

# The Life and Mission of St. Paisius Velichkovsky. 1722-1794. An Early Modern Master of The Orthodox Spiritual Life

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*M*any people today have become familiar with the figure of the Russian Pilgrim. The book, *The Way of a Pilgrim* purports to have been written as the autobiographical record of a poor and barely educated Russian peasant of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Treading his way across the Steppes, enduring countless hardships and adventures as he persevered, gripped only with the reading of his beloved book of the spiritual writers of the Early Church, he directed all his mental energies around the countless recitation: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.” This famous story is designed to advocate how the prayer of the heart can happen if one wills it: a mystical transitioning from prayer on the lips, to prayer in the mind, to prayer of the heart: namely, prayer in the deepest levels of the human spirit’s personal communion with the Risen Christ.

The work in its English translation had a remarkable resonance in 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe and America; so much so, that nowadays if one asks about the spirituality of the pilgrim, most would think first of Russia and its mystical tradition of the Jesus Prayer, and perhaps hardly at all of the Puritans! The book’s popularity was helped along, doubtless, by its starred appearance in J.D. Salinger’s *Franny and Zooey* in 1961. It first came out in 1884 in a Russian version entitled: “Candid Tales of a Pilgrim to His Spiritual Father.” In all likelihood it emanated originally from the St. Panteleimon monastery on Mount Athos (the Russian house) and was probably crafted there with no small literary skill by one of the Archimandrites of that house (though very little is known for certain about him), who also took it back with him to Russia (the Optina hermitage), where it soon became treasured as a spiritual testimony capturing the ‘soul’ of Holy Russia.

The book is what we should now regard as a pious novel, yet nonetheless authentic since it was written out of the Archimandrite’s deep experience of countless Russian pilgrims coming for his direction as a confessor on Athos. It has been estimated that before the 1917 Revolution, more than 100,000 Russian pilgrims a week made the once-in-a-lifetime trek to Jerusalem, Athos, and Sinai. But the author knew his theology and tradition very well indeed. He was no uneducated peasant. The book was designed as part of an offensive to

spread the Philokalic tradition far and wide in the Slavic lands, and to break the riverbanks of what had been up until that time a spiritual path of hesychasm that had been restricted to monastics.<sup>1</sup> The author wanted to engage the laity with this deep tradition of the Jesus Prayer. To meet this goal the tale succinctly popularized three key and distinctive aspects of the Eastern Orthodox Hesychastic tradition.

The three characters describing it are clearly shown in the way the poor pilgrim, first of all, learns to love and cherish his spiritual book the *Dobrotolyubie*, the Russian translation of the Greek *Philokalia* (Lover of Beautiful Things), a compendium of the teachings of the eastern fathers on prayer and the spiritual life; secondly, focuses all his spiritual efforts on the short invocation of the Name of Jesus; and thirdly advocates the necessity of having a skilled spiritual father to help guide the seeking soul (and in the case of the absence of such a living guide—to take the book as one’s *vade mecum*). In propagating these three keys of the spiritual life the author reveals himself as taking up the torch of a major predecessor: St. Paisius Velichovsky, who was the towering spiritual figure who first brought the Philokalic tradition to the Slavic lands, and who can be rightly regarded as the modern Father of the Jesus Prayer. St. Paisius was regarded as a major Staretz in the great Optina hermitage near Moscow, and it was his teaching that undoubtedly inspired the creation of *The Way of the Pilgrim*. Sadly, although he is one of the most important of the early modern spiritual masters of the Orthodox tradition, next to nothing is available in accessible studies about him. The life and work of this major figure in the history of spirituality goes largely unnoticed; yet he was a man who lies behind the major revival of the Philokalic spirituality that characterizes modern Orthodoxy.<sup>2</sup> This present survey of Paisius’ life and doctrine tries, in a brief space, to span the great void in the English-language literature.<sup>3</sup>

### THE LIFE AND EARLY FORMATION OF ST. PAISIUS

Saint Paisius Velichkovsky, lived from 1722–1794. He was a Ukrainian by birth and for most of his life he liked to sign himself on documents as native of Poltava which was his hometown. But the locus of his major life’s work, and his spiritual reputation, have established him as one of the greatest honorary Romanian Orthodox saints, so much so that he is often called St. Paisie of Neamț. The saint himself wrote in his last years a sketch of an autobiography, especially focused on being a record of all the monastic communities he had founded. It was never completed. It is called in short “The Autobiography”<sup>4</sup> and recounts his own life from his birth up until his residence at the Cârnuț Skete in Wallachia. Its complete title was “Narrative of the holy community of my beloved fathers, brothers, and spiritual sons, who in the name of Christ have come to me, the unworthy one, for the salvation of their souls.” One of

his disciples, the Romanian monk Vitalis, who had been with St. Paisius at Dragomirna, Secu, and Neamț, wrote the first biography of his teacher in the four blank end pages of a Menaion<sup>5</sup> for the month of February, which was never widely disseminated. The higumen of Neamț, Archimandrite Mardarius, complained twenty years after Paisius's death that still no biography was extant. Accordingly, the community asked Schemamonk Metrophanes to write a life, since he was one of the senior surviving disciples of the saint. He wrote a life in Slavonic and a large number of copies of it were made.<sup>6</sup> Metrophanes himself notes that the monk Isaac Didaskalos (the Teacher) undertook to publish a life in Romanian that was a digest of his own work. Shortly afterwards the monk Gregory, who later became Metropolitan of Wallachia, added a short life of St. Paisius as an introduction to his book entitled *Collection of Sayings on Obedience*. This Vita was entitled *A Brief Narrative of the Life of Our Most Holy Father Paisius*. It was printed at Neamț in 1817. This was the first written life that departed from the heavy style of Byzantine tropes that had characterized the earlier hagiographical narratives, and it attempted to give a holistic sense of the importance of Paisius's life in terms of contemporary contexts and judgments. Gregory of Wallachia placed emphasis on the remarkable leadership character of Paisius and on his superlative organizational skills and offered an overview of his lasting importance in terms of the Philokalic revival within the Orthodox Church.<sup>7</sup>

Even so, by the mid-nineteenth century the extant biographies were not felt to be substantive enough, and so higumen Sylvester from Transylvania commissioned a full Vita from the monk Platon, with instructions that it should explicitly reflect the Slavonic and Romanian heritages of St. Paisius. Platon, accordingly, compiled a full-scale biography in Slavonic which was soon after translated into Romanian by the monk Cyriacus and printed in Romanian at Neamț in 1836. The Slavonic edition of this work was published later, at Optina in Russia, in 1847 and went through several other editions there, establishing Paisius's reputation in Russian circles around the Optina hermitage, as well as in Romania.<sup>8</sup>

The family of St. Paisius was related to the Ukrainian nobility, and had many Cossack officers among them. His father Ivan was a protopriest and dean of the Orthodox cathedral in Poltava. Paisius was the eleventh of 12 children in the family. His father died when he was only four years of age, and he was brought up under the care of his elder brother John, also a priest at the cathedral. It was customary to begin children's literacy studies in that time with the recitation of the Psalms and the Horologion prayers. In the Autobiography, Paisius tells the reader that he was seized with an unquenchable love for reading and prayer.<sup>9</sup> His studies soon grew to include the reading of the entire Bible, the lives of the saints in the Menaion, and from that he progressed to the

works of St. John Chrysostom and the Discourses of Ephraim the Syrian. This predominant reliance on Church literature was a common way that young Orthodox intellectuals in the 18<sup>th</sup> century accessed a foundation for literary and cultural studies in the broader sense.

For his secondary education, at the age of 13, Paisius attended the Kievan Theological Academy, founded in 1633 by the important hierarch Peter Mogila, but it was a time when the program of studies was dominated by the neo-classical Greek curriculum. St. Paisy later regarded it as a wasted period, finding the scholasticism of that kind of approach excessively desiccating. He stayed here from 1735 to 1739. It was a time when he specialized in acquiring languages (Latin, Greek, Polish, and Slavonic were the main foci of the school) but it was also a time when his desire for monastic life was growing stronger. He made visits to the hermitages in Kiev, especially the world-famous Kiev Pechersky Lavra. It is recorded at this time that he had a group of young friends who were devoted to the spiritual life, and together they made a mutual promise never to join a rich monastery, but to strive to live in strict observance and follow the difficult path. At the end of his time in Kiev he met and was influenced by two refugees from Moldavia, who had come to the city in the aftermath of the Russo-Turkish war: Hieromonk Pachomius and Metropolitan Anthony of Moldavia.<sup>10</sup> Paisius mentions in his Autobiography that he heard Metropolitan Anthony celebrate the Divine Liturgy in Romanian, and his heart was deeply moved by the beauty of the service. He says: “[In my soul] was born a great love for the Moldavian language and its God-protected people; still more from this moment, my soul was set on fire with the desire to become a monk in a foreign land.”<sup>11</sup>

In 1740, aged 18, he left the academy after completing the first grade of studies, and followed his vocation to monastic life. He submitted to the direction of hieromonk Pachomius and entered the monastery of Lubetch on the banks of the river Dnieper. He did not settle here, however, and soon moved on to the monastery of St. Nicholas Medvedovsky on the river Chasmin, where he became a rasophore monk on the Feast of the Transfiguration in 1741, receiving the name Platon. The monastery was shortly afterwards closed down because of the political stresses of the time, and he returned to the Pechersky Lavra at Kiev. He tells us in his Autobiography that he was dissatisfied with the life in the monastery there, and was seeking a spiritual father when he encountered the monk Ignatius who explained to him about the many patristic texts on asceticism he had with him, and who spoke to him in glowing terms about the monastic life in Romania where, he told Paisius, he had set his heart on returning. St. Paisius tells his readers that it was this spiritual encounter more than all the others which showed to him his future path; how he had to make his way into Romania to discover there a flourishing of monastic spirituality.



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### **DEVELOPING THE MYSTERIES OF MONASTIC LIFE**

In Lent of 1743 a meeting with the Romanian Hieromonk Michael proved decisive. He was higuren of the St. Nicholas Skete at Trăisteni, and he encouraged Paisius to become a monk at this small household. It was located in the region of Buzău where, at that period, there were a cluster of no less than forty monastic communities, comprised of monks of Bulgarian, Serbian, and Russian origins, many of whom were refugees from the wars of that era. Paisius

first entered the Dălhăuți Skete and then went on to the Trăisteni Skete. Both of the communities were under the spiritual eldership of Starets Basil of Poiana Mărului, who became an important and formative influence on Paisius's spiritual life, especially when telling him about the Prayer of the Heart.

In the Skete, which at the time had twenty monks living in it, not counting the hesychasts who lived in separate hermitages nearby, Paisius was introduced to a strict Athonite observance of the daily services. He was recommended for ordination at this period, though it was deferred because he was not yet of the canonical age. After two years' formation in the community, Paisius moved to the Cârnu Skete, in Wallachia, to live with the hesychast Starets Onuphrius. Here the Typikon, or daily observance, was also modeled on that of the Lavras of Athos. The brethren lived in solitude, and gathered together only on Sundays and feast days for the services. After the Divine Liturgy there was a festive meal in common, and they engaged in conversations about the spiritual life until Vespers. After Vespers each one returned to their separate cells. In this time Paisius perfected his command of the Romanian language.

In 1746, aged 24, with the blessing of the fathers of the Cârnu Skete and in the company of the hieromonk Tryphon, St. Paisius moved to Mount Athos on the Halkidiki peninsula. In his Autobiography he tells us that he was anxious to move in order to avoid the ordination to the priesthood that the Moldavian fathers wanted to impose on him.<sup>12</sup> As Metropolitan Serafim also notes in his study, the saint's spiritual formation also required this next decisive step for its maturation.<sup>13</sup> They arrived and lodged at the Great Lavra of St. Athanasius on July 4<sup>th</sup> of that year, and after a few days, St. Paisius found out where the Slavonic monks were lodged and so made his way to the Pantocrator monastery.<sup>14</sup> He was assigned to live in one of its small Sketes by the name of Kiparis. Although he looked all over the mountain for a spiritual guide, he says that he could not find a single one that was advanced in the Prayer of the Heart. So he settled down once more to the solitary life, and so he passed the next four years in quiet.

In 1750 his former Starets, Basil of Poiana Mărului, came to visit the Holy Mountain, and made his way to seek out Paisius. He advised him not to spend so much time in solitude, but to take in some brothers to live beside him, so that a small community could follow the common observance together. Starets Basil also tonsured him to the Lesser Schema at this time. So it was that St. Paisius accepted his first disciple, a Romanian monk named Bessarion. Over the following four years, and always by Bessarion's arrangement and outreach, they admitted a total of eight Romanian monks to the Skete. When the first Slavonic-speaking monks arrived, the services, which had up till then been all in Romanian, were alternated with Slavonic.

## **PRIEST AND TRANSLATOR: FINDING GUIDANCE IN ANCIENT TEXTS**

In 1758, Paisius was ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Gregory Rasca, and the rate of growth for the community required them to move to the larger Skete of St. Elias. Paisius's community became known all over the Holy Mountain for the beauty of its services and the fervor of its monks. The former Patriarch Seraphim, who then lived in the Pantocrator monastery, took Paisius as his spiritual guide. While he was living on Athos, Paisius came to the conclusion that a critical problem affecting Orthodox life was the paucity of living elders who could provide guidance in the life of prayer that was directly founded on deep personal experience. He decided then that he should turn to the fathers as if they themselves were living spiritual elders. Their writings would give him the answers to his present need to find masters and teachers. At first, not knowing patristic Greek, he set out to organize and list all the Slavonic manuscripts he could find on Mount Athos. He found copies of the works of Hesychius of Jerusalem, Philotheus of Sinai, and Theodore of Edessa, and began a hand-written collation of them. But he wrote later to Archimandrite Theodosius of the Sophroniev hermitage in Russia, that his first steps in collating the fathers were "all in vain."<sup>15</sup> So he set himself to learn the difficult patristic Greek; and to this end studied with two of his Romanian disciples Macarius and Hilarion, who had mastered those language skills at the St. Sabas academy in Bucharest. Later at Dragomirna his study of ancient Greek would be intensified.

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On Athos, he presumed, it would be easy enough to get hold of numerous Greek manuscripts of the ascetic fathers. But he was soon proven wrong. He narrates that it was only in the Skete of St. Basil that he found ready access to the Greek patristic writings on prayer. He first gathered and rendered into Slavonic the works of St. Peter Damascene, St. Anthony the Great, Sts. Gregory of Sinai, Philotheus of Sinai, Hesychius, Diadochus of Photiki, Thalassius, Symeon the New Theologian, and Nicephorus the monk. This work begun at Athos, Paisius would continue at Dragomirna with Macarius and Hilarion leading the team of translators. It was a labor that would soon grow to become constitutive of his life's vocation.

## **STIRRING UP THE OPPOSITION**

Living in the Athonite Skete of St. Elias, Paisius acutely felt the restrictions of the few available rooms, and knew that his growing band of disciples would soon require larger premises. He therefore started his monks on a program of building, so as to enlarge the number of cells. To assist the monks during this time of extra physical labor he decided to substitute the Jesus Prayer for part of the sung offices. This provided the neighboring archimandrite of the

Kavsokalyvia Skete, Abbot Athanasius, with a chance to attack St. Paisius for untraditional innovation. Athanasius took the occasion to criticize him for a whole range of his spiritual teachings: namely his allegedly excessive reliance on the old Greek manuscripts (prioritization of patristic ascetical teachings at a time when much Greek Orthodox thought had become scholasticized), also for an excessive use of the works of St. Gregory of Sinai (thus faulting him for his emphasis on the Hesychastic school of spirituality, again at a time when this was not common), and lastly for unauthorized liturgical innovations (namely the use of the Jesus Prayer as part of his monastic Typikon). Each of the accusations hid behind the mask of traditional Orthodoxy but in fact was advocating the sleepy *status quo* from a low period in the history of Athonite life; whereas Paisius was calling for a return to the true sources of Orthodox tradition: a tradition which, as he knew, was always characterized by its vitality and its freedom in the face of spiritual weariness, formalism, and hide-bound traditionalism. St. Paisius was not willing to accept this criticism silently, and issued in return a fourteen chapter *Letter of Apologia* in which he used the testimony of the fathers of the Church to demonstrate that his spiritual path was authentically and deeply Orthodox, and that it was within the right of a monastic leader to introduce adaptations to the Typikon of a house under his spiritual guidance.

This early encounter with monks and priests who resisted his doctrine was a good preparation for all the greater levels of resistance that he would stir up when he returned to Romania. Every powerful spiritual work, so it seems, not only stirs up the opposition of the powers of evil which are ever hostile to the good, or that of the world which constantly seeks a state of spiritual apathy and cynicism with which to disguise its avoidance of Christ; but also, in a paradoxical way, often seems to stir the stubborn resistance of many otherwise fervent Christians who often hinder and block the dynamic works of Christ's elect leaders. In the works of the good it is often this opposition from Christ's own servants which most discourages those whom God has appointed to extraordinary tasks of leadership. This is a peculiar problem related to the mystery of spiritual discernment: when those of lesser vision cannot comprehend the mind of the saints (not surprisingly so, since this eludes their own more limited capacities), and when critics do not have the depth of discernment necessary to tell them the basic truth that if they cannot contribute to Christ's energetic expanse of the Kingdom, then at least they should try not to hinder a work that demonstrates the grace of the Spirit.

### **A COMING HOME - TO ROMANIA**

In 1764 when Paisius was 42, Prince Gregory III of Moldavia asked him to leave Athos and come to preside over the revival of monastic life in his coun-

try.<sup>16</sup> Paisius recognized here the hand of Divine Providence; a fulfillment of the strange tie of destiny he felt with Romania. So it was that he and 64 of his monks set sail for Moldavia and came to the Dragomirna monastery of the Descent of the Holy Spirit, in Bucovina. This house was offered to them by Metropolitan Gabriel of Iași. Here Paisius reordered the Typikon of observances on Athonite models. His rule was a blend of the great monastic rules of Sts. Basil, Theodore the Studite, and Nil Sorsky. Great emphasis was placed in his own synthesis on attentiveness during the Psalm recitations in church, and also on simplicity, poverty, obedience to the elder, and the fervent prayer of the heart.<sup>17</sup> One of the new characters of his Typikon here was to introduce a Catechetical Lecture, in the Byzantine fashion, where the Higumen of the monastery addressed all the monks on spiritual matters in the Refectory each evening. Paisius's talks were taken from the patristic writings on prayer. He was beginning to show that particular genius he had for synthesizing the patristic tradition and making it live again in the contemporary spiritual lives of the monks. This was to be taken to a new pitch in his publishing work when he later collated the Slavonic *Philokalia*, a major collection of patristic texts on prayer that would be forever afterwards associated with his name and his mission.

His work of transcribing patristic sources on prayer which began on Athos was continued at Dragomirna, with monks Macarius and Hilarion leading the team of translators. While the community was resident at Dragomirna the monk Raphael copied and compiled a selection of works from the ascetic fathers into Romanian. This was the first ever Romanian version of the *Philokalia*: the first time the spiritual fathers had been rendered into a vernacular tongue.<sup>18</sup> The Romanian version of this proto-*Philokalia* included writings of St. Symeon the New Theologian (including the treatise on the “Method of Prayer”<sup>19</sup>), Evagrius of Pontus, Dorotheus of Gaza, Gregory of Sinai, Nicephorus the Solitary, Nilus of Sinai, Starets Basil of Poiana Mărului, and the complete works of St. Nil Sorsky. The Romanian editor speaks of how his desire to elucidate and advocate the tradition of the Jesus Prayer was the whole motive behind his work of translation.<sup>20</sup>

The community at Dragomirna grew quickly, eventually numbering 350 monks. Archimandrite Zacharias remarks that it was at Dragomirna that St. Paisius's international mission can be really said to have taken shape.<sup>21</sup> But Bucovina was taken forcibly into the Austrian Empire, and the monastery passed out of his hands. In the time that he was here, however, another attack was raised against him by an unnamed philosopher-monk of the Moshenk Mountains of the Ukraine. This teacher reiterated an objection to the prioritization of the *Philokalic* method and the Jesus Prayer that St. Paisius was popularizing in monastic circles, and he urged his followers, dramatically, to seek out and

throw Philokalic literature into the river Chasmin. Hearing this, Paisius once more composed a considered apologetic work which is now called the *Six Chapters on the Prayer of the Heart*. This scholastic opposition to Paisius's Philokalic tradition was soon afterwards brought onto Romanian soil by the monk Theopemptus of the Poiana Voronei hermitage. This occasioned another and final apologia from the saint's pen, addressed to the brethren of the Poiana community in 1793.<sup>22</sup> In this final work he again turns to the witness of the fathers and adduces 35 of the ascetical writers to demonstrate that his teaching is at one with the ancient ascetical doctrine of the Orthodox spiritual fathers.

After the loss of Dragomirna, Paisius and his community were invited, on October 14, 1775, to take refuge at Secu monastery in the county of Neamț. Here they followed their own rule, distinct from the resident community, while Paisius petitioned Prince Constantine Mourousis to build new quarters for them at the Secu site. At the advice of the Metropolitan, however, the Prince assigned to Paisius the monastery of Neamț itself. It was the largest foundation in the area, and the Prince encouraged him to accept it and re-found his community there as a model for the renewal of monastic life in the whole country. When he heard that Paisius was hesitant about accepting the large center (a thing the saint had always thought would be detrimental to monastic life), the Prince wrote to him once more: "We offer you this holy monastery not only for the strengthening of your own community, but in order that it may serve as an example to other monasteries. And so, show obedience, and go to Neamț without any uneasiness."<sup>23</sup> Paisius and the larger part of his monks left Secu to settle at Neamț on the vigil of the Feast of the Dormition, in 1779. From that base he continued to direct some of his disciples remaining at Secu, as well as order the new administration and building program at Neamț. Cells were built there, and an infirmary added. Eventually the community grew to a number of 700 monks. The monastery became a center for pilgrimage and arrangements were soon established to lodge and house the pilgrims and the poor.

### THE PHILOKALIA PROJECT

Paisius established two groups of translators, editors, and copyists, to work on the writings of the fathers and prepare them for editions in Romanian and Slavonic respectively. The collections were made with a specific view to being a contemporary guide to hesychastic prayer. It was here that the concept of the Philokalia was really born. It was a momentous epoch in the early modern history of Orthodoxy. Several ancient collections of monastic lore and spiritual wisdom had already preceded it, such as the 5<sup>th</sup> century writings of the Desert Fathers, or the medieval Byzantine *Evergetinoi* collections (the so-called books of the *Paterika*, or the Niptic fathers) but this collection by Paisius was a focused work of editorial policy that gave precedence to the concept of the



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prayer of the heart as the chief guide and goal of the monastic life: indeed the apex of a Christian life, whether lived in the world or in the monastery. As Chetverikov puts it: “Thus the Lavra of Neamț became the center and torch of Orthodox monasticism, and the school of the hesychastic life and spiritual culture for all the Orthodox East.”<sup>24</sup>

St. Paisius had been anticipated in the actual publication of a *Philokalia* by the Greek Athonite saints Macarius of Corinth, and Nicodemus the Hagiorite. Paisius’s reputation as a spiritual elder had already attracted the attention of St. Macarius, who had even made an attempt to join his community in Moldavia; but stormy weather forced the abandonment of that sea journey, and the intention was never realized. When Macarius and Nicodemus’ great collection of the spiritual fathers was drawn to Paisius’ attention, it seemed to him the perfect synopsis of his own vocational vision. Accordingly, when the Greek edition of the *Philokalia* appeared at Venice in 1782, he lost no time in making a Slavonic version of a very large portion of it: 24 of the original 36 texts. The original Greek *Philokalia* actually had very little impact in its first edition. It appeared before its time in the Greek Orthodox world, as it were. It was destined to be Paisius’s Slavonic version (the *Dobrotolyubié*) that set fire to the Russian Orthodox world and brought about a veritable *Philokalic* revolution: changing the face of modern Orthodox spirituality and setting a new fire of spiritual excitement in the Orthodox monastic life.

Soon after he settled in Neamț St. Paisius sent two leading disciples, the Romanian monk Gerontius, and the Russian Dorotheus, to study at the Greek Academy in Bucharest, so that they too could strengthen the translation team. He himself had undertaken translating work as a major part of his daily ascesis. He would spend the mornings giving counsel to the monks and organizing monastic affairs, and then pass much of the afternoon and evening in the work of patristic translation. Of the thousand manuscripts possessed by Neamț monastery, representing all its history, and in all the languages, no less than 276 were produced by the school of Paisius in this time. The majority of the translators were Romanian, only a few working in Slavonic. But Paisius himself predominantly rendered the texts into Slavonic, and his work was brought to a culmination with the production of the Slavonic *Philokalia* in St. Petersburg in 1793. A new and posthumous development of the Starets’ mission came about when Neamț monastery established its own printing press and distribution center in 1807.<sup>25</sup> The original machinery is still visible there.

### **PAISIUS’ ENDURING INFLUENCE**

In 1790, St. Paisius assumed the Great Schema and was elevated to the rank of Archimandrite by Bishop Ambrose of Poltava, acting as the vicar of the Metropolitan of Moldavia. His influence on his spiritual children was at its height,

but his work would go on for generations to come through his publications. In fact the dissemination of the Philokalic writings was to have a massive effect in reviving the tradition of spiritual eldership in Russia, through the enthusiasm with which Paisius's mission was taken up at Optina monastery, final home of the author of *The Way of A Pilgrim*.

One of St. Paisius' contemporaries described an encounter with him in the following terms: "For the first time in my life I have seen sanctity incarnated and not dissembled. I am impressed by his luminous, pale, and wan appearance, by his bushy and long beard, as brilliant as silver, by the tidiness of his clothing and of his cell. His speech was gentle and sincere . . . he had the air of a man wholly detached from the flesh."<sup>26</sup> It is said that towards the end of his life he had the gift of tears in abundance, and once had a vision of Christ during the Divine Liturgy that left him in a state of ecstasy for five hours.

Paisius died on November 15, 1794, aged seventy-two years. He was buried in the monastery church at Neamț where his grave is still greatly venerated. The Romanian Church and Mount Athos were the first to venerate him formally as a saint, and subsequently the Russian Church added his name to the Calendar of saints.

One of the most significant aspects of Paisy's spiritual teaching was to prioritize the need for a spiritual elder if one wanted to make progress in the mystical life. He himself had found this insistence from his reading of the works of St. Symeon the New Theologian, who had brought the concepts of spiritual fatherhood into close association with the mystical themes that would later become descriptive of the hesychastic school. It is in the time of Paisius, especially, that the combination of the three defining ideas of: spiritual eldership, the prayer of the heart, and the search for the hesychastic vision of God's light, come into a mature synthesis. Each of the elements is certainly there present in all the previous hesychastic fathers, but it is by the time of St. Paisius that the weaving together of the elements makes for a dynamic revival of hesychastic monastic life in 18<sup>th</sup> century Orthodoxy, and on into the present era. Paisius spoke of his idea of spiritual eldership to his first disciple, the Romanian monk Bessarion:

It is difficult to lead someone else along paths which one does not know for oneself. Only a person who has sustained a long combat against the passions, and with the help of Christ has conquered the carnal desires, anger, vanity, and avarice; who has healed his soul by humility and prayer, and who has lovingly followed his Savior in everything, only such a man can show to his disciple, without deceit, all the commandments and virtues of Christ. . . . But where will we find such a guide? They are not numerous; especially in our time. There remains for us only one solution: to study the Holy Scriptures and the writings of the fathers day and night, asking the counsel of like-minded



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brethren and elder fathers, so as to learn how to fulfill the commandments of God and imitate the ascetics of old.<sup>27</sup>

It is especially in his *Six Chapters on the Prayer of the Heart* that St. Paisius lays down the biblical and patristic authorities that show the high importance of finding an experienced Spiritual elder (Starets) if one is serious about undertaking the dedicated spiritual path.

But, if this concept of the need for living spiritual elders is one of the chief ideas associated with St. Paisius's school, we might also draw attention to another of his particular charisms as leader: his concept of monastic organization. It was something that caused controversy in his own day, and he encountered sufficient opposition throughout his life to ensure that he had reflected on his ideas extensively in the Apologias he wrote on this theme. Paisius was quite evidently trying to change the shape of the Monastic Typikon as it had become established in his own day, by introducing more flexibility into it, and by re-orienting coenobitic monasticism so as to have a sharper focus on the interior life of prayer. Patterns of monasticism that had become traditional in Orthodoxy in his time, namely the separation of the coenobitic (common life) style of monastery with its orientation around the formal offices of prayer, from the more eremitical lifestyle of solitary mystics, were shaken up by St. Paisius who wanted to bring the lifestyles more closely back together; as distinctive, but not separate, spiritual paths.

His unique contribution in monastic history was a vision of a coenobitic monasticism that had at its heart a common enterprise of brothers, but one that made teaching on prayer, and the extensive practice of personal prayer, one of the key elements of the Typikon of the house. St. Paisius introduced almost a new rule of monastic life that was based on the hesychastic ideal of ceaseless prayer of the heart. This apparently paradoxical and impossible ideal he showed to be both highly practicable and compatible with coenobitic forms of organization. Because of that strange juxtaposition he was able to renew Orthodox monasticism throughout Eastern Europe, and the effects of his renovation continue to mark the Orthodox world to this day.

Aware that he had many traditionalist critics, St. Paisius insisted that his monks must fulfill the standard expectations of the monastic Horologion, or pattern of Offices, so that no one would be able to blame them for neglecting the Church's official structure of daily prayer. They must also give themselves to reading and study of the Sacred Scriptures and the Fathers as a life-long love. But more than all this, the Paisian ideal was that the ascetics should exercise themselves constantly in the Jesus Prayer. This being established as the foundational spiritual rule, they must also accept that it is basic to good monastic discipline that they should also be skilled in a craft with which to support their monastery. It was a busy regime: alternating intellectual and physical labor with the great and primary work of private prayer. Even allowing for the fact that the Jesus Prayer can be conducted in the course of other labors and activities, it has been estimated that a typical monk following the Paisian Typikon would be engaged in prayer for about 14 hours daily.

While he called the solitary monastic life a path for the mighty and the perfect, he also advised his disciples that it was a hard road fit only for the few. He praised the common coenobitic form of monastic life as a safe ship captained by the Holy Spirit which will lead safely through the seas of this life into the harbor of salvation. But he made it clear that his own preference was for the form of monasticism where small groups of like-minded souls followed the leadership of an elect elder in a Typikon, or rule, that could be adapted to their zeal and desire for greater focus on the paths of prayer. It was this form (especially as evident in the life of the Skete, or smaller monastic community) that he called "the royal road" suitable for beginner and expert alike.<sup>28</sup>

St. Paisius's life's work was taken up by a veritable school that came after him. Many of his own disciples, several of whom had become spiritual masters in their own right, took his teaching and mission back with them to Russia and the Ukraine after their Elder's death. But his readers in the next generations, and especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, assumed his vision and mission at one remove: including great saints such as St. Seraphim of Sarov, the Optina Startsi, and (later) Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov and St. Theophan the Recluse. The

Optina monastery to the southwest of Moscow, and its living tradition of elders, propagated Paisius's understanding of the role of the spiritual father in the development of a deep inner life based around the prayer of the heart, in a way that greatly affected the subsequent spiritual development of Russia. This great movement of hesychastic elders that came after St. Paisius passed on the tradition of the Jesus Prayer by also passing it out of the limits of the monastic life; handing it as a precious heritage to a vast range of Orthodox lay devotees. It is a hesychastic tradition that has shown itself capable of dynamic adaptation: from the cell of the hesychastic hermit, to the busy life of the layperson in the world: the invocation of the Holy Name being a healing, and a stilling, and an enlightenment in a world where the traditional supports of Orthodox life (the village church, the nearby monastery) are today few and far between, especially in the Diaspora. To that extent St. Paisius's mission and his vision remain valid and important into the present era, as a way of witnessing and establishing a spirit of Eldership for use of serious God-seekers in a modern world often devoid of accessible Elders, by the judicious study of the authorities of the past, allied with deep traditions of hesychastic devotion adapted to lay lifestyles.

## NOTES

1. The Orthodox monastic spirituality based around the Prayer of the Heart. It derives its name from the Greek for "quietness" of soul.
2. Patristic Christ-centered mysticism centering around the use of the Jesus Prayer: part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century revival of Orthodoxy concomitant with the collation and publication of the *Philokalia*, a major edition of Greco-Byzantine patristic spirituality, issued by St. Nicodemus the Athonite and St. Macarius of Corinth.
3. Chief works are: Archbishop Serafim Joanta, *Romania: Its Hesychastic Tradition and Culture* (Wildwood, CA: St. Xenia Skete, 1992), 128–157; A full study was written in 1934 by Archpriest Sergius Chetverikov (in Romanian) *Paisius: Starets of Neamt Monastery in Moldavia. His Life, Teaching, and His Influence on the Orthodox Church* (Romania: Neamt Monastery, 1933); Synopsis and Review in *Irenikon* 11 (1934): 561–572; Sergii Chetverikov, *Moldavskii starets Paisii Velichovskii: ego zhizn', uchenie I vliianie na pravoslavnoe monashestvo* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1976); see *Irenikon* 53 (1980): 113–114; Igor Smolitsch, *Russisches Monchtum* (Wurzburg: Augustinus-Verlag, 1953), 482–495; Igor Smolitsch, *Leben und lehren der startzen* (Cologne: J. Hegner, 1952); French version of the same: *Moines de la sainte Russie* (Tours: Mame, 1967), 80–104; C. D. Hansworth, *Staretz Paisius His Doctrine of Spiritual Guidance* (thesis synopsis) (Rome: Oriental Institute [date?]). Résumé in: *Irenikon* 53 (1980): 114–115.
4. Published in Slavonic by Anthony-Emil N. Tachiaos, *The Revival of Byzantine Mysticism among Slavs and Romanians in the 18<sup>th</sup> century: Texts Relating to the life and activity of Paisy Velichovsky (1722–1794)* (Thessalonica: Aristoteleion Panepistemion Thessalonikes, 1966).
5. Liturgical calendar of the saints: a standard book in monastery churches.
6. Edited by Anthony-Emil Tachiaos (1933) [full reference?].
7. Archimandrite Ciprian Zaharia, "Paissij Velichovskij et le role oecumenique de l'Église Orthodoxe roumaine" *Irenikon* 58 (1985): [page numbers?].

8. 1847, 1890, 1892. The Biography of Platon was edited by Anthony-Emil Tachiaos (1966) [full reference?] and was also issued in English by the St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood from Platina California, under the mistaken impression that it was the Biography of Metrophanes, under the title: *Blessed Paisius Velichovsky*
9. Orthodox Daily Offices.
10. Metropolitan of Moldavia between 1730–1739; later to become Metropolitan of Chernigov and then of Belgorod in Russia.
11. St. Paisius, *Autobiography*. f. 21. p. 17 [full reference]. Cited in Joanta, *Romania*, 134.
12. St. Paisius, *Autobiography*. f. 93–94. pp. 75–76 [full reference]. Joanta, *Romania*, 137.
13. Joanta, *Romania*, 137.
14. Commonly known as St. Panteleimon Monastery, which was then under Ukrainian direction.
15. Chetverikov, *Paisius*, 99.
16. Voivode Grigorie Ghica.
17. The rule of Paisius is discussed in Joanta, *Romania*, 140; and Chetverikov, *Paisius*, 110–117.
18. Joanta, *Romania*, 147.
19. Discovered in the 20<sup>th</sup> century not to be by St. Symeon, but from a slightly later period of the Hesychastic movement. The work describes the physical postures that can be associated with the Jesus Prayer, and was very popular on Mount Athos. It can be found in G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, eds., *Philokalia* 4 (London: Faber and Faber, 1999): 64–75.
20. Joanta, *Romania*, 147.
21. “The beginning of a mission which went beyond the relations of a single man with his disciples, and which would soon be extended to the secular world.” Zaharia (1985) p. 185 [full reference?]. Cited in Joanta, *Romania*, 141.
22. *To the Adversaries and Detractors of the Spiritual Prayer that is the Jesus Prayer*. Text in: Igor Smolitsch, *Moines de la saint Russie* (Tours: Mame, 1967), 98–104.
23. Chetverikov, *Paisius*, 179; Joanta, *Romania*, 141–142.
24. Chetverikov, *Paisius*, 184.
25. See Joanta, *Romania*, 150. Neamt press issued the Romanian version of the works of St. Ephraim in three volumes in 1818, 1819, and 1823; the Divine Ladder of St. John Klimakos in 1814; and the Ascetic Discourses of Isaac the Syrian in 1819. The majority of the Paisian translations were not printed, but at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were collated into a vast manuscript of 1004 pages, which is now lodged as Ms. 1455 in the Library of the Romanian Academy.
26. Words of Constantine Caragea as cited in P. I. David (Romanian Text) ‘St. Paisius the Great (Velichovsky), a perfect Romanian Monk.’ *Biserica Orthodoxa Romana* (Bucharest). vol. 92. 1975 pp. 175–178 [full reference?].
27. Chetverikov, *Paisius*, 82–84.
28. See St. Paisius’s *Letter to Dimitri*. Cited in Smolitsch, *Moines*, 89–93.