

Hardest of the Hardcore

(There have been people throughout history and across the world who have sustained themselves by God alone, having lived for years with neither food, shelter, nor clothing. We are far from the experience of such ascetics; however, stories of them reach us from time to time. The following account is a true story about an ascetic who lived alone in the forests of Romania until the 1950's)

In the summer of 1945, I took my staff and went over the Mountain to Sihastria Monastery. I wanted to confess to Father Cleopas. When I crossed the ridge of the Mountain and had arrives at Sihastria Valley, at the edge of the clearing called 'Trapeza' there appeared before me the calm and holy face of an unknown hesychast. He was rather short of stature, with his head uncovered, dressed in a kind of long ryassa of wool, barefoot, and belted with a rope of hemp. He has neither a staff nor a bag, and in his hands he carried a prayer rope made by him from the hips of wild roses. He seemed to be waiting for me. When he saw me, he blessed me with both hands and said to me by name: "Father Theodulus, you're going to Sihastria, to Father Cleopas? How many times have I also gone to Sihastria Monastery and stood in Church during the service, but no one saw me! I know that your holiness wishes to leave Agapia and go to Sihastria, but you shouldn't go. Stay at Agapia Monastery and do your obedience there, since God did not send you to Agapia in vain. There is the salvation of your holiness!"



When I saw that he spoke to me by name and also knew my thoughts, a kind of fear and astonishment at first overwhelmed me, so that I was unable even to speak, especially because I didn't know then who he was. But his words entered into my heart and filled me with great spiritual joy, such as I had never felt before. Then, taking courage, I asked him: "What is your name, Reverend Father, and how long have you lived in asceticism in these parts?" "I am called John," he answered me, "and I am from the Tighina region. I was Vicar Bishop in my youth. But, loving silence and prayer more, I left this high office, and hearing of the hermitages of Oltenia, in 1915 I came as a novice brother to Crasna Skete in Gorj County. The Abbot had me take care of the cattle of the skete. After some years he said to me: "Brother John, prepare yourself, because tonight we will make you a monk!" He wasn't acquainted with my past life. Then I left everything and departed that night for the desert in

the depths of the forest. Then hearing about the hesycasts in Maldavia, in 1920 I withdrew for good to the Sihla Mountains."

After a short silence, the holy hesychast John added: "Father Theodulus, please bring me a packet of writing paper and a kilogram of ink." "But what would you do with them, your holiness?" The good ascetic, however, pointing his hand to the branches of the fir trees said to me: "I only need nibs, for look how many pens God has given me!" "Where, exactly, and when should I bring you paper?" I asked him. "Don't worry about that," he answered, "the Lord takes care of everything!" "Your holiness, do you wish me to bring you also some dried bread or some other food?" "I don't need anything, since, by the mercy of God, I have everything I need!" Then, kissing his hand, I said to him: "Bless me your holiness!" "May the Lord bless you, and forgive me!"

Therefore, when he had blessed me with both hands, I descended to the valley towards Sihastria, and he stood a moment leaning against a fir tree.. Then he disappeared like a deer into the depths of the forest and I say him no longer. An unspeakable joy rested in my soul. How many things would I not have liked to ask this great hesychast, but he didn't want to disclose to me anything about his spiritual asceticism in the Sihla Mountains, nor even the place where he had his cave or earthen hut."

After a month I took the knapsack on my back, and a staff, and went over the mountain towards Sihastria. I had business with Father Cleopas. On the road I prayed to meet the holy hesychast John so that I could give him the paper and ink. I also brought with me some dried bread for food. Who knows what he had to write! Perhaps some secret spiritual teachings; perhaps counsels about the Jesus Prayer, which he had acquired in his youth; perhaps some divine revelations; or perhaps about his own life.

When I reached Trapeza clearing, the holy hesychast John immediately appeared before me without my observing from which direction he had come. His face was white, luminous, and radiated a heavenly joy alien to ordinary men; and his heart overflowed with great peace and spiritual quiet. His body was covered by the same coarse clothing of wool, knit by his own hands. In his left hand he held a prayer rope of rose hips, and he always held his right hand on his chest as for prayer.

After I had kissed his hand and made a prostration to him, the holy John blessed me with both hands and kissed me on the forehead, and said to me: "Father Theodulus are you going to Sihastria? It is better for you to return to Agapia, since Father Cleopas, the abbot of Sihastria, is absent today. He was called to Neamt Monastery." "Your holiness," I said to him with emotion, "I brought you paper and ink. Here are also some nibs!" "Thank you Father Theodulus. I knew you would find them!" The he placed then in the knapsack which he had on his back. "I also brought you some food: bread, fruit, and a little wine." "May God reward your love, Father Theodulus, but I don't need anything, God takes care of me."

I insisted in vain that he take something. He wouldn't even look in the basket to see what I had brought him. But so as not to sadden me, the good soldier of Christ gave me this spiritual word:

"Father Theodulus, fasting is great profit for a monk. You should know that there are seven kinds of food for men, that is to say, seven degrees of fasting"

"A: Carnivores, who always eat meat. These are in the lowest degree of fasting, even if they sometimes restrain themselves from food. They are never able to advance in prayer.

"B: Lacto-vegetarians, who never eat meat, but only milk, cheese, eggs and all kinds of boiled vegetables. These are in the second degree of fasting, which is kept by Monks in coenobitic Monasteries and, very rarely, by laymen.

"C: Vegetarians, who eat only vegetables and boiled or raw legumes. This arrangement forms the third degree of fasting, and the most zealous monks of the common life keep it.

"D: Fruit-Eaters, who eat bread and uncooked fruits once a day, without otherwise ever tasting food. He who attains this degree of fasting is able to master his body and thoughts without difficulty and can advance rapidly on the path of prayer.

"E: Cereal-Eaters, comprise the fifth degree of fasting. To this degree belong monks especially hesycasts and desert-dwellers who eat once a day only black bread, cereals, and soaked grains of wheat, corn, millet, lentils, beans, peas, etc.

"F: Dry Food, is the sixth degree of monastic fasting, which is usually attained only by the most zealous desert dwellers. Those who live in this harsh asceticism eat only dried bread soaked in water, with salt or a little vinegar, once a day and by measure. This is how the hesycasts of the Nile valley lived.

"G: Divine Food or manna, is the last and highest degree of monastic fasting, which is attained by very few ascetics after prolonged asceticism, being strengthened by the grace of the Holy Spirit. These are satisfied with the Most Pure Mysteries alone, that is, with the Body and Blood of Christ, which they receive only once or twice a week, without tasting anything else but water only. After difficult temptations and asceticism, and by the Grace of God, I have come to be satisfied with the Most Pure Mysteries alone, and no longer feel hunger, or have need of bread or vegetables'



"Behold, Fathers, to what measure of spiritual asceticism holy John had arrived. Then I asked him: 'Your holiness, there in the forest where you live, aren't you cold in winter?' 'Father Theodulus I am a citizen of the Carpathian Mountains, and the Lord takes care of me; for

wherever he has found me, I have never lacked anything. I feel neither the cold of winter, nor the intense heat of the sun, nor hunger, nor thirst, nor any other earthly need!" "Your holiness, I greatly wish to withdraw to Sihastria Monastery to be near monks! I would have more quiet there and time for prayer." He answered me, "If you were order by the metropolia to go to Agapia, be obedient since you were sent there by the will and command of God!"

"Observing then that the great hesychast didn't want to talk long so as to interrupt the Jesus Prayer which he had in his mind and his heart, I thanked him from my heart for the counsels and profitable words he had given me. I made a prostration to him, kissed his hand, and asked his blessing to leave. And the holy Bishop John blessed me with the sign of the holy cross and said to me: 'May our Lord Jesus Christ bless you and forgive me!'

"Another year passed with troubles and trials enough. I didn't hear any more about Bishop John. In the spring of 1946, my thoughts urged me to go for a few days for a retreat to Sihastria Monastery. I made the usual prayers for travelling, took my staff, and crossed the mountain with the thought that I would once more see the holy hesychast John. When I reached Trapeza clearing, the miracle happened for a third and last time. At the edge of the clearing his holiness John was waiting for me. The same luminous face, the same limpid and cheerful eyes, the same joy and spiritual peace in his soul, the same rough clothing of wool on his thin and elderly body. I made him the customary prostration and kissed his hand, and he kissed my forehead, and we both sat on the trunk of a fir tree blown down by the wind. Nothing earthly interested him. After some moments of silence his holiness said to me: 'I would like to go back to my native village, to die there. We also have forests enough 'How can you go now, the nations still haven't quieted down?' 'I believe in God, that He will always cover me with His hand!'

"Then the Elder, seeing my sadness, strengthened me in hope and counselled me to have great care for the souls that had been entrusted to me at Agapia Monastery, that here will be my salvation. At the end, he blessed me with both hands and kissed me in the Lord. I made a prostration to him, and thus we parted, I with tears in my eyes. He withdrew to his greatly-desired desert, towards the Sihla Mountains, and I descended towards Sihastria. This was my last meeting with him."

"Since 1946 I haven't met him again. No one said any more about him. I thought he had departed to the eternal realms, from somewhere in the Sihla Mountains. After five years, however, I heard that a brother of Sihastria who kept the monastery's sheep met him in the forests towards Chitele Mountain. Going to the pasture with the Sheep, he suddenly noticed that all the sheep had massed together and the dogs stood as if in astonishment. When he looked around, he saw an old monk with a white beard in their midst. It was the holy John! 'Indeed, in what have I sinned today before God that I am revealed to men!' the desert-dweller said to himself. Then he said to the brother who kept the sheep: 'Brother Stephan, come here and don't be afraid! I know that you confess to Father Elder Joel. But please don't tell anyone that you saw me today!'

"Brother Stephan received the Mysteries one week and didn't tell it to anyone. But his thoughts still urged him to tell it at confession to Father Joel. And the Elder, when he heard about this, immediately took some dried bread and food in a bag and walked through the forests around the monastery for a week with Father Bessarion, the abbot of Sihla Skete, hoping to meet with the holy John. But they didn't meet him. Then, after a month or two, Brother Stephan was walking with the sheep through the forest, and all of the sudden he met

John the Desert-Dweller. He was barefoot and with his head uncovered. He beckoned to him with his hand and said to him: 'Brother Stephan, I asked one thing of you and you didn't do it! Know that you will go into the army and will not return again to the monastery!' And thus it was. The brother went into the army and remained in the world. From that time I have heard no more about holy John the Hesychast."