

The Holy New Hieromartyr Joseph of Desphina

ὁ Ἅγιος νέος Ἱερομάρτυς Ἰωσήφ ὁ ἐκ Δεσφίνης
(† July 22, 1944, Old Style)

Following a decision, in September of 2014, by the Synod of Bishops of the Church of the Genuine Orthodox Christians of Greece to enter his name into the catalogue of Saints, the official Proclamation of the sanctity of the Holy New Hieromartyr Joseph of Desphina, as well as the first liturgical commemoration in his honor, took place on Monday, August 3, and Tuesday, August 4, 2015 (according to the Civil or New Calendar), at the Church of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul in Daphne (Athens), Greece. Presiding at the Vespers Service, on Monday, and the Matins and Divine Liturgy, on Tuesday, was His Beatitude, Archbishop Kallinikos of Athens, President of the Holy Synod, with four Hierarchs, with four Presbyters, and with two Deacons concelebrating. A large number of clergy, monastics, and faithful were also present for the historic event.

St. Joseph the New Martyr was born Ioannes (John) Antoniou, in 1900, in the small town of Desphina (Desfina) in Central Greece, where he was reared by pious parents in a traditional Orthodox manner. At a young age, he was tonsured a monk and in 1925 was ordained to the Priesthood. In 1935, having rejected the calendar reform in the State Church of Greece, he joined the Old Calendar struggle. In the same year, he was deposed by the New Calendarist State Church for “Old Calendarism,” and a year later he organized a huge public celebration of the Blessing of the Waters, at the central port of Karystos on the island of Euboea, gathering the Old Calendarist communities in his region that had rejected the calendar innovation. At this celebration, he strongly condemned the calendar innovation and the departure of the State Church of Greece from Holy Tradition.

Eventually, in 1938, in retaliation for his faithful protest, he was arrested and jailed, stripped of his clerical dress, and forcibly shaved by the police authorities at the behest of the State Church. This sort of barbaric and technically illegal action was taken against the Old Calendarist clergy throughout Greece, much to the shame of the ecclesiastical administration of the “official” Church and the secular agencies at its disposal as a branch of the civil structure.

Father Joseph was highly regarded among the Greek clergy and faithful as a man of strict fasting, high moral accomplishment, and self-sacrifice. He was a tireless celebrant of the Divine services and was constantly available to the faithful and to all who needed his spiritual counsel and guidance. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, when a large part of Greece either belonged to Old Calendarist communities or sympathized with their commitment to Church tradition, there was deep public respect for the traditionalist heroes, and thus St. Joseph was held in high esteem for his spiritual virtues and prophetic gifts. Indeed, during the occupation of Greece by Nazi Germany, when he was serving in the mountain villages near Corinth, he shared what food and basics of life he had with his fellow citizens, many of whom were close to starvation in the last two years of the occupation.

In 1944, with the defeat of the Axis Powers and the growth of the communist insurgency, St. Joseph, who had remained silent about the Communists and their ideology, as long as they were helping to defend the Greek nation against the Nazi invaders, began to speak openly against the communist insurgents. Their violent actions against their fellow Greeks, including clergy, teachers, and innocent civilians who opposed their ideology, he openly condemned. He also condemned and abhorred their militant atheism. Indeed, he boldly called the communists to repentance for their crimes and for their faithlessness. As a result, the communists, in their anger, sentenced him to death. They subsequently arrested him, tortured him, and slaughtered him, as they did many Priests during the Greek Civil War. After his murder, they hastily buried his remains in Panariti, a small village in the region of Corinth. It was said that a light was seen from afar for a number of nights over the area where he was martyred.

The precise location of the holy Martyr Joseph’s Relics was discovered in a very curious way, after the liberation, when his donkey, in the company of those seeking his burial place, stopped at a certain point and began scratching with his front hooves in the earth. Indeed, when the place where the animal indicated was excavated, the remains of the Martyr were found. They were identified by his monastic belt. The Relics also gave off a fragrant scent. Those fragrant Relics, along with the Saint’s Icon, painted at the Holy Monastery of Sts. Cyprian and Justina in Phyle, Greece, were available for veneration by those present at the Proclamation of the Martyr’s sanctity by the Holy Synod of our Church.

May the Holy Hieromartyr Joseph pray for us.



At left, St. Joseph; at right, the Clergy.