

# **The Mystery of an Encounter: The Venerable Icon of Our Lady of Philermos and the Russian Orthodox Church.**

**Mgr George Mifsud Montanaro**

The title of this brief communication may sound a trifle melodramatic; but it is not false. It was chosen on the impulse of a moment and was suggested by the feeling that the holding of a symposium on the celebrated and historic icon, which is still a vivid memory in Malta, had something not only of the unexpected but also of the prodigious. The piety of Christians had long recognized this to be a “wonder- working” icon; and here a wonder has been produced before our eyes. Once more “Our Lady of Philermos” – or, as the Knights Hospitaller in Rhodes would say, “Our Lady of All Graces” – spreads among us her beneficent and salutary aura; and it is, no doubt, her impetratory grace, mysteriously and prophetically exercised, that has brought together what before has been remote and, in a sense, re- composed scattered strands of the seamless tunic of Gospel fame. It is no small matter that this symposium should take place on the initiative of the Embassies of Russia and Italy and with the active participation of two eminent hierarchs of the Orthodox Churches of Yugoslavia and Russia, of representatives of the Holy See and of the Order of Malta, and of the Maltese civil and ecclesiastical authorities; and, even that it should take place in Malta, with its peculiar geo- political situation on the European “limes”, somewhat analogous to that of the Southern Slavs and of Russia, and with its particular religious sensibility, historical experience and responsiveness to the instances of cultural exchange.

And, thus, a new chapter is added to the strange and paradoxical history of the icon, its locations and translocations passages from one hand to another, always in time of tragic upheaval and consequent new departures: foreign invasion, the Turkish conquering advance, the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Second World War... The involvement of the icon in the inter-play of individual and collective destinies, and especially in Orthodox-Catholic relations (in Rhodes and in Pauline Russia, for example), authorizes us to suppose that the Hand of God is directly engaged and that the icon’s recent re-discovery in Montenegro also is, providentially, significant and of direct relevance to us at the present moment. At once an illumination and an incentive, it discloses spiritual links and affinities and invites our deeper, more courageous commitment to the promotion of the peace and concord of the holy Churches of God.

A mystery, then, in the Biblical sense; but also an encounter, - in the strong sense of the word, as canonized in the Byzantine liturgical texts, where *Hypapante* (in Greek) and *Sretenie* (in Old Church Slavonic) signify no ordinary “meeting”, “encounter” , “reception” ‘but one that is open to the infinite... Thus, for example, the solemnity of February 2, which closes the Christmas cycle, is designated in the Orthodox tradition as “The Encounter of Our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ”: this refers, of course, to the mystery of the Divine Child’s presentation and meeting in the temple with His chosen people in the persons of the old Simeon and Anna the Prophetess. In the Byzantine liturgical calendar there are also feasts commemorating holy icons in which the same term is used in this special, formal, suggestive sense of “meeting”, “welcoming”.

Such a feast is the commemoration of the transfer from Malta to Gatchina in 1799 of the three most dearly cherished and holiest possessions of the Order of Malta: the Right hand of St. John the Baptist, a historic cross containing a fragment of the True Cross of the lord, and the Philermos icon of the Mother of God. It is to this “encounter” that our attention is drawn today. In liturgical celebration this grace-filled encounter is, so to speak, actualized. The present symposium represents for each one of us, I am sure, a more than ordinary encounter.

According to the tradition current in Rhodes, it was a penitent who, before settling in the solitude of Mount Philermos, amid the ruins of an ancient city, some 10 kms from Rhodes, had brought with him from Jerusalem the icon of the Mother of God, attributed to the hand of St. Luke the Evangelist. Whatever the truth behind this tradition, there is nothing improbable in the icon’s immediate provenance from Jerusalem, even if – and not surprisingly – the icon betrays no local stylistic peculiarities. Available evidence indicates that the icon was in Rhodes already when the knights Hospitaller established themselves on the island in the first decade of the fourteenth century. Care must be taken not to confuse or identify the icon of the Mother of God

of Philermos with the *Hodegetria* of Constantinople, as is rather facily done in works of edification, such as the well-known *Zhitia Svatykh* or to qualify it a *priori* as *Obighitria-Filermskaya* in *Prostranny Myesyatzeslov Russkikh Svyatk* by N. Taeborg such identifications would be arbitrary. As it is the icon approaches most closely to the type that goes by the name of '*deesis*'. Ideally, this is part of a larger composition, in which the central figure is that of the Divine Saviour with, on either side, suppliant figures of saints, the Holy Theotokos on Christ's right and St. John the Baptist on the left, on a single panel or on a triptych, and sometimes with other saintly figures, as may be seen on many iconostases. In such compositions the *Theotokos* is always represented as turning towards Christ, of the type known as *Haghiosoritissa*, where the suppliant *Theotokos* is represented alone, the presence of Christ being implicit: the faithful, already familiar with the theological concept, would have no difficulty in filling in the picture with the eyes of the mind.

In the case of the icon of the Mother of God of Philermos the outstretched ha of Philermos the outstretched hands are absent and only the head and shoulders of the *Theotokos* are shown: the supplicatory gesture is all in the gently inclined head and in the expression of the eyes, fixed on the viewer with compassionate intensity. Such, no doubt, was the original form of the icon, as venerated in Rhodes. Only a close examination of the original, now in Montenegro, could provide any information on the reduction of surface it may have undergone. Several icons of this type are known to exist, of various periods. One very striking specimen is now conserved in Padua (Musei Civici, no. 1110), dated the first half of the fifteenth century and attributed to Angelos Akotantos, according to Nikos Chatzidakis "the earliest and perhaps the most famous 15<sup>th</sup> century Cretan painter". The Cretan provenance of these icons is significant; and historians are well aware of the close connections between Crete and Rhodes in the Hospitaller period. It may being exact copies, had in the famous and much venerated icon of Philermos their prototype and inspiration.

This, then, was the icon that was sent to Emperor Paul 1 of Russia after the fall of Malta in June 1798. on his capitulation Grand Master Ferdinand von Hompesch had asked to be allowed to take away with him the order's three most treasured possessions. Bonaparte agreed, while making sure of previously separating them from their precious revetment and reliquaries. The events are well known and followed in quick succession: in June 1798 Grand master hompesch left Malta for Trieste, on September 6, 1798, the knights assembled in St. Petersburg declare Hompesch as having forfeited his office and, on October 27, proclaimed Emperor Paul 1 Grand Master; on November 13, 1799, the Emperor accepted the office and on July 6, 1799, grand Master Hompesch, under pressure from the court of Vienna, "voluntarily" abdicated.

On October 12th, 1799, took place the solemn translation of the three sacred objects- the relic of St. John the Baptist, the relic of the true Cross, the icon of the Mother of God of Philermos to the city of Gatchina, some 45 kms south of St. Petersburg and a favourite imperial residence. At ten in the morning the Emperor, with the imperial family and a numerous suits, rode out of the Palace in the direction of Ingeburg, where the formal "encounter" (*vstretcha*) was to take place, at the so-called "Saviour's Gates". From there a solemn procession began, with the clergy leading. The Emperor himself, fully vested in Grand- Magistral robes, walked immediately behind the first carriage on which had been placed the reliquary with the right hand of St. John. When the procession had reached the Palace, the Emperor took up the reliquary and, while the prescribed *troparion* (festal anthem) was being sung, bore it into the newly decorated palace church and laid it in the place prepared for it. Here also were brought the icon of Philermos with the new precious *oklad* offered by the Emperor and the relic of the life-giving Cross. However, the three holy objects were not destined to remain for long in Gatchina. In the following year 1800 they were taken to St. Petersburg where the liturgical memory of their translation was celebrated on October 12, in the chapel of the Winter Palace, and there they remained. Half a century later, Emperor Nicholas 1, wishing to honour the memory of his father, Paul 1, built a church in Gatchina, which he dedicated to St. Paul. This church was consecrated in 1852 and on that occasion the three holy objects were once more brought to Gatchina, but only on a temporary basis. Though the people of Gatchina specially requested the Emperor that the new church of St. Paul become the permanent resting-place of the three "Maltese" relics, he agreed only they be brought to Gatchina for the anniversary feast of the first translation on October 12, and return to St. Petersburg on October 22: the relics were considered the property and special responsibility of the imperial family, that, indeed, highly valued them.

The relations of Emperor Paul 1 with the Order of Malta and with the Holy See have intrigued and puzzled many a historian. From his youth Paul had developed a consuming admiration for the Order. As a

boy, he had been very much impressed by Vertot's *History of the Knights of the Order of Malta*, read out to him by his preceptor: on such occasions, he would put on all his decorations and imagine himself a knight of Malta... He was well aware of the relations of Peter the Great and Catherine 2 with the order, as well as of the service of the Order in the formation and training of the Russian Baltic fleet. The alliance and concerted action of the Russian Empire and the Order had already been envisaged by Catherine from a military angle. Paul seems to have envisaged this linkage as part of an international movement to be created, to counteract the revolutionary spirit, one in which the chivalric Orders would constitute an elite. It is not surprising, therefore, that, soon after his accession in 1796, he should show the Order his special benevolence, helping it in the affair of the Ostrog estates in Vollhynia, which had recently passed under Russian dominion after the regrettable partitions of Poland. Through his initiative the Grand Priory of Poland was reorganized and re-entitled as the Grand Priory of Russia, and was financially generously provided for. The Order, having lost most of its continental properties necessary for its survival, could not but be very grateful; and that is why the newly elected Grand Master von Hompesch in late 1797 had hastened to offer him the title of Protector of the Order,- an office Paul accepted and took very seriously.

These events should not be regarded as extraneous to the destinies of the icon of Our Lady of Philermos and of the Russian Orthodox Church. Paul's *aventure maltaise*, as it has been called had an impact that far exceeded his personal sympathies and special concerns; it touched also the strictly religious and ecclesiastical spheres, if only in view of his position of emperor and autocrat of All Russian Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. Admittedly, all this – and, indeed, for all its interest, the entire course of Paul's brief reign – has an episodic character, which explains why it is so often passed over in manualistic historiography. This is not the place to delve into the complexities of Paul's mind and psychological make-up or to unravel the web of concurrent motivations, one of which was certainly his desire to secure papal recognition of his position as Grand Master. What is incontrovertible and must be borne in mind is the fact that Paul's did assiduously cultivate and did propose the idea of Church reunion. Not only is Paul's sincerity beyond doubt, but he gives proof of sufficient theological preparation and theological finesse, as well as a measure of prudence that was not typical of him. It is noteworthy that he excludes any idea of conversion of "apostasy" as he calls it. While declaring his acceptance of Papal primacy, he thinks in terms of a corporative reunion or reconciliation, though he also envisages a "*grand changement*" in the long term. Furthermore, he prefers to speak – at last, in an initial stage – of "*la reunion des opinions entre les deux religions*", rather than of the reunion of the Churches. Of course, the great, the radical weakness of Paul's design was that no consideration at all was given to the possible reactions of the Russian Church itself and the Orthodox faithful. Of the Orthodox Church Paul could only see the crippling nature of the consequences of the Old Believer schism and completely failed to recognize the signs of spiritual renaissances already present in his own time. For the realization of the "*grande reunion*" he relied solely and entirely on the application of the principle of authority and unlimited sovereignty. With Paul's death, his project also died. But something remained; an anxiety and a travail that seems to traverse the whole length of 19th century Russia from Paul 1 to Soloviev. Paul's brief reign with his intense and suffered exchanges with the Roman See inaugurated a new phase in inter-Church relations which is only now coning to a head after a long process of maturation, of return to the sources, of dispassionate theological reflection, in both East and West.

And something else remained after Paul's passing: the precence in the Russian land for over a cenyum of the three precious relics of the Order of Malta, as a token of Divine Grace, as a testimony and an inspiration. On the icon of Our Lady of Philermos and on the relic of St. John the Baptist and of the True and Life-giving Cross have been showered the loving and generous care of the Russian imperial family and the ardent devotion of countless Russian Orthodox faithful, clerical and lay. The Russian Orthodox Church, in addition to be ensuring their regular and decorous veneration, on its part offered a special liturgical office, complete in all its parts, substantial in content and, as required by ritual usage, composed to be chanted according to the appropriate tones. The day chosen for the annual celebration of the precious relics was October 12, anniversary date of their first arrival in Gatchina. It comprises the special texts or *proprium* of the feast, of which a partial translation is given below. It will be noticed that pride of place is given to the memory of St. John the Precursor and Baptist, because of the presence of the relics of his right hand. The Holy Mother of God, present in her wonder-working icon, is honoured in each of the final strophes, traditionally dedicated to her memory (*Bogorodichniy*).

---