

29/11/2022

Yelena Popovic: My goal was to bring St Nectarios to the hearts of people. I felt his story could help them



“My goal was to bring St Nectarios to the hearts of people. I felt if I could do that, this particular story could help them”, said Yelena Popovic in an exclusive interview for Basilica.ro. “It’s a great thing to give hope.”

Yelena Popovic is the director and scriptwriter of the film “Man of God”, about the life of St Nectarios of Aegina. Fleeing the war in former Yugoslavia, she became an actress at Hollywood and discovered Orthodoxy in America.

The seeds of the project were sown while she briefly returned to Serbia after her father had passed away. It was then when she read a book about St Nectarios’ life.

A fervent research period on the saint’s turned into a script where some of the replies are St Nectarios’ words, as he wrote them in the 136 letters to the nuns whom he advised spiritually.

The movie was shot during the pandemic, by a company owned by Yelena Popovic and her husband, but she says St Nectarios was actually the producer of the film.

Last March, the movie was screened in 800 theaters from 46 states across the USA and there are requests for distribution in Australia and South America. It ranks first among the Amazon best-sellers in the Faith and Spirituality category.

The Romanian premiere is scheduled on Tuesday, November 29.

Basilica.ro: How has your film been received worldwide, and how have you promoted it? For instance, is there a market for religious films?

It's the first Orthodox film that was accepted in the Western world on that scale. The Western Diocese of the Catholic Church in San Francisco put my film as a recommendation for children among huge productions such as Belfast, Encanto, The Batman, Father Stu and Doctor Strange and the Multiverse of Madness. So, more people are going to see the film.

A Catholic girl posted on Facebook a 30-minute speech saying she was interested in Orthodoxy because she watched my film. In America many people are becoming Orthodox. This is a good time for such a movie.

That's how you promote our religion, not by saying "we are this or that".

Basilica.ro: Did you expect that? How do you explain it?

I didn't expect something like that. But I made it being a Serbian American living in the US. I knew how to make a film where I would appeal to the global audience. I wanted to make the film for everyone, whether they're atheists, or Buddhists - I didn't care. I think Orthodoxy has that beauty and that something very special. It's a best-kept secret in the West, waiting to be revealed.

Also, I said many times that I did not make a religious film. The film is religious, because it has a religious theme. It is about St Nectarios. But, when you have a subject like that, it is very important not to focus on religiosity and spirituality, because then it can become very fake.

I tried not to think so much about the spirituality, but about truthfulness, about the human side, about honesty. I wanted my actors to be very still and I wanted them to really feel the emotion. My goal was to bring St Nectarios to the hearts of people. I felt if I could do that, this particular story could help them.



I learned in drama school that truth was very important and that's what gave me confidence to work so well with actors. I had to go deep inside of myself and see what every scene had meant to me personally. So I had to bring myself in every frame of the movie, because that's the only way that the audience can truthfully feel something. It has to come from inside out. And this is the way I directed this.

I have received numerous calls from people, not only from Orthodox people, for people of different religions. And I will give you only one example. There was a journalist in France that wrote an article in a magazine. Her husband had passed away nine months before from a cancer. She said: After seeing your film, my desire for living has come back.

There are a lot of stories like this that this film is having that impact that what I originally wanted: to help those that suffer, people who maybe are confused about

the Church.

I think seeing this film will help them understand on a deeper level what it means to have that personal relationship with God, how we can live this life, and feel joy, regardless of all the unfortunate events that might take place and especially why would a man who was so holy suffer so much.



This film really deals with those questions. I'm not saying you're going to get a clear answer, but at least you would have a feeling of relief. It's a great thing to give hope to people.

Basilica.ro: Can you now see that the film's production had a spiritual influence on those who contributed to it?

According to my film photographer, there were some young women who played the nuns and who were secular in real life, they were not believers. After the film, they became Orthodox and started to go to church!

I talked to EWTN TV about a miracle that happened during my filming. It was on September 19, 2020, on the Commemoration day of the Miracle of Archangel Michael at Colossae (according to the unrevised calendar). I have always loved Archangel Michael, I named my youngest son with his name. On that day, it rained everywhere else, but on 500 square meters where we were there was not a single rain drop, so we could finish the movie.

Basilica.ro: Your film received assistance from Vatopaidi Monastery. Saint Nectarios himself founded a monastery on the island of Aegina. Why do you believe monastic life has remained so relevant throughout the ages?

Father Joseph of Vatopaidi, who has passed away, a saint, was the spiritual father of our Elder Ephraim from Vatopaidi. And father Joseph of Vatopaidi was the spiritual brother of Geronda Ephraim from Arizona, whom I was in contact with for 15 years and who gave me the blessing originally to make the film. Then you have St. Joseph the Hesychast, who was their spiritual father. I feel there's a connection there.



I know a lot of monks personally. And I've had wonderful spiritual conversations. Gheronda Paisius in the St. Anthony Monastery of Arizona is a spiritual father to many people who are not monks. He said Apocalypse will come when there'll be no more people who love God, nobody left to do good.

Well, for me, Apocalypse is going to be the day I leave this world, you know, and so I'm not I'm not focusing on that.

I feel that the monks, with their prayers, not only keep the church alive, but they keep this world alive. Their prayers are very powerful and they've helped me and I know they've helped many other people.

And I think monasticism is a very important part of Orthodoxy, of our Church. And it needs to remain that way. Orthodoxy is your relationship with God, but they're just guiding you to find that. Personally, I feel like I'm at home when I go to

monasteries. So that's me.

Geronda Ephraim from Vatopaidi was the most responsible for the making of this movie. Without him, without Holy Vatopaidi Monastery without St Maximus the Greek Institute, this film would not have been made. We did our creative part, but they found the means and believed in us. I'm forever grateful.

Basilica.ro: Are you visiting Romania for the first time? What did you get a glimpse of, and what is your impression of it?

I was very happy to hear that, from the airport, I was going to be taken to St Nectarios' monastery here, in Bucharest. It really pleased me to see how devoted and faithful people in Romania are. You can feel that when you walk into the church. People are very peaceful, with a lot of faith. It really moved me.

Basilica.ro: Did you know that Romanians revere St. Nectarios in high regard? What message does he have for the modern man?

St Nectarios is so much loved in Greece, Serbia, Romania and he has even had an effect on people of different faiths from the USA. They went out of their way to promote my film, even though they were not of our faith.

His message? Nowadays, we live in a world where many cry for justice and freedom. You want freedom? You want justice? You have to take the path that St Nectarios took.

You really want to be a free man and find a way out of the world which, according to Jesus's words, is a valley of tears? If you look around, there's a lot of pain and suffering.



On a social level, we can do a lot of things, but we cannot do it without Christ, without the Church. Man can never be happy if he doesn't have God in his heart.

I say follow your dreams. It says in the Psalms that God rejoices in the path of the man. God will help you with everything as long as you make Him your primary goal and allow him to do the work for you. It's a way of life.

St Nikolai Velimirovich would say there are people who go to church, light a big candle and then, for six days, they work against God. We don't want to be one of those.

My message is: I would not be alive today, I would not be mentally okay, I would be in a very bad state if I did not have the Church, if I did not take the Holy Communion, if I had not turned to Christ.



And this is what I personally can share with young people, with people that are lost.

Once you make that change, you will see that things will get better for you, that you will actually start feeling alive.

We can work on social progress, on psychological progress. But any progress that ends in death cannot be a progress.

St. Justin Popovich talked about Resurrected Christ, Who gives us eternal life. And that's the only thing that makes this life make sense.

Basilica.ro: What is your definition of spiritual beauty?

Spiritual beauty... First of all, true faith in God is true, unlimited freedom, the real freedom. In this world we can never be fully free. And I'm not only talking about the society, I'm talking about also our own psychology.

Our days do not depend on who I am, but on who tells me what. If somebody insults me, I'm going to have a bad day, if somebody tells me I'm great, I'm going to be very happy. That is not freedom, that is slavery to circumstances.

The closer we get to God, we practice becoming dispassionate towards insults, towards things that we're going to face almost every day of our lives.

When you purify yourself from inside, when you become very humble and develop this love for everybody, including for your enemies, then you truly become free.

And you gain this beauty, this spirit. That's spiritual beauty: regardless of outside circumstances, you feel inside joy and peace that are not of this world. And that's what Jesus left us. And that can be attained - with God's will.

True spiritual beauty comes from having Christ in your heart and, and cultivating (the fruits of the) Holy Spirit inside of you.



St Nectarios lived originally in Egypt, where he was very well respected by the Muslim community. At the time, they were considered lower class, but he would go and help them. There was this baker that asked him to pray for him, so he prayed and the man got up and walked. Then all the Muslim asked him to pray for them, but he would only do it with the permission of the Imam.

When people have spiritual beauty, it cannot be hidden, just like the light cannot be hidden, and they influence other people whether they're atheist, or Buddhist, Muslim, Jews, Christians. People can see that this person has spiritual beauty and they want to be around them.

Basilica.ro: What plans or future thoughts do you have? Can you reveal them? Are you thinking of a movie about another saint?

I would like to make a film of a very brave man, who was a criminal and a murderer at one point, but had so much repentance that he became a monk and a martyr for Christ: St. Moses the Ethiopian. I have an idea to do it in such a way that the contemporary world would relate to it.

When he gave me his blessing, Father Ephraim of Arizona told me: If it's God's will, it is going to happen. Let's see what happens!

Photo credit: Basilica.ro / Raluca Ene

basilica.ro