

The Life and Conduct
of the

HOLY AND BLESSED TEACHER
SYNKLETIKE

St. Athanasios the Great

Translated and with annotations
by Monk Chrysostomos



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TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

St. Synkletike, commemorated on January 5 in the Orthodox Church, is a very important figure in early monasticism. She is one of the few desert Mothers whose teachings have survived. Some have, in fact, dubbed her the “St. Anthony” of women monastics. She flourished in the fourth century. According to St. Nikolai of Ohrid, she reposed in 350 A.D.,¹ which, given the estimates of her lifespan, would put her birth somewhere between 265 and 270 A.D.

This life of St. Synkletike presents a brief account of her early years and her initial monastic struggles. There then follows a lengthy discourse on her teachings, given to certain female disciples (aspiring or tonsured nuns, as the teachings themselves confirm). The teachings are presented as though she gave them orally, after great initial reluctance, in a single session, though it is likely that this long discourse is actually a compilation of teachings given over a long period of time. Finally, the life recounts her last days and the patient endurance she showed amid the illnesses that led to her death.

I undertook to translate this work at the behest of His Eminence, the Most Reverend Chrysostomos, former Archbishop and Metropolitan *Emeritus* of Etna, who for some time urged me to produce an English translation of St. Synkletike's life and spiritual instructions. In the course of fulfilling his request, I encountered an extant English translation by Professor Elizabeth A. Castelli of Barnard College (Columbia

¹ Bishop [Saint] Nikolai Velimirović, *The Prologue from Ochrid: Lives of the Saints and Homilies for Every Day in the Year*, trans. Mother Maria (Birmingham: Lazarica Press, 1985), Part One, *January–February–March*, s.v. “January 5,” p. 28.

University),² but was disappointed by some aspects of her translation. In many instances, the original Greek was misunderstood, and the text does not appear to have been well edited, leaving the English unintelligible in places.

In my present translation, I have principally followed the text in Migne's *Patrologia Græca*,³ though in some cases I have consulted the Modern Greek translation in the *Ἑλληνες Πατέρες τῆς Ἐκκλησίας* series,⁴ and particularly in instances where words were used in obscure ways.

I have also drawn from the English translation of *The Evergetinos*, published by the Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies,⁵ to which I was a contributor. When so doing, I found it necessary to rework the translated passages considerably, since, as the astute reader will notice, Migne's text and the text used by St. Nicodemos the Hagiorite in *The Evergetinos* differ considerably. Considering the limited number of manuscripts that were at St. Nicodemos' disposal when he edited the 1783 edition of *The Evergetinos*, this is wholly understandable. That is not to say, of course, that the text in the *Patrologia Græca* is without serious deficits; indeed, the *Evergetinos* was quite useful in helping me to clarify several problematic passages in the former. These are clearly indicated in the footnotes.

Concerning the authorship of this work, it was tradition-

² "The Life and Activity of the Holy and Blessed Teacher Synkletica," in Vincent L. Wimbrush (ed.), *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), pp. 265ff.

³ Migne, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XXVIII, cols. 1488-1557.

⁴ Ἀθανασίου Ἀλεξανδρείας τοῦ Μεγάλου, *Ἄπαντα τὰ Ἔργα* (Thessalonike: Paterikai Ekdoseis "Gregorios ho Palamas," 1976), Vol. XI, pp. 251ff.

⁵ *The Evergetinos: A Complete Text* (Etna, CA: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 2008), in four books.

ally attributed to St. Athanasios of Alexandria (†373),⁶ who wrote the life of St. Anthony the Great, the so-called “Πατήρ τοῦ Μοναχισμοῦ” (father of monasticism). While the prevailing consensus, today, is that St. Athanasios did not, in fact, write the Life of Amma Synkletike, this matter is, in the end, one of secondary importance. Those things that matter, for anyone seeking the spiritual counsel of this great desert Mother, are the content of her life and the timeless relevancy of her insights. My purpose here is simply to present a readable and accurate account of her life that is both edifying and instructive. It is my sincere hope that this translation will successfully provide such an account.

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⁶ According to some, St. Synkletike knew St. Athanasios, and it was she who hid him in a pit or cistern for six years during one of the periods of exile that he suffered for his opposition to the Arians and those aligned with them. (See *Θρησκευτική και Ἠθική Ἐγκυκλοπαίδεια* [Athens: 1967], Vol. XI, s.v. “Συγκλητική.”)

THE LIFE AND CONDUCT OF THE
HOLY AND BLESSED TEACHER SYNKLETIKE

By St. Athanasios the Great

It would be fitting for none to remain uninitiated in what is good. For if they are thus exercised in such matters, they will not suffer harm in this life. Nevertheless, much of what is beneficial has escaped the notice of those less informed. This has happened to them due to their minds' becoming dull through negligence. For it often happens that valuable pearls elude paupers, since those who are untrained in such matters disregard them as having little or no value. Thus we who have an infantile and untrained soul, when we encounter the present pearl, see it as nothing great, gazing solely upon its shape, while remaining far from any knowledge of its nature. But little by little we have learned of its beauty from those near at hand, and divine love has been engendered within us for what we have seen; indeed, these things have kindled desire in our minds.

2. But who am I to speak to those who were in her presence,¹ or yet to count myself among them, as if I knew something about the illustrious and blessed Synkletike or could speak about her? I suppose that indeed all human nature would be incapable of adequately recounting her good deeds. Even if someone were to endeavor to speak about her, he would greatly, even infinitely, fall short of his goal, whether he be wise or learned. For just as those who attempt to stare at the sun damage their eyes, those who try to contemplate her life as in a mirror become dizzy at the magnitude of her

¹ The original Greek reads: "Τί δὲ λέγω τοὺς παρόντας."

achievements and either desist or become faint, succumbing to confusion in their thought.

3. Nonetheless, investigating things concerning her according to our ability, hearing fragmentary details of her early years from people her age, and being ourselves illumined, albeit faintly, by her deeds, we have undertaken to write, storing up a treasure of salvific nourishment. For to speak of her worthily is not only impossible for *us*, but difficult for most people.

4. This namesake of the heavenly assembly (συγκλήτου)² hailed from Macedonia. Her forebears, having heard of the Alexandrians' love for God and for Christ, departed Macedonia and went to the city of the Macedonian.³ Arriving in that place and finding that reality exceeded the reputation, they gladly settled there. They were not pleased on account of the multitude of people, nor did they marvel at the size of the houses; but, finding, rather, a single faith and sincere love, they made their new location their second home.

5. The blessed Synkletike was both conspicuous for her lineage and adorned with the other qualities that are deemed delightful by the world's standards. She had a sister who was of like mind, and two brothers, and they were reared to live in a most pious manner. One of her brothers died in childhood. When the other had reached his twenty-fifth year, his parents urged him to marry. After all had been prepared for the desired end and the customary contract had been concluded, the young man flew like a bird from the snare, exchanging an earthly bride for the unblemished and free assembly of the saints.

² Σύγκλητος means "senate" or "assembly"; hence, the name Συγκλητική denotes what is "senatorial" or "noble"; in this instance, a noble in the "heavenly assembly" of Saints.

³ The city of Alexander the Great, or Alexandria.