

## Early Example of Ecumenism from A.D. 1283: 26 Holy Martyrs of Zographou Monastery on Mt. Athos



*Icon of the 26 Holy Martyrs of Zographou Monastery on Mt. Athos*

**Today, October 10 (Julian Calendar) is the Feast of the Martyrdom of the 26 Martyrs of Zographou Monastery on Mt. Athos by the Latins**

The 26 Holy Zographou Martyrs were burned alive in 1282 on Mount Athos by a Latin army serving the Emperor of Constantinople, Michael VIII Paleologos. Their memory is celebrated on October 10th and September 22nd.

In 1274 Michael VIII Paleologos entered into union with the Pope of Rome with the infamous Union of Lyons during the Council of Lyons, in the hope that an alliance would strengthen his empire. The union was not popularly received and the Emperor threatened to enforce the treaty by force if necessary.

The fathers of Mount Athos were solidly opposed to the union and sent a letter to the Emperor enumerating the heresies of the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church. They urged the Emperor to put aside the union, reject heresy and return to Orthodoxy.

The emperor despised the monks of Mt. Athos for their opposition. Crusaders, who had been expelled from Palestine and had found refuge in Romania, declared to the Emperor their readiness to establish the authority of the pope by fire and the sword. Michael employed Turks and Tatars as well. And exactly because some monks did yield under the pressure of promises and tortures, two monasteries were lost to the Latins: Lavra and Xeropotamou. They killed many monks in Vatopaidi, Iveron and other monasteries (some were hanged, others drowned, others beheaded at Karyes on Mt. Athos).

The Latins attacked Zographou. When the impending attack was revealed by God to Abbot Thomas of Zographou, he told the fathers that those who wished to save themselves should flee, and that those who wished for martyrdom should stay in the monastery. The majority of the Zographou monks left the monastery, but the most steadfast, twenty-six in number, remained within the monastery tower. The twenty-six men who remained and locked themselves in the monastery tower were: Abbot Thomas, monks Barsanuphius, Cyril, Michaeas, Cosmas, Hilarion, James, Job, Cyprian, Sabbas, James, Martinian, Cosmas, Sergius, Minas, Joasaph, Ioannikios, Paul, Anthony, Euthymios, Dometian Parthenios and four laymen.

The Latins were soon outside the Monastery. Initially they motioned to the monks to have the gates opened to let them in: if they acknowledged the Primacy of the Pope they would have nothing to fear but his mercy plus a lot of gold. The monks replied to them from the top of the tower: "And who told you that your Pope is Head of the Church? From where does this teaching of yours come? For us, Head of the Church is only Christ! It is easier for us to choose death rather than give in and defile this holy place by your violence and tyranny; we shall not open the gates of the Monastery! Leave now!" The Latins replied with rage: "Die then!"; and gathering wood around the tower lit a large fire to burn them alive.

The holy martyrs sang hymns to the Mother of God while the tower burned, and gave their souls to God on October 10th, 1282. In December of the same year, the dishonorable Emperor Michael died in poverty, when the Serbian King Milutin rose up against him in defense of Orthodoxy.

## **The Miraculous Icon of the Theotokos and the Abbot's Revelation**

On the day that the Latins set out for the Monastery of Zographou, an old monk had an obedience in a vineyard half an hour's distance from the monastery. As part of his daily prayer rule he read the Akathist before the icon of the Mother of God. On this day, when he began to pronounce the word *Rejoice!* (χαῖρε) a voice came to him from the icon: `Do thou also rejoice, O elder! Flee from here now, or misfortune will befall thee; go and tell the fathers of the monastery to prepare themselves, for the God-opposing Latins have attacked this, my chosen Mountain, and are already near.' The frightened elder fell to his knees and cried out in fear: `How can I leave thee here, my Queen and Intercessor?' At this he again heard the voice: `Do not worry about me, but go quickly!' The elder went to the monastery immediately to warn the brethren. When he reached the monastery gates he beheld that same icon of the Mother of God. In a miraculous manner, the icon had preceded him to the monastery. The amazed elder related all that had been revealed to him to the abbot and the other fathers. At that, all of them glorified God and the Mother of God. The miraculous icon of the Virgin which they had with them was found unharmed in the ruins of the tower and was placed on the sanctuary screen of the Chapel of the Dormition of the Theotokos where it still is today.

Source: email from Fr. Panagiotes Carras, Toronto, Canada, (HOTCA)