

NEW SAINT CANONIZED: FATHER DIMITRI GAGASTATHIS 1902-1975

St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians instructed: *“Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ”*. (1 Corinthians 11:1) Following his command, we honor and venerate the holy men and women who have lived throughout the centuries as faithful disciples of Jesus. They are models for us of what it means to follow Christ. They show us how it is possible to live out and put into practice the way of Christ.

It is difficult at times to find role models to emulate since most of our canonized saints were martyrs who died for Christ, confessors who suffered for Christ, missionaries to pagan lands or monks and nuns. Where can I find someone more like me to imitate? Where are the saints who were married men and women leading a life much like mine? The canonization this past year of St. Olga of Kwethluk, Alaska gave me one such example. She was a wife, a mother, a grandmother, the wife of a priest and she died recently in 1979. Now I have a new model of holiness to model: a husband, a father of nine daughters, a simple parish priest. Father Dimitri Gagastathis, who fell asleep in the Lord in 1975, was recently glorified as a saint by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople.

His Life

Father Dimtri Gagastathis, a simple, village, parish priest, was born on August 1, 1902 in the village of Platanos to poor parents. His education ended at grade school since his parents were too poor to enable him to continue. His life was centered on the village church where he served his priest as an altar server and would often imitate his priest by “playing church” at home. Leaving school in 1917 he became a shepherd and while watching the flock on the hills around the village passed the time reading the lives of the Saints and *“whatever Christian book I happened to find”*. He was drafted into the Greek army in 1921 and was discharged in 1924. In February, 1928 he married a girl from his village, Elizabeth Koutsimpiris, and eventually they were blessed with nine daughters. He continued his education at a seminary and in 1931 was ordained as a priest and assigned to serve in the church of his home village the Church of the Archangels in Platanos.

Persecution

The peaceful village life of Platanos ended with a Communist insurgency that began during World War II and intensified in 1946 with the eruption of the Greek Civil War. This Communist-led uprising attempted to overthrow the established government of the Kingdom of Greece and impose Communism. Soon the Communists arrived in Platanos and demanded the loyalty of the villagers. As the village priest, as man in authority with some degree of influence, he was targeted by the Communists to gain his cooperation. He wrote:

“The (Communist) guerillas called me in for interrogation three times. Each time they wanted me to go along with them and keep quiet, just as the other priests in our district had done. Me? Deny my Christ? Never! On the contrary, I stood firm and prayed to the Archangels to continue helping me in my duty. I did not sign the declaration of cooperation they wanted.

‘I will die doing my duty’, I told them.”

The Communists sentenced Father Dimitri to be executed and arrived to take him away. On the way, he asked to be allowed ten minutes alone in his parish church to pray and prepare himself. He later wrote:

"I entered the temple, fell on my knees in front of the iconostasis and prayed to the Archangels from the depth of my soul...I then began a service of supplication. As soon as I uttered 'Blessed is our God...' I heard a loud crash coming from the iconostasis and the icon of the Archangels shook as if to tell me, 'Do not be afraid. We are with you!'I took courage and went outside. To my surprise, I no longer saw the Communist guerilla escorts waiting for me."

The attacks upon the village priest did not end but continued throughout the time of the Communist uprising and civil war. Each time he was delivered from death by prayer and the help of kind people who hid him in the forests. Some of his brother priests, however, turned against him and supported the Communists for fear for their own lives. A priest in a neighboring village taunted him:

*"Do you see all the priests around you? They are with us!
We have a bishop and great scientists on our side too. Do you, insignificant little man,
still think that you alone will do any good?"*

Even his wife, Presvytera Elizabeth, tried to convince him to remain quiet, compromise, and not bring danger to himself and their family by opposing the Communists. Father Dimitri stood firm and recognized the evil that Communism would bring to Greece if they were allowed to prevail. But as he ran from barns to mountain to avoid capture by the Communists, he had moments of doubt and despair:

"I went to hide on the mountain again. I cannot forget one particular Sunday morning. As I heard the sound of bells ringing from the surrounding villages, I crossed myself and then pondered, 'What has befallen me? Will God ever make me worthy again to assume my former position? Every priest in the Diocese is serving Liturgy today while I am out here hiding in the 'caves and holes of the earth' (Hebrews 11:38), praying in tears, alone with just the little birds to keep me company during the day and the wild animals that God keeps from devouring me at night."

Despite the years of persecution and attempts to kill him, Father Dimitri showed kindness to the Communist soldiers whenever he met them and even spared one who was scheduled for execution by the forces loyal to the Greek government.

*One morning, a patrol by nationalist soldiers in the village led to the capture of four Communist guerillas. As they were being prepared for execution, one of the guerilla prisoners (the one who had personally signed for my execution), requested to visit my house... He entreated my help in the wake of his impending execution. What could I do?
I got up from the table and prayed to God to help me find a way to rescue him.*

The Communist guerilla, who previously sought to execute Father Dimtri, was saved from his own execution by the prayers and intervention of Father Dimitri.

Pastoral Ministry

With the defeat of the Communists, peace returned to the village and Father Dimtri resumed his pastoral ministry. He prayed endlessly for his village parishoners to remain close to the Lord and to be saved. He taught them, not simply by his words and sermons but by his life. He organized bus excursions for the children of his parish *“in order to benefit their souls and draw them away from movies and other such kinds of distractions”*. His joy was to serve the holy altar and to pray there before the Lord. Many years during the Nativity Fast he would undertake to serve 40 Divine Liturgies, arriving at the church at 1:30 in the morning, beginning Liturgy at 3:00. He described a typical day:

“In finished the service at 6:00 in the morning and went home to rest for a while. At home, I took my medication, ate some bread, and then went to work in the field – a forty-five minute walk from the house. I prayed the whole time, working until 3:30 in the afternoon, reciting the hymn “O Rejoice Theotokos, Lady full of grace...”

Another typical day:

“One day, I was out working in the field all day long, carrying water to an irrigation barrel from which an attached hose distributed water into the field. Every time I emptied water into the barrel I prayed, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me!” In the evening, I prayed the Compline service there in the field and chanted various hymns afterward.”

Because of Father Dimtri’s faithfulness to the Lord and fervent prayers he was blessed with numerous visions and visitations from the Lord and His holy Saints. The Holy Theotokos appeared to him three times in a dream in 1949 commanding him to rebuild a nearby church. In 1956 a severe storm threatened severe damage to his village but by his prayers, the storm was diverted. In 1969 while preparing to serve the Divine Liturgy at a monastery in Meteora, the holy altar began to exude a sweet fragrance and soon the entire chapel was filled with the same heavenly fragrance.

Marital Conflict

His pastoral ministry and his family life were not always peaceful and harmonious. He described an incident in which some friends who were not pious Orthodox Christians, visited his wife. They challenged Presvytera Elizabeth: *“Why should your girls stay behind the times when it comes to the cinema and contemporary fashion? They should change their lifestyle”*. When Father Dimitri arrived home she flew into a rage against him, accusing him of *“keeping the girls behind the times”*, and *“planning for them all to become nuns”*. Father Dimtri remembered *“She even spat on me and tried to hit me, but – glory to God – I was granted such patience that I was able to hold my tongue without being disturbed.”* When their youngest daughter did leave home in 1972 to join a monastery, she again flew into a rage and berated him for hours. His wife eventually came to realize that her reaction was a temptation from the Devil. He recalled:

*I decided to put on the stole and pray the supplication prayer to the Archangels.
I entreated them to strike down Satan – he who troubles Presvytera and me through her, and – a
great wonder! – when I returned home, Presvytera came over and asked forgiveness
of me for all the things she had said that evening.*

Presvytera Elizabeth remained devoted to her husband till the end of his life. During his final illness, she never left his side and prayed aloud the daily cycle of services at his bedside.

Final Days

Father Dimitri was diagnosed with colon cancer in 1969 and in 1973 it was found to have spread to his liver – a terminal prognosis. Yet even in the hospital he continued his daily prayers, standing next to his bed each evening for over an hour to pray the service of Compline. He remained cheerful and welcomed all who came to him. His doctor recorded:

“No matter how tired he was, he would never turn away anyone who came to see him. He always had a kind word and a piece of advice for everyone. He would also share, while tears flowed from his eyes, the stories surrounding the miracles of his life experience, each time giving glory to God and repeating, ‘Our Faith is alive, my children, our religion is alive’.”

He peacefully fell asleep in the Lord, at home, on January 29, 1975 and was buried behind his beloved parish church of the Archangels in Platanos. He was canonized as a saint by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople with the Holy Synod of Bishops in July, 2025. He is remembered each year on his feastday: January 16 (*Gregorian Calendar*) or January 29 (*Julian Calendar*).

A Model for Priests

The life of this married priest and father of nine children is a model for all priests to emulate. The center of his life was prayer and the holy services of the Church. Whatever problem or temptation he faced, he first turned to the Lord and His Saints for help and his entreaties were often rewarded in miraculous ways. He was not successful according to the world’s standards. He never served a glittering Cathedral in Athens, never attracted thousands to his parish church. He remained a faithful parish priest serving his people in the same church for nearly fifty years.

He is also a model for priests in his refusal to “go with the flow” or “go along to get along”. When threatened with death he refused to compromise the faith by supporting the Communists. When everyone turned against him, even his own wife and fellow priests, he remained faithful to the truth.

There is a temptation for priests today to remain quiet and passive in the face of sin and evil. The challenge is to “go along to get along”, say nothing, keep everyone happy. Admit anyone to Holy Communion without question: men and women living in open, unrepentant sin: unmarried couples living together...others living in same sex relationships. The Church must have open arms and welcome all. We are a hospital for sinners, a place for healing but healing is impossible unless each of us recognizes our sickness and desire change and healing. This was the complaint of the Prophet Isaiah against the leaders of the people of Israel. He accused them of being ineffective as the watchmen over the people. He called them: *“dumb dogs, unable to bark; dozing on a bed, loving to*

sleep". (Isaiah 56:10) Through the prayers of St. Dimtri Gagastathis may we be priests of prayer. May we too recognize our need for repentance and healing of our sinful passions. By his prayers may we also be faithful in proclaiming, with love and compassion, the truth and leading all to repentance and healing.

-Father Edward Pehanich