

THE BLESSEDNESS OF PILGRIMAGE

Presented by Archpriest John Tomasi

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2025 Group Photo of Mt. Athos Pilgrims

Pilgrimage is very active in the Orthodox Church. Orthodox Christians throughout the world are constantly embarking on pilgrimages to holy places, such as the Holy Land where pilgrims can trace very steps that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ walked in His earthly life. Another famous place is *Agios Oros*, The Holy Mountain, or known by its most familiar name, Mount Athos. *Agios Oros* was enriched by the Mother of God when she discovered it while on a missionary journey with the Apostle and Evangelist John. Their boat was blown off course due to inclement weather, and they were safely guided to this holy place.

- ❖ Finding the peninsula so beautiful and peaceful, the Mother of God asked her son to allow her to watch over it and dedicate it as a spiritual haven for men, where they could come to worship God without distraction
- ❖ Millions of men over a period of 1,000 years have gone there; some became monks, some abbots, and others returned home changed and enlivened
 - St. Athanasius of Mt. Athos, who founded the “Great Lavra” was the first to begin setting up monasteries
 - 20 monasteries were eventually established, along with a multitude of sketes and hermitages
- ❖ The men who came and others who followed approached the Holy Mountain, seeking an encounter with God
 - In the fourth century, Egyptian monks employed “The Prayer of the Mind” repeating continually in prayer the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ
 - During the Byzantine era, “The Jesus Prayer” was established, and named the hesychastic prayer
 - St. Paisius Velichovsky in the late 1700s reiterated the importance of the Jesus Prayer on Mt. Athos
 - Eventually, St. Paisius moved to Moldova, where he established three monasteries
 - There, the monastics practiced the Jesus Prayer continuously
 - The monk Leonid ventured forth from one of these monasteries to establish Optina Pustin
 - Pustin literally means “desert” in Russian, and from this desert the Jesus Prayer spread
 - Within time, all of the monasteries in Russia embraced this prayer
 - St. Herman of Alaska traveled from Valaam Monastery to Spruce Island, and the Jesus Prayer traveled with him, hence, American Hesychasm was born
- ❖ The Hilandar Serbian Orthodox Monastery, was founded in 1198 by St. Sava and his father, Stefan Nemanja
 - The famous “3-Hands Icon of the Mother of God” resides at Hilander
 - The icon itself is placed upon the seat where the abbot would normally sit during church services, signifying that She is the abbess of this monastery
 - The 3-Hands Icon has the actual silver hand that St. John of Damascus embedded in it
 - St. John lived in the 7th century and had been accused of treason; for this reason, his hand was cut off. After praying fervently before the icon of the Mother of God, his hand was miraculously reattached to his arm. In thanksgiving for this miraculous healing, St. John placed a replica of a hand, made of silver, into the lower left section of the icon.
 - Hilandar also houses a famous library that contains 1,800 Greek and 800 Slavic manuscripts, and 20,000 books
- ❖ Saint Andrew Skete was dilapidated and practically vacant when my sons and I visited it in 2006
 - Not far from Karyes, this skete houses the famous and miracle-working “It is Truly Meet” icon of the Mother of God

- In 2006, my sons and I had spotted a monk alongside the road at St. Andrew Skete, collecting and cataloging the bones of many monks to be placed in a special area. Traditionally, the bones of monks are carefully preserved to await the Second Coming of Christ and the General Resurrection
 - The monk's name was Abbot Ephraim, and he explained to us in English that he was the new abbot of this skete
 - He had been asked to leave Philotheou Monastery to become the abbot of this once-Russian skete
 - He gave us a tour and showed us the church and its countless relics. We ended up spending the afternoon with this simple and wonderful monastic
 - In his office Abbot Ephraim gave us tea and Turkish delight and also shared the history of the skete.
 - In the 1920s, there were 4,000 Russian monks who had been living in St. Andrew Skete and were ordered back to Russia by Stalin, only to be martyred as soon as they arrived home
 - After the Greeks heard of this, they decided to make it easier for men from other countries to become Greek citizens if they were seeking to live out their lives as monks in Mt. Athos
 - When my sons and I departed, we received the abbot's blessing; as we walked along the road, we contemplated in earnest how much work and time it would take to restore the skete
- ❖ Fast-forward 19 years, and I was looking at St. Andrew Skete, witnessing how much it had changed.
- It had been completely renovated—with every part now sparkling clean and renewed!
 - Many monks live there now, and one of them who spoke English offered to show us around
 - I found out that Abbot Ephraim had died and is considered a miracle-worker from this monastery, as he healed so many people and renewed the monastery to such a degree
 - Now Abbot Ephraim is slated to be canonized as a saint in the Orthodox Church
 - The monk who helped us also stated that they have very little money as a monastery, with no outside funding.
 - It is only through the donations of others that they survive
 - I discovered a stunningly beautiful blessing cross in their little store, and I bought it to help support them
- ❖ The Beauty of Pilgrimage—whether you visit the Holy Land, Meteora, Greece, Mt. Athos, or Alaska, it *is* blessed
- When we seek God with all our heart, He will reveal Himself to us
 - Remember, there are many monasteries and holy places to visit even in our own country



2025 Photo of Archpriest John & Leo



2025 Philotheou Monastery in Mount Athos