

## Abba Ephraim of Vatopedi Freed from Prison and Returned to His Monastery



Late Friday night, Archimandrite Ephraim, the Abbot of Vatopedi Monastery, returned to Mount Athos after a three-month detention in Korydallos prison. On Saturday Alexander Gatilin, a spokesman for the Foundation of St Andrew the First-Called Apostle, told the *Interfax-Religion* correspondent that yesterday the Appeals Board of the Athens City Court decided to change the measure of restraint of Fr Ephraim. He went on to say that after Fr Ephraim had posted bail and filed the necessary documentation, he went by car to the port of Ierrissos (nearly 400 miles) from Athens, where he boarded a boat. His monks and his spiritual children accompanied him and a crowd of about 700 people greeted him at the pier of Vatopedi Monastery. The boats in the harbor sounded their horns and the crowd gathered about Abbot Ephraim sang hymns. The clergy of the monastery were in full festal vestments. The brotherhood, its employees, and pilgrims held lit candles and formed a living corridor through which Fr Ephraim passed as he headed the procession to the Monastery.

Gatilin added: ‘The many believers gathered there celebrated; a Paschal atmosphere prevailed that evening in Vatopedi. Before entering the Monastery grounds proper, the brotherhood vested Fr Ephraim in his Abbot’s mantle. The bells tolled as the Abbot entered the Monastery grounds and went to the Cathedral of the Annunciation, where he served a short service of thanksgiving’.

Addressing the gathering, Fr Ephraim said. ‘I left on 26 December, the day of the Most Holy Mother of God and I’m back again on her day (the Orthodox feast day of the Praises of the Most Holy Mother of God). While I was in custody, when I called upon the name of the Most Holy Mother of God, I immediately received the strength that I needed’. Abbot Ephraim spoke of how the inmates showed him ‘great love and respect’, and how he heard the confessions of almost all the prisoners in the wing of the prison where he lived, along with the confessions of many of the prison staff, too. Abba Ephraim noted, ‘A devout Christian told me yesterday that I’d be released. I asked him why he thought so. He replied that he had a dream, how he came to the prison, and found no one there, but he met a woman in dark robes, who said, ‘Do not seek Elder Ephraim, he’s here at my house, in Vatopedi’. He acknowledged that he was grateful for every thing that happened to him, that he forgave everyone, and that he did his best to keep his soul pure, ‘not provoking a single thought directed against anyone’.

As reported in December 2011, a Greek court ordered Fr Ephraim’s arrest in connection with an investigation of property transactions between Vatopedi and the EU-run Greek State in 2008. In late December, Patriarch Kyrill of Moscow and all the Russias wrote a letter to the Greek President asking for Archimandrite Ephraim’s release from custody, expressing surprise at his pre-trial incarceration. Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk described the arrest of Fr Ephraim as an attack on Athonite monasticism in particular and on Orthodoxy in general. Previously, influential Russian politicians, the Russian Orthodox Church as well as the Foundation of St Andrew the First-Called voiced support for Abbot Ephraim. This was in recognition of the fact that Abba Ephraim was part of the delegation from Vatopedi Monastery that brought the Bely of the Most Holy Mother of God to Russia for a stay lasting from 20 October to 28 November, going to various cities throughout the country, where nearly 3 million people venerated the relic, including top political leaders. Commenting on the current changes and Fr Ephraim’s current freedom, the Found of St Andrew the First-Called expressed its support for Abba Ephraim and voiced the hope that ‘justice and fairness will prevail in the end, with Archimandrite Ephraim cleared of all charges’.

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