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## Saints Alive!

(or “The Bits the Hagiographers Left Out”)



St. Paisius Velichkovsky and the Great Bakery Disaster

When one thinks of Saint Paisius, it is usually as the great spiritual father and translator of the Russian Philokalia, who inspired the revival of Orthodox spirituality in eighteenth and nineteenth century Russia. Early lives, written by his disciples, were the basis of *Blessed Paisius Velichkovsky*<sup>1</sup>, and *Starets Paisii Velichkovsky*<sup>2</sup> the two most commonly known English biographies. In 1906, however, an unpublished manuscript was found in the library of the Russian Imperial Academy of Sciences—Fr. Paisius’ own autobiography. Although used by his spiritual children as material for their original Lives, it had never been published in its entirety, and had lain relatively forgotten for a century. Vividly written, the autobiography covers the period from St. Paisius’

childhood to the time of his departure for Mt. Athos. Obviously intended to be a much longer narrative, the work was cut short by the author’s repose. Although it had been used by Fr. Sergeii Chetverikov in his *Starets Paisii Velichkovsky*, the text did not appear in full until 1986, when it was published in Thessalonika as part of a volume on Slavic and Romanian religious life in the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> In 1989, the autobiography appeared in English as the *Life of Paisij Velychkovskij*<sup>4</sup> accompanied by Fr. Metrophanes’ life of Elder Paisius (previously translated by St. Herman of Alaska Press and included in *Blessed Paisius Velichkovsky*.)

The autobiography is illuminating because it shows the matured spiritual father reflecting on himself; an eager and unformed novice, who desired only to please God and serve the brothers. St. Paisius’ early life was not smooth. His search for a spiritual father, and the difficulties of maintaining a stable monastic life amidst the political turmoil of Ukraine led him from monastery to monastery until he finally reached Mt. Athos. Recounting a period spent at the hermitage of Treisteny in Moldavia, however, Elder Paisius recalls his youthful trials as a novice baker.

When everyone had gone off to the forest then, to do the aforementioned work, the superior called one of the brethren who was the most experienced of all in the baking of bread and ordered him to show me the procedure for baking bread; and he ordered me to bake the bread, that it might be ready for the meal. This brother showed me in detail the procedure: pouring water into a cauldron, he showed me the pans of flour and the jug of kvass. He told me, “After you have heated the water, pour it into the flour in the pans and begin to knead it; then pour all the kvass from the jug into the dough and knead it all together.” Having said this, he went off to the brethren in the forest. But wretch that I was, after his departure I heated the water and poured it in the flour, completely forgetting to add the kvass. When I began to knead it, there was too little water, and too much flour. Having no experience, I did not know that it was possible to heat more water and add it, but thinking that once the brother had measured out so much water and flour it was

<sup>1</sup> Metrophanes, Schema-monk, *Blessed Paisius Velichkovsky: The Man Behind the Philokalia*, St. Herman of Alaska Press, Platina, CA, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Chetverikov, Fr. Sergeii, *Starets Paisii Velichkovskii*. Nordland Publishing Co., Belmont, MA, 1980.

<sup>3</sup> Tachiaos, A.-E., *The Revival of Byzantine Mysticism Among Slavs and Romanians in the XVIIIth Century*, Thessalonika, 1986.

<sup>4</sup> Featherstone, J.M. trans., *The Life of Paisij Velychkovskij*, Harvard Univ. Research Inst., 1989.

in no wise possible to add or take away from it, I labored with great toil to knead all the flour, and the dough became so hard that it was impossible to put my finger in it. At a loss for what to do with all the remaining flour, I cut the dough in pieces with a knife and placed it on the table. Sprinkling flour upon it, I beat it with a piece of wood and thus scarcely managed to knead in all of the flour; and placing all the dough in the pans with the greatest of difficulty, I scarcely managed to set them on the oven, so that the dough might rise more quickly in the warmth. I waited for quite a while, and then I lit the oven so that it might be ready, but after I had burnt a great quantity of wood, the dough had still not risen. I was grieved by this, not knowing why it would not rise, but remained hard and immovable like a rock.

In the afternoon one of the brethren came from the forest, not the one who had shown me how to bake the bread, but another, sent by the superior to learn whether the bread was ready or not. He asked me, "Why is the bread still not ready?" Answering him with a sigh, I told him that it still had not risen. He and I then took the pans off the oven, and feeling it with his hand, he found that it had been kneaded hard as a rock. Learning the reason for this, he smiled and said, "You ignoramus! When you saw that there was too little water you ought to have added more without hesitation, or else taken away some of the flour, and thus you would have kneaded the dough as one must needs do!" Then he asked me, "Did you add kvass to this dough?" What fear and shame came upon me when I heard this! I scarcely managed to answer that I had forgotten to add the kvass. But seeing that I was terrified and being a sensible man, he began to console me with spiritual words: "Do not grieve over this," he said, "for it was not from contempt, but from your inexperience in this work that you have erred." He heated some water and poured it upon the dough, and he and I began to knead it, adding the kvass. With great difficulty we scarcely managed to knead it somewhat, though it was impossible to knead it thoroughly on account of its great hardness. Then, having given me instructions what to do, he went back to the forest. I waited a rather long time, and when I thought the dough had risen somewhat, I made it into loaves and placed them on the table.

After sufficient time I built up the fire in the oven, and it grew so hot that it emitted sparks. I swept these up carefully and, allowing the oven to cool a little, though not so much as was

necessary, I put the bread into it, thinking that it would bake well. But because of the oven's great heat it turned black forthwith and began to burn, and it was burnt nearly two fingerbreadths from the top and bottom. At a loss for what to do, I fell into great despair, firstly because through my ignorance I had made such a mess of things in the bakery of the holy hermitage, and secondly because the holy fathers would not find anything to eat when they came back from the forest. Taking the bread, then, completely burnt, from the oven, I waited with fear the arrival of the brethren. And when they returned from the forest and saw what I, wretch that I was, had done in my ignorance, I fell down at their holy feet with tears and asked forgiveness. The father superior and all the brethren, imitating Christ's mercy, forgave me. Cutting one of the loaves, they saw that it was in no wise fit to be eaten; and they boiled corn mush and made a meal of this. No more did they bid me to bake the bread. But once having endured this, I thereafter watched diligently how the bread was baked and, with God's assistance, I learned to do this.

I describe here how I suffered because of my inexperience in this matter for the sake of the brethren who come now to our community, that they may not be frightened because of their inexperience in this or a similar obedience. For through God's help and their own fervor they will be able to gain experience in the obediences assigned them.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72