

The Sermon of the Metropolitan of Morphou Neophytos

*following Vespers during the All-night Vigil on the feast of
St. Neophytos the Recluse and St. Isaac the Syrian
which took place on the premises of the holy church, under construction,
of St. Auxibios, first Bishop of Soli, the miracle worker,
in the community of Astromeritis (27.09.2021).
an English transcription of the RumOrthodox video*

The Saints Neophytos the Recluse and Isaac the Syrian lead us to knowledge

Οί ὅσιοι Νεόφυτος ὁ Ἐγκλειστος καὶ Ἰσαάκ ὁ Σύρος μᾶς ὁδηγοῦν στὴ γνώση

The video begins with the chanting of the Apolytikion of St. Neophytos the Recluse by the chanters of the Holy Metropolis of Morphou with Protopsaltis Mr. Marios Antoniou among them.

MY FATHERS and brothers, as you can hear — you can sit if you want, the chanters as well. Tonight we celebrate two great saints of our Orthodox Church. Really great ones! And they are great not only because they lived their lives in an ascetic manner, but also because they left us their holy writings which “decorate” the theology and the ascetic life of the faithful and lead us, during these difficult days we live, on how to become saints, since the purpose of every Orthodox Christian needs to be, according to our Lord Jesus Christ, sainthood:

Be holy, for I am holy. [1 Peter 1:16].

So, today is celebrated our Saint, Fr. Neophytos the Recluse, [who is] well-known to all Cypriots and to many more at the ends of the earth, a day that our church celebrates the finding of his holy relics, as we said before. A saint who, as I am informed by the hagiologist [αγιολόγος] of our Metropolis and the whole of the Church of Cyprus, Fr. Fotios, our chancellor, [Saint Neophytos] fell asleep on the 12th of April, 1221. That is, this year, 2021, 800 years have passed since the day of the falling asleep of Saint Neophytos. “Generations come and go,” St. Neophytos remains the [St. John] Chrysostom of Cyprus, as named by the theologians, especially by those who study patristic and neptic theology, and St. Neophytos remains “the planner” of the whole Church of Cyprus.

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His Engleistra [place of seclusion], along with the monastery of St. Barnabas, now in the occupied part [of Cyprus], [the monastery] of St. Heraklidios in Politikon as well as [the church of] St. Lazarus in Larnaka and [the monastery of] St. John Lampadistis in Kalopanagiotis where St. Heraklidios was baptized, where we will have in a few days the feast day. In my opinion, I might be wrong, these are “the strongest thing” we have as far as the sanctity of this place [Cyprus] is concerned.

Together with St. Neophytos, who is known to us also through the many miracles he performs [and] thus the many celebrations in each church of Cyprus and his holy icons [that] exist everywhere, today, I want to present in your love, a Saint whom the great modern St. Paisios named the “much wronged Saint of the Church.” I am talking about an even older saint of our church, a Saint, an ascetic from Syria, thus his name — St. Isaac the Syrian — who lived during the 7th century in the area of Mesopotamia.

He lived and practiced asceticism there and left us, as I have said and wrote in a book, *The Doctorate* (if the use of the term is permitted to me) *of the Ascetic State of Every Fighting Orthodox Christian*. There is nothing more superior to recommend for someone to read continuously, regardless of whether he is an amateur in the ascetic life or in a mediocre [state] or in a state of enlightenment, than the writings of St. Isaac the Syrian.

St. Paisios, who cherished him a lot, used to say to us and to many visiting him that, “The worth of the book *Ascetics* by St. Isaac the Syrian is equal in value to ten libraries full of patristic books.”

This book was written in the Syrian language during the 9th century. Two monks of the Monastery of St. Savvas the Sanctified in Palestine who were knowledgeable in Syrian and the Greek languages translated this book into Greek. From then on, it never stopped being translated into all the languages of the world. It was even translated into Japanese. Think about that.

Still, we, being captured by the modern passion of laziness and “mediocrity” as St. Porphyrios used to say for us the modern Greeks, not the old ones, we, the modern ones, who have been corrupted by the consumerism and the atheist letters of Europe, “These two things weave the shroud of the [Greek] nation.”

Who can now read the beautiful language [of Ancient Greek] that the fathers translated in the 9th century? Yet, I will read you just one page so you can realize how understandable is this language, our language, the Greek one. And what crime is committed by the so-called modern Ministries of Education that this language is not taught—as it should—in all classes? We should start from primary

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school and until we reach secondary school, [where] we should have already attained at least [the level of knowledge required for the study of] the original language of the Gospel [Ancient Greek]. But that is an issue for another time.

Before I move on and complete my homily, I hope that at least one or two of you will leave [this place] with the desire to study these books, either laymen or clergy.

St. Paisios used to tell me in person:

You, among the many flaws you have, one flaw of yours is that you are a bookworm. This is not a good thing. You do not leave much time to your nous for prayer. You always prefer reading. This will be apparent as a problem later on [in your life]. Right now you cannot realize it. You even think it's an advantage.

Those books, my son, of the holy fathers are to be read little by little, but every single day. And when I say 'little' – two chapters from the Holy Gospel, three kathismata of the Psalter and two pages from Saint Isaac!

St. Paisios had an icon in his cell, a paper icon, not like the aristocratic ones of ours, a paper icon in which St. Isaac is seated and writes his *Ascetics* with a feather as there were no pens back then, just ink. The people of the time used to write using a feather of a big bird and ink. St. Neophytos and all the saints, this is how they wrote their writings – with a feather. I am telling you this because it's important and it's a joyful narration so I can help you rest a bit.

St. Paisios was so excited by these ascetic writings of St. Isaac the Syrian that, as he was watching this paper icon of the Saint sitting and writing, [he] turns to him and says,

My St. Isaac, I like to highlight the books. Give me your feather so I can highlight the whole book!

There is not a single word that is without value! A sentence that is not the light of Christ! Give me your feather so I can highlight the whole book.

And not only did [St. Paisios] make this thought, but he wrote it down on his book so that today [there] exists the book St. Paisios was reading with the words, "My Saint, give me your feather so I can highlight the whole book."

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Such was the value he discovered and spiritual food for his soul! He also told me:

Wherever you go, whatever you do, you will have one book open on your desk, St. Isaac the Syrian. Never finish him [meaning, read the book again and again], regardless of how many years you live.

If you visit my office, even if all the other books are closed, St. Isaac is always open. St. Paisios also told me:

Read it, little by little. It is so ‘vitamin-rich’ that you cannot read more than two pages at a time and understand them. Then go back [again]. Go back and never say. “I finished St. Isaac.” The end of the perfect is endless. And St. Isaac the Syrian is one of the perfects, of the great Saints!

Thus, I read every day one or two pages of St. Isaac and highlight. One day, when I was in Evrychou, I was so excited by what I was reading that I remembered the feather!

And I said, “My St. Isaac, St. Paisios was right! Every single word of yours is gold and it must be highlighted!”

“St. Paisios, send me a feather so I can highlight the whole book,” I told him.

A few days later, that is four or five days, a spiritual child of ours and a very close friend of Fr. Iakovos [our Archimandrite] arrives at the Metropolis [of Morphou] to visit. Vassilis from Thessaloniki comes into our office and tells me: “Metropolitan, I brought you a gift. I am not sure if you will like it but since I see you, every time I meet you, in front of a book, I thought of bringing you a gift which the ancient scholars, the educated ones, always held in their hand.”

I thought he must have brought me a Parker pen. I open a rectangle box and what do you think was inside it, Marios? A feather!

I say, “Lord have mercy. The Saints hear even our jokes!”

Inside this book that we published, we added the photo of the feather. Here it is! I wrote underneath [the photo]:

The feather sent by St. Paisios to highlight *The Ascetics* of our favorite, St. Isaac the Syrian.

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From then on, we also made him a beautiful holy icon, the one you venerate here. He wears this eastern sarikion [«σαρίκιο»] on his head.

Now, summing up and in order to proceed to the Six Psalms [Exapsalmos], I will read you just one page in Greek, as translated by the fathers in the 9th century from the Syrian [language], so you can realize the depth of the Holy Spirit, because all these [writings] are not St. Isaac's. They are the result of the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

Before that, let me tell you why St. Paisios used to speak of St. Isaac as the “wronged” [Saint].

In the synaxaria and the liturgical books, the Saint was not mentioned. Some pious, mostly monks, aware of his ascetic, theological, neptic, therapeutic value used to honor him next to the other also great writer from Syria, St. Ephraim the Syrian, who is commemorated on the 28th of January. And they said, “and the Saint and God-bearer father of ours ... St. Isaac the Syrian.”

He had neither Apolytikion, nor Kontakion, nor Megalynarion, nor Service. Why this injustice? Because some were accusing St. Isaac of being “a bit” Nestorian as he lived in Mesopotamia among heretic Nestorians. For that, he is not numbered among the Saints. Imagine how strict the Byzantines were.

But even though he lived in a heretic environment, the Saint not once performed Liturgy with heretics. It is that important, my fathers, to be careful with whom we perform Liturgy.

The years and the centuries passed and St. Isaac [remained], the great “unknown,” without being commemorated, without given any glory, “a wronged Saint.”

St. Paisios had this gift. He “owned a TV” and could see both the heavenly and the earthly, as with all great Saints! One day, St. Paisios was in a monastery and he heard a monk speaking against St. Isaac: “What a great book this is [Ascetics]! But this Saint was a heretic, he was in bad faith ...”

St. Paisios did not say anything but he was saddened! “I started going back to my cell and I was saddened for these words spoken against St. Isaac, because in every single line [of his book] I was reading, I could feel the greatness of this Saint! On the other hand, I was confused. How could they not write an Apolytikion for him? So many neomartyrs with their own Apolytikion. Is there something wrong with the life of the Saint?”

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So “a small question mark” crossed St. Paisios’ mind. St. Paisios says that as he was ascending to go to his cell, right in the middle of the road, a big “screen” opened in front of him, and all the Saints starting walking in front of him. What a scene! First of all, St. Antonios, [then] St. Pachomios, St. Hilarion ...all the Saints were passing right in front of him. And he bowed to them [«κάνω σχήμα»] and they were blessing him.

At one point, St. Isaac passed. He stopped and talked to him.

Fr. Paisios, do not be saddened. I have heard such words against me for many years there in the glory of God where I reside. My Father, I lived in Mesopotamia among heretic Nestorians, but not once did I perform Liturgy with them! On the contrary, I was trying to bring them to the Orthodox faith. You can celebrate me with a holy icon and write me a Service.

The next day, St. Paisios is on his feet and where do you think he went, Mar-
ios? To Gerasimos Mikragiannanitis, the great hymnographer, at Little St. Anne’s
Skete [Mt. Athos]. With tears, he told to the virtuous hymnographer, Fr. Gerasi-
mos, about the vision he had, and he [Fr. Gerasimos] wrote the Service that our
chanters sang today. This Service that you sing is after the order of St. Paisios and
it was written by the also sanctified hymnographer Gerasimos Mikragiannanitis.

So, you see that “a Saint is known by a Saint.” And how important it is to hold in
reverence our Saints and especially these great Saints!

Know that when the other Saint, St. Neophytos, wrote his own writings in iso-
lation for 40 years, he took into account the writings of St. Isaac. St. Neophytos
had an incredible memory. He could remember entire books by heart, but before
he lived in isolation in Egkleistra, do you know what he did? He visited all the
monasteries of Cyprus and bought theological books and created a great library.
And he studied. St. Neophytos was a really studious saint and with the grace of
the Holy Spirit, he wrote his own writings.

It seems that one of the writings he had belonged to St. Isaac. I remember a verse
that I very much liked even from my university years. I will say it to you and I
will finish so we can connect the two Saints.

Which date did St. Paisios pick for the celebration of St. Isaac, the “Wronged
One”? He separated [his celebration] from the 28th of January and he suggested
the 28th of September as his celebration date. Hence, we, Cypriots, have the great
blessing of celebrating the great Saint of Cyprus [St. Neophytos] the same date

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with the great Saint, not only of Orthodox Syria, which exists today, but of the whole Orthodoxy. Ecumenical Saints, both of them. St. Isaac, incredibly great. St. Neophytos, great.

Now that his writings have been published by the monastery of Engleistra of Paphos, you will see that little by little the reading of the writings of St. Neophytos will lead him to a position that is worthy for him in the theological, doxological, ascetic, therapeutic letters.

I conclude with the verse that is saved in St. Neophytos' writings and probably belongs to St. Isaac because I also found it in St. Isaac. As we said, one a Saint of the 7th century, the other Saint fell asleep in the beginning of the 13th century, 1221. St. Neophytos says: [The Metropolitan reads in ancient Greek],

I am clay. I need a technician. Become my technician because in wisdom You created everything.

The Great Artist who created everything "very good" [Genesis 1:31] so that man can enjoy them.

And make me Your proper vessel.

Now, since I have already said enough, let's say this last one and ask the chanters to forgive us. I will read it as is written in the book in one page and whatever one understands, let it be so. The important thing is that you will feel them, regardless of whether you are "of primary school", "illiterate", or "of university," I am certain that you will feel them. So, listen with attention. [The following were read in Ancient Greek.]

It is better to reside with beasts than to reside with those who have bad associations.

Better to sit with vultures than with the greedy and covetous.

[Better to] be a friend with a murderer than one who is avaricious.

Are you listening? The whites bring down the stars. [Cypriot expression, whites meaning silver/money]

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It is better to have a murderer as a friend than one who is avaricious.
It is better to be in a container with pigs than with one who “eats the world with his tongue” [a gossip].

Sit among the lepers than [with] the prideful ones.

And do not persecute and do not crucify,
and do not do injustice,
and do not slander.

Become forgiving and do not fall into jealousy.

Now, pay attention to this one.

Associate with kindness, not with justice.

Right? Not on a reciprocal level. Kindness is preferable.

Excuse is not a way of life for Christians.

Listen to this. I will read it again.

Excuse is not a way of life for Christians.

And that [excuse] is not written in the teaching of Christ. The teaching of Christ is the gospel.

Be glad next to those who are glad and cry next to those who cry, which is a sign of purity.

With the sick be sick [yourself], with the sinners, mourn.

With those who repent, be delighted.

Be a friend of every man and be alone within your mind [«διανοία»].

Partake in the sufferings of everyone. Keep your body away from everyone.

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Of the holy God-bearing fathers, Isaac the Syrian and Neophytos the Recluse, their intercessions. Lord, have mercy and save us.

The video concludes with the chanting of the Apolytikion of St. Isaac the Syrian, Bishop of Ninevah

Illuminated by rays of the virtues, O God-bearer Isaac,
in spirit thou wast shown to be an all-radiant beacon of the life
which is in Christ;
and by thine divinely inspired teachings, O Father,
thou dost guide safely to the way of salvation those who bless thee as
a godly servant of Christ.