

## **Saint Joachim of Tirnovo and the Rock Monasteries of Bulgaria**

Our monastic father Joachim was born of noble Bulgarian parents. He grew to despise the vanities of this world and on coming of age, went to the holy mountain of Athos. There he entered upon the angelic path, zealously following the examples of the holy fathers whom he met. He lived in constant prayer, purity, fasting and vigil, resting only while standing or sitting. He never exercised his own will, but was entirely obedient to the abbot and the brothers who often sent him on errands. Always gentle and quick to shed tears of compunction, he lived in strict abstinence, thereby subjugating his body. Thus fulfilling the rule of the holy fathers, he became well-known among the monks of the Holy Mountain on account of his spiritual attainments.

After spending some time there, Joachim journeyed to the river Danube. There he hewed out for himself a cave in the rocks of Krassen, where he lived with three disciples:

Diomed, Athanasios and Theodosios. There he also cut out a small chapel in the rocks, which he dedicated to the holy Feast of Transfiguration.

Hearing of Joachim's virtuous life and ascetic labors, the Christ-loving King Ivan-Asen (1218-1241), the son of the old King Asen, came to him and gave him a great sum of gold. This enabled the Elder to hire laborers and to hew out more caves. A large monastery was thus established, dedicated to the great Archangel Michael, which exists to this day. [1] The Elder attracted many monks and, as a work-loving bee, he instructed them constantly in the monastic way of life, which is the road to salvation. His disciples competed with each other in virtue, ascending to the heights [of perfection] as on the rungs of a ladder. [2]

At that time the Patriarch Vasilios of Tlrmors died. All the archbishops of the Bulgarian land gathered to search for a man worthy of the dignity of an archbishop, and they unanimously agreed upon the name of the monk Joachim. However, according to the concept of that time, there was an incongruity: King Ivan-Asen II, as the greatest and most powerful head of state in the Balkan Peninsula at that time, should have had not only an archbishop but a patriarch. Therefore, in the treaty of 1234 between Bulgaria and the Byzantine Empire of Nicaea [3] in addition to political topics and the subject of royal marriages, there was entered the clause:

"The archbishop of Tirnovo is to be recognized as Patriarch by the Synod of the Eastern Patriarchs."

In 1054 the Patriarch of Rome separated irrevocably from the union of the five Patriarchs, and in that manner the wholeness of the so-called "pentarchy" (the five-headed supreme authority of the Universal Church of Christ) had been damaged. But in the spring of 1235 it was restored in the person of St. Joachim,

The emperor of Nicaea, John Vatotsi, and the Patriarch of Constantinople, Germanos II, convoked a pan-Orthodox Synod in the city of Lampsak at the Sea of Marmara, in order to fulfill this important canonical procedure at which it was noted that Patriarch Germanos acted "with God's good will and the full cooperation of the great and pious King Ivan-Asea, son of the old Asea, together with his co. brothers, the other patriarchs."

Patriarch Athanasios of Jerusalem and Patriarch Nicholas of Alexandria could not personally attend on account of local impediments (i.e., Moslem domination). However, they sent official letters of approbation. Attending the convocation were: Patriarch Germanos of Constantinople, Patriarch Simeon of Antioch, "with metropolitans, archbishops, bishops, and very reverend

archlmandrites, hegumens and monks." From the Bulgarian side came "metropolitans, archbishops, bishops and very reverend monks from Mount Athos." [4] This Pan-Orthodox Synod proclaimed as the fifth Patriarch in the Christian world. "the previously consecrated" [5] Archbishop of Tirnovo, Joachim, a "pious and holy man, shining with virtues and leading a hermitic life." The synodal document, signed and sealed, was handed to Patriarch Joachim "for eternal and irrevocable memory."

The King returned to his city of Tirnovo with great joy. Then all the Western bishops enthroned Joachim in his great patriarchy of the royal city of Tirnovo. The blessed Patriarch observed all the rules of the Holy Church, fulfilling the monastic rule as well as that of an archbishop. He held both rudders and, like a good helmsman, he piloted the ship of the Church across the abysses of the sea (i.e., the tumults of this world). He gave alms to the orphans, satisfied the needs of the poor, visited prisoners and was in constant prayer. He saved many that were condemned to die. Others, who appealed to him for help, he saved from the king's wrath.

During the time of his patriarchate (c. 1230), the relics of St. Parasceva of Epivat were

transferred from her birthplace to the city of Tirnovo where they remained for 160 years (i.e., until the fall of Bulgaria to the Ottomans) in the royal church dedicated to the Saint. It was also during his patriarchate that Tirnovo was visited by that beloved Serbian Saint, Archbishop Sava. His visit coincided with a harsh winter and, after taking part in the Great Blessing of the Water on the River Yantra, the elderly hierarch caught a severe cold and died. He -was solemnly buried in a stone-hewed grave at the Church of the Forty Martyrs. A year later the Serbians transferred his relics to Serbia. Although empty, his grave is still preserved in this historic church. [\[6\]](#)

Saint Joachim prophetically foresaw his end .... He called together his disciples and the entire clergy, blessed them, and advised them well. And so he blissfully departed this life, giving his soul into the hands of the living God, Whom he had learned to love. The Blessed Patriarch Joachim served as patriarch for 19 years, and passed away on the 18th of January in the year 6754 (1246), indiction 4.

By his prayers may the Lord God preserve Bulgaria for all ages and grant us a place in His Kingdom. Amen.

(Translated by Borislav Svrakov from *Zhitia Bulgarski Svetsi* by Bishop Parthenius, Synodal Publications, Sofia, 1979, the account is based on a 14th century Life found and published by Prof, Ivan Snegarov in the Theological Academy's "Godishnik," 1953 - 54, pp. 162-169; and the *Synodic of Boril*-cf. Prof./V.N. Zlatersky's History of the Bulgarian State, v. 3, Sofia, 1940. Slightly abridged.)

The remains of more than a thousand cave churches and cells are to be found in Bulgaria today. Most have been dated from the early 10th century and into the period of Ottoman domination.

Among the best preserved is the large monastery complex near the village of Ivanovo, the former Lavra of Archangel Michael established by Saint Joachim. Research has identified six of the Lavra's seven churches and chapels around which were grouped the monks' cells. Carefully cut into the soft limestone, the chambers have smooth walls joined at right angles; the largest covers an area of 45 square yards. The Ivanovo complex contains numerous frescoes dated to the first half

of the 13th century. In one of the cave churches, the walls and ceiling are covered with scenes from the Gospel cycle, predominated by episodes from the Lord's Passion: the Entry into Jerusalem, the Last Supper, the Betrayal of Judas, Peter's Denial, Christ Before Pilate, the Hanging of Judas... The figures are large, slender and well-proportioned, while the faces are noble and expressive.

The exceptional artistic value of these and other Bulgarian cave frescoes has secured them a place on UNESCO's list of the cultural treasures of the world. For the Orthodox Christian, however, these rock caves hold a much greater depth of interest, providing an amazing document, as it were, of spiritual vitality and ascetic fervor, which may yet inspire today's Christian to renounce the world for the sake of the eternal kingdom.

### **Notes:**

[1.] So writes the author of the 14th century *Life*; today only the empty caves remain.

[2.] An allusion to St. John Climacus' allegorical "Ladder of Divine Ascent".

[3.] During the Fourth Crusade of 1204 he took Constantinople and founded the Latin Empire of Nicaea.

[4.] Here we must understand the surroundings of Tirnovo which was full of monasteries and was called at that time "Holy Mount."

[5.] i.e., he was not consecrated but only proclaimed patriarch, since he had already been archbishop for eight years.

[6.] Zlatarsky, 1940.



