

ARCHIMANDRITE SYMEON

***MONASTERY OF SAINT GEORGE
MAVROVOUNI***



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The Saint's icon

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Archimandrite Symeon

THE HOLY MONASTERY OF SAINT GEORGE MAVROVOUNI

The beginning of this monastery's history is, for the time being, unknown. In *The History of the Greek Nation* it is referred to as a monastery of mid-byzantine years.

Saint Neophytos the Recluse (1134) in his speech on Saint Theosevios the Arsinoitis tells of a certain miracle of Saint Theosevios on a blind monk who made a vow to the saint to cure him and, in return, he would stay and serve in his church until the end of his life. The monk, though, does not keep his vow. After he stayed for a short while at the Saint's church, "he departed and left for the so called Mavrovounia and stayed in the church of Saint George the Great Martyr." There is the possibility that Saint Neophytos speaks of the monastery of Saint George Mavrovouni, which at that time would have been at its peak and renowned in all of Cyprus.¹

At the beginning of the 20th century, professor Hadjioannou in the collected folklore works with the title *Cyprus* mentions, among other things, the following: "The present state of the monastery confirms its past glory. The ruins of many buildings and their imprints are apparent. The columns without grooves, made of white marble, lay fallen here and there; two of these were actually re-used for support of the iconostasis inside the church."

There is evidence that a few of these columns were taken by villagers from Lysi, when they were constructing the women's quarters of the church of Panagia of Lysi. From this glorious past are preserved until today a very beautiful capital of a column, a marble upright slab, part of the old floor with small and colored geometric shapes and three very archaic columns without decorations that hold the roof in the old archondariki². The first column has the inscription "1728 May 20". In 1722, the monastery was renewed and the church took roughly its present shape. New icons were painted by the well-known

¹ The likelihood also exists that Saint Neophytos is referring to the church of Saint George of Nikoxilitis in Paphos.

² Visitors' hall. (Translator's note)

iconographer Ioannikios of the monastery of Saint Iraklidios. The iconostasis was gilded and the square parts on the iconostasis' tower are painted. The icon of Christ the *Grand Hierarch* is from this period, "property and expenses by monk Anthimos 1739".

In December 1735, the Russian traveler monk Vasilios Barsky visited the monastery and describes it, "A few days later I visited the small monastery of Saint George. This small monastery lies on the boundaries of the land belonging to the Archdiocese between small and exposed mountains within the valley in a smooth and pleasant place with healthy air and spring water. It is surrounded by many fruit-yielding trees, mainly olive trees and mulberry trees. The monks live from the goats and the silk. This monastery was built during the last years of the Turkish occupation. It has a few monks, two or three cells, a small but beautiful and well-equipped and decorated church, which has an arched roof, two entrances and a stone-paved floor."

Folklore tradition refers to there being ovens outside the monastery and that a great festival took place, greater than that of Larnaca's Saint George. There were so many chickens there that "the monks collected the eggs in large baskets." And that "when the chicken would hatch eggs, the women of the village of Troulli³ would promise a bird to Saint George, who is the doctor of chickens."

The monastery, after the massacres and the pillages of 1821, started to deteriorate and decline. A folklore tradition states that Koutsouk Mehmet "slew twelve monks".

On the 1st March 1854, the monastery was hired out to Charalambos Ioannou from Troulli for three years for three thousand piastres. One of the conditions of the agreement was that "the tenant is to light the oil-lamp of the Saint unceasingly and to invite a priest, twice a month, to perform the service of Holy Liturgy."

The great wealth of land the monastery had at its disposal is apparent from the rental fee. The large room with the three columns (archondariki) was used until the middle of the 20th century as an oil-mill. The now deceased, centenarian mother of father Anthony, a priest of the village of Troulli, had kept safe the information that she had met at the monastery a hieromonk from Athienou by the name of Trantas⁴ (she could not recall the first name), who had brought a few women here, most probably to start a women's monastery. The attempt failed. The women married in Athienou and the hieromonk returned there himself.

³ The village of Troulli is the nearest village to the monastery.

⁴ The hieromonk was called Panaretos and was a deacon to the then bishop of Kition. After being widowed he became a hieromonk priest. He served as an officiating priest in Panagia of Avdelleron.

A little before 1930, Hadjiantonis Spanos of Troulli, an amateur carpenter and a member of the church committee of Saint Mamas, a devoted Christian, as father Anthony remembers him, undertook the restoration of the old iconostasis by completing the missing parts with new wood and with a yet unpainted Crucifixion on the upper portion. He painted the new surfaces with an indigo color that was also used to paint carts!

The altar of today is his work. It consists of parts of the old one, which he made smaller, and square sections of the old iconostasis cut and placed upside down depending on their fit. The 'sky' canopy above the old altar, very large and heavy, iconographically illustrated, was left leaning on the southern wall of the church.

Gannes, an English governmental employee and an author, who served in Cyprus from 1926 to 1932, visited the church and encountered this jumble. Gannes characterizes the aforementioned carpenter as "an unspeakable carpenter" because, in his attempt to fix the iconostasis, he did so much damage that in one case he used a piece of the very beautiful 16th century icon of Christ to repair the iconostasis.

He also mentions a 16th century icon of Saint Nicolas with remnants of a gold background, an icon of the Forerunner, gift of Helen and her son in 1702, and an icon of the Theotokos, given in commemoration of the priest Gerasimos who died in 1782.

This was the situation of the church until the EOKA⁵ uprising. Around the year of 1957, English soldiers entering the church, probably either in retaliation or fearful in case the iconostasis was used as a cover for EOKA fighters, they literally destroyed it.

The church committee members of Saint Mama of the town of Troulli and others came to collect the broken iconostasis and they piled it up by the wall of the church. The icons were moved either to the chapel of Saint Marina or to the church of Saint Mama.

With the reoperation of the monastery, some icons and a church candelabrum were returned. An 1871 icon of Saint George was left here. The Saint appeared with no head, though, after a fire where the upper part of the icon was burnt. During these years, the condition inside the church seems somewhat dismal. A monastery from the then glorious Byzantine age appeared deserted, with a small church without an iconostasis and icons, and with the icon of Saint George, headless!

In the winter of 1963, the southern wall of the church fell taking with it the whole roof, apart from the hollow of the sanctuary. Immediately within the next year, the church was rebuilt as it was before. The builder is Christakis

⁵ The uprising of the Cypriots against the British rule during the years 1955-59. (TN)

Artemi from Arsos. Inside, there was still no iconostasis. Among the few icons that remained was the icon of Saint George with his face burnt.

Some pilgrims tell of a soldier without a head wandering around. The very same woman that stated the event said that in place of the head there was something like fog and that the face could not be made out. Others mentioned that they also heard a voice that told them, "Until when will you have me in this state?"

An inhabitant of Leivadia told me with emotion that in the days of 1974 he was a soldier on the mountain opposite and they saw fire in the area of the sanctuary that was emerging from the Saint's church.

The monastery's wealth of property amounted to 272 acres and was given to the government by Archbishop Makarios in return for the wages of the rural priests, apart from the two and a half acres that contained the monastery. Recently, the government has given back to the monastery two areas of property that neighbor it.

This property was rented to the farmers of the neighboring village of Troulli. For this reason, the district committee undertook several embellishment measures in the area, such as the landfilling and fencing of the monastery with supporting walls to the East, tree planting, mainly pine trees and cypresses, water canals and so on. By the care of the village priest, a new iconostasis and icons were made.

The monastery of Mavrovouni was unknown for us, just as it was for the most people of Cyprus. We had also come earlier here but did not pay much attention. The place resembled more a ruined chapel rather than a monastery. Our decision to come here was made in December 1993. Nothing incidental exists in the spiritual journey of people. Likewise, we came here coincidentally for another reason that day. Grace rises from a place but you cannot always grasp it. That day, the history and the oldness of the place and the prayers of the so many resting fathers "the here devout sleepers in asceticism greatly glowing" spoke within us.

The area with the arid mountains transports you to Mount Sinai or to Palestine, to the places where the *Gerontikon* was written and monasticism began. It was December 1993. All was green apart from the tops of the mountains.

In the whole area, there was strong old-testament poetic feel. The river with the cane reeds, the copse of palm trees, the asceticism and wilderness of the place. "[There] were twelve wells of water, and threescore and ten palm trees"⁶ [Exodus 15, 27]. "In the habitation of dragons, where each lay, shall be grass with reeds and rushes" [Isaiah 35, 7]. "[The desert] shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice even with joy and singing" [Isaiah 35, 2].

⁶ Bible excerpts are based on the King James Version.

So that day, after years of attempts in the discovery of a suitable place, the place and the answer were given to us: "We shall come here". "The mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands" [Isaiah 55, 12].

We mentioned this decision of ours to the Bishop of Kition. This monastery, together with the two and a half acres of land that surround it, belongs to the Holy Archdiocese. The Archbishop with his official document granted the Bishop of Kition the right of use and spiritual ownership of the monastery. The administrative committee of the monastery of Saint George Kontos of Larnaca, where we served, with the blessing of the Bishop of Kition Chrysostomos approved a sizeable amount for the economic support of the whole project. The economic and moral contribution of the village of Troulli was also very important.

The willingness of the Cypriot people to contribute towards the whole project was touching and proved that the standards of the people, as far as monasticism is concerned, have not been blunted but are preserved untouched and intact as they have been cultivated through the centuries by our mother the Orthodox Church. Saint George was present in every work and every problem that surfaced.

The place of the monastery is divided in two parts. The first consists of the old church with the additional part of the narthex, the archondariki, the office and the dining room, as well as the bookshop. The second part, off bounds to lay people, consists of the cells of the monks, the library and the guest rooms. It faithfully followed the folk architecture of Cypriot monasteries of the 17th and the 18th centuries that has a simple and humble character which is proper to the spirit of monasticism. In less than a period of two years all this was ready. The large *efestios*⁷ icon of Saint George was kept behind the iconostasis of Saint Mama of Troulli. It consists of pieces of wood from a tree called 'aoratos'⁸ (juniper) in Cyprus which are connected between them with two vertical beams. The surface of the painting had fallen away almost entirely. Among the few pieces that were left, the name of the Saint "Mavrovouniotis"⁹ could be made out. The working of the painting with the heavy brush strokes seems to be the work of Paul the priest-iconographer, a known iconographer of the mid-17th century. The few remaining pieces of the icon were sufficient so that the drawing and the repainting could be re-done exactly along the lines of the old one.

The silver cover was made in Athens by the famous silversmith Constantinos Kyrkos, who acted on a sketch suggested by us. This icon, along

⁷ The church's main celebrated icon. The word translates as 'household' in English.

⁸ 'Aoratos' in Greek means 'invisible'. The particular tree is given this name in Cyprus because someone can hide behind it and not be seen due to its dense foliage.

⁹ 'Of the Mavrovounia (black mountains).'

with all the other old icons, was transferred to the monastery on Great Saturday. A new iconostasis was made, plain and unadorned, which, together with the icons made in the years of the Turkish occupation, creates a contrite atmosphere.

At the bottom of the icons there is an epigraph:

“THIS ICON OF SAINT GEORGE OF MAVROVOUNI WAS WROUGHT IN SILVER IN THE CITY OF ATHENS BY THE BISHOP OF KITION CHRYSOSTOMOS I.

AT THE EXPENSE OF EVELTHON, A PRIEST FROM PARALIMNI, AND HIS WIFE ANDRIANI IN MEMORY OF THEIR SON CHRISTOFOROS¹⁰ IN DECEMBER 1995.”

The other epigraph in verse was written by the ever-memorable philologist Theodosios Nicolaou:

“HAVING LEFT THE MONASTERY OF GEORGE KONTOS, HERE THEY DOCK ASCETIC FATHERS, ICONOGRAPHER ARCHIMANDRITE SYMEON, NEOPHYTOS AND DEACON NECTARIOS, IN THE HOLY QUARTERS OF AN INKY MOUNTAIN FINDING DIRECTLY PROTECTOR GEORGIOS”.

When I visited father Porphyrios many years ago, he asked me where I lived. I told him, “Saint George Kontos of Larnaca.” “Let me see now, this place,” he said and began describing a place totally different to the one of Saint George Kontos of Larnaca. He spoke to me of soldiers and mountains; I was particularly confused by the large amount of water that he saw flowing like a river. It seems that the Elder was perceiving the future and was describing Mavrovouni instead of Larnaca.

We have said earlier that the presence of the Saint in this entire project of the rebuilding of the monastery was strong. Father Neophytos (now bishop of Morphou) who was supervising during the whole project can mention much, I mention but three.

The large door of the monastery’s entrance, before being put into place, was leaning against the wall of the church and the carpenter was preparing to place on top of the iconostasis the Crucifixion and the *lipitera*¹¹. The large door slipped and fell with great force on the icon of Saint John the Theologian (*lipitero*), an old and thin piece of wood, and, while someone would have

¹⁰ Christoforos was a spiritual child of the Elder that died unexpectedly while studying medicine at the Medical School of Thessalonica in 1995.

¹¹ Panagia and Saint John the Theologian mourning at either side of the cross. The word ‘lipitero’ (in plural ‘lipitera’) means ‘sad’ in Greek.

expected the icon to be smashed into pieces, it did not have a single sign of a scratch. The carpenter astounded would tell of the event for days.

While the monastery was still being built, one of the people that regularly came and helped started out one afternoon to come to the monastery to worship. That day, out of season, it rained and instead of going by the normal road and then turning with his car, the blessed child thought, as a shortcut, to turn through the field and the car got stuck in the mud. Despite his attempts and the changing of gears, the car would not move from the mud. Hopeless, he opened the door and got out. There was no one around. He thought of calling on Saint George for help. He made a short prayer and, as soon as he entered, the car got unstuck from the mud and he arrived at the monastery. He went in the church and knelt before the large icon of the Saint to thank him when he heard outside the trotting of a horse as if some rider was galloping in the yard. He got up and looked outside; there was no one. He felt a shudder and was moved. He was at the same time frightened for, despite his unworthiness, he felt intensely the presence of the Saint.

One Sunday, when the monastery had served liturgy, a woman from the village of Avgorou came and told us that she did not know about the existence of this monastery. One night, Saint George came to her in her sleep and explained to her where his monastery is, that it is after the village of Kellia and that it has three monks, and prompted her to visit it.

Exactly on the day of Easter, 14th April 1996, after we had served the liturgy of the Resurrection in the monastery of Saint George Kontos, where we served for many years, we departed and came to the monastery of Mavrovouni. In the afternoon, the first service was served. Vespers of Love was served in the presence of many priests and faithful people. The foreseeing of Elder Iakovos Tsalikis to a brother of the monastery was distinctive, "At the place where you will go now, there is nothing. There was a monastery there once that died and you will bring it back to life; a lot of people will come and find rest."

Elder Paisios prompted the above brother to become a monk in Cyprus, "There is one where you will go, you will become two. Another one will come and you will become three. You three will go somewhere and make a spiritual base. These bases will expel the other bases."¹² The problem of Cyprus is spiritual, not political, and there is need for spiritual resistances.

Just before the Elder died, the aforementioned brother mentioned to him that the work for the renovation of the monastery had begun. So great was the Elder's joy that he blessed him with both hands and drew on a stone on the floor the sketch of how the monastery should be with its two courtyards, thus so that it would both benefit the people and be peaceful the monks.

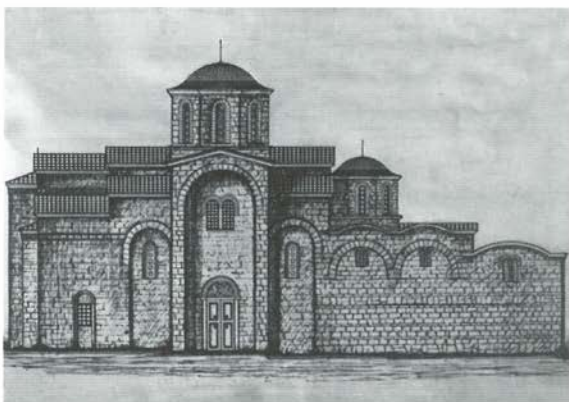
¹² The British and Turkish bases on the island.

An important event after two years in the running of the monastery was the selection and ordination to Bishop of Morphou of a brother of the monastery, Archimandrite Neophytos Masouras on 13th September 1998.

From the day of Easter 1996, the Holy Monastery of Mavrovouni continues its course. Today the brotherhood consists of five monks. Every day, the Holy Liturgy is served together with the rest of the holy services. The coming of people, especially of the younger generation, to the services and the Holy Liturgy is moving. Due to the large amount of people and the smallness of the church, the erection of a new church has been decided, with monastic style and with double the capacity of the existing one. The fathers of the monastery have planted hundreds of trees, especially palm and olive trees, so that the monastery appears as an oasis of hope and life within the arid surroundings that encompass it.

At the present time, the foundations of the new church have been completed. In the foundations there can be found a smaller underground church dedicated to the Holy Fathers of the monastery of Optina in Russia. The age in which these fathers lived, with western influences growing in Russia, and the way the fathers met and overcame these difficulties have a lot to teach us today in Cyprus where we are dealing with similar problems.

Another important recent event for the monastery was the ordaining to Metropolitan of Arsinoe of Archimandrite Nectarios, a second brother of the monastery, on 14th September 2008.



The cross section of the monastery's future church

A CONVERSATION WITH THE ELDER OF THE HOLY MONASTERY OF SAINT GEORGE ARCHIMANDRITE SYMEON¹³

– *Elder, as is well known, in every Holy Service that takes place here or even at a simple vespers a lot of young people come. How do you explain this?*

– It is a fact that at the Divine Liturgy on Sundays but also at a simple daily vespers a lot of young people come. The modern way of life has lead people to dead ends. Stress and fatigue are the outcome of this way of life. The children, during the vespers in the contrite atmosphere of the church and the peace of the monastery, feel their soul rest and gain strength for the next day. There are instances when, in the morning before they go to work, they come by the church first, watch part of the service and depart. Beyond this spiritual rest that the children seek, there is also a more general thirst for God. I sometimes say to the children that the monastery is the embrace of God. Of course, God's embrace is far greater than a monastery; I just say it like that because at that moment they feel it better. You should not feel God generally and vaguely, but specifically; as tangible as it can get and like a friend. It is this God that our Church offers with "[t]ake, eat [...] this is my body" and "[d]rink ye all of it".

– *What constitutes the day of a monk?*

– The monks wake up very early. At our monastery waking up is at four o' clock. At Stavrovouni, for example, waking up is at two o' clock. An hour of prayer follows in the cell. The small bedroom where a monk lives is called a cell; only the essentials are kept there. A monk does not possess anything, and of course, neither any money. The prayer of a monk is done with the prayer rope and it consists of the phrase "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me". This prayer is called "the prayer of the mind". The monk repeats it many times until he manages to pass it into his heart to bring him joy and sweetness. Of course, monks say other prayers as well and make many prostrations. After the hour of prayer, the monks go down to the church for the service. Usually, the Divine Liturgy is held every day. Afterwards, there is breakfast and, following, each monk performs his service, that is, his manual labor. Some paint icons, some are in the garden, some in the kitchen and so on. At midday, the monks, after they hear the bell, come to the refectory for lunch. During lunch, someone reads from a patristic book the Saint of the day's life. After lunch and the thanksgiving prayer, there is rest. In the afternoon, vespers is held and then there is dinner that is simple, not cooked. Then follow the evening prayers in the church and, after that, each monk goes to his cell to read and to

¹³ Published in the magazine of the Pancyprrian Lyceum of Larnaca in 2000.

pray until the time of sleep. As hard as a monk's life and the monastic program appear to be, when done with obedience and humility, they bring great rest to the soul. While the world adds daily new needs to life, the monk takes away and becomes light and rises easier to God.

– *Elder, Saint George is the protector of this monastery. In these four years that the monastery is operating, have any miracles been observed?*

– There have been some miracles in the way that people perceive miracles, but I do not want to speak of them. The fact that this monastery was set up in such a short time is a miracle. I pray to Saint George not to make such striking miracles, the kind people want, because in the end we would be a great shrine and the peace and the simplicity there is now would be gone. The Saint should do miracles that are not visible. Is it not a miracle the fact that someone repents for his sinful life, becomes a new person and connects with the church? We see a lot of these miracles, especially among young people. Is it not a miracle to see a young person that works in the world stay fasted for three days at the beginning of Lent and do it with such joy and eagerness so that he can receive the Holy Communion the day after? A miracle not for the three days he fasted, but for the change, the throb and the joy that this child has found in the church.

– *What would you advise young people on matters of prayer and confession?*

– I would advise the young people to devote a little time a day, even a quarter of or half an hour, for themselves. And this is better in the morning when the mind is clear and rested. They should devote this time to prayer. To talk to God like their friend. And this is how it is indeed; God is our friend and our father. If this is done systematically, we are already on line with God; we will say a lot and he will say himself a lot. He will say everything inside of us, inside our heart. What is also good is the contact with a spiritual father, not just for the matter of sin, but for the teaching of the spiritual life as well, the means and the way that will take us closer to God.

– *What is the role of television in our lives?*

– Television is something that has come into the lives of people today. The problem with television is that it consumes a lot of time from everyone and offers little. I realize that there is a lot of loneliness today and no communication, not even inside a house. Television allows you to escape from the house, to travel here and there, but in the end takes you nowhere. You are still there. We, the older generation, reminisce the years when there was no television and we would sit and listen to stories from our grandparents, stories

that were true, from their own lives. This connected people with each other. It connected the parents with their children. Now, everyone keeps isolating themselves more and more. Love is lost and the soul becomes cold. It is this lack of love, this void that children seek to fill with dangerous ways.

– *What do you believe is the best way to bring the young people to the church?*

– The church does not have to panic with the rapid developments in the lives of people, nor does it have to come up with ways to hold things together. The church should remain and serve conscientiously the tradition of the Orthodox faith. Whatever is foreign to this tradition should be removed gradually. We want churches that express the spirit of the Orthodox theology, that combine majesty with simplicity and modesty. We want priests who inspire people with their character and conduct. The world and the young people will sooner or later come to or at least pass by the Church. But what will they face when they do come? When a child meets a priest, he does not expect him to teach him football; that is what a P.E. teacher does. Children expect from us inspiration, inspiration that will lead them eventually to God. And it is the saints that inspire because inspiration, the breath of the Holy Spirit, has permeated their existence. As long as we partake in the lives of the Saints, we partake in the life and the breath of the Holy Spirit and we can inspire people. And this is neither that simple nor that easy.



The monastery before the renovation.



A capital from the Byzantine era temple.



The copse with the old palm trees.



The gate of the monastery.



Chapel of Saint Neomartyr George the Cypriot and Saint Marina.



Underground chapel of the Saint Fathers of Optina.



Cave of Saint Maria of Egypt.



First day at the monastery. Pascha 1996. The Vespers of Love.



The brother of the monastery Archimandrite Neophytos is ordained Metropolitan of Morphou
13.9.1998



The visit of the ever-memorable Patriarch Petros, personal friend of the monastery's Elder.
27.5.1999



The visit of the ever-memorable Archbishop of Cyprus Chrysostomos. 11.4.2003



The reliquary of Saint George.



The epitaph of the monastery.



The Elder painting icons.



The icon of the Saint without the silver cover.
Dimensions 116 X 87 cm.



A litany for the drought.



Russian pilgrims.



Tonsure of a monk.



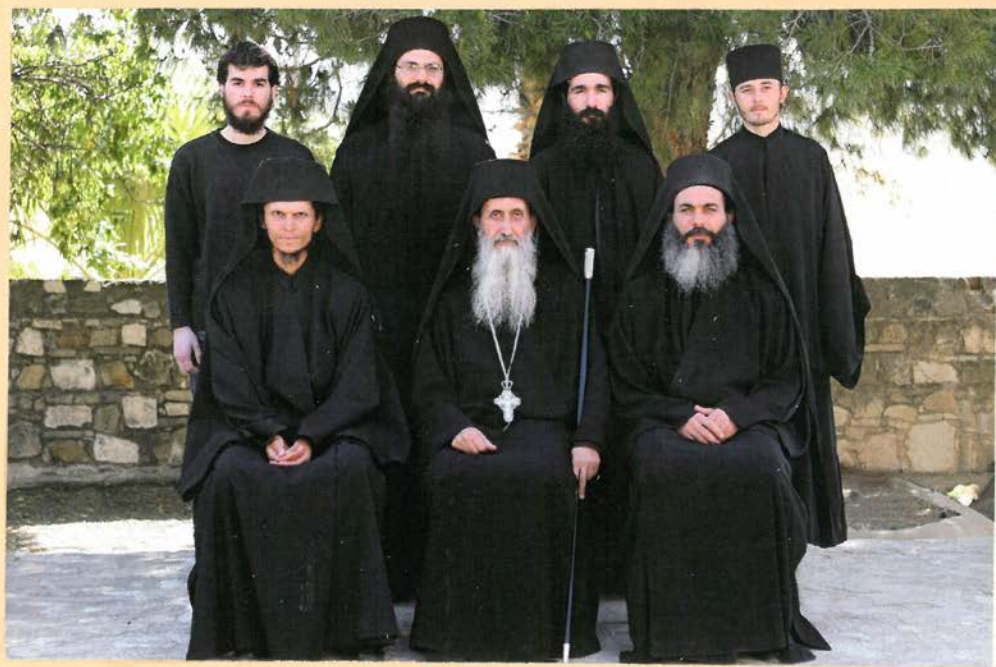
Tonsure of a reader.



The brother of the monastery Archimandrite Nectarios is ordained Assistant Bishop of Arsinoe.

14.9.2008





The current brotherhood of the monastery.