



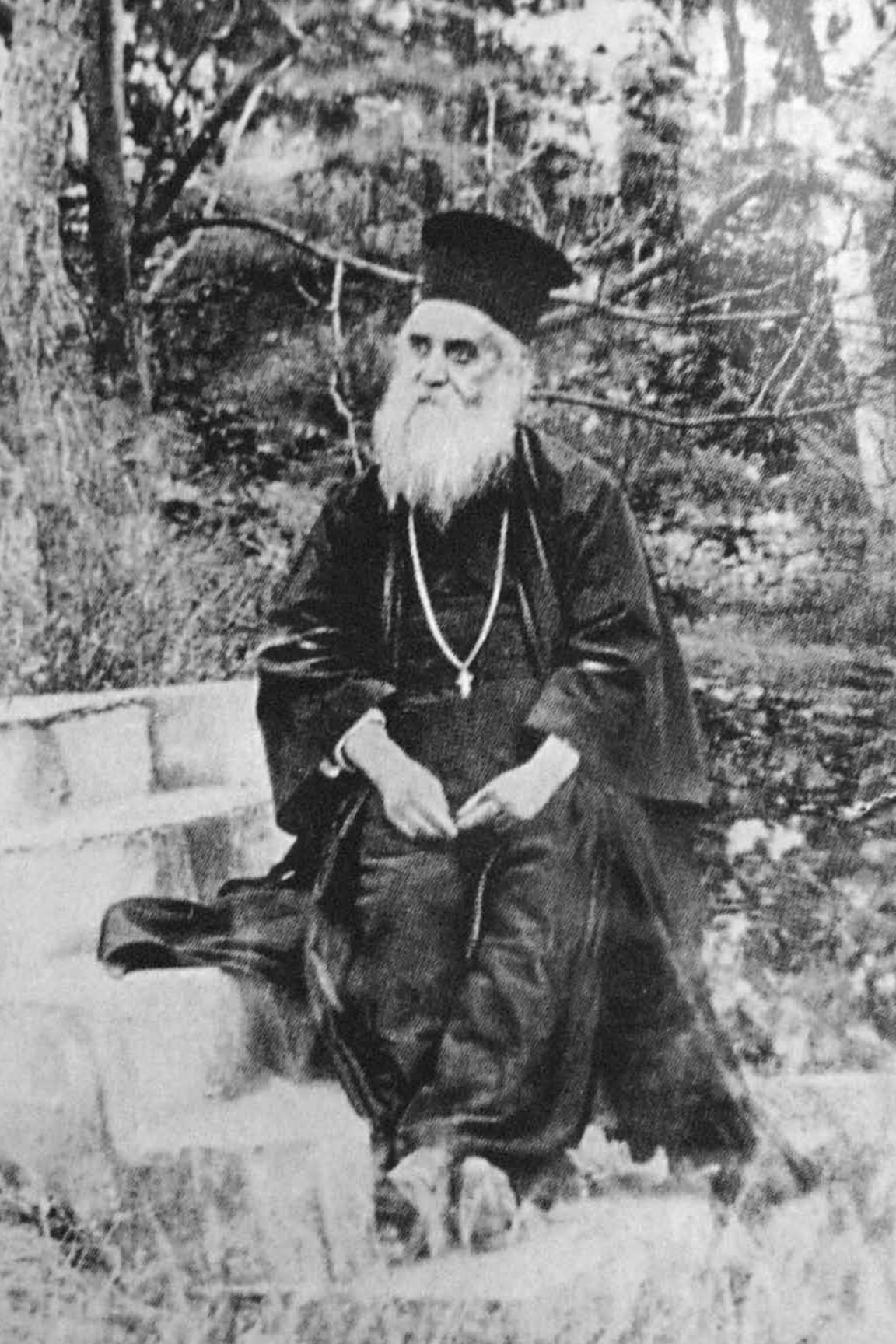
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SAINT NECTARIOS OF PENTAPOLIS: THE AEGINA YEARS

by Mother Nectaria McLees

One of Greece's earliest inhabited islands, Aegina has been populated since 2200 B.C. and served as a major trading center on the sea route between the Peloponnese and Northern Greece. The island developed the first Greek currency as well as a weight and measure system, and was known for its sculptors and artisans. Aegina fell to the Turks in 1715 after five centuries of Venetian rule, but in 1826, when Greece regained its independence, the national government was briefly headquartered here and the port regained some of its former importance.

Holy Trinity Monastery is located in the island's dry, hilly interior on the site of Paleochora, "Old Town," which was heavily populated from the 14th to the 17th centuries when frequent coastal pirate raids forced the Aeginians inland. During these centuries a phenomenal three hundred churches and family chapels were built in the tiny area. Thirty-five of them, most still maintained by local families, remain on the hill opposite the monastery, and, with the exception of the two largest, are open for prayer. A few still contain lovely frescoes. A morning's solitary climb around the holy mountain, incensed with sun-warmed sage and a myriad of wildflowers, is well worth a pilgrim's trek. The large chapel dedicated to St. Dionysios of Zakynthos (+1622),¹ who also served on the island, was St. Nectarios' own

¹ St. Dionysios was a 16th century bishop of Aegina whose incorrupt relics now lie on the island of Zakynthos.

Opposite: St. Nectarios, c. 1912.

favorite place to pray. Other island saints and righteous include St. Athanasia of Aegina, who lived and died on Aegina in the first half of the ninth century; the young St. Theodora of Thessalonica (+892), who made her way north and attained sanctity far from her island birthplace; St. Savvas the New of Kalymnos (+1948), a close friend of St. Nectarios who lived with him for some time on the island; and Elder Ieronymos Apostolides of Evangelismos Skete (+1966).

Saint Nectarios of Aegina was born on October 1, 1846 in Sylyvria, Thrace, to Dimas and Vasiliki Kephalas, and was baptized with the name Anastasios. When the boy was thirteen, his family's extreme poverty and his own desire to study took him to Constantinople where he found work as a shopkeeper's assistant. One well-known story from the saint's childhood concerns



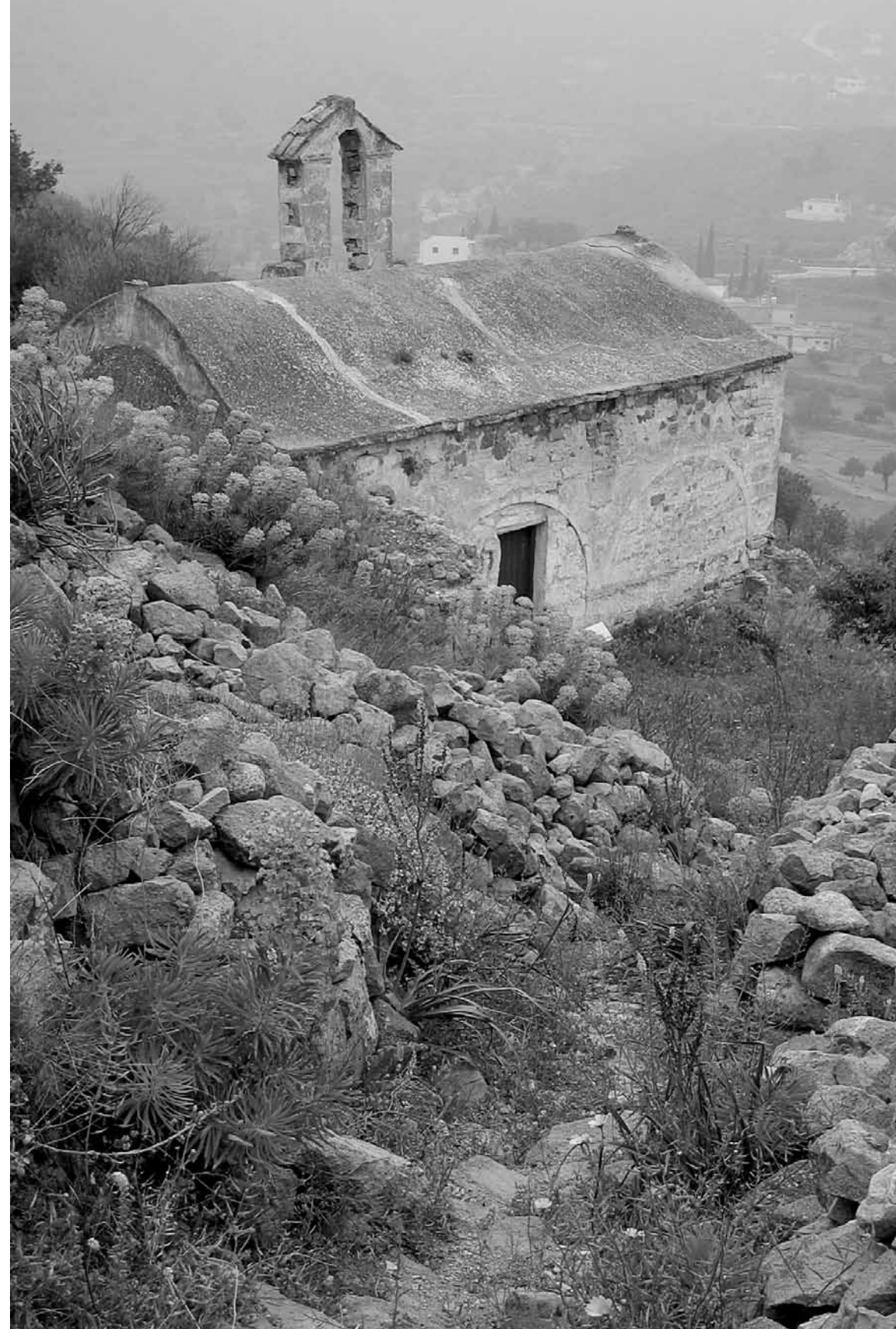
Rest of St. Nectarios, 1920.

his departure from Sylyvria. Not having the money for passage, Anastasios went to the port and begged the captain of a Constantinople-bound frigate to take him aboard. The captain abruptly refused and ordered his crew to get underway. The ship, however, could not move from the pier. The crew checked and rechecked the engines but were at a loss

to find anything wrong. The frustrated captain went back on deck, and spying the forlorn boy still standing on the pier, shouted at him to come aboard. No sooner had he stepped onto the ship than it slipped from its mooring and sped out to sea. But Anastasios' troubles were not over. Although the captain had allowed him passage, he still had to face the company ticket collector as he made his rounds of the boat. As the official approached, the anxious child began to weep, attracting the notice of a young man from Chios by the name of Horemis, who, when he heard his story, paid for Anastasios' ticket.

As the boat sailed towards Constantinople a violent storm blew up off the Thracian coast. The crew worked frantically to keep the ship afloat and the captain, as he hurried past Anastasios, huddled in a corner of the deck,

Opposite: Old island chapels on this and the following pages are from the ancient hill of Paleochora, opposite St. Nectarios' Holy Trinity Monastery in Aegina.





shouted at him to pray harder if he wanted to stay alive. Inside Anastasios' cross was a small piece of the Cross of the Lord, given him by his grandmother who had told him that if he was ever in danger of drowning at sea, to tie the cross on a string, lower it into the water, and he would be saved. The child remembered her advice and lowered his cross into the water. In a short time the waves became calm, but when he pulled up the string, the cross was gone. The captain and crew, seeing the storm abate, gave thanks to God, but Anastasios was inconsolable over his loss. As they entered the harbor at Constantinople, the sailors repeatedly heard a loud knocking at one end of the ship's hold. One of the crew climbed overboard to investigate the mysterious sound and found Anastasios' little cross wedged between two outer beams of the hull.

When he arrived in Constantinople Anastasios found a job in a tobacco shop, packaging loose tobacco and delivering it to customers on a pushcart. His desire, however, was to become a teacher and to this end he kept a journal entitled, "A Treasury of Spiritual Sayings," filled with Scripture passages, maxims of Greek philosophers and quotes from the Church Fathers. Sitting up at night packaging orders, the boy would copy these sayings out onto cigarette wrappers and wrap them with the customer's bundles.

Sleeping in the store, and given only food and lodging by his harsh employer, Anastasios' clothes were soon in rags. One winter, in desperation, he wrote a troubled letter addressed to the "Lord Jesus in Heaven." A neighboring merchant, noticing the letter, took it from the boy intending to mail it, but seeing the curious address, opened it and found written there, "*Christoutaki mou* [My dear little Christ], I haven't an apron or shoes. You send them to me. You know how I love you. Anastasios."

Touched by the guileless letter, the kindly merchant secretly sent the child some money with a note saying, "For Anastasios, from the Lord Jesus."



*St. Nectarios' monastic cell,
Holy Trinity Monastery.*

When his employer saw the new clothes he beat the boy badly, assuming that he had stolen the money to buy them. Anastasios was saved only by his benefactor's appearance, who, hearing the turmoil, rushed over to explain.²

To Anastasios' satisfaction within a few years he was able to leave the store to supervise the students of the Metochion of the Holy Sepulchre in Constantinople. In exchange for helping with the lower grades, he was allowed to attend the upper ones. At twenty-two he left Constantinople for Chios where he taught school in the village of Lythion for seven years, inspired by the life of St. Cosmas of Aitolia, the eighteenth-century preacher-educator. At twenty-nine he entered the monastery of Nea Moni on Chios and in 1866 was tonsured a monk with the name Lazarus. This was changed to Nectarios



St. Nectarios' monastic cell.

less than a year later, when he was ordained to the diaconate.

He eventually came under the patronage of Ioannis Horemis, a rich Chiote, and providentially, uncle to the young man who had paid his passage from Sylyvria. Years before, Horemis had been strangely moved by his nephew's story of the penniless boy, and he was overjoyed to discover that the

monastery's deacon was none other than the little Sylyvrian. Seeing the hand of God in the discovery, he sent Deacon Nectarios to study in Athens. Later the young monk went to Alexandria where he became a protégé of Patriarch Sophronios of Alexandria, who sent him back to Athens to take a higher degree in theology.

Successfully finishing his education, Nectarios returned to Alexandria and was ordained a priest in 1886. Less than three years later the patriarch raised him to the episcopal throne as Metropolitan of Pentapolis and Vicar-bishop of Cairo. Greatly loved by both the patriarch and the people of his diocese for his virtue, wisdom and modesty, the metropolitan nevertheless had enemies among the diocesan clergy who were jealous of his quick advancement. Slanderous rumors were spread that he was guilty not only of graft and immorality but was plotting to usurp the patriarchal throne. His enemies were so persuasive that they convinced the patriarch of the truth of the accusation,





and the infuriated Sophronios cast Nectarios out of the patriarchate with neither a trial nor a chance to defend himself.

Such is the inscrutable providence of God that for the rest of the metropolitan's life he unsuccessfully petitioned church hierarchs to clear his name. Two succeeding patriarchs of Alexandria, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, and several consecutive archbishops of Athens found it politically inexpedient (or simply lacked the moral courage) to publicly wipe the slanderous stain from the name of the saint. The allegations were never even investigated.

The defamatory rumors and an ambiguous letter from the Patriarchate of Alexandria announcing his suspension as a hierarch preceded the metropolitan to Greece. For an entire year after his return, St. Nectarios was unable to obtain even a humble position from the Ministry of Religion. During these long months he lived on the charity of his landlady who allowed him to continue to board with her even when he could not pay, cooking him hot meals and nursing him when he was ill. Finally, after a year of soliciting employment, the metropolitan was offered a provincial post which barely provided for his physical maintenance—as a traveling



Procession for St. Nectarios' feast, Aegina, 1992.

preacher to rural villages on the island of Evia. The slander originating from Constantinople followed him, however, and he soon found that the rumors were causing scandal among those whom he most wished to serve. He sadly resigned, later preaching in a diocese west of Athens until 1894, when he was offered the directorship of the Rizarios Ecclesiastical School of Athens.³

Panagiotis Brasiotis, one of St. Nectarios' students who later became a professor of theology at the University of Athens, recalled that the new director

³ The Rizarios School: One of the Greek diocesan training schools, the Rizarios School takes students from twelve years of age through high school, giving them a regular school curriculum, but concentrating on subjects such as church history, dogma, theology, and Byzantine chant. Young men who want to become priests can study a few additional years and be ordained without taking the full course of theology at a university. These schools are often attended by priests' sons (who themselves frequently become priests), boys interested in monasticism or those whose families simply want them to have the benefit of a church-oriented education.

quickly won the respect of the students, teachers and administrators by his rich knowledge of philosophy and theology and, even more, by his holy life. In one well-remembered instance, instead of punishing two boys who had been fighting, Father Nectarios imposed a severe fast on himself, remarking sadly that he was responsible for not guiding the children well enough. Seeing this, the guilty ones tearfully repented, begging him to curtail his fast.

Another time, when one of the assistant janitors of the school fell ill and was hospitalized, he was greatly upset because a prolonged absence meant the loss of his job. St. Nectarios, knowing what this would mean for the man's



Chapel over St. Nectarios' first sepulchre, Holy Trinity Monastery.

family, quietly did the janitor's work early in the morning before classes began. The day after the sick man was released from the hospital he rushed to work, fearful that he had lost his position, only to find the metropolitan cleaning the school toilets, as he had every morning during the janitor's illness.

Saint Nectarios' biographer, Archimandrite Joachim Spetsis, who knew the saint during his tenure at the school, recalls the metropolitan speaking about ultimate values; a clue, perhaps, to how he viewed his own persecuted position in the church: "When a man comes to understand his destiny and that he is a child of the Supreme God, he looks with contempt at the goods of

this world. It is true that the virtuous man endures temptations and humiliations in this world; but he rejoices deep within his heart, because his conscience is at peace. The world hates and despises virtuous men, yet it envies them, for as our ancestors used to say, virtue is admired even by the enemy."⁴

With his rich store of theology, St. Nectarios was a theologian in a true sense; not only did he understand theological principles, but they were alive in his own soul, and he would have made a name for himself by his prolific writing alone; dozens of books and tracts on theology, philosophy, apologetics, church history, and popular piety flowed from his pen. The saint's well-known volumes of hymns to the Mother of God are treasures of the twen-

⁴ "St. Nectarios of Aegina: Life, Miracles and Writings", *Orthodox Word*, April-May, 1968, St. Herman of Alaska Press, Platina, CA.





tieth-century Church, and today his writings are among the most popular and oft-quoted in Orthodox Greece. Such twentieth-century luminaries as Fr. Philotheos Zervakos of Paros and Father Amphilochius Makris of Patmos counted him as their spiritual father.

Many lay people also went to him for confession and to receive spiritual counsel. Among these were women who desired to take on the monastic life, and St. Nectarios hoped that he might found a convent for them near Athens. Being told of a ruined monastery on Aegina, near Paleochora, he went there in September of 1904, accompanied by three of his spiritual daughters. They found a small chapel dedicated to the Mother of God of the Life-Giving Spring, and two tiny cells watched over by an old woman who lived on the alms of local Christians. The small company held an all-night vigil, praying that if it was God's will, He help them to rebuild the convent.

The following day St. Nectarios met with the mayor of Aegina, Nicholas Papas, who promised to repair the remaining cells and deed him the property for the new convent. The nuns stayed in Aegina, and on Sundays and feast-days, Archimandrite Theodosios from the neighboring Chryssaleon-disa Monastery sent one of his priests to serve in the chapel. Saint Nectarios continued as



St. Nectarios' first sepulchre, with the tree he was told about in his vision.

director of the Rizarios School until 1908, when he resigned and moved to the monastery, which he organized as a cenobium, eventually housing thirty-three nuns. The first abbess of the convent was a blind nun named Xenia, one of St. Nectarios' closest spiritual daughters, a warm-hearted and virtuous young woman, who is being considered for canonization. Although there are now only about a dozen nuns, the monastery continues to flourish with the help of the tens of thousands of pilgrims who come there every year.

In 1995, the author met an old pilgrim at the convent who had been a friend of Sister Theodosia, the last nun who knew St. Nectarios. Before her repose, Sister Theodosia related how she came to join the convent:

“When I was a child of ten, I came with some of the other little village girls to the monastery and asked Geronda [Father Nectarios] to let us join his sisters. He smiled and said, “Go home, when you’ve grown up a little more I’ll take you.” We went home and returned the next year on the same day, and said, “We’ve grown up a little. Will you take us now?” So he did, and he used to take us everywhere with him by the hand.”

Sister Theodosia became an accomplished liturgical chanter and she recalled that the saint would often come out of the altar and whisper to her on the *cliros*, “Sing on, my nightingale!”



St. Nectarios’ relics in the old monastery chapel.

One of the monographs about the saint records his seemingly prophetic words to his young nuns about their monastery: “I am building a lighthouse for you, and God will put a light in it that shall shine through the length and breadth of the whole world. Many shall see the light and come here to Aegina.”

For the first years of the monastery’s existence, in addition to serving as the convent’s spiritual father, the sixty-year-old priest occupied himself with heavy physical labor—tilling the garden, carrying water, and hauling stones for the construction of new cells. He was also an accomplished shoemaker and repaired the

shoes of the nuns and workers. Known to be clairvoyant and in a constant state of prayer, his reputation as an elder spread and the monastery became a place of pilgrimage for both the renowned and simple. After the establishment of the monastery, St. Nectarios invited his friend, Father Savvas, to teach the nuns Byzantine chant and iconography. Father Savvas stayed on for a while after St. Nectarios’ repose, finally withdrawing to the island of Kalymnos where, after his own repose, he was canonized as St. Savvas the New.

Even in seclusion on Aegina, however, the evil one would not let the saint alone and incited charges of immorality by several priests who were jealous of his growing reputation as a spiritual elder. Investigations disproved the charges and they were dropped, but once again, clerical jealousy had done





its work in disturbing the peace of the monastery and the simple lay-people who came there.

Saint Nectarios' biographer recounts a conversation he had with Constantine Sakoraphos of Lamia, who had known the saint during his years at the convent: "What can I tell you, Father Joachim! After he settled at the convent in Aegina he became all spirit; he became like an angel and led an altogether heavenly life."

Archbishop Titos Matthiakis remarks:

His simple and guileless style, the goodness of his heart, his extreme humility, together with his great learning made a deep impression... It's no exaggeration to say that the strengthening of the religious feeling of the people in Greece during the closing decade of the last century and the first decade of the present century was to a great extent due to the inspired and faith-filled sermons of St. Nectarios.... Through his sermons unbelievers and enemies of the Christian faith were transformed into ardent champions; slanderers and accusers were disarmed; and avaricious and uncharitable hearts opened to the poor.⁵

In the last year of his life St. Nectarios developed cystitis and suffered for months with severe pain. He refused medical treatment, consoling himself instead with long treks through the mountains to the neighboring Chryssaleondisa Monastery where he prayed in front of the famous icon of the "Mother of God, Chryssaleondisa" (the Golden Queen). Towards the end of his illness he was taken to the Aretaion Hospital in Athens, where he was admitted to the charity ward. After fifty days of severe illness he reposed on November 8, 1920, at the age of seventy-four.



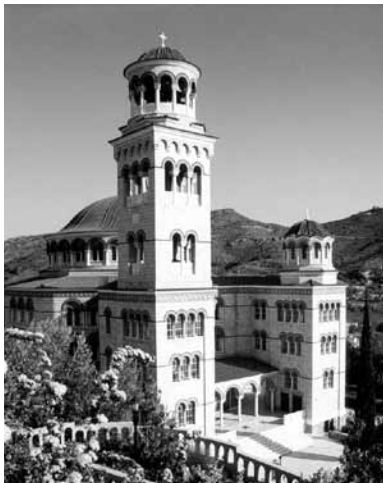
Chapels on the hill of Paleochora.

The wealth of miracles that have been attributed to the saint's prayers began the moment his soul departed from his body. The nurse who came to prepare him for burial removed his sweater and laid it aside on the bed of a

⁵ Chondopoulos, pg 178.

man who had been paralyzed for many years. Within moments a wonderful fragrance filled the air and the sick man rose from his bed healed. The marvelous fragrance spread quickly through the hospital, and staff and patients alike began coming out into the halls to ask where the smell was coming from. The fragrance was so strong in the room where they had temporarily placed the saint's body that, even though the windows were left open, they could not use the room for days afterwards. The hospital room was made into a chapel dedicated to St. Nectarios.

The saint's body was taken back to Aegina where he was buried in the courtyard of his own monastery. Some years after his burial, as is the custom in Greece, his coffin was opened to remove his bones, wash them and inter them anew. To their amazement, the clergy and nuns assisting at the disinterment found his body completely intact, as if he had only just fallen asleep, and even his vestments looked as they had on the day of his burial. To avoid the crowds that would have gathered if they had known of the disinterment, no notice had been given to the public. One woman, however, passing by in a taxi from a resort on the other side of the island, smelled the wonderful fragrance from the road. She was not a church-goer and her young soul



New Church of St. Nectarios, below Holy Trinity Monastery.

was already burdened with a loose reputation, but when she smelled the fragrance she told the driver to stop and ran to the convent to see what was taking place. The sight of St. Nectarios' incorrupt relics moved her so deeply that she began to weep and publicly confess her sins. Amending her life, she became a devout Christian.

After the discovery of the saint's incorruption, the convent telegraphed Archbishop Chrysostomos Papadopoulos of Athens, asking what to do. The archbishop came to examine the relics and, incredulous of St. Nectarios' sanctity, told the nuns to leave the body of the saint exposed to the elements for a few days and then rebury him, so that the relics would dissolve in the natural way. The simple-hearted nuns, fearful of his authority, obeyed him, but two months later, when they opened the coffin again, they found the

saint still completely incorrupt. They placed his body in a marble sarcophagus in a small chapel near the grave.

In 1934, fourteen years after St. Nectarios' repose, an unbelieving local doctor was riding by the convent when he was caught in a sudden rainstorm and was forced to seek shelter in the convent's guesthouse. Having heard the reports of the saint's incorruption, the doctor went to the sarcophagus and pried off the heavy marble lid. Disregarding the protests of one of the nuns who chanced to see him, he slid the lid down to look. Later he reported, "I was amazed to see that it was the Fr. Nectarios we all knew, his face and expression made him completely recognizable—his beard was still intact... and when I touched his hand I saw that it was still skin...it had not shriveled up." Some years later, through God's providence, the saint's relics did decompose, and now his skull is enshrined in a silver miter in the monastery church. Other parts of his relics lie in a silver box alongside.

The authenticated miracles that have occurred since St. Nectarios' death would fill many volumes. The sick and possessed are healed, many have been warned of imminent danger, and there have been numerous visions of the saint offering guidance and solace. In many instances he has appeared to people saying, "Take oil from the lamp over my grave. Put it in holy water and drink it and you will be cured."

Holy Trinity Monastery, including the church with St. Nectarios' relics, the original tomb, and his living quarters, are open daily to pilgrims. A majestic basilica, one of the largest in Greece, has recently been built at the foot of the monastery to accommodate the thousands of pilgrims who come during the summer and on the saint's feast-day on November 9. ✦