

Let Us Meet at the Gate of Paradise

REMINISCENCES OF ELDER PAISIUS OF SIHĂSTRIA AND SIHLA

by Costion Nicolescu
Translated by Nun Nina

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

ELDER PAISIUS (Olaru) (1897–1990) was considered the father and guide to the generation of spiritual giants that graced twentieth-century Romania. In issue 272 of *The Orthodox Word* (May–June 2010), we presented the life and teachings of Fr. Paisius. Not only was he a director of other monastics, but he was also a loving father to all Romanians: the rich and the poor, the intelligentsia and the illiterate. During the dark days of the Communist reign, people from all over the country would make the arduous journey to Sihla Skete to hear a word of consolation from this man of prayer and knower of hearts. Below we present the recollections of one of these faithful pilgrims, whose love for the great elder preserves his image for future generations.

I. HOW MANY TIMES?

I took shelter under the *epitrachelion*¹ of Fr. Paisius about five or

¹ *Epitrachelion*: a liturgical stole that hangs around the neck of the priest and is required to be worn for all priestly duties.—ED.

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six times. On each occasion I was in varied company, with friends or with family. After so many years, I can no longer differentiate one meeting from another. Blessed are those that keep journals, no matter how simple, which, when opened in later years will give them, at least outwardly, a chronology of events for a certain period of their life.

I always made my way to meet with Fr. Paisius with great emotion and timidity, and it seems that the first time it was even more so. On the one hand, it was due to my conscience being so acutely aware of my personal sins, and it was to the extent of that awareness that I could draw near to him. On the other hand, it was because Fr. Paisius was considered by the entire community, by the great mass of the faithful, and by the other renowned spiritual fathers in the country, to be *first among equals*. He was an elder of the heart, having a supreme spiritual authority. This fact was silently accepted by all—an unquestionable fact. When someone would come back from Sihăstria and Sihla, they were first asked: “How is Fr. Paisius, and what did he have to say?”

I retain a composite image of all these blessed encounters. I no longer remember precisely one time or another, on what occasion I heard a certain word or another. However it is composed, the image of Fr. Paisius is wholly united within me. Even though I have known many skilled Fathers, who I believe now take part in the choir of the saints, even though they are not yet canonized, I confess—and I am not alone—that of all these, I experienced the most powerful and closest feeling of Paradise, of the presence of God, in the presence of Fr. Paisius.

2. WAITING OUTSIDE HIS CELL

Up at Sihla, on the veranda of the little cell underneath the rocks, you would wait to go in to Father. A bench was there, and almost always there were a few others waiting as well. Most of them wanted to confess, and all wanted his prayers, blessing, and counsel in times of personal or community trials. I think that one or two times we were

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told to wait because Father was resting. Almost always you would be asked not to demand too much when going in to see Father, because he was sick, weak, and tired. These were routine warnings, more or less respected by those who came. The waiting period was good. At the foot of the hill one could see the little skete church and the other cells. The place was flooded in green, accompanied by an endless concert of birds. Immediately next to his cell is the little church “built from one tree,” which has its own story. A path goes off toward the cave of the Venerable Theodora. There you can catch your breath after making the climb from either Sihăstria or Agapia. While waiting to see the elder, one has mixed emotions, anticipating the approaching encounter with him—one moment one is deeply consoled and the next moment very excited, thus making one dizzy.... A certain unfathomable elation settles upon you, despite feeling even more unworthy in that close proximity. You have entered into a space completely liturgical and Eucharistic. You are at a portal into another delightful realm—the wholly unfathomable world of God.

3. ALWAYS WORKING

I most often found him “working.” Next to his little house at Sihla, on a slope, there was a kind of garden with beds of vegetables, mostly potatoes. I watched him for about two hours bent over with a shepherd’s staff in one hand, and with the other hand gathering a rock from here, another from there, and putting them into a little pile. He would rake here and there. One could see that everything was done with great meticulousness and great patience. It was evident that he liked what he was doing, that the earth with its plants was dear to him. There were a lot of rocks, and the ground seemed extremely unfruitful, no matter what was planted there: it was condemned to remain barren. This work could be endless. In spite of all this, Father’s every gesture displayed a great gentleness and love in performing that labor.

Another time, after he had been moved from Sihla into a cell near



Sihla Skete Church.

the gate of Sihăstria, we were advised to enter and wait for him. We waited for about a half an hour and he had not yet arrived. On the other side of the door, at the far end of the cell, some gentle tapping could be heard—sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly. No matter how hard I tried to imagine what it was, I couldn't. After a while, seeing that Father had not appeared, I knocked on the door, asking a blessing. Since my repeated attempts did not get any response, I finally dared to timidly open the door a crack. There, in the back, was a woodshed. Father was seated on a tree stump, painstakingly arranging the wood from one part to the other, according to an order only he knew. Since he was somewhat deaf, he had not heard us calling him.

In both cases, it seemed that he was keeping busy rather than working. Perhaps he was also seeking a space and time for quiet, a

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temporary escape from the assault of the faithful. And the seriousness with which he worked made you think that he was carrying out very important, vital labors. At the same time, you understood that his labor was also part of his daily rule, just like prayer, and he did not let a day go by without adding his contribution, in accordance with his now diminishing strength.

4. THE CELL

His cell was small and modest, but oh, so very hospitable! The furniture was extremely simple: a bed, a table, and a chair. On the back of the chair was draped his epitachelion. On the table were a few service books—the *Psalter*, the *Liturgicon*, and the *Horologion*, and also his famous wooden Cross. In the corner was a bucket of water and a wash basin. Hung on a peg on the back of the door were a ryassa or two, which were rather shabby. On the walls there were reproductions of icons of all kinds. Different sundry smells greeted you: medicine, herbal remedies, incense, oil burning in the lampada, the wick of a burning candle, and dried sweet basil.² It is strange that this mixture became indistinct in a short time. But perhaps this portrait describes the general elements of all the cells in Sihăstria and in similar Moldavian monasteries. I dare to say that being near or within Fr. Paisius' cell illustrated the saying "The man sanctifies the place." A good spiritual fragrance was evident, perceptible.

5. HIS FACE

Now, after so much time, the image of Fr. Paisius from photographs taken in his later years remains with me more than the image of seeing him in person. Despite the fact that old age somewhat exaggerated the sternness of his face, his features transmitted an irresistible light

² Dried basil is tied in little bunches and used by priests to sprinkle holy water when blessing people and places.—TRANS.



Elder Paisius working in the garden.

and an infinite kindness. His appearance was stern. His face had deep features and penetrating eyes, which would make you feel shivers at your first meeting. One can never possibly forget his eyes—clear, fatherly, and tender. His eyes were an intense, bright Mediterranean blue. Even after his sight began to weaken, until he went almost blind, the look in his eyes continued to have the same expressiveness, coming from the power of his inner spirit. He had a pair of glasses that were a little crooked, with thick frames—the kind old people wear—tied with string behind his head, if I remember rightly. The thick, strong lenses made his blue eyes look even bigger. It seems, at

one time, he had one lens covered with a piece of cardboard (I think he had just undergone cataract surgery). In the other eye was reflected a mountain lake, deep and blue, a blue like that of Fra Angelico.³

6. THE MIRACLE

His prayers and blessings were the common experience of all those who met him. If Father did not know you, he would first ask you what your name was, where you were from, what you did, if you had a spiritual father, and, if so, who he was. In general, his first inclination was to

³ Fra Angelico (c. 1400–1455) was an Italian painter and monk, known especially for his unique use of color.—ED.

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refuse to confess those who were not his spiritual children. He would direct them to be obedient to their spiritual father—which is canonically correct. However, as most would insist, having a great desire to confess to Father and sometimes possessing serious problems, he would often yield. He would never refuse to say prayers of forgiveness and blessing for whoever would cross his threshold. There, more or less together, on our knees under Father's epitrachelion, the miracle would happen....

With your forehead in his lap—if you managed to get up that close—under his all-inclusive stole, as swift as lightning the removal of the entire burden of your accumulated sins would wonderfully take place. Every so often, you would momentarily feel, on the top of your head, Fr. Paisius' big bony aged hand resting—heavy and light at the same time—with a beneficial double sensation: the absorption of sins and the descent of grace. Toward the end of the prayers (the first were the common prayers of absolution, and, at the end, a personal one, totally unique, familiar, and distinct), through the epitrachelion on your head Father would tap you lightly with the cross as a blessing and a sign of fatherly love—his way of communicating, tangibly as well as ineffably. Even though the prayer was, for the most part, the same each time, it never lost its paradisaical power and beauty. He was fully present in his words, so that they completely enveloped you. And when he called upon God for you, for help and blessing upon your “little table,” upon your “little house” (he would use many endearing diminutives in his speech—genuine and affectionate), and also upon each of those present, you felt yourself overwhelmed in an all-embracing joy, tenderness, and understanding for everything that was yours, no matter how modest. You saw more clearly who you were and who you should be.

When, at the end, he would ask for each one “a little corner of Paradise,” and when he would say good-bye, planning to meet you “at the gate of Paradise,” you already felt an advance installment of Paradise. You had a foretaste of the paradisaical state. He was a meek father, and the penances he would give you were, in most cases, not very severe.

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They were seemingly easy; those who were of a more zealous nature even judged them to be too easy. His penances primarily consisted of the recitation, many times a day, of well known prayers such as the Our Father, the Creed, and Psalm 50, as well as a certain number of prostrations. His lenient side came forth when he asked you to do these prayers “as many times a day as you can.” When, after all, can a man arrive at the place to say, with a satisfied mind, that he could only do so many? From what I know, however, he was very strict in cases of serious dogmatic and moral violations. Although he claimed that he did not possess the Jesus Prayer, he would recommend that everyone try to acquire it, saying it as often as possible each day according to one’s strength. I remember him saying it in a little more extensive form: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son and Word of God, have mercy on me, a sinner!” It always seemed to me that his addition of “and Word” brought in a note of high theology and spiritual strength. I also believe that by saying this, Father joined himself directly to St. John, the Evangelist of Love, to whom he probably felt strongly attached.

7. A PROFITABLE WORD

We have learned through the *Patericon* and through older and worthier believers not to leave an eminent spiritual father without asking for a word of instruction. And so, before departing, we would launch a request full of hope, saying, “Father, give us a profitable word.” This word would be boldly requested, worthy to be carried as a flag through the whole world, unto the consolation and benefit of some, for the astonishment and attracting of others. A profitable word from Fr. Paisius—which I remember only in fragments—was short and simple enough at first sight. But, after you had departed from him, his words would stay with you and, after a while, you would discover under their simplicity the anticipated profundity and so much more. I will relate a few of them in an order that has nothing to do with my receiving them.

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Sihăstria Monastery.

In the summer of 1978, I climbed up to Sihla with my wife, who was in her fifth month of pregnancy, in order to ask him for his blessing. He gave it to us, but in speaking to us—I no longer know about what—at a certain moment he illustrated the always surprising action of Providence: “Hey, do you think Maria knows when she will give birth? She only thinks that she knows, but in fact she doesn’t know anything. You will give birth when God wills.” And, indeed, the term of pregnancy and the birth had many mishaps, and the baby was premature; only by the prayers and blessings of Father was the baby born alive.

On another occasion, my wife asked him (with an anxious concern characteristic of motherhood) how is it that some children, even though raised in faith and fear of God, later come under the influence of this ill-fated age and seriously deviate from the instruction they have received. He answered that we must do as much as we can for the

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Christian upbringing of children. If the spiritual construction is good, then goodness will completely pave one's way. He would say that "pure gold, even on heaps of manure, is still gold."

Speaking to us of the importance of each one of us fulfilling a rule of repentance, he would say: "Just as *savon* [soap] washes the body, so does *canon* wash the soul." This use of the word *savon*⁴ by him amazed me. He took it from who knows where, but in such a sure manner, just for the sake of making it rhyme with *canon* [rule].

He also told us that word of instruction for which he is now known: "Never believe everything that you hear, never say everything that you know, and never do everything that you can." When he said this, we were there with the poetess Anca Sârbulescu. Rejoicing from the wealth of this fragrant saying, we left in a state of blessedness beyond description: it seemed to us that we were soaring rather than walking. On the road to Sihăstria, we climbed up the little path toward St. Theodora's cave, where we were tempted by a raspberry bush. There, with mouths full of raspberries, merrily recapitulating our meeting with Father, we realized that we understood the first two parts of his instruction—to not believe all that you hear and to not say everything that you know. However, the third part was unclear. Namely, what did he mean by not to do all that you can? Isn't it good to try to do as much as you can? We ran back to Father and asked him for clarification. If I remember correctly, Father said something like this: "It is in man's power to also do a lot of evil, especially because of pride in connection with his abilities. Such deeds must not be carried out, especially because evil is deceptive and can possibly be clothed in seemingly good appearances."

Another time, we had been complaining and were quite discouraged by the onslaught of atheistic wickedness, manifesting itself through others and through an upsurge in the demolition of churches, especially

⁴ Normally the word for 'soap' in Romanian is 'săpun', 'savon' being the French term. Fr. Paisius romanianized it just for the sake of the rhyme, saying: 'Cum spală savonul trupul așa spală canonul sufletul.'—TRANS.

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in Bucharest. We wanted to let him know about the situation, and we wanted to hear a word to strengthen us, to console us, and possibly also an incentive to do something. I think that Father was already well informed about this and that he judged things in their most spiritual light, in which the tragedy was much greater and much less, at the same time. In order to strengthen us, he insisted, without a shadow of reproach in his voice: “The Church in our hearts cannot be demolished by anyone! Only by having the Church, first of all, in your heart, are you able to fight profitably for the Church.”

8. THE MEETING OF SAINTS

On one occasion, we brought our own confessor—worthy of eternal remembrance—Fr. Julian Stoicescu,⁵ with a few friends to see Fr. Paisius. We were very excited and quite curious to see what was going to happen. Fr. Paisius and Fr. Julian were two very great spiritual fathers, who were both considered to have an exalted spiritual life. They were

⁵ Fr. Julian Stoicescu was a married priest who served in the capital city of Bucharest. He was known as “a priest of fire,” and there is a book written about him with this title. He was born in 1911. After his ordination to the diaconate in 1939, and two years later to the priesthood, he served in a women’s monastery for several years. Fr. Julian treasured this, for there, he says, “I was formed in prayer and in the church services.” His wife said that although he wanted to be married and loved his family, he had the soul of a monk. He was arrested by the Communists in 1960 and set free during the general amnesty in 1964. He said in an interview that Communism was a punishment from God. He also stated that his prison years were a gift from God, that it was of great benefit for his soul to learn from suffering. After his release, he served in various parish churches in Bucharest, and in 1972 the Patriarch sent him to the church in Flamanda “for its moral and material restoration.” Against incredible obstacles, he restored the church and attracted many of the youth. His steadfastness and love of God and neighbor were a source of great strength to many, especially in those dark, confusing days when Romania was under the tyranny of Communist rule. Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Romania’s great theologian, said that if the Romanian nation had ten priests like Fr. Julian, the whole nation would resurrect. He reposed in the Lord on September 30, 1996, at the age of eighty-five.—TRANS.



Fr. Julian Stoicescu.

peaks of spirituality—one in the wilderness and the other in the midst of the world, and they were going to meet. The meeting was, truly, as simple as it was extraordinary. They did not exchange very many words—only looks that were charged with endless tenderness and blessings. The whole thing was indescribable prayer. There was a paradisaical embracing when they met and when they parted. What spiritual energy filled the cell, where it seemed that so much light was bursting forth! O Light originating from Tabor,

which enveloped all! What an intense communication of grace! It all lasted only a few minutes (much less than we wanted), yet eternity was compressed into it. If a sinner recognizes holiness, how much more will those who are holy recognize the holiness in one another. They were completely equally matched. Christ was present, and He poured Himself forth unsparingly. I saw there how the cataphatic⁶ relationship takes the leap into the apophatic.⁷ How well we understood Peter's desire to make a tabernacle around the Savior and His saints (cf. Matt. 17:4; Mark 9:5; Luke 9:33).

⁶ Cataphatic (positive) theology is the expressing of God or the divine through positive terminology, such as "God is love."—TRANS.

⁷ Apophatic (negative) theology, in contrast to cataphatic theology, is the setting aside of all that can be known in order to draw near to God, Who is wholly transcendent.—TRANS.

9. THE LAST TIME

In his last years, Father was again to descend to Sihăstria, where his faithful disciple Fr. Gerasim took care of him with great devotion, seeking to support him in his weakness and to ease his pains. Fr. Paisius endured everything like a martyr. Throughout his life one of his basic maxims was “Patience, patience, and again, patience.” It was now more difficult to see him. His disciple would protect him as much as possible from becoming too weary with seeing so many visitors. In 1988 I nevertheless had the blessing to come to Fr. Paisius’ cell of ascetic labor one last time. It was through the protection and intercession of one of Fr. Paisius’ blessed disciples, Fr. Hyacinth,⁸ the abbot of Putna Monastery. He has since departed from this world and gone to meet his confessor [Fr. Paisius] and to the Great Meeting with God. He had come from Putna for Sihăstria’s patronal feast day on September 8 (the Nativity of the Mother of God). A group of many

⁸ Fr. Hyacinth was the abbot and spiritual father of Putna Monastery from 1977 until 1992. His main activity was the effectual resistance to the atheistic Communist regime. His whole being co-suffered with the people and the country amidst their sorrows. Putna Monastery—one of the most ancient and historic of Romania’s monasteries—is the resting place of St. Stephen the Great, for whom he had great veneration. Before he was abbot, he had the obedience to give tours of the church to the many people who came to the monastery. Under the Communist regime, the monastery was merely considered a national historic monument and the burial place of one of the great kings, but Fr. Hyacinth would take every opportunity to teach and catechize. Once the Communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu visited Putna Monastery. Fr. Hyacinth boldly told him how King Stephen would read the whole Psalter before going to war, how he would build a new church after each battle won, and many other pious stories. Ceausescu listened attentively and asked, “Does everybody believe this?” Fr. Hyacinth said, “Of course!” Everyone was afraid of how Ceausescu would react. He only said, “They only believe it because the histories of the people were mystified.” Fr. Hyacinth was for a time the spiritual son of New Martyr Hieroschemamonk Daniel (Tudor). He continued as spiritual father and confessor of the monastery up until his repose. He reposed while sitting in his confessional chair on June 23, 1998.—TRANS.



Fr. Hyacinth of Putna (on right) with Fr. Jacob.

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fathers and faithful, squeezed into a truck, were accompanying the abbot.

It was dusk and Fr. Paisius' cell, smelling like peasant remedies, was plunged into half-darkness. The gentle light of the lampada flickered, watching over the many icons on the walls. Father, whose body had diminished with illness and old age, was hidden somewhere at the head of the bed, leaning on a pillow. Our purpose was merely to be near Father in the atmosphere of his holiness just for a few minutes, and to be able to obtain those simple and cheerful blessings which felt as if they were transporting you directly to the gate of Paradise. And truly, even though he was almost completely immobile, Father, in a faint voice, would bless you, transmitting the same power of grace and asking with great strength for "a little corner of Paradise" for each of us.

Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae speaks somewhere of the tenderness of the saints. This infinite tenderness, this endless tender care for the other's salvation, was completely personalized in Fr. Paisius. Someone characterized him as being "an intimate of Christ"—a fitting quality, in principle, of all the saints.

10. HIS REPOSE

Fr. Paisius Olaru fell asleep in the Lord on October 18, 1990, after well over seventy years in the monastery. He will be enrolled as one deified out of a long line of great spiritual fathers of Sihăstria Monastery, which is rightfully considered, in this century, the Athos of Romanian monasticism.

On the Saturday when he was buried, the courtyard of Sihăstria Monastery was packed with people. There were groups of nuns (more than ever before) who had come from all over Moldavia. Some also came from over the mountains, mainly from Râmeci and Prislop Monasteries. Representatives had come from all of the monasteries. There were multitudes of people, simple and devoted people of the

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Church, who had found healing over the years under the epitrachelion of Fr. Paisius and who had come, traveling all night long, from near and far, packed into dilapidated trains and buses.

Father awaited his burial service in the chapel—silent, reconciled—receiving the final prostrations of his spiritual children. The mood which came over the people was more like that of a holy day, a feast day. Singing, “With the saints give rest, O Christ, to the soul of thy servant ...” everyone was certain that Fr. Paisius would be seated among the saints, where he would be the same untiring man of prayer and mediator before Christ for all of us and for our country. Nor was there a lack of tears—tears of tender emotion at his remembrance—which were reassuring, comforting, and strengthening.

It is known that before being canonized, according to the tradition of the Holy Synod, the saint first enters into the consciousness of the Church, of the faithful, as a saint. All of those who had seen and met him, even if it was only one time, already had the conviction of Fr. Paisius’ holiness. Metropolitan Daniel also expressed himself in this way two years later at the canonization of St. Theodora of Sihla,⁹ foreseeing and urging the fitting canonization of Fr. Paisius in the future. There exists no impediment! Fr. Paisius can wait, but it would be good that we understand that this concerns us, not him. It is we who need to accept his translation into another state.

II. WAITING

Through Fr. Paisius, God showed His goodwill with great power once again to our nation, because “God is with us!” We must understand and submit! Father waits for us now, patiently at the gate of Paradise. It seems as if I can see him in the doorway—reluctant to enter without us.... It would be a shame to betray his waiting and miss the reunion and the entrance.

⁹ St. Theodora was officially canonized on October 14, 1992, on the feast of St. Paraskeva, in Iași, Romania.—TRANS.