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**FROM "SECRET SERVANTS OF GOD"
TO "FOOLS FOR CHRIST'S SAKE"
IN BYZANTINE HAGIOGRAPHY**

When Christianity became a state religion, hagiography was faced with a serious challenge. In early Christian times, to become a saint one had to be a martyr or a confessor; but who deserved the crown of sainthood under the changed conditions? In the West from the sixth century on, a common way for a monk to become a saint was to go on a mission to barbarians, in the hope of gaining martyrdom. It was this hope rather than the desire to save souls that motivated Latin missionaries, including the tenth-century Bruno of Querfurt¹.

There is no evidence of such voluntary martyrdom among the Greeks, however. To be canonized in Byzantium one had to do more than convert non-Christian subjects of the Empire. The "passions" of certain Christians who found themselves under the authority of infidels or heretics provided some new material for Byzantine hagiography, but generally the life of Byzantine Orthodoxy was so uneventful that there was a danger of a hagiographic crisis.

The genre of hagiography searched for "surrogate" martyrdom. This is what the author of an early *vita* writes about his character: "The saint had to create his own martyrdom for there were neither persecutions, nor a persecuting Emperor. He was his own persecutor, his own tyrant and fierce torturer, and at the same time a fighting martyr and a righteous confessor. So what [can be done]? Would you deny him the name of martyr? Never!"²

Under the new circumstances, when the saint had to play the role of his own tormentor, new, earlier unknown types of sainthood emerged, such as stylitism, wandering asceticism or transvestism. Another new type of saint was "God's secret servant".

Most "beneficial tales" (a genre that was highly popular from the late fourth to the sixth century), recount essentially the same story, though they may vary in specific details. An ascetic (usually an anchorite) prays to God asking to be told whether there is a righteous man on Earth who equals him in feats. God invariably answers in the affirmative and each time God's nomination sounds unexpected and astonishing.

Historia monachorum in Aegypto contains a long story about a famous hermit, Paphnutios, who asks God this question three times. God first names a flute-player. A righteous elder visits him and asks about his feats, but the flute-player insists that he is "a sinner, an alcoholic and a lecher." He admits, however, that once he saved a virgin from rape and once helped a dignified lady who fell into poverty. When Paphnutios asks again, God points to a village elder. The curious monk comes to visit him and learns that the elder enforces social justice in his village. The third attempt brings an Alexandrian merchant to the scene. He is incredibly rich, but gives away all his money to the poor³.

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¹ Cf. J. M. Howe, "Greek Influence on the XI-Century Revival of Hermitism." Ph. D thesis. (Los Angeles, 1979), pp. 185-187.

² *Vita Martiniani, Acta Sanctorum Februarii*. (Paris, 1865), vol. 2, p. 670.

³ *Historia monachorum in Aegypto*, ed. A.-J. Festugière. (Brussels, 1971), pp. 102-109; cf.: M. Richard, "Les textes hagiographiques du Codex Philothéou," *Analecta Bollandiana* (1975), vol. 93, p. 151.

It should be noted that although in all three cases Paphnutios admits that the laymen are really righteous, he still feels somewhat superior to them and announces to all three that their chastity will remain imperfect unless they leave the world and join him in the desert. We will see that later on this motif totally disappears. A curious hermit feels more and more inferior, and a "secret servant" more and more self-assured.

In another story, an anchorite named Pyrrhus asks God the same question only to learn that a certain Sergios, who is in charge of Alexandria's brothels, surpasses him in righteousness⁴. A third story is about the famous Saint Makarios. He turns out to enjoy the same divine glory as two lay sisters who persuaded their husbands to practice sexual abstinence⁵. In the vita of St. Antonios, the hermit learns that he is inferior to a leather-worker from Alexandria, whose only virtue is that every day he says to himself that all the Alexandrians will go to Paradise and he alone to Hell, because of his sins. Antonios admits that he has not yet reached such a level of virtue⁶.

A detailed description of a "secret servant" case is found in the vita of St. Theodulos. The stylite asks the traditional question and learns that he is inferior to Kornelios, a bandore-player from Damascus.

Hearing this, Theodulos begins to cry and says: 'Woe is me - the unfortunate and forsaken! So, your slave, my Lord, is inferior to a bandore-player? I, who had toiled and suffered for so many years, I, my Lord, am lowlier than a bandore-player? Oh, what a worthless and contemptible end! What does this ignominy mean, my Lord, that You placed me below a bandore-player? I, who stands on a pillar, am worse than one who plays on a stage? I, fasting and wakeful, am worse than the devil's bandore-player?!'⁷

After this vehement and theomachistic speech, Theodulos can no longer stand on a pillar. He comes down and goes to Damascus to look for the bandore-player, Kornelios. In the city he asks a passer-by about Kornelios, and he answers: "Father, horse races are being held now; he spends his time there." When the elder learns that the man whose trade is disgraceful also indulges in a disgraceful passion he begins to cry again, and the passer-by becomes concerned about him. When the race is over the bandore-player appears. "He is carrying his instrument under one arm and embracing a whore with the other." When Theodulos asks Kornelios about his feats, "he stares at him and answers, 'Oh, please, Father. Why do you mock me, a sinner? Why do you ask me, who lives among fornicatrices and jesters?'" The elder insists that the bandore-player remember. Kornelios thinks for a while and says that once he gave all his savings to a woman who was going out to sell her body to buy her husband out of jail. The bandore-player does not regard this act of his as a feat and begs for the elder not to suspect him of complacency. Theodulos, however, rejoices. In his eyes, justice has triumphed. He throws himself down at the bandore-player's feet, and then leaves repeating to himself: "Indeed, the Lord knows His people"⁸.

Even in these stories it remains somewhat unclear why the laymen mentioned are given such high honors. But explanations offered in some other stories sound totally absurd. For example, an anchorite learns that he is no better than the city greengrocer who eats at night, gives away to the poor everything he does not need, and believes that he is worse than everybody else. This, however, fails to persuade the anchorite that the greengrocer surpasses him in righteousness.

⁴ J. Wortley, *Les récits édifiants de Paul, évêque de Monembasie, et d'autres auteurs*. (Paris, 1987), pp. 128, 30-130, 170. Cf. *BHG*, 1449.

⁵ "Apothegmes sur saint Macaire," *Annales du Musée Guimet*, (1894), vol. 25, pp. 228-230.

⁶ *Vitae patrum, PL*. (1860), vol. 73. Col. 1038. The list of such examples can be easily continued, cf. *PG*. (1858), vol. 65. Col. 84; 168-169.

⁷ *Vita s. Theoduli Stylitae, Acta Sanctorum Maii*. (Paris, 1866), vol. 5, p. 753.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 754. Cf.: H. Delehaye, *Saints stylites*. (Brussels, 1925), pp. CXVIII-CXIX.

Then he learns that the greengrocer is not annoyed by the sound of singing coming from the street. After that the anchorite admits his defeat⁹.

In the still more detailed “tale of a sin-bearing father” (*BHG*, 1445) a hermit learns that the emperor Theodosios is more righteous than he is. When they meet, the emperor denies that he has committed any feats. When pressed by the elder, he discloses one after another his secret virtues: he visits hospitals at night and heals ulcers; he lives with his wife as if she were his sister; he wears chains under his porphyry. The hermit does not think that this is enough to outweigh his own feats. Then, finally, the emperor confesses:

When, in accordance with the custom of our state, horse races are held, I sit there, as it befits my imperial duties, but when the race begins, ... I do not raise my eyes but proceed with my regular tasks” ... Hearing this, the astonished elder... throws himself down at the feet of the emperor and says: ‘I ... have not yet achieved this degree of virtue’¹⁰.

On the surface, the moral of all these stories is that monks should not feel superior to laymen, since the latter have their own ways of achieving sainthood¹¹. But this is not all, since in other stories of the same kind (some of them will be discussed below) all characters are monks, and thus the relations between monks and laymen are irrelevant.

The first story of a “secret servant” in a monastery is found in the vita of Euphrosynos.

He was despised as a simpleton [ἰδιώτης] and entrusted only with kitchen chores. He performed many a secret deed [of virtue]. He appeared before people dirty after his cook’s work and wearing seedy clothes¹².

Once the pious presbyter of the monastery saw Paradise in his dream and there, to his astonishment, he ran into Euphrosynos. He turned out to be working there as a warden, while the presbyter had just arrived there for the first time after three years of indefatigable feats. Upon the presbyter’s request, Euphrosynos gave him three heavenly apples, which the presbyter found in his cell when he woke up. He rushed to the church and told the monks:

‘Pray... we have a precious pearl in our monastery - Euphrosynos. We despised him as an ignoramus [ἀγράμματον] while he deserved the Lord’s grace more than any of us.’ As the presbyter began to tell his story, Euphrosynos the cook ... opened the back door, walked out of the church and never appeared again, thus escaping earthly fame¹³.

As we see, the reader learns less and less about the feats of the saint and more more and more about the intrigue of the disclosure.

The tale of Euphrosynos seems to be one of the forms of the famous legend of Isidora, the Cinderella of Egyptian monasticism. Both Palladius and Ephraem Syrus recounted her story (*BHG*, 958-959). Once there lived a nun in the Tabennisi convent. Everyone believed she was mad, so they kept her in the kitchen and mocked her. One day the great righteous man Pitirum came to this nunnery: an angel had told him that a woman lived there who was saintlier than he. Pitirum was to recognize her by the crown on her head. The righteous man was shown all the nuns but no one fit the description. Pitirum insisted that there must be somebody else in the convent. “They tell him: ‘We have a mad woman [σαλή] in the kitchen’”¹⁴. Finally, the “mad woman” was brought out by force. Her head was covered with a dirty rag. Pitirum recognized the “crown” and prostrated himself before her.

⁹ J. Wortley, *A Repertoire of Byzantine Beneficial Tales*. A Draft, (Paris, 1991), p.133, n. 538; *BHG*, 1438i.

¹⁰ Jean Rufus, “Plérophories,” *Appendice, Patrologia Orientalis*. (1912), vol. 8, pp.173-174; Cf.: Лопарев Хр. “Повесть об императоре Феодосии II”, *Viz Vrem* (1898), vol. 5, pp. 67-76. There are not sufficient grounds for Loparev’s opinion (pp. 88-89) that the tale was compiled in 12th-13th century.

¹¹ J. Wortley. *Repertoire...* p. 10; Лопарев. *Повесть...* p. 65.

¹² F. Nau, L. Clugnet, “Vies et récits d’anachorètes,” *Revue d’Orient chrétien*, (1905), vol. 10, p. 42. The same story is retold in the 10th-century-vita of Blasios Amoriensis, *Acta Sanctorum Novembris* (Brussels, 1925), vol. 3, pp. 658-659.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 45. In another variant of the tale (*BHG*, 1440 md) the sainthood of a gardener (who remains unnamed) is revealed to an old man. Unlike the tale of Euphrosynos, the tricks played on the gardener for thirty years are listed with gusto. (Τὸ Γερωντικόν. Συναγωγή ῥημάτων καὶ διδασκαλιῶν. [Constantinople, 1861]. vol. 1, p. 120; J. Wortley, *Repertoire*. pp. 158-159, n. 631).

¹⁴ *The Lausiac History of Palladius*, ed. C. Butler, (Cambridge, 1904), vol. 2, p. 98.

All the nuns rushed to raise Pitirum and told him: 'Abbas, do not debase yourself for she is insane [σαλή ἔστι],'¹⁵ Pitirum answered: 'You are insane, and she is your amma and mine. [This is how spiritual mothers are called.] I pray to be worthy of her on the Judgment Day.'

Hearing this, the women threw themselves down at his feet and began confessing their sins. One said that she had slung mud at the σαλή, another that she had pummeled her, a third that she had smeared her nose with mustard. All told about their misdeeds. The righteous woman, meanwhile, had run away from the convent¹⁵.

Isidora is generally viewed as the first Orthodox fool for Christ's sake¹⁶. In my opinion, this is only partially true. Other characters in the story *think* that she is mad and call her σαλή, while she does not seek to create this impression, and the word σαλός at that time had not yet developed the meaning of holy folly, as a special type of sainthood. Isidora merely *allows* others to think badly about her; she does not pretend anything, but only shows humility. She is always silent; in the first variant of the legend she does not even have a name.

Secret virtue appears to be more significant in this story than aggression against the world, and therefore Isidora fails to meet the "classical" description of a holy fool. In other variants of this tale (which exist as separate vitae) the aggression gradually intensifies.

"Abbas Daniel's Tales" tell (*BHG*, 2101) about an old man and his disciple who came to a nunnery and asked to spend the night there. In the convent courtyard a nun was sleeping. Daniel was informed: "She is a drunk [μεθύστρια]. We do not know what to do with her: we are afraid to throw her out of the nunnery, and if we let her stay she will corrupt the other sisters"¹⁷.

Some water was splashed over the "drunk," but she barely opened her eyes. "She is always like this," the Mother Superior said angrily.

When night came and everyone in the nunnery was asleep, the elder and his disciple quietly got up and went out to take a look at the drunk. From their hiding place they saw her rise from the ground, raise her arms to the sky, and begin to pray fervently while shedding tears and bowing to the ground. When she heard one of the sisters come out to relieve herself, she immediately threw herself on to the ground and began to snore. Daniel took the Mother Superior to show her this, and she cried and said, "Oh, how we have wronged her!"

As soon as the "drunk" was exposed, she fled from the convent. She left a note saying:

'Pray for me and forgive me for sinning against you.' The nuns began to cry and wail, and the elder said: 'It was because of her that I came here. Such drunks are loved by God. [τοιούτως γὰρ μεθύστας ἀγαπᾷ ὁ Θεός].'¹⁸ The sisters, their eyes filled with tears, confessed to him the sins they had committed against her. In their cells they glorified the Lord who, alone, knew how many secret servants He had¹⁸.

Unlike the nun of Tabennisi, who stays in the kitchen where nobody can see her, the "drunk" appears in the courtyard of a convent. If she were mad but quiet, she might be ignored and not mocked. Yet, her conduct is provocative. The "drunk" would not go unnoticed; she challenges those around her to make a choice about what to do with her. Thus appear the first signs of the holy fool's aggression against the world.

The tale of the Tabennisi nun, originally written in either Syrian or Greek, was soon translated into Latin¹⁹. This translation is an accurate rendering of the Greek original except for one small difference: the holy fool has a name, Isidora, which she did not have in the Greek version.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

¹⁶ W. Bousset, "Der verborgene Heilige," *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, (1922), vol. 21; Certeau M. de "Le silence de l'Absolu. Folles et fous de Dieu," *Recherches de science religieuse*, (1979), vol. 67; K. Vogt, "La moniale folle du monastère des Tabennisiotes," *Symbolae Osloenses*, (1987), vol. 62.

¹⁷ Vie et récits de l'abbé Daniel, *Revue d'Orient chrétien*, (1905), vol. 5, p. 69.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

¹⁹ Vita s. Isidorac, *Acta Sanctorum Maii* (Antwerp, 1680), vol. 1, pp. 49-50.

Originally neither the “drunk” nor the nun from Tabennisi had names. They acted as silent reproaches to the world, and the silence was broken as soon as they had acquired names. It is interesting that the name of Isidora did not stick: in the later variants of the story she is called Onesima (*BHO*, 814-816). Several later versions of this tale are available today: Syrian, Carshuni, Arabic, Ethiopian and Old Georgian²⁰.

Onesima was a tsarina who renounced her wealth, left her home, and stark naked ... reached a place where trash of all sorts was brought from the city. She picked up a few old rags, covered her nudity and said to herself, ‘I will not stay where people know me... I will pretend to be foolish and mad, so that people will jeer at me. I will suffer insults and beatings, and I will do it all of my own will’²¹.

After staying forty years in the desert, Onesima decided to join a nunnery and said to herself:

I will act strange. The sisters will despise me... and the Mother Superior will scourge me, and I will endure all this from those younger than me. And I will suffer this abuse for love of Christ... And when I am fasting, they will say, ‘She is a glutton;’ I will abstain from wine, and they will say that I drink during the fast. I will work and they will say I am idle.

She came to the cloister called Sedrarum in the Syrian version, and Bantasin in the Arabic and Georgian ones. She does not answer any questions; she even “refused to walk on her own and had to be forced”²². She was put in three chains,

and she pretended to be insane... The sisters tried to wash her feet but she would not let them, and tore their clothes. Every day she kicked and screamed. Sometimes she would grab some dough and throw it on the ground feigning insanity. The sisters would beat her and drag her around, while she rejoiced inside ... Day after day she would come out carrying a mug to give some water to the wanderers on the roadside, and day after day she would break the mug in the nunnery courtyard as if possessed by a demon.

The end of the tale is identical to that of the story of the Tabennisi convent: forty years later, a righteous man, the abbas of anchorites was sent there by God (the Ethiopian version calls him Daniel²³ just as in the story of the “drunk”). The saintly woman refused to appear before the abbas and offered fierce resistance. The sisters beat her and brought her before the righteous man who recognized her by her “crown” and bowed down to her. This was followed by the familiar scene of the astonished and repentant nuns. Ten days later she fled from the cloister.²⁴

As the legend develops²⁵ the main character finally turns into a holy fool: not only does she pretend to be what she is not, but also manifests aggression towards those around her. However, the monastery walls were too confining and left out the audience. Holy folly needed more space to perform and found it in the vita of Theophilos and Mary, authored by John of Ephesus (*BHO*, 1184).

When I stayed in Amida nine years ago, I often saw a young man dressed as a mime, and with him there was a young woman dressed as a prostitute. They usually wandered about the city, performing skits and buffoonades, constantly showing up in churchyards and parodying clerics and everyone else, and being slapped by everyone... In the daytime they were surrounded by many people... who made jokes and played with them and boxed them on their ears, but nobody could discover where they spent their nights, although many men were consumed by passion for this woman²⁶.

Once, when several noblemen were about to rape the “prostitute,” the mime’s eyes filled with

²⁰ Cf. Цакадзе Н. П. *Сирийская, арабская и грузинская версии “Жития св. Нисимы”*. Автореф. дисс. (Tbilisi, 1975).

²¹ Кекелидзе К. С. Эпизод из начальной истории египетского монашества. Он же. *Этюды по истории древнегрузинской литературы*. (Tbilisi, 1961). vol.7, pp. 93-94.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 95.

²³ *The Book of the Saints of the Ethiopian Church*, ed. E. W. B. Budge. (Cambridge, 1928), vol. 3, p. 877.

²⁴ Кекелидзе. *Эпизод*. p. 96. Cf.: A. S. Lewis, *Select Narratives of Holy Women*. (London, 1900), 62-69.

²⁵ In several later variants of the legend, Onesima disguises herself in men’s clothing after escaping from the monastery. The relationship between holy folly and transvestism will not be discussed in this paper. It should be noted, however, that two transvestites were also called “secret servants of God” in their vitae: St. Pelagia (*Pélagie la Pénitente, Métamorphoses d’une légende*. [Paris, 1981], vol. 1, p. 128 and St. Apollinaria, *PG*, [1864], vol. 114. col. 382).

²⁶ John of Ephesus, “Lives of Eastern Saints,” *Patrologia Orientalis* (1925), vol. 12, fasc. 2, pp. 166-167.

tears and he said that she was his wife. One day John secretly followed them as far as their hiding place and

saw them both stand up and pray with their faces turned eastward and their arms raised to the sky... And they prostrated themselves, and rose to their feet, and prostrated themselves again, and repeated this many times, and then sat down to rest. After that I, in my turn, prostrated myself before them. They were agitated and vexed, and they said to me: 'Who are you, and what do you need? What do you want from the mimes?'

They would refuse to speak until

I took a solemn oath: 'I will not tell anybody about you as long as you stay in this city.' They also asked that I never speak to them in the daytime when other people were around, that I do not do them honors, greet them, or refrain from boxing their ears as if they were mimes... And I promised.

They came down to the churchyard and when day came one could see them "pantomiming before the crowd."

The next day, the false mimes told John that their names were Theophilus and Mary, that they came from aristocratic families in Antioch and were engaged to each other, and that a saintly man named Prokopios, who had run away from a rich family in Rome and lived in the stables as a beggar²⁷, revealed to them the path of higher perfection and persuaded them to abandon their fathers' homes disguised as brother and sister and "to go to foreign countries hiding the great gift of perfection that you have been granted, lest it be snatched from you."

John "dared not revile the mimes the way they wanted him to," and they disappeared from the city. The legend ends in a familiar praise of the "Lord's secret servants"²⁸.

In the story told by John, it is sinfulness rather than insanity that the characters feign (both miming and prostitution were regarded as shameful professions). Yet, they provoke other people "for real," hence, their sin is real.

While early "secret servants" look like ordinary laymen, later they turn into the worst of laymen. If the early "secret servants" do not suspect their own sainthood, in later tales they become aware of it. Moreover, they try as hard as they can to hide it from others. As the saints' awareness of their status grows, the grounds for it appear more and more obscure to the reader. The tale of the cook Euphrosynos is the last one to mention secret good deeds (although they are not described). Theophilus and Mary never tell what the "great gift of perfection" is about. This "gift" becomes more and more distant from its bearer and his or her personal qualities. On the other hand, the motif of asking God gradually disappears from hagiography. The righteous man asking who is more righteous than he is no longer the central figure. He becomes an auxiliary character and gradually turns into a saint's confidant (like John of Ephesus) – a figure which is indispensable in a "classical" vita of a fool for Christ's sake.

The "democratic" character of the tale of "secret servants" (anyone can achieve sainthood) was gradually replaced by an "aristocratic" one (God's chosen will remain chosen in spite of everything). Thus emerged the figure of the holy fool – a saint "in spite of" rather than a saint "due to."

Of course, "secret servants" were not automatically replaced by *σαλοί*. The last appearance of a "hidden" saint is attested in the vita of John the Merciful, written in the first half of the seventh century, the heyday of Byzantine "folly for Christ's sake." In this vita a "classical" holy fool, Vitalios, appears side by side with a secret servant, a monk who pretends to have a wife but turns

²⁷ The subject of "secret servants" thus merges with that of the "God's man" (Alexios or John the Kalybitis) who embodies the secret challenge to the world. The latter subject is not discussed in this paper for lack of space.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

out to be a eunuch. When his sham is disclosed, John the Merciful exclaims: “Oh, how many secret servants the Lord has – and we, the humble, do not even know them!”²⁹ The same exclamation is applied to St. Andrew the Fool in his vita³⁰. The last “secret servant” of Byzantine hagiography is an unnamed Ethiopian, appearing in the vita of St. Niphon (and emerging side by side with holy fools)³¹. He was a poor wood-seller, whom people took to be insane, but when a drought happened, it was revealed to the bishop that only this Ethiopian’s prayer can help the trouble³². It cannot be ruled out that later on these stories influenced some vitae of Muslim saints.

²⁹ Leontios de Néapolis, *Vie de Jean de Chypre dit l'Autonier*, ed. A. Festugière (Paris, 1974), p. 375.

³⁰ Vita s. Andreai Sali, *PG*. vol. 111. (1863), col. 712-713.

³¹ *Матеріали з історії візантийсько-слов'янської літератури та мови*. ed. А. В. Ристенко, (Odessa, 1928), p. 74, 164.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 72-74.