Fr. Photios' spiritual sons, who had succeeded him as the priest in his native village, became very unwell just before he was



Corner of St. Raphael's Church.



Archangel Michael (Taxiarchis) Monastery, Mantamados, Lesvos.

supposed to serve liturgy. He grew anxious, thinking, “What am I going to do? Who is going to serve? People will come and they won’t have liturgy.” He was alone in the church, very far away from Fr. Photios, but he said aloud, “Fr. Photios, my spiritual father, help me.” He then thought, “I’ll do what I can and see what happens.” So he lit the oil lamps. It wasn’t half an hour before the door opened and Fr. Photios, who was now in his eighties, came in. The young priest said, “Father, why did you come here?” Fr. Photios replied, “Did you not ask for help?” And he came in and served.

Fr. Athanasios Eusmas of Mitilene and Fr. Themistocles Christodoulou of Athens wrote accounts of Fr. Photios, and the next three stories are theirs. On one occasion, Fr. Photios served with the metropolitan in a country chapel. These country chapels often don’t have ceilings, just open rafters, and once during liturgy a live scorpion fell off of the roof beam into the consecrated chalice. The metropolitan said to the deacon, “Take the tongs, remove the scorpion, and put it in the well where the holy things are put that are to be discarded. So they removed the scorpion, but Fr. Photios followed the deacon out and said, “Give it to me.” The surprised deacon asked, “What, the scorpion?” Fr. Photios said, “He is full of my Lord’s Blood, how can we throw him into the well?” and he swallowed it alive. The priests who were there witnessed this.

As a spiritual father he was very wise and strict about the church typicon. He wanted things done properly, but at the same time, out of love for his brothers and sisters, he would also do extraordinary things and even disregard the norm. People would say, “Are you not afraid?” He would answer, “I only care to please the Lord, no one else.” In defending what was good and true, he would do things like writing to doctors who performed abortions, and address them fiercely: “Stop this or you will be in a worse place than Judas.”

Father Photios was also uncompromising when it came to piety. On one fast day, a Wednesday or a Friday, he was at one of the main villages of the island where there was a farmers’ market with people grilling meat. He went up and kicked over all of the grills so that the meat rolled down the street. People were so angry that they beat him up. The villagers took him to the hospital. He was black and blue from the beating, but joyous, and said, “Thanks be to God. When I become well, if need be I’ll do it again.”

Father Photios was also known for his clairvoyance and his gift of prophecy. He respected doctors, but he didn’t take much care about his health, believing that with prayer and fasting he would be all right. He only allowed

one particular doctor, a friend of mine from Michigan, to examine him. This friend told me that once he was in a taxi with Fr. Photios and one of his spiritual daughters. She was praying hard in her mind, “Oh, Lord, make him agree to be examined by the doctor, please persuade him.” Fr. Photios turned to her and said, “Enough! I will.”

At his funeral, as they were carrying his body out of the church, a thunderbolt struck the churchyard. It didn’t do any damage, but the people immediately remarked, “Father Photios, even at your funeral, you are loud!”

The Hieromonk from Asia Minor

There was also a hieromonk who came to Lesvos from Asia Minor after the war, who had a reputation for holiness and lived as a hermit. We don’t remember his name unfortunately, but my grandfather used to invite him to bless his farm and to hear the confessions of the family and the farm workers. Mother said that every time they invited him to bless the house he would keep a complete fast for three days before doing the Blessing of the Waters. He also blessed my father’s little *periptero*, and when my father finally sold this place to move to Athens, they discovered a bottle of holy water which had been kept from the blessing twenty-five years before. The water was still fresh and untainted, and still smelled of basil.

Sts. Raphael, Nicholas, and Irene

RTE: One of the things that Lesvos is most known for is the incredible 20th-century recovery of the relics of the Holy Martyrs Raphael, Nicholas and Irene of Lesvos. For our readers who may not be acquainted with them, St. Raphael was the abbot of Karyes, near the village of Thermi, St Nicholas, a deacon of the monastery, and St. Irene was the twelve-year-old daughter of the mayor of Thermi. The three were at the monastery with the village teacher and Irene’s father when it was raided by the Turks, and they were martyred on Bright Tuesday, April 9, 1463, a decade after the fall of Constantinople. The martyrs were then forgotten until they began appearing in the twentieth century to people on Lesvos and other places in dreams and visions in which they described the location of their relics and cured many of disease.



ΟΙ ΑΓΙΟΙ
ΡΑΦΑΗΛ
ΚΑΙ
ΝΙΚΟΛΑΟΣ
ΟΙ ΕΝ ΘΕΣΣΑΛΙΑΣ
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ΒΑΣΑΝ

Icon of Sts. Raphael, Nicholas and Irene of Mitilene.





St. Raphael's reliquary, Monastery of Sts. Raphael, Nicholas and Irene, Lesvos.

FR. RAPHAEL: The recovery of the relics was in the fifties, although the revelations of St. Raphael had been going on sporadically for a long time before that. As you say, people received the messages in different places, but mostly in Mitilene. The villagers of Thermi knew that supernatural happenings occurred on the hill near the village from time to time, and there was an old tale that this was a place of martyrdom. Even before St. Raphael revealed the story of the martyrdom, they believed that a monk had been martyred there, and older shepherds would warn new young ones, "You might see a monk wandering about, but don't be frightened, because he is a holy man."

There was also a tradition on the island that every Bright Tuesday, the Tuesday after Pascha, people would go to the hillside, and on the ruins of what they believed was an old monastery would serve liturgy in the open air. They didn't know why they did this, but it was a local custom. One explanation, of course, is that it was the day of the martyrdom of Sts. Raphael, Nicholas and Irene, but another could be that the original monastery was dedicated to the Mother of God, for there is a Constantinopolitan tradition to serve a liturgy for the Mother of God on the Tuesday after Pascha. In either case, local people did not know the reason, but they kept the tradition.

Nevertheless, people had seen St. Raphael as early as the 1920s. My mother knew a very old woman, Hariklia Karageorgiou, who used to say clearly and confidently, "Until my last breath, I bear witness to what I saw." As a young woman, she picked olives on Lesbos, and one day as she was leading a donkey carrying olives to the olive press, a torrential winter rain began to fall. It churned up so much mud that the donkey became stuck and couldn't move and Hariklia began praying, "Lord, help me! If the olives are lost, the foreman will sack me, and perhaps even beat me." Suddenly a tall priest appeared, with dark curly hair and blue eyes. Coming up to her, he lifted the donkey onto its legs with one hand. She asked, "Are you the priest of this village?" He said, "No, my name is Raphael and I lived here. You don't know me, but you will know me. Many people will know me." Then he disappeared from in front of her. Some people said, "This is a miracle," and others said, "She's crazy," but Hariklia always said, "Say what you like. I saw it."

Around 1923, Sts. Nicholas, Raphael and Irene began appearing in the houses of Thermi. This was the time of the Lausanne Treaty's Exchange of Populations when the Greek Orthodox were expelled from Asia Minor and the Muslims left Greece for Turkey. Before the Exchange, there was a large manor house in Thermi that belonged to a wealthy Turkish landowner. This

Turkish man and his family finally had to leave because several times at night they saw a Christian deacon walking through the rooms, censuring the house. The frightened Turkish lady said, “It’s some kind of spell,” and they even called the village policeman, but he couldn’t do anything because this mysterious deacon walked through closed doors.

Later, when several Greek Asia Minor refugee families were sheltered in the house, the appearances continued. St. Nicholas the deacon would appear and sometimes Sts. Raphael and Irene as well, and these devout Christians understood that these were martyrs and saints. They even prayed to them, and when they didn’t appear, the refugees missed them. Later, St. Raphael appeared to people and told them about the appearances: “God sent St. Nicholas to cense the house because the Turk had used church stones from the ruined monastery on the mount to build it. The stones are consecrated and the building is holy.”

The daughter of one of these Asia Minor refugees, Vasiliki Rali, is still alive, and is a wonderful person to interview. She is a reliable witness, very accurate and objective, with an extraordinary memory, and has written one of the best accounts (*The Karyes Hill*) because of her first-hand knowledge of what occurred there. Vasiliki’s mother was a resident of that house, and she recalled that when they saw the saints, they could also hear them singing troparia. They appeared once on Lazarus Saturday and sang, *Giving Us Before Thy Passion an Assurance of the General Resurrection...*, from the Matins service for that day.

The land on which the graves and relics of the martyrs were found, and where the monastery was rebuilt, belonged to Vasiliki’s family. After the Exchange of Populations, land was given by the Greek government to the refugees by drawing lots. Her mother prayed to God to give her a good piece of land with some olive trees, since they had lost everything in Asia Minor. One night she dreamt of an uncle, long dead, who came to her and said, “Look at this document.” It was a contract. “You will get this piece of land because the Mother of God wants you to have it. When the lottery is drawn, this is the land that you will receive, but it is not for you, it is for a higher purpose because amazing things will happen in this place.” After a few days she received the land.

Vasiliki eventually inherited the land from her mother, and after marrying a devout Christian, Angelos Ralis, the story moves forward. Again her uncle appeared in a dream, this time telling Vasiliki, “The Mother of God wants



St. Irene's reliquary, Monastery of Sts. Raphael, Nicholas and Irene.



Top: Fresco of the martyrdom of Sts. Raphael, Nicholas, and Irene.

Bottom: Reliquary of New Martyr Deacon Nicholas.

her church to be rebuilt in this place. Give the land.” When she told her husband of the dream, he said, “We will not only donate the land, but we will pay for the chapel.” They hired a builder named Doukas Tsolakis from the village of Thermi to dig the foundations and build the chapel. Doukas was a good man, very fair and honest; however, he was an unbeliever, a former Communist partisan from the mountains who was fiercely unreligious. His wife was a very devout woman, but afraid of confessing her faith because of her husband’s atheism.

As he was digging, Doukas found human remains and then heard sighs coming out of the grave. He said, “What is this? Am I dreaming? Am I not well?” He collected the bones, put them in a bag and wanted to hang them on a tree so that they wouldn’t be in the way, but suddenly, he couldn’t lift them. He said, “This is impossible, how can I not lift them?” He became so frightened that for the first time in forty-five years he made the sign of the Cross, and then he lifted them easily.

Saint Raphael now appeared to Doukas’ wife and said to her, “Tell your husband to be careful, to act with piety and not to swear, because where he is treading is holy ground.” Sometime later, a child who brought Doukas’ lunch from the village saw him from afar digging on the hillside. Several meters above him, hovering in mid-air, were two monks attentively watching the work; the boy dropped the food and ran home. (Like me, he also became a monk with the name of Raphael.) As I will tell you in a moment, this non-believing builder became the greatest witness of what had happened there. I remember him in his old age standing on a little wall and telling us what he had seen.

Soon after the relics were found, St. Raphael began appearing to Doukas’ wife Maria and other men and women, saying, “Those bones, those relics, are mine.” At different times they would see him, sometimes as a monk, sometimes as a priest. He would tell them that his monastic name was Raphael, and that he had been born Georgios Lascarides from the island of Ithaka. He had joined the imperial army in the early 15th century, and after his service became a monk and was ordained a priest.

Because he was well educated, he had been sent by the patriarchate to France to participate in one of the many theological discussions of that time. This was before the fall of Constantinople when there were meetings working toward reunion of the Christian East and West in Lyon, Florence, and other places. Saint Raphael told several villagers in dreams the name of the French

town where this meeting was held and where he met Deacon Nicholas, but when the villagers awoke, they couldn't remember it. St. Raphael appeared again and said, "This is the name, don't forget it. Write it down as soon as you wake up." They did, and when they checked the encyclopedia they found that in this place, the town of Morlaix, France, there had indeed been a theological meeting during those years attended by Byzantine representatives.

Also, on the island of Ithaca, people traced his lineage and have found evidence of a very old tradition that a distant relative of the Lascarides family was martyred in the east.

St. Raphael also said that he served in Mystra in the Peloponnese where the Paleologos family ruled. There he became friends with Constantine Paleologos, soon to be the last Byzantine emperor, who asked him to come to Constantinople. In Constantinople, St. Raphael became the *protosingelos* or chancellor of the patriarchate, but he was not pleased with the plan to serve liturgy with the Latin Church, so he left Constantinople and came to Lesbos. At least, that is one account. There is also a church in Athens, St. Demetrios Loumbardiadis, where he served as well.

RTE: For our readers, St. Demetrios Loumbardiadis is an old Athenian chapel, accessible by a footpath through the woods behind the Acropolis. Papa Nicholas Planas is believed to have served there, but I didn't know about St. Raphael.

FR. RAPHAEL: Yes, he did. And in the past century he has appeared to people in dreams, but also in broad daylight. A few Lesbos islanders said that even while awake they have sometimes seen something like a screen hanging in front of them, on which they watched the events of 1463 as if on a film. Photios Kontoglu, the famous painter and iconographer who wrote the first *synaxarion* of St. Raphael, was amazed and moved when he heard the accounts of these simple people, who described details of late medieval priests' clothing with an historical accuracy that they couldn't possibly have known unless they had seen it. For instance, the villagers told Photios that the priests, as part of their vestments, had a soft towel hanging from their belt. Photios said, "Surely you mean the *epigonation*," the stiff-diamond shaped award that priests wear today. "No," they replied, "It wasn't stiff like the one priests wear today, it was like a towel." Kontoglu said, "I was moved, because only a trained art historian or liturgist would know that, in those days, there was no award like we have today, but that it was a soft cloth." I've heard that per-



Ekaterini Lytra, one of the first villagers to see St. Raphael.



Ekaterini Lytra's icon corner, where St. Raphael appeared to her.

haps it was in remembrance of the towel the Lord used to wash the disciples' feet, or that it was simply there for the priest to wipe his hands.

Doukas Tsolakis Becomes a Believer

Now comes a part of the story I especially like, the part that I said I would come back to, when the builder Doukas Tsolakis became a great believer. After he found the relics of St. Raphael and the things people had seen in dreams were verified, they completed the chapel and after the first liturgy held a feast with village music and dancing. I know this because my godfather Panagiotis was there as a member of the fund-raising committee. Although Vasiliki and Angelos had contributed the money and land, more funds were needed to finish the church.

After dancing four dances, Doukas suddenly became deaf and couldn't hear the musicians. He asked them to play louder, but they couldn't, and then Doukas lost his balance and toppled over the bank into a stream. My godfather said, "We climbed down to lift him up and were afraid that he had been killed by the fall, but when we arrived he was shaking and saying, "Forgive me, for I've sinned." It took great effort to get him out of the stream. When he returned to his senses he told us, "When I fell I saw a priest, tall with curly hair" – he described him exactly as everyone else had described St. Raphael, and then added, "He was holding a little spear... (like the lance that the priest uses in the *proskomedie*) ...and I thought he was going to pierce me with it." Behind the priest, Doukas said, was a most venerable and glorious woman wearing a veil. He said, "I couldn't gaze at her, she was so wonderful and holy and bright." On either side of her stood other holy women, though not as holy as she was, and they were standing next to her with great devotion. This woman said to the priest (remember now that Doukas was completely foreign to the faith): "Father Raphael, leave our child Doukas alone. Now he knows." "Then," Doukas said, "She came to me. 'Child Doukas,' she said, 'now do you see? Do you believe? All of this happened for you to believe. There was no other way.'" He accepted everything joyfully, and then the woman said, "Now, Child Doukas, for forty days you will fast, pray, and you will walk from the village every evening to light my oil lamp. After forty days you will receive Holy Communion."

For the next forty days, this former fierce partisan was like a lamb. He put on a black shirt like a monk, he didn't shave, and every evening he went

and lit Panagia's oil lamp. The other men in the village mocked him saying, "Look at Doukas, he's like someone out of the old women's stories of saints." Doukas replied, "I don't care what you say. Now I know and my life is different, it's not the same anymore. I'm joyous and I don't care. I'm not coming to drink with you at the coffee shop. I have other things to do." Every day he would go to the chapel and pray.

In time, St. Raphael appeared to Doukas and many of the believers again: "Now you will dig and find the relics of St. Nicholas." He had already told them about his own martyrdom, about how he was arrested on Great Thursday of 1463 and tortured from Great Thursday until Bright Tuesday. There had been an uprising in the village and the Turks thought that St. Raphael and the others were hiding the rebels, so to make them talk, they killed the child St. Irene. They dismembered her completely and then burned her body in an olive oil vessel. They then took St. Raphael captive, sawed off his jaw and beheaded him, while St. Nicholas died of a heart attack while watching the torture of his friend and abbot. When they found St. Raphael's relics, the jaw was not there, and he later told them, "You will find it further down."

But the point now was to find St. Nicholas' relics. There were many on the island who doubted, although the stories of the apparitions had been published throughout Greece and seen by people in other places as well: "Oh, they found a few bones and now they are making up a whole story." But Doukas and the rest replied, "St. Raphael appeared to us and said that we will find another body, a whole skeleton. If we find this will you still say it is a coincidence?" The doubters insisted that it was nonsense, but St. Raphael appeared and said, "You will find it, and every unbelieving mouth will be shut. It will be on a Wednesday when it is raining. Just pray and work." Doukas said, "I will never give up, I will dig until I find water in the rock." As Kontoglu describes it, the men continued digging day after day with the women singing akathists; half of the village of Thermi had given up every worldly care.

Finally, they uncovered the skeleton. They didn't make the association immediately, but when Doukas said, "We've found them!" they remembered that it was both Wednesday and it was raining. You can see the photograph published in Photios Kontoglu's book, with Doukas looking like a hermit after praying, fasting and working, with other workmen on their knees around this perfect skeleton with hands crossed, a piece of earthenware pottery with a cross engraved on it laid over the mouth, as they used to do to mark them as Christians. This was St. Nicholas the Deacon, lying exactly where St.



Candles of Supplication, Taxiarchis Monastery, Mantamados.



Shrine of Earthen Sculpture of Archangel Michael (Taxiarchis), Mantamados.

Raphael had asked them to dig. He had also told them, “If you dig further down you will find the relics of St. Irene.” And they did find the burnt bones of the twelve-year-old girl in an earthen vessel. (She is now affectionately referred to locally as “Rinoula.”) St. Raphael also told people, “It’s like Golgotha here,” and said that they should also venerate Gerondissa Olympiada, an abbess martyred some years before St. Raphael. The women’s monastery dedicated to St. Raphael is now built directly over the place where the graves were, replacing the small church built by Angelos and Vasiliki.

RTE: Do you remember when they found the relics?

FR. RAPHAEL: No, I was born later, in 1967, but I must have been one of the first children named after St. Raphael the New Martyr of Lesbos. And, as I said, at least one monk was called Raphael before me.

RTE: I was fortunate to spend time with your remarkable godmother, Ekaterini Lytra of Thermi, back in the early 1990’s. She told me that as a young woman she loved fine clothes and jewelry, and had an active social life until St. Raphael came to her and told her not to be so concerned about her appearance, and to practice hospitality. While I was there, she always had a large pot of soup on the stove and people came and went all day long.

FR. RAPHAEL: Yes, she had an open-door policy. St. Raphael told her that she should feed at least one person a day. I witnessed this when I would stay with her occasionally. Nearly every day someone would come to have something to eat. People felt at home. Some were just coming to visit, and some needed the food, but she wouldn’t discriminate, she fed everyone. She said, “This is my rule, and Raphael gave it to me so I have to keep it.”

The transformation you just spoke of was extraordinary. There is a photograph of the young Ekaterini, when she was only interested in the latest films, plays and fashions. After St. Raphael’s visitation, she felt as if she had come out of a long illness. St. Raphael had given her a whole new meaning – to live for Christ and nothing else. He had said to her, “You remove all of this jewelry, and this will be your jewel.” He showed her a little black plastic cross, like the ones people bring home as gifts when they go to monasteries. It was tied on a black ribbon instead of a chain. He said to her, “You will wear this all of your life.” After this appearance, she went and got the cross and ribbon and she still wears it. Her transformation was known to the

whole village. She always had something encouraging to say, and there was an atmosphere of joy around her.

Taxiarches: The Shrine of St. Michael the Archangel

RTE: Will you tell us now about the Shrine of St. Michael the Archangel in the village of Mantamados?

FR. RAPHAEL: This is the site of a former monastery that several centuries ago suffered the massacre of the brotherhood at the hands of pirates. A single surviving monk, who had been gathering firewood in the hills, returned in time to see the pirates retreat to their boats after the carnage, when suddenly Archangel Michael appeared above a huge wave that engulfed the marauders. After burying his dead brothers, the monk gathered up the blood-soaked earth and fashioned the face of the archangel in relief, which was later given a silver riza. It stands in the church until now, and there have been many miracles.

Many people on the island, including my sister, have been named in his honor: Evstratios (Stratis) or Evstratia. This is not for St. Eustratius, but for Archangel Michael, who is *Archistratigos*, the Chief Commander. The shrine church is well kept up, but because of the decline of monasticism in the twentieth century, the monastery has yet to be restored. My mother's mother, Maria, who was very pious, used to tell us stories about the archangel. His fresco in the courtyard of the church (not the famous relief inside) used to disappear from the wall during the war with Fascist Italy in the forties and during the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974, and then return mysteriously sometime later.

When I was a child, there was a woman named Anastasia living at the shrine who was dedicated to the archangel. She was an orphan, an abandoned child who had been left outside the monastery. There were no monastics there in the twentieth century, only priests and a devout caretaker couple who took the child in and raised her. The girl became a sort of nun. No one knew exactly if she was tonsured, but she looked like a nun and had dedicated her life to the Church. She was always cleaning. My grandmother said that everyone considered her a holy person and that they would go to her for counsel. They would tell her their problems and open their hearts to her. They called her "*I Kori Tou Taxiarchi*," that is, "*the Chief Commander's Daughter*." Local people had an endearing nickname, Taxiarchoula. They said that she would

converse with the archangel during her long vigils and that she told people how his voice sounded. She never left the place until her death.

There were many others like this on the island; every Greek island has unknown people who have lived devout and holy lives for Christ. ✦