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# An Introduction and Book Review: Saint Paisios of Mount Athos and the Making of a Byzantine-Style Icon By Nikos Linardakis, M.D.




On July 12th, 1994, a devout servant of God, known as Elder Paisios of the Holy Mountain (Mount Athos), departed this earthly realm just shy of his 70th birthday. Throughout his lifetime, he was visited by many seeking his spiritual guidance, imparting wisdom, blessings and embodying humility. Born in Cappadocia of Asia Minor in what is now modern-day Turkey, following the Greco-Turkish War of 1919-22, he was actually baptized with the name “Arsenios” Eznepidis, in honor of his Godparent and spiritual father—St. Arsenios the Cappadocian. Following his service as a radio operator in the military, he embraced a monastic life with fervor and dedication.

I first learned about this newly canonized Orthodox Christian saint just three years ago, after a heartfelt conversation with my dear friend, Fr. Daniel Armatas. Back in the 1980s, together with my brother Christos and I, we embarked on an AHEPA journey to the monasteries of Meteora, Greece. Fast forward to today, Fr. Daniel took the royal path of priesthood within Orthodoxy. Since our memorable trip, Fr. Daniel and hundreds of others have been drawn to meet with the monastic Elder Paisios.

St. Paisios of Mount Athos was recently officially canonized as a saint on January 13, 2015. His life was marked with miracles and profound teachings that touched people throughout the world. Fr. Daniel was fortunate to have a personal encounter with him at the monastery, an experience that left an indelible mark on Fr. Daniel’s life. So much so, that he honored his son with the middle name Paisios, a tribute to the Saint who had profoundly impacted him.

As our lives intertwined again, I researched and read about St. Paisios. What particularly captivated me was the biography penned in Greek by Hieromonk Isaac, considered the definitive account of St. Paisios’ life. I was fortunate to acquire a beautiful hard copy of the English translation by Hieromonk Alexis Trader and Fr. Peter Heers (ISBN 978-960-89764-5-0). Fr. Peter Heers has led a dedicated life of

Orthodox Christian education and has a strong grasp of the Greek language, and stands as a beacon of knowledge through platforms like YouTube® and other social media channels, he disseminates The Orthodox Ethos advocating for the Orthodox way of life. You can explore his videos for insightful discussions on Orthodoxy. Fr. Heers strikes me as an articulate and erudite man, guided by genuine Christian principles.

I immediately purchased another copy of his book translation for a Byzantine iconographer, Veryle Lynn Cox, to read about St. Paisios. My intention was to commission and gift an icon of St. Paisios to Fr. Daniel and his family. Given that St. Paisios was recently canonized a saint, the depictions of St. Paisios in icon form were scarce, adding to the significance of this particular icon. This became a passion project with the hopeful outcome of long-lasting and beneficial effects. Something we could all cherish in the years to come. Intended as a token of gratitude to my friend for the introduction and our passages. Through its creation, the icon illuminated several lessons and brought immense joy. That project unfolded beautifully, becoming a rewarding experience for everyone involved. Thus, it stands as an important narrative, weaving together the story of St. Paisios, the invaluable book chronicling his life, and the intricate craftsmanship and iconography behind the creation of this Byzantine-style icon.

Conveying a “book review” for a biographical work on a saint can be a challenge. Yet, immersing oneself in the pages dedicated to St. Paisios feels akin to quenching thirst with a refreshing glass of cold water on a scorching summer day—it’s revitalizing! Each page had valuable insights and goodness. If there’s one minor flaw I could point out, it’s the occasional tendency for Greeks, and even myself, to repeat themes or ideas. But amidst such richness, it is a forgivable aspect and a helpful review—rather than an error. Biographical works of the lives of saints are not typically written for critical scrutiny; instead they serve as avenues for engagement, exploration, inquiry, and documentation of the saint’s journey. Like an icon, they offer a window through which we can delve into their lives, seek to understand, and emulate their actions. These are lofty heights of virtues to achieve—virtues exemplified by the Saint.

As a monastic residing at Mount Athos, St. Paisios embodied simplicity, diligence and a gentle demeanor. Despite his exhaustion, he graciously lent his ear to the countless pilgrims who sought his spiritual guidance in person. The book vividly portrays the many challenges he confronted. His profound devotion to Mother Mary and Christ were enlightening to many and brought depth to his spiritual journey.

Agios Paisios (Saint Paisios) was born on July 25, 1924 and we commemorate his

feast day on July 12th, the date of his death and surrender to our Lord in 1994. Canonized a Saint by the Eastern Orthodox Church on January 13, 2015, his life serves as an example of sacrificial devotion. Delving into his biography, turning page by page with interest, I discovered a wealth of wisdom that nourished my soul and filled it with grace. Although he was a man of the world, his spiritual calling grew, even with a keen awareness of worldly matters. He gave up more than most would, including his own family, in order to become a monk. He spoke eloquently about the pressing needs and tribulations of our time, addressing concerns that resonated with his era. His foresight was remarkable; he envisioned the collapse of the Soviet Union, the invasion of Cyprus by Turkey, and voiced apprehensions about Israel and the tumultuous times ahead.

One important prayer for St. Paisios was the “Jesus Prayer.” He engaged in continuous prayer for others, often kneeling with his hands, assuming a posture of deep reverence, touching his head to the ground. With his prayer rope in hand, he fervently recited variations of the Jesus Prayer, beseeching divine mercy for all, whether it be “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me,” “…on us,” or “…on Thy servant” followed by the individual’s name. His prayers extended for anyone in need, driven by his deep concern for the salvation of the immortal souls. Additionally, he sought intercession from Christ, the Mother of God, the Forerunner, the Saint commemorated on that day, and his own patron Saint, Arsenios. This example of spiritual life serves as a path towards deeper prayer, while dispelling negative influences or passions.

As a physician, I’ve witnessed and experienced firsthand the transformative impact of unceasing prayer. Not only reducing pain, but redirects to what truly matters. Unceasing prayer nurtures the soul. When we glorify God, we relinquish worldly concerns. This shift in perspective brings awareness, of the fulfillment of God’s will, and encourages a sense of purpose.

The book now holds a cherished place in my home library, its pages carefully noted and underlined. St. Paisios’ dedication was evident in every aspect of life. He labored diligently, carved icons from wood, and extended aid to many, while he was consumed with obedience to Christ. The book is biographical, but recounts and narrates several miracles and divine interventions. His divine actions were met with struggles, prompting him to continually thank God for doing His will. Every day, he learned about the lives of Saints, something we should do as well. There are several examples of his interactions with individuals, saints, and even animals.

Numerous testimonies are examined in detail, and they provide glimpses into his compassion for others and his unwavering devotion to Christ. His words resonate,

“Spiritual life is so fragile, and you need to be so careful!” and “These hard times are a blessing, because they force us to live closer to Christ.” He prophetically warns, “The war now will not be fought with weapons: it will be a spiritual war against the Antichrist.” He bestowed blessings upon others, and lived with divine grace.

Elder Paisios taught: “The devil does not hunt after those who are lost; he hunts after those who are aware, those who are close to God. He takes from them trust in God and begins to afflict them with self-assurance, logic, thinking, criticism. Therefore, we should not trust our logical minds. Never believe your thoughts. The ancient fathers did not trust their thoughts at all, but even in the smallest things, when they had to give an answer, they addressed the matter in their prayer, joining to it fasting, in order in some way to ‘force’ Divine Grace to inform them what was the right answer according to God. And when they received the ‘information,’ they gave the answer.”

A few of the testimonialsare fun to read about, and in his lighthearted side, revealing his wit. He showed a capacity to amuse and bring simple joy and to entertain others. He also emanated a joyful light. However, despite his inclination for solitude, that was not God’s plan.

I also learned about another series of book volumes that Elder Paisios read diligently, the Philokalia. This collection serves as a valuable resource for orthodoxy, and I urge every Orthodox Christian to read and explore the Philokalia in its entirety. Despite the considerable length of the St. Paisios book, which measures at 719 pages long, its pages seemed to fly by with remarkable swiftness and enthusiasm, that it did not feel like anything more than 200 pages. It was filled with pearls of wisdom and newfound prayers. There was one important event after another. At its completion, I felt filled with the Holy Spirit and compelled to write about him and to venerate his icon. Which brings me to the creation of the new icon.

During this whole process of delving into the life of St. Paisios, I had conversations with the iconographer and with Fr. Daniel Armatas seeking insights into certain details. As the icon was intended as a gift for Fr. Armatas, I chose to keep it as a surprise. There were many details that came into its creation. I sought guidance from various resources, and also from another well-known iconographer, Fr. Anthony Salzman of Saint Philothea in Watkinsville, Georgia. Everyone’s expertise proved invaluable in ensuring the icon’s uniqueness, accuracy and authenticity.

This icon was made using traditional Byzantine-style techniques for iconography,

and also depicts several distinctive attributes, implemented courageously by iconographer Veryle Lynn Cox. Completed on a handmade linden wood board by Fr. Dimitri Kulp of St. John's Workshop in Wisconsin, and coated with gesso—an absorbent mixture of animal hide glue, marble dust and white minerals. The application process involved covering the wood with gesso and a layer of linen, followed by 12-15 layers of gesso to achieve a meticulously smooth surface. The intricate image of the icon design is "written" and the iconographer painstakingly deposited color details from dark to light. Each layer of clay, natural colorants, and honey was carefully applied. Then, the water-gilded gold is even applied with her breath, preserving the original tradition of Byzantine-style iconography. I sense the photos help document the process of this lost art form, and emphasize its significance in Christianity.

"The gold represents God, the clay represents man, and breathing on it represents the breath of the Holy Spirit," explains iconographer Veryle Lynn Cox, which captures the theological depth inherent in this creative process. The meaningful icon was completed over several months, and was finally sent to Fr. Armatas. He later had the honor to venerate and bless the icon during his Church service, further imbuing it with sacred significance and grace.

Here are a few key features of the St. Paisios icon and the subtle suggestions, that were incorporated by iconographer V.L. Cox in the design and creation of the icon:

First, the image of St. Paisios is in his likeness, but in satisfying the stylization and traditions of Byzantine iconography, the Paisios image is not a portrait; it is created as a recognizable abstraction of St. Paisios. In a way, less "earthly." To capture the essence of St. Paisios, we scoured the book for quotes, although many were too lengthy to comfortably fit on the icon. Ultimately, we chose a saying that encapsulated his ethos, carefully inscribing it on the oklad that envelopes the icon. Intertwined together with the knots of the prayer rope, the oklad bears his profound words: "We should live and act with philotimo."

Secondly, considering St. Paisios' frequent repetition of the Jesus Prayer in its various forms "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me…on them…on us…" I recognized that while this icon was intended for Fr. Daniel, it would serve as a source of solace for his family, his community, and perhaps even a prayer intended for my own family. Thus, I opted to incorporate the prayer "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us." This prayer wraps the icon with a metal repoussé oklad. Like a robe or vestment, the oklad gives the piece of religious art a finished and protective quality, texture and dimension.

Thirdly, the icon features embedded images of St. Euphemia and St. Arsenios, significant figures in St. Paisios' life.

Fourth, the background scenes depict pivotal moments at the holy monastery of Mount Athos and his humble cell Panagouda. These settings are meaningful as they were the meeting places where my friend Fr. Daniel and others were blessed with the extraordinary opportunity and privilege to visit and commune with St. Paisios. Another poignant reminder of these sacred encounters and the profound impact of St. Paisios' spiritual presence.

Fifth, his robe and cardigan vest were based on the modest clothing he wore. Dangling from his left hand is his accessible prayer rope, an essential tool in his religious practice. Additionally, his wool-knitted cap, shaped in a calm beehive shape, is faithfully rendered. Each of these relic details was carefully chosen for inclusion, ensuring deepened meaning to the portrayal of St. Paisios.

Sixth, the Cross held in St. Paisios right hand is reminiscent of those typically depicted in iconography as "martyrs." Although he wasn't killed, he is revered as a martyr for his selfless act of offering his life for another's well-being. By beseeching God to afflict him with cancer or another ailment, instead of another person, he exemplified the ultimate sacrifice—laying down his life for others.

Seventh, another meaningful quote that resonated with Fr. Daniel adorns the scroll held in St. Paisios' left hand: "Kindness softens and opens up the heart as oil opens a rusty lock."

The icon was completed on Epiphany, Jan. 6, 2022. Following its final journey to Fr. Daniel, it was soon blessed and witnessed at his parish congregation, on Saint Paisios' name day July 12, 2022.

In the process of writing the translation of the book, Fr. Peter Heers, mentions how St. Paisios influenced him, "The life of the great elder is an entire catechism, a proof of the Apostolic Preaching, the Acts of the Apostles today! It is a grounding in Orthodoxy, giving birth to boldness in confessing the Faith, propelling the struggler to press harder against the old man and reach higher to the New Creation."

Fr. Peter continues, "The Lord sent this Life and my communication and communion with the disciples of the Saint as a gift from on high to help me to continue to struggle and go deeper. His Life has strengthened me in many ways and given me courage to stand and not doubt nor fear. Without the Saint's Life in my heart I would have been incomparably weaker and more exposed to the world

and its wiles.”

I hope everyone will have the chance to delve into the life of St. Paisios through this book and draw inspiration from this recent Saint. St. Paisios of Mount Athos. Just as I and many others have been enriched by his example, may we all strive to live and act with philotimo.

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