

SAINT JOHN KOUKOUZELIS

—Commemorated October 1st—

In the great city Dirachion, located in the region of Ioustiniani, there lived a boy named John (†1360 AD) who had been orphaned at a young age. After his father died, his devout Christian mother sent her son to school to be educated in the sacred faith. Everyone soon began to call this boy “angel voice” on account of his extremely beautiful voice. In those days, as was customary for kings and emperors throughout the ages, imperial officials were searching for gifted singers with beautiful voices.

When they came across this young boy, they placed him in a royal school, in order for him to be trained to perfection in the musical arts. In a short time, as a prudent and bright student, he surpassed all his other classmates. Consequently, he was loved very much by the emperor, who intended to find a spouse for him and planned to honor him with a magnificent and lavish wedding ceremony. After some time, noticing that all the rulers held him in high esteem (both on account of the love the emperor had for him, as well as his exceptional musical talent), John became concerned, lest he be deprived of the heavenly bliss on account of this transient earthly glory.

During that time the Abbot of Great Lavra monastery on Mount Athos happened to be visiting the emperor at the palace for a certain urgent matter. When John Koukouzelis¹ witnessed the dignity and angelic conduct of this Abbot, he felt a great admiration and respect for monasticism and decided to abandon all honor and royal glory. He stripped himself of his secular silk garments, dressed himself with rough woolen clothing, took a laborer’s rod in his hand, and departed for Mount Athos.

When he arrived at the monastery of Great Lavra, the door-keeper asked him where he was from, and what he wanted. John responded, “I desire to become a monk; I used to be a shepherd.” The door-keeper then informed the Abbot, who was pleased to hear this because the monastery was in need of such a person. Having tested him for a period of time, they tonsured him a monk and

¹ Although it remains uncertain as to how this saint received the name Koukouzelis, there is the opinion that he acquired this nickname as a result of his ascetical diet during his years at the royal school, where he would eat fava beans (*koukia*) and green peas (*zelia*).

sent him to remote pastures to shepherd the monastery's goats. With great joy and zeal, John eagerly headed for the quietude that he had always desired, tirelessly and diligently attending to his assignment, all the while continuously praying to the Lord.

The emperor in the meantime had great sorrow on account of John's departure. He sent regents to various cities, regions, deserts, and monasteries in search of him. These servants also traveled to Mount Athos and searched the entire peninsula carefully; however, no one could imagine that the person whom they were seeking was the shepherd clothed in old, ripped rags.

One day, while he was tending the goats near the edge of a cliff, after looking around in all directions to confirm that there was no one present to hear him, he began to chant a hymn with great skill and compunction. A hermit living in a nearby cave, however, had gone unnoticed. Upon hearing the sweet and harmonious melody, full of amazement he exited his cave to find himself before an extraordinary sight: the shepherd was chanting, and the goats were not grazing but standing motionless and gazing at him, as if marveling and enjoying the angelic melody. Having witnessed this, the hermit quickly departed for Great Lavra and announced everything to the Abbot, who quickly sent disciples to bring John to him. When John arrived, the Abbot asked him, "In God's name, tell me the truth. Are you John Koukouzelis whom the emperor has been searching for so dearly?" Then John fell at the feet of the Abbot asking for forgiveness, and with tears said, "Yes I am, the sinful and unworthy servant of your holiness. But please, I beg you: allow me to remain at this humble ministry, which you have assigned me to. Permit me to continue tending to the goats, so that the emperor learns nothing of this."

Having granted this request, the Abbot left for the capital city, and prostrating himself before the king, he said, "I appeal to your power and authority, O Master: grant to me one person, who desires to save his soul, and if he has in anyway offended your Kingdom, please forgive him." The emperor then inquired who this person was. "If you do not consent to this in writing first," replied the Abbot, "I will not tell you." The emperor then ordered that the appropriate document be drafted, and once completed, he signed it. Then the Abbot related everything concerning monk Koukouzelis in detail. Upon hearing this, the

emperor's eyes filled with tears, while his heart filled with both joy and sadness. He was happy to learn of John's extreme devoutness and that, having despised every worldly pleasure, he received the angelic schema; he was embittered, nonetheless, because he had given his consent in writing and could not retract his decision. After consoling the emperor and soothing his heart with comforting words, the Abbot thanked him, wished him well, and returned to his Monastery where he related all the events to the brothers.

And so, this marvelous man John, no longer troubled by the earthly king, was free to serve the Heavenly King by chanting and praising Him tirelessly every day. Later he received the blessing from the Abbot to build a cell and a chapel in honor of the Archangels some distance from the Monastery. There he lived in solitude six days a week, while on Sundays and all other feast days, he was never absent from the right choir of the monastery's catholicon, where he would chant to God with zeal and compunction.

During one Saturday of the Akathist, after chanting the idiomela and the canon of the Theotokos as always with utmost care and diligence, he felt extremely tired and briefly fell into a light sleep while standing in his *stasidi*.² At that moment, the Queen Theotokos appeared to him and said, "Rejoice my child John! Chant to me and I will never abandon you." Having said this, She gave him a gold coin. John then awoke to find an unexpected marvel: the coin in his right hand! As his eyes filled with many tears and his heart flooded with infinite joy, he thanked the Mother of God and proceeded to show the coin to the other fathers, who in turn took it and placed it in the church, where it performed many awesome miracles. Henceforth, he was never absent from the right choir, where he would chant eagerly and praise the Lord tirelessly.

With time, due to his continual effort and prolonged standing, one of his legs developed an infection and began to discharge pus. The all-powerful Queen, however, healed him from this ailment, just as She healed St. John of Damascus. She appeared to him and said, "From now on you will be healthy," and immediately his leg was restored to complete health. Having thanked the Mother of God for Her intervention, he lived the remainder of his life with fasting, all-night vigils, and, above all, with great humility, without ever becoming sick until death.

² A *stasidi* is a wooden stand with arm-rests and a seat.

He also foresaw his end, and, having called all the brothers together, he prayed for them and asked them to bury him in the chapel of the Archangels, which he himself had built. In this manner he reposed in Jesus Christ, our Lord, to Whom belongs glory unto the ages. Amen.



The miraculous icon of the Mother of God referred to as Panagia Koukouzelisa, which is found in the Monastery of Great Lavra on Mount Athos. It was in front of this icon that Saint John Koukouzelis had the vision of the Mother of God and received the gold coin from her.