

## On Evil Spirits

Just as the holy Athanasios began building the monastery's main church, which is still preserved in our time, Satan launched a terrible attack by tempting the construction workers with an immense difficulty. While the foremen and the workers were drafting the plan for the temple, suddenly everyone's hands became paralysed. They could not even bring them to their mouths. So St. Athanasios read the Trisagion Hymn, and immediately their hands returned to normal. The saint himself began first to dig the ground then he ordered the others to do the same. Straight way they began the work without any problem. They were astonished by the miracle and with no hesitation fell on their knees before the holy Athanasios and begged him to allow them to stay near him so that they too could become monks. Thus Satan departed in shame, for he had failed to stop the building of the monastery which was to become the first bastion of Orthodoxy and asceticism on the Holy Mountain, Panagia's garden.

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Two weeks after the holy Peter of Athos settled into his cave, Satan launched immense temptations, sending out an alert and general mobilisation of all demons, in order to attack this heroic pioneer of asceticism.

But St. Peter became a laurel-victor over the attacks. During the night the father of lies and envy gathered together all his soldiers, some of whom attacked the cave by throwing javelins and arrows against it, while others broke huge rocks from above and threw them down as they screamed, "Come out of our house. Otherwise we will kill you."

Being strengthened by prayer, the saint remained unharmed by their threats and attacks. Coming out of the cave for a short time he saw a multitude of demons. Raising his eyes to heaven he cried out from the depths of his heart, 'All holy Theotokos help me, your servant!'

At the sound of the Mother of God's name those cowardly demons disappeared. Fifty days passed before they came back in the form of beasts and snakes, the same way! as they had attacked that great teacher of the desert St. Antonios. And again the saint defended himself by making the sign of the holy cross and calling upon the holy name of Jesus the Saviour.

Following this, the always innovative and conniving enemy tried to trick the saint in this manner: he took on the form of a young relative and appeared before the holy Peter, acting joyous and emotional about meeting him again after such a long time, telling him all about his relatives' sadness and worry over his shipwreck as revealed to them by St. Nicholas, who had also, the demon claimed, told them that their rare, beloved treasure (Peter) was

hiding in the forests of Athos.

"So come," he said, "let us go together back to your friends and relatives who are waiting for you. You will find another monastery, for there are many of them. Tell me how you can serve God better—when you depart from the world or when you stay for the benefit of souls? Why should you stay out here in these desolate mountainous heights instead of being with the people who are waiting for you to teach them. Don't you remember the prophet's saying, "The one who takes worthy things out of the unworthy is like my mouth."

The saint heard these words and was disturbed. This was a sign that the youth speaking to him was not from God. He bowed his head and with tears in his eyes bravely replied: "Know this well, that no one brought me to this place, neither man nor angel, but God and the all holy Theotokos. Unless it is their will, I cannot depart from this place."

At the sound of the Theotokos' name, this apparition of his relative, in reality a wily demon, disappeared

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Seven years later, the third demonic attack against this brave commander of Athosite asceticism occurred when Satan appeared to him as an angel. This "angel" stood at the entrance of the saint's cave with an unsheathed sword and cried out, "Come out, true servant of Christ, come to hear about the mysteries of God and things that will benefit your soul."

"And who are you who wants to tell me things that will be for the good of my soul?" the saint asked.

"I am the archangel of God, Who sends me to bring you good tidings. Be brave, have courage and rejoice, because a throne has been prepared for you and a crown of blossoms made for you which will last forever. It is now the time that you should leave this place to go to the world so that many souls will benefit. Besides, that is why the Lord let this water spring you drank from be dried up, for He wishes to send you away. "

"Who am I, the most unworthy of all, that an angel of my Lord has come to me?" answered the saint.

"Do not wonder," the false angel assured him. "For you have surpassed all ancient saints and prophets, such as Moses, Elijah, Daniel and Job. Go and preach to the world. God orders you so that many may benefit."

"Unless my Lady Theotokos, who has brought me here, my helper — as well as St. Nicholas — will this, I am not leaving this place."

Again, at the sound of the Theotokos' name, the demon vanished instantly.

That same night the Lady Theotokos, the protector and overseer of Mount Athos, and St. Nicholas — the two holy visitors — came to him after he had faced such great temptations, and said, "Peter, do not be afraid of the devil's winning ways. You must know that the Lord is with you. Starting tomorrow

morning, you will be fed with heavenly food."

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"The evil spirit of delusion," St. Maximos the Kafsokalyvitan said to St. Gregory the Sinaitan, when it comes to a man confuses his mind and makes him crazy. It hardens his heart. It causes a person to be cowardly, to be fearful, to despair and to be full of arrogance. It makes the eyes of the person wild, disturbs the mind, causes shivers to go through the body. Light appears, not bright but reddish. The mind becomes demonic. The evil spirit encourages the individual to blaspheme. Anyone who is possessed by such a demonic spirit is angered and becomes mad. There is neither humility nor true mourning and tears in him. He boasts of all his accomplishments and seeks to be glorified and honoured. He indulges his passions. He loses his mind and is totally destroyed.

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St. Nikodemos the Agioritan was attacked many times in various ways by evil spirits, either directly by them or through men. Here is what his biographer, the monk Euthymios, wrote describing an attack by the evil spirits with the purpose of disturbing and scaring the saint:

Do not think that he achieved all these . . . without envy and temptations from invisible and visible enemies. As far as the visible ones are concerned, it is best to forget them and to leave them to God's mercy ..

The blessed Nikodemos, when he first arrived [on Mount Athos] was such a coward that he would leave the door of his cell open before he went to sleep, for he felt comforted knowing other people were around, or so he thought.

But when he went to the desert he became so brave that any time he was up all night writing and the demons were outside his cell window whispering, he kept on working, fearlessly. Sometimes he would even laugh at their tricks.

One night on the island of Skyropoulas where he was staying, the demons created such a loud banging that he thought for a moment that the wall of the cell would give way. But the next morning everything was in place. The same thing happened while he was in a group of kalyves. There he tried hard to hear what the demons were saying, but he could not hear a thing. Only once he heard them saying 'He who writes.'

At another time they were knocking at his cell's door. Each time they knocked twice. One time when he was trans- kiting the thirty-fourth Psalm, at the line where it says, 'The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them,' they created such a noise that it appeared

as if a whole army were marching over his hut with great force. And indeed a stone wall near his cell actually did crumble during this attack.

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During the year 1925 a man possessed by the devil came to the monastery of St. Dionysios. In his room after Vespers he started singing loudly and dancing in a frenzy, pounding his feet on the floor until he collapsed. The fathers had to tie his hands and feet together to force him to rest. But he would free himself as if they had tied him with only a thread.' One day an experienced monk tied him down with a new rope. At the same time, the demon who was in the man was; screaming, "Monk, tie me up and I will show you where this rope will go." And indeed two hours later the possessed man was freed and the rope was found in the garden.

Another day, after the man's exhausting dance, Elder Vissarion ran to him with a pitcher full of water to offer him a drink. To this water the elder had added some holy water. "Come John, my child," he said to him, "come and have some cold water." Because he was out of breath and very thirsty, the possessed man began to drink. But after only a few moments he felt burning on his throat and said, "Monk, you have burned me," and screamed and spat the water out of his mouth.

What a miracle! Everyone marvelled at the divine energy that holy water has. After that he was offered ordinary water, which he drank with great relish.

They read exorcism prayers for a month, and after he was freed from the evil spirit, he left the monastery. Once they had asked the demon, "Of what are you most afraid?

The holy water, the antidoron, or the Holy Communion?" To which the demon replied, "If you could only keep the Holy Communion you receive in Church, none of us could harm you."

"John, why are you afraid of the Holy Communion?" "Do not ask John; leave him alone. Listen to me and

what I have to say: John is not the one who is talking to you. Untie me so that I can dive into the sea, and soon I will be in Athens!"

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A novice in the Iviron skete of John the Forerunner and from Ioasaph's hut, though he was receiving Holy Communion frequently, saw demons. A wild cat would appear in his window ready to attack him. He realised that the appearances were demonic. The elders questioned him as to whether he had not confessed a sin, and he then admitted that he had hesitated to tell that he had killed someone unintentionally when he had lived in his village. He did not tell about it from fear that he would be charged with murder and

sent to be tried in court. As soon as he confessed it, the demonic appearances ceased.

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One evening the cell of St. Silouanos the Athonite was filled I with a peculiar light. It went through his whole body so that he became transparent and he was able to see everything within his chest cavity. A thought came to him to accept this as God's grace. But this was disturbing, and he kept wondering why there was no feeling of contrition in him. He even burst into laughter as he prayed. He knocked! his forehead with his fist. He stopped laughing, but his compunction did not return, nor did any sense of repentance.] Then he realised that the vision was not from God. Shortly] afterwards, he saw evil spirits in front of him, and he conversed with them as if they were human beings. They told him, "Now you are a saint," or "you will never be saved." When he asked them why they were telling him contradictory things, they replied: "We never tell the truth."

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An elder said, "Even on Mount Athos the devil finds a way to catch us .... He has also managed to take in the young ' people. Even in a Christian family they can lose the meaning of what family is. Everywhere it is the same way. The monasteries try to do things right, but . . . ."

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An elder said to a beginner monk, "The devil has one target: to take you away from your 'nest' (that is, your company of monks). When he succeeds in that, the rest is easy.

"Don't let your trust and love in your elder be diminished. Because if you do, it will stop you from continuing your struggle and you will be defeated. Always remember these two passwords: 'Bless' and 'forgive.' When you are reprimanded, say 'Let it be blessed.' When you are given an order, always think 'He that orders is also responsible .' This way you will remain a carefree, quiet and sensible, obedient monk."

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Ascetic Nikodemos from Kafsokalyvia (1807-1867) struggled greatly. He fed

only on bread and never ate any vegetables. The devil, who is full of envy and the enemy of all good people, set many traps for him. He would present him with illusions and bright appearances, but Nikodemos would always come out a victor in the struggle, because he had an experienced spiritual father to guide him.

Once he was snowbound in his cell for so long that he used up all his dry bread and had no more food. Then the evil spirit appeared to him as the Holy Trinity in bright light and said: "I am the Holy Trinity, bow before me and you will be filled with grace, and you will get some food." At the same time tables covered with many appetizing foods appeared before the monk, giving off aromas which tempted him.

The athlete of Christ Nikodemos knelt down and begged the Lord to deliver him from this temptation.

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A pious ascetic lived in the skete of Kafsokalyvia. One time he heard a knock at his door. It was someone dressed as a monk with a knapsack on his back full of the toasted bread

which all ascetics eat. "Who are you?" asked the pious elder.

"I am a father confessor from St. Anne's."

"If you are a monk, especially a spiritual father, make a prostration."

As soon as the stranger heard this he disappeared (for he was a demon), and left behind a trail of bad odour which lasted for three days. We should mention here that the evil spirits do not make prostrations nor venerate God.

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An elder used to say, 'A monk resembles a small, squirming fish. He knows how to escape the world like the little fish that avoids the bait hidden in the deadly hook.'

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Ever memorable Elder Gabriel, the "grandfather," the hegumen of Dionysiou, often told this story:

In 1910 through God's grace I, the least of all, came here to this holy place to become a monk. What I am going to tell you had just happened not long before I arrived. I asked about it and everybody told me the same thing, since it was an original and rare event. This is what I was told: Four years before, there was a person gentle in appearance who had come here from

Thessaloniki. He was a pastry maker, the only son to his parents, and he had come to the Holy Mountain to become a monastic. His name was Athanasios. Soon after he became a novice, he was sent to our metochion 'Monoxilitis,' which is situated in the interior of Mount Athos, as it was customary to work there and also to be taught how to fast and follow all the services. In this way he would be prepared for the strict asceticism practiced in our monastery.

One day, after he had arrived there, soon after all the brothers had come from the church and were getting ready to start their work and while they were still standing on the balcony of the metochion, stones were thrown at them, coming from the direction of the nearby forest. No one was harmed by this, nor were any buildings or furnishings damaged.

At first they thought that people were throwing the stones at them for a joke, but as they proceeded to go to work, they realized that the barrage was continuing. It was then that they all ran back to the metochion, frightened and suspecting foul play from either people or demons. They went into the church and prayed to God and to the Theotokos to save them.

While they were in the church, the attack stopped, but as soon as they came outside, the stones began flying at them again. To add to this demonic confusion, their dog was suddenly thrown three metres down from the balcony by an invisible power. Also tossed about were many unbreakable objects such as wooden stools, monks' hats, and so forth, all of which appeared to be moving about by themselves and falling off the balcony.

The frightened monks stayed gathered around the very pious Father Markos, a previous hegumen, and spent most of their time in the church, knowing that all this was a demonic attack. To make sure for the last time that this was truly the case, the chief steward of the monastery, Porphyries, sent one of the monks out to Karyes on foot in order to ask for assistance from the local guard, which they required as ordered by the overseers. When the guards arrived, the stones were still coming from the direction of the forest. The guardsmen searched the area and even fired several shots, but with no results. They agreed that demons were attacking, and departed.

Finally novice Athanasios, who was mentioned earlier, told the fathers that the attack was directed at him because of his parents' and his involvement with magic in his previous sinful life. He said that for two days now he had experienced an oppressive feeling, and to convince the fathers that what he was saying was true, he asked them to let him go to the small church of St. Artemios which was not far from the metochion. As soon as he began to walk away in that direction, the stones all began falling on him and around him without doing him any harm.

After this the other monks left Athanasios to stand alone in the church while they went about their usual business. The chief steward then wrote to the main monastery, explaining what had happened and asking them to send a boat to take the novice back so that everyone else in the metochion would be freed from this demonic disturbance. The request was granted, but as soon as Athanasios began to go toward the shore to enter the boat which had been sent for him, the attack began again. In order to console the boatmen, the steward had to send along with them both Father Markos and

the most holy monk Isaak. In spite of this, stones continued to fall until they were well out to the sea. Fortunately they fell all around the boat without harming anyone.

Under these circumstances they arrived at the monastery. At first, because no stones fell upon their arrival or as they were making their way up to the monastery, some monks started making fun of them, saying that they were suffering from delusions. Suddenly five or six very large rocks fell from the nearby tower, which convinced everyone that this was no laughing matter after all, but a serious problem.

The monastery's synod decided to send the novice to the spiritual father Savvas, a former member of their community who was now at St. Anne's, hoping that he would be able to look after him. The next day they took him there.

This great ascetic, though very old, felt profound compassion for the suffering novice. He fasted totally and prayed for an entire week. As a result, he and his whole company of monks suffered greatly, for not only were they attacked with huge rocks which fell from above their hut into the sea below with a terrible thundering, but also because the seemingly quiet Athanasios would become violent and blasphemous, and would attack the other monks verbally, especially the spiritual father Savvas. At one point they even had to tie him down so that he would not kill himself. Finally the prayer of the just man won over the evil. While the most pious spiritual father was praying with tears in his eyes, admonishing the devil to leave the novice, he saw a demon in the shape of a fox exit through the novice's mouth. It stood at the hut's entrance and stared at the elder angrily, grinding its teeth. Then it disappeared. Immediately the novice fell on his knees before the elder, weeping and thanking him, telling him that he had been freed and saved from an unbearable burden.

The elder kept the novice near him for a few days, then sent him to another spiritual father in Koutloumousiou's skete, where he was tonsured a monk with the name of Avvakoum. I met Avvakoum in Karyes, where he used his skill as a pastry maker to earn what was necessary to live. His co-ascetics reported that he was a strict ascetic, wearing chains under his clothing, following the old father's example. Attaining to a very old age, and not being able to take care of himself, he returned to the main monastery of Koutloumousiou and there near the monastery stable, in a small hut, fell asleep in the Lord a few years ago.

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Father Simeon went to live in the same cave near Small St. Anne's in which Father Joseph the Hesychast had formerly lived with his subordinates. One day a young man who had just arrived on Athos, hoping to become a monk, came to visit him. The elder was pleased to see him and expressed his happiness that so many



young men were now coming to the mountain to become monastics, following the example of the elders. "My brother," he said to him, "no matter what, never keep your thoughts hidden from your spiritual

father. Trust him totally, otherwise you will be in danger, as I once found out myself. " "What happened?" asked the young man.

"After I left the world and became a rasophore,<sup>1</sup> I wanted to be a hesychast right away to live quietly in prayer as did the great fathers. Thus I came to this place, small and where there is no water, contrary to the advice of many elders and especially of my spiritual father M. Seeing that I was insisting, he finally said to me, "Go, since you are insisting. But you should come back to see me, to tell me your thoughts!

Our cells were only a twenty minutes' walk apart. Of day after I had finished my rule of prayer and as I was sitting on my wooden bed, I heard women's laughter and talking. Shortly after, I saw four young women looking at me through my window. I became anxious. "Where am I thought.' In Piraeus or Mount Athos?"

They started laughing in a teasing way. The first one said "That one is very handsome!"

"What a fool he is," said the second one; "he came here to be a monk. I would like to marry him."

The third one interrupted her, saying "No! I will marry him. You are ugly."

"You are wasting your time," the fourth one said, "because he will die in forty days before he receives the Great Schema."

Then they disappeared. At these seemingly prophetic words, I started to worry and lament for my forthcoming death. But still I did not go and tell this incident to my confessor.

The fortieth day came. I was anxiously waiting for the twelfth hour at midnight and began to cry out in pain, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me! Forgive me, my Lord. There is no time for me to receive the Great Schema . . . ." The midnight hour struck, and I thought death was coming.

But nothing happened. I pinched myself to see if I was still alive. Then I realized I had been duped. Quickly I got up and ran to my spiritual father.

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An elder said: "The devil does not respect anyone, whether a priest, a bishop, or a patriarch."

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An ascetic told me this about the evil spirits' actions. Once while he was in his hermitage praying, suddenly a bright light shone in front of him. He paid

no attention to it and continued praying more intensely. Then two demons appeared in the shape of gypsies playing at hitting each other. This happened so suddenly that the ascetic could not help himself— he burst out laughing at them.

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The evil spirits use all kinds of deceptions. Sometimes they create bold images, or they change themselves to appear as angels of light. This is the way they appeared before a contemporary ascetic while he was praying: it was at night, and he heard loud voices, drums playing, and dancing. He got up to see what was going on. He saw nothing. It was the devil. He had barely sat down on his stool again to continue his prayer when suddenly his room was filled with light. The roof of his cell was lifted up. He thought the light was reaching the sky. Where the light came to an end there appeared the face of a man, like Christ's. He could see only half of the face, but as he stared at it he heard an inner voice saying "You have been honoured to see Christ!"

His automatic response was the thought "Who am I, the unworthy, to see Christ?" and he crossed himself. Immediately the apparition disappeared, and the cell's roof fell back in place.

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"When the Holy Spirit dwells in a person, his thoughts are collected within him," St. Maximos the Kafsokalyvit would say to St. Gregory the Sinaitan. "That person," continued, then is careful and humble. He remembers death, his sins, the final judgment, and eternal hell. He becomes sensitive to holy things. His eyes are filled with tears and tranquility. The more God's grace comes to him, the more his mind is at rest, and his soul is consoled by Christ's passion and His immense love for mankind. The mind in this state then enters the realm of true visions and comprehends the inconceivable power of God, Who by only one word brought the universe from non-existence into being. At the same time his mind is both in awe of God's omnipotence, through which He governs everything, and overwhelmed at the incomprehensibility of the Holy Trinity and at the immensity of the Divine Sacrifice. At such a time his mind is 'lifted up above all material senses, is illumined and filled' with divine knowledge. Within this luminous divine light, his heart grows calm and serene, full of the fruits of the Holy Spirit: joy, peace, tolerance, goodness, affection, love, humility, and many more. Then it is that a man's soul is in absolute bliss.

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A well known contemporary hermit told us this:

When a man receives the divine grace in abundance, he cannot take it all in at once. He is shaken up by it, as if an electric current had passed through his body. He cannot endure such divine grace. Then there are tears, bliss, inexpressible joy, transformation, and divine love.

All night long I had the holy relics of St. Arsenics on my bed and I was praying. Suddenly the devil appeared. He grabbed me and threw me on the ground, screaming "What is this skull?"

Then I cried, "Saint of God, help me!" The devil disappeared and I was filled with an ineffable joy.

When in the morning someone came to visit me, he was surprised at how my face was transformed by the presence of divine grace.



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