



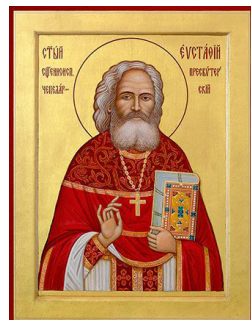
## ■ A New Confessor of Bulgaria

# **The Life, Sufferings, and Miracles of the Holy Confessor Protopresbyter Evstati Yankov Evstatiev\***

† **Sunday of the Resurrection (7/20 April 1952)**

**B**orn in the picturesque Rhodope village of Chepelare on August 20 (Old Style)<sup>1</sup> 1886, Evstati was the first child of the Christian couple Yanko and Maria.

Life in a poor yet hardworking, united, and devout family, regular attendance at services in the church of Chepelare, and the sincere love of young Evstati for the Lord laid the solid foundations of his fervent Christian faith.



From as early as four or five years old, Evstati was so deeply drawn to the beauty of the services that he once ran away from home to attend church.

**I**t was Good Friday.

The Crucifixion of the Lord, erected in the middle of the church, captured the attention of the little pilgrim who had just crossed the threshold of God's house. The impressionable child could not take his eyes off the Savior. A sorrowful cry burst from the heart of the child, filled with compassion and pain, breaking the prayerful silence in the church:

**“Oh, what have they done to Him? Why have they punished Him so?”**

Such love and tenderness for the Lord, crucified for our sake, flowed from the pure child's soul that everyone present in the church was deeply moved.

**F**rom that moment, Evstati knew no other childhood game but “playing church.” With a brilliant memory from a young age, the future priest memorized all the prayers and the entire content of the sacred rites simply by observing and listening to the services in the church.

**T**hus, it was only natural that the other children always chose Evstati to play the important role of “priest” in their innocent game. And the zealous little “pastor” took on this role with such enthusiasm that he inadvertently commanded respect not only from his peers but also from adults. He preached with fervor, sang church hymns, and recited genuine prayers.

**T**ouched by his words, the elders would stop him on the streets of Chepelare:

**“Dear child, tell us something about God!”**

**And the little “priest” would speak about God with childlike zeal.**

**“This child will become a priest,” the elders of Chepelare would whisper joyfully.**

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**And** the Lord Himself, in His providence, arranged for Evstati to pass through the crucible of many trials, thus preparing his soul for the heavy priestly cross.

**T**he first sorrowful event in the boy’s life came soon and unexpectedly—his father, Yanko, gradually but fully fell into the vice of drunkenness. Shortly thereafter, he left his home, leaving his four children to the care of their poor mother, Maria.

**F**rom that moment on, poverty, want, and deprivation became constant companions in the household of the grief-stricken family.

**D**espite the enormous difficulties, young Evstati placed all his trust in God.

**H**e was a dutiful and diligent helper to his mother, who worked day and night so that the boy could study. From then on, the grateful Evstati never forgot his mother’s selfsacrifice.

**A**fter completing the state-run three-class school in Chepelare in 1899, the fifteen-year-old Evstati, as the eldest child, had to seek employment elsewhere. Thus, he became a farmhand for certain masters in Stanimaka<sup>2</sup>.

**E**ven here, zeal for God did not abandon the future holy confessor. He used every free moment to visit a church or to pray somewhere in secret.

**H**is masters loved the young Chepelare native for his honest work, modest and devout behavior, and therefore rewarded him with the op-

portunity to attend daily services at the nearby Church of Saint George without hindrance. Our God-lover always sought to be in the choir and help the chanters.

**T**wo years later, the former Metropolitan of Skopje, Theodosios, visited Stanimaka. He visited the Church of Saint George, where he was delighted to hear the 17-year-old Evstati chant the “Our Father.” He took the boy with him to Sofia as his subdeacon and Kellion monk<sup>3</sup>. In his free time, the highly educated hierarch taught the vigilant youth Church Slavonic, Greek, and Russian, Byzantine chant, rhetoric, and grammar.

**E**fstati Evstatiev served as subdeacon to Metropolitan Theodosios until 1906. That same year, he completed a one-year course at the newly established Psalt School at Bachkovo Monastery, where he refined his skills as a church psalmist. The thirst to serve God burned ever brighter in the devoted heart of the young Chepelare native.

**I**n the autumn of 1911, Evstati entered the Three-Class Seminaria at the aforementioned holy monastery. Though this educational institution was not elite, its purpose was to prepare spiritual shepherds for the free rural parishes of the Plovdiv Diocese.

**T**he future pastor of Chepelare had the blessed opportunity to draw spiritual experience and knowledge from many prominent Bulgarian spiritual fathers. For many years, highly enlightened individuals taught there, such as the holy martyr Boris, the future Metropolitan of Nevrokop, then still a hierodeacon, as well as gifted theologians who would later become the Metropolitans of the Sliven and Lovech Dioceses—Eulogiy (Georgiev) and Anthim (Shivachev).

**I**n the final academic year of 1913-1914, Evstati Evstatiev wedded to the deeply devout teacher of the Chepelare three-class state school, who later became its director—Todora Naidenova, with whom he had one son, Simeon.

**O**n the Sunday of the Triumph of Orthodoxy, the fervent desire of the 29-year-old Evstati’s heart, ablaze with love for God, finally began to be realized. On that day, February 23, 1914, Metropolitan Maxim of Plovdiv ordained the holy man to the diaconate. After receiving his diploma<sup>4</sup>, Deacon Evstati returned to his native village, where about half a year later<sup>5</sup> he was ordained to the priesthood by the Bishop of Plovdiv at the Church of Saint Athanasius.

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**I**n **Chepelare**, the young priest was welcomed with great honor by his relatives, friends, and parishioners.

**T**here was a local tradition in which newly ordained priests would visit homes to sprinkle them with holy water. In this way, they could

gather some means from the people, which the Rhodope villagers sought to use to alleviate the immediate needs of their new pastor.

When the poor Father Evstati was offered this, he resolutely refused, though he highly valued the customs and was well aware of how beneficial the sprinkling with holy water was:

**“I will sprinkle when the time comes for it, but not to ask for anything! The cassock is sacred to me, and I will not dishonor it, even if I die of hunger!”**

Father Evstati did not come to be served, but to serve God and his neighbors (cf. Mark 10:45). This was the longing of his soul from childhood; this he demonstrated by his living example; and this he testified to, writing in his diary by his own hand:

**“There is no vocation heavier and more responsible than the priesthood. The soul of a priest must be exceedingly great, and since this is rare, few priests will be saved. When you feel zeal for the priesthood, vividly imagine the Judgment, the responsibility, and the nature of the punishment in contrast to worldly peace. [...] A priest is like a ship in the midst of waves. His soul is wounded by those near and far, friends and foes, and he must bear everything with great magnanimity.”**

The priestly cross of Father Evstati was heavy, but he bore it without complaint, meekly and humbly, with faith and utmost self-denial, with seraphic love for God and his neighbor.

During his ministry, Priest Evstati shepherded his Chepelare flock in a fatherly manner, passing through two world wars, two national catastrophes, godless communist rule, and the inevitable consequences of these—death, hunger, deprivation, poverty, unbelief, the widespread persecution of believing Christians, and the Church itself.

From his youth, he made his heart an altar for the Lord and daily offered Him a sacrifice of praise—a deep, concentrated prayer, washed with tears of repentance.

The people of Chepelare testified that Father Evstati often, during or after the service, literally watered the floor of the church with his tears.

His angelic singing, fervent services, and long captivating sermons moved people to prayer, to the remembrance of sins, to acts of mercy and compassion, and to a pious Orthodox life.

The parishioners remembered him as a cheerful, radiant, and simple man. In both winter and summer, he greeted the people gathered in the narthex with sincere love and the triumphant Christian greeting: “Christ is risen, dear brothers and sisters!” He comforted every suffering heart

with a kind word, wise counsel, a smooth-tongued story, or simply with a church hymn.

**T**he pleasant timbre, the beautiful Byzantine melodies which he easily performed, and the strong and remarkably beautiful voice with which the presbyter of Chepelare was gifted, awakened the spirit of prayer even in the most negligent parishioners. By setting the right tone, the holy pastor not only multiplied his own talent but also enhanced the musical gifts of his flock. The spiritual children of Father Eustati became renowned in the churches of the Rhodope region for their prayerful chants, reverent behavior in the choir, and sincere love for Eastern singing.

**F**ather Eustati loved orderly liturgical practices and traditions, but above all, he sought to instill in the souls entrusted to him the right faith and good habits. He enjoyed making jokes, but always with discretion and modesty. He was selfless—he accepted whatever money was given to him, and from the poor, he not only asked for nothing but also paid the fees required by the metropolis for marriage and baptism documents himself.

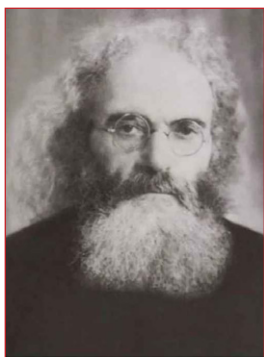
**H**e often reminded his parishioners:

**“Remember, God does not need your candles, nor does He hunger for your offerings! The sacrifice for all was the Son of God—our Lord Jesus Christ. So, if you have no money, will you not go to church? Because you cannot buy and light candles?! God requires nothing from you except pure faith.”**

**A**nd it was this that shone in the Chepelare priest—pure Orthodox faith and a life lived according to it. The spiritual pastor keenly understood his duty to teach the truths of the faith, generously feeding his parishioners with the rich bread of God’s word and the spiritual heritage of the holy fathers.

**A**t first, the priest Eustati Yankov focused on catechizing his parishioners, and when the basic truths of the faith were firmly established in the souls and minds of the believers, he moved on to more “solid food” (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:2)—sermons, lectures, and discussions with dogmatic, liturgical, moraltheological, and apologetic content. He preached the word, instructing whether the time was convenient or not, reproofing faults and sinful habits, forbidding insincere penitents, rooting out pagan superstitions, exhorting with great patience and wisdom (cf. 2 Timothy 4:2).

**F**ather Eustati preached at every service, and during the Holy Liturgy, he would customarily teach twice—after the reading of the Gospel and shortly before the dismissal. He spoke simply, clearly, convincingly, with



examples from Holy Scripture and life, especially loving to tell stories related to the Rhodope region. Every word that came from his zealous lips, like fire, went straight to the conscience of the parishioners; it burned away every snake—every sinful habit that had nested in a person's heart; it enlightened and warmed the seed of every gospel hope, every impulse toward repentance and virtue in Christians.

People listened without making a sound while their father spoke. And it often happened that his sermons lasted for an hour and a half, and sometimes more than two hours! But neither the wise preacher grew tired of speaking, nor did the flock of Chepelare grow weary of listening.

Father Eustati cared that his parishioners regularly attended church, strictly observed the fasts, and bore witness to their faith by their deeds, words, and thoughts, being merciful, meek, and humble toward each other. Taught by his Creator not to regard anyone's status, the pastor made no distinction between the rich and the poor, ministers and beggars.

He relentlessly rebuked from the pulpit the vices and weaknesses of the Christians of his time. Very often, wealthy Chepelare residents recognized themselves in his sermons and gnashed their teeth, and some even allowed themselves to angrily proclaim: "Look! The dragon has opened its mouth again and started spewing fire and brimstone!"

But Father Eustati adorned his crown of virtues with the unfading flower of humility. Noticing irritation, dislike, or even the slightest feeling of anger or resentment in his adversaries, the gentle presbyter would stand before them, bow, and humbly ask for forgiveness, thereby earning their respect forever. He often warned his spiritual children with a folk saying:

**"The tongue has no bones, but it breaks bones! That is why a person must be very careful in how and what he says to those around him. This applies even more to church ministers, priests, and especially to spiritual fathers who hear confessions!"**

Once it happened that the righteous priest made a remark to the churchwarden<sup>6</sup> during a service in front of the entire congregation. The churchwarden was saddened and the next day came to the church earlier than usual, lit a candle, prepared everything necessary for the service, and finally went out to sweep the churchyard.



**W**hen Father Eustati arrived at the church and saw that everything was neatly cleaned and prepared but the warden was absent, his heart tightened. He immediately understood the reason. With tears in his eyes, he knelt before the holy altar and immersed himself in prayer. More than an hour passed, the church filled with people, but Father Eustati still did not give the opening exclamation. Everyone knew that their pastor was praying in the altar, but no one dared to interrupt him. People could not understand what was happening.

**A**fter a while, the saddened warden entered the church, wondering why the service had not yet started. As soon as the holy father heard his servant's voice, he left the altar and hurried to the offended man. He met him in the middle of the church and bowed to the ground, saying:

**“Todor, forgive me! Yesterday I hurt you deeply, and I cannot serve until you forgive me! The Savior in the Holy Gospel tells us: ‘Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee, leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift’ (Matthew 5:23-24). So now I too cannot offer the bloodless Sacrifice until I am reconciled with you!”**

**T**ouched by his sincere words, both the warden and all the people in the church wept. Todor, in turn, bowed to the holy and righteous man and asked for forgiveness, completely forgetting about the offense.

**H**aving made himself a temple of the Holy Spirit, Father Eustati received an extraordinary gift from the heavenly treasury—the spiritual eyes of the pastor were opened during the communion of the faithful, and the humble priest could see who among his flock was receiving the Holy Gifts worthily and for salvation, and who was not.

**W**ith tears in his eyes and fervent prayer, the holy confessor could move even the most hardened and unrepentant sinners to compunction and sincere confession.

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**W**ith the help of his wife, Father Eustati founded a women's church choir and a Sunday school.

**S**ince 1915, the spiritual laborer in Christ's vineyard and his pious wife began sowing the seed of faith in the souls of the children attending the Chepelare gymnasium. They left warm memories among all their students, not only among Christians but even among children from Muslim and communist families.

**S**ide by side, for almost 18 years, Father Eustati and his wife Theodora worked diligently, selflessly, and tirelessly in God's field.

**B**ut on March 11, 1933, his wife suddenly passed away.

Dark clouds hung over the young widowed priest. The enemy of our salvation launched a fierce attack against the righteous man. Years later, the servant of God confessed: “When I became a widower, I met Satan!”

But the Chepelare pastor did not despair; instead, he lifted his eyes to the heights of fasting and prayer, from where he expected help, for the Christian’s hope is in the Lord (cf. Psalm 141:1-2). And indeed, the dark clouds sent by the evil one were repeatedly driven away in shame by the rays of the Sun of righteousness, which warmed the humble soul of Father Eustati. Not only did he withstand the temptations, but he also strengthened his heart so much that he became a chosen vessel of God’s grace. The righteous priest repeatedly said that



**only when God visited him with this severe trial did he begin his true pastoral work—caring for others.**

“God gives a cross, but He also gives a Simon of Cyrene!” - Father Eustati loved to repeat, not realizing in his humility that he himself often became that Simon of Cyrene.

From the very beginning of his ministry, Father Eustati engaged in secret charitable activities and acts of mercy. During Easter and Christmas holidays, he anonymously distributed donations from his own funds to the poor and widows. On the eve of these holidays, people in need would find envelopes with money hidden under their doors or left in their yards.

Many times, when he went to the diocesan office, the priest of Christ would simply sign and tell the secretary: “Give my salary to this person.” Even the bread from the blessing of the loaves and memorial services, he gave to the poor, orphans, and widows.

Especially during major holidays, the merciful father never missed an opportunity to remind his congregation at the end of his sermon:

**“How, dear brothers and sisters, will you now celebrate? Will your heart allow you to sit down at the festive table when your poor neighbors are starving, walking around in rags and barefoot? What kind of Easter will that be for them, what kind of Christmas? Let us try to ensure that on this bright holiday, every home has an abundant meal, joy, and children’s laughter. Let us make sure that everyone around us is well-dressed and shod. And God will reward us a hundredfold!”**

The entire town of Chepelare and the surrounding villages testified with one voice:



**“Did he only help with money?! With advice, kind words, and comfort! How many people he saved from destruction, despair, and a bad life! What paths would we have walked if not for Father Eustati! His words deeply stirred the human soul.”**

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**The** fame of the righteous life of Priest Eustati gradually spread throughout the country. In 1936, against his will, he was awarded the title of Protopresbyter. But this distinction in no way reflected the true measure of the spiritual stature of God’s servant. Only a few facts from his personal history, like small sparks, shed light on his hidden asceticism.

**The** fragrance of such a life caused many of his brethren—priests, monks, and even archpastors—to flock to the small town of Chepelare, as to a full-flowing spring from which they drew inspiration to follow the path of Christ. Many wished to become his spiritual children. Priests from Smolyan and Asenovgrad joyfully accepted him as their confessor and guide in spiritual life.

**Moreover**, throughout the Rhodope region, there was no more worthy clergyman to be entrusted with the spiritual guidance of the monks of Bachkovo Monastery. The humble pastor repeatedly declined the insistent invitations of the abbot of Bachkovo, until finally, he was persuaded by his words:

**“It** is well known that for almost ten years now, you have been striving as a monk in the world. Your ascetic life and prayerful struggle are spoken of everywhere. [...] Do not worry that you will break church traditions and order<sup>7</sup>, for ‘God does not look at the outward appearance, but at the heart’ (cf. 1 Samuel 16:7).”

**Thus**, Father Eustati became a priest among monks and a monk among priests.

**The** Protopresbyter of Chepelare was a firm support for many of his fellow pastors, especially those who also bore the heavy cross of widowhood. Graced with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, he was distinguished by his modesty, simplicity of heart, and remarkable delicacy in his interactions with all pastors, archpastors, and monks.

**His** life in Christ was truly hidden, but precisely because of this, the clergyman irresistibly attracted all who, like him, sought to serve God until their last breath—not in the eyes of a noisy world, but modestly hidden in the depths of their love for God.

**Such** closeness the holy pastor had with a few faithful servants of God—bishops, priests, and monks<sup>8</sup>. Among them, the name of Archimandrite Seraphim (Alexiev) stands out with particular strength, who

later would be the first to describe the righteous life of his spiritual friend and co-pastor, Eustati.

Despite a nearly 30-year difference in age, the two clergymen communicated as if they had one heart, one soul, and one will; aiming for the depths of humility, they simultaneously worked tirelessly for the good of the Church. Deeply enlightened, conscientious servants of God, Archpriest Eustati and Archimandrite Seraphim brought each other great comfort by sharing moments of their lives.

Every year, Father Seraphim would gladly spend at least a week as a guest of his spiritual brother in Chepelare. Many times, they walked together through the beautiful Rhodope mountains, absorbed not so much by the magnificent views around them as by the soul-saving conversations they had. As soon as the time for the evening service came, Father Eustati would give the opening exclamation, which echoed loudly in the “temple of God not made with hands”—in the wonderful Rhodope mountains. There, among the majestic nature, the two brothers in Christ offered a sacrifice of praise, singing the entire Vespers service by heart. Their hearts thought of nothing earthly, but faithfully called out to the Creator:

**“Oh, how I long to become a servant of Thy mysteries,  
and my heart—Thy altar,  
and my spirit—Thy temple!”<sup>9</sup>**

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Like Protopresbyter John of Kronstadt, whose holy life he zealously emulated, Father Eustati Eustatiev received letters with the names of the sick, the suffering, and those in distress from all over Bulgaria. Along with requests for prayers, there was often money in the envelopes.

Initially, Father Eustati used these funds, along with his personal income, to carry out his charitable work.

And in 1938, he founded the Orthodox Christian Brotherhood (OCB) “Holy Annunciation” in his parish. The primary goal of the brotherhood



From the Proclamation of the Sanctity of Saint Evstati ([see here](#))

was the spiritual and moral enlightenment of the people of Chepelare through discussions, meetings, and distribution of free literature, as well as material assistance to all in need. The charitable activities of the OCB “Holy Annunciation” flourished to such an extent that before major holidays, it became necessary to hire vehicles and workers to distribute the large number of collected donations.

The spiritual prosperity of Father Eustati’s flock was the brightest testimony to the fruitful educational efforts of their pastor. The parishioners of the Church of St. Athanasius were renowned among the surrounding towns and villages for their good knowledge of the faith and their zealous life according to it.

• The time came for the good pastor of Chepelare to send his son, Simeon, whom he had raised with great love and care, to study at the Plovdiv Seminary.

Left entirely alone in his home, Father Eustati gave away his household goods to the poor and widows, keeping only what was absolutely necessary. He arranged a small prayer room in his house, where he withdrew day and night for heartfelt conversation with God. He also received people there for confession, and they began to call this prayer corner by endearing names—**“prayer room,” “little Jerusalem,” “chapel.”**

Then he began to live like a monk in the world—chaste, without possessions (voluntarily poor), and in obedience to the will of God. These vows, which every monk takes at the beginning of his dedication to God, Father Eustati fulfilled perfectly and completely voluntarily.

Thus, day by day, this little “Jerusalem” drew closer to the Heavenly Jerusalem. The holy man lived simply, ascetically. With tears and repentant sighs, he quenched his thirst; with the word of God and the writings of the holy fathers, he satisfied his hunger. His breath was prayer, his prayer was breath. The doors of his house, like the doors of his heart, were always open to all.

“We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to His purpose,” testifies the holy Apostle Paul (Romans 8:28). That is why the Lord did not delay in glorifying His faithful servant with the gift of miracles.

Weeping mothers brought their sick children; distressed fathers led their possessed children to the house of the righteous pastor; women with complicated pregnancies sent their relatives and neighbors to ask for the prayers of Christ’s priest.

When a sufferer was brought to the house or church, Father Eustati would place the epitrachelion on the head of the sick person and pray for their salvation and healing. Tear after tear flowed down his garments as

he concentrated on reading the prayers. Seeing how the righteous man prayed, sympathized, and wept, the relatives of the sick person were deeply moved and joined in fervent prayer with the loving priest.

In this way, the sick were healed, the mentally ill were completely freed from their torment, women gave birth to healthy children, and many doctors were astonished by the sudden recovery of their seriously ill patients through the prayers of Father Eustati.

Not only for the sick and suffering did the future confessor of Christ's faith reverently shed tears.

Soldiers who returned alive and well from the bloody battles on the front lines showed their bullet-pierced coats as evidence of the righteous man's prayerful intercession. A protector, comforter, counselor, and sincere friend to students and teachers, merchants and workers, prisoners and the free—the pastor of Chepelare “became all things to all men” (1 Corinthians 9:22).

As a sign of sincere respect and gratitude, the faithful, pious monks, priests from near and far corners of Bulgaria, and revered bishops lovingly began to call Father Eustati **“The Vladyka of the Rhodope”** and **“The Bulgarian Father John of Kronstadt.”**

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**The** Lord Himself, the Creator of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible, testified to the name of the **“Vladyka of the Rhodope”** through the following event:

Vasil Shokov of Chepelare lost sight in one eye due to a serious childhood injury. Years later, in 1947, as a grown man with a wife and children, his healthy eye became inflamed. After three years of fruitless visits to hospitals and doctors, Vasil became completely blind.

A man of deep faith, he did not fall into despair or grumble, but placed all his hope in God. He fervently asked for the intercession of Saint John of Rila in prayer.

Time passed, and the Shokov family decided to invite Father Eustati to perform the sacrament of Holy Unction. Early in the morning, while the priest was preparing for the sacrament, placing all his trust in God, an unexpected guest arrived out of breath. Vasil Sivenov, a young soldier and neighbor of the Shokov family, stood at the door of Father Eustati's home and knocked persistently on the gate.

**“What** happened, why have you come to me so early?” the gentle father asked in surprise.

● **“Father, listen to what happened! ...Some time ago, I had a dream. A venerable elder, dressed in a cassock and holding a staff in his right hand, came to me and asked me to build him a small house. The dream**

repeated. Each time, I promised, but after waking up, I didn't even think about fulfilling the promise.

**I** recently completed my military service. I returned here to Chepelare. Before starting work, I decided to relax at a sanatorium with friends. So, we went there, and one night I fell asleep, and in the morning, my friends couldn't wake me! I slept until noon, drenched in sweat, while my friends kept calling and calling me. Growing very worried, they persistently tried to wake me, and I finally opened my eyes. During this deep sleep, I saw the elder a third time, but this time he was stern and scolded me:

**'Young man, you promised to build me a house, and you are doing nothing!'**

**'Who are you?'** I asked fearfully.

**'Now I will show you who I am!'** the elder said and led me directly to the Rila Monastery to the relics of Saint John of Rila. He lay down in the reliquary, rested for a bit, then got up again and said to me:

**'Do you understand now who I am?'**

**'Yes, you are Saint John of Rila! But how will I build you a house? You know I'm young, just out of the army, and I don't have any money!'** Saint John smiled kindly and said to me:

**'Do not be afraid! Your Vladyka, Father Eustati, will help you, and so will the blind man whose sight I will restore!'**

**After this, Father, we came here to your house, and you greeted Saint John, and you talked with him warmly for a long time. Finally, the venerable one said to me:**

**'Vasil! According to the dimensions and plan I have given you, you and the former blind man, whose sight I will restore, will build me a small house in the Asenets neighborhood!'**

**The dream ended, I opened my eyes, left the sanatorium in fear, and hurried back to Chepelare."**

● **Father Eustati** listened attentively to Vasil S.'s story, and tears of joy slowly flowed from his eyes. That evening, the Holy Unction was held. Many people gathered at the home of Vasil Shokov—relatives, friends, and neighbors. The Holy Unction began, but it was no ordinary service. The priest knelt, holding the prayer book in one hand, and with the other, he crossed himself and held the epitachelion (stole) over the head of the blind man, who was also kneeling. How the holy priest prayed! His tears washed



From the Proclamation of the Sanctity of Saint Evstati ([see here](#))

the head of the blind Vasil, the epitrachelion became soaked with moisture, and the floor beneath the saint's feet became completely wet. Suddenly, during the final prayer before the anointing, Vasil, covered by the epitrachelion, regained sight in both eyes! Saint Eustati finished the service, and then publicly recounted Vasil Sivenov's dream. Great joy filled that night—the light of Christ, which enlightens every person, restored the sight of the blind Vasil by the hand of the righteous Father Eustati, through the prayers of the venerable wonderworker Saint John of Rila. The very next day, Vasil Shokov began the construction of a chapel dedicated to Saint John. Even after this great miracle, the priest of God, Eustati, tried in every way to remain hidden under the monastic mantle of Saint John of Rila. In reporting the miracle to the Rila Monastery, the humble presbyter did not mention his own involvement, exclaiming with the royal prophet: “Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory” (Psalm 115:1).

**But** “a city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house” (cf. Matthew 5:14-15). Though the fame of Protopresbyter Eustati Yankov grew more and more among the people, the gentle breath of the Holy Spirit and the cool shade of his sincere humility protected him from spiritual blindness and the deadly sin of pride.

**It** is said that one swallow does not make a spring. But this marvelous bird of Chepelare, soaring high on the wings of prayer and fasting and simply called by the people “Father Stratyu,” not only spread the triumphant song of Christ throughout the Rhodopes with his life and deeds but also diligently sowed the seed of faith in the hearts of the Bulgarian people. With a melodious tune, sung by the holy fathers, and with hope in his eyes, the holy bird diligently instructed his children, longing to see the fruits of his labors. But human thoughts are one thing, and God's purposes are another (cf. Isaiah 55:8).

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**Difficult** days came for our much-suffering homeland. After the coup of September 9, 1944, a communist dictatorship was established in Bulgaria (for some time under the guise of democracy). Being opponents of God, the communists hated the Christian faith. They brazenly invaded spiritual fields, cruelly trampling on the hope that had been sown, reaping the budding love with a sickle of hatred, and destroying the roots of faith in Christ with a hammer of fury.

**As** early as November 1944, Father Eustati was summoned to the authorities and “friendly” advised not to serve or preach “so much” in order not to “interfere with the activities of the Fatherland Front”<sup>10</sup>. But the servant of God stood firm in his confession:





From the Proclamation of the  
Sanctity of Saint Evstati  
([see here](#))

**“I am a priest, and I must preach the word of God, serve in the church, and help people spiritually and materially. Even if I did not believe in God, just for the salary that the metropolis pays me, I would be obliged to fulfill my duties. But how much more so, when I believe in God, and this faith is my greatest treasure, for which I am willing to sacrifice even my life!”**

As time went on, all those spiritually close to Father Eustati Yankov began to disappear one by one. Arrested, thrown into prisons and labor camps—“of whom the world was not worthy, they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth” (cf. Hebrews 11:37-38) at the hands of the atheist communists.

The murderous hand of the new regime slowly reached out to the innocent confessor-priest of Chepelare. First, Simeon, Father Eustati’s son, was kidnapped in broad daylight, and for four months, nothing was known of him. Shortly after this, four armed communists broke into the priest’s home and stole the money collected for the diocese to build a new bell tower.

In the spring of 1949, the godless authorities dared to accuse Father Eustati of having, during the time of the “monarcho-fascist dictatorship,” before September 9, 1944, as a religion teacher, reported on the students and teachers of the Chepelare Gymnasium to the police. This absurd slander outraged not only the spiritual children of the priest but even the idealistic communists in Chepelare. The entire population rose to defend the accused, forcing the authorities to back down.

In 1951, under pressure from the relevant authorities, Metropolitan Cyril of Plovdiv sent a letter relieving Protopresbyter Eustati Yankov from regular parish service in Chepelare.

Despite threats, repression, and open hostility toward Father Eustati, he did not waver even an inch from his priestly duties. He taught the students of the Chepelare Gymnasium religious education until it was removed by the communists in 1946. In the church, he continued to preach zealously for hours, hold discussions, serve with devotion and dignity, hear confessions, and welcome all those in need into his home. He also organized charitable activities and performed works of mercy.

His authority among the people was so high that as soon as the church bell rang, people would stop working and head to the church. The communist bosses would angrily shout after the workers:

**“Where are you going? Work hours are until 5:30 p.m., and it’s only 4:00 p.m. now!”**

**But** the people of Chepelare calmly replied:

**“Don’t you hear? The bell is ringing! After the service, we’ll come back and work for another hour and a half, but we cannot miss Vespers!”**

The proud authorities were powerless to impose their will. The spiritual children of Father Eustati knew that “the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much” (James 5:16). During this tumultuous time for the Church, the righteous servant of Christ intensified his prayers, spending even more time in his small home prayer room.

**He** often reminded his parishioners:

**“Brothers and sisters, do not depart from faith in God. Progress in divine truth and through it, rise spiritually. For there, in the vastness of the heavens, is the Kingdom of God, where the Lord Jesus Christ grants us eternal life—a life worth sacrificing everything earthly for!”**

**U**nable to break the will of this faithful servant of Christ, the godless communist authorities decided to destroy him physically. One day, while on his way to the Church of St. Athanasius, Father Eustati was walking down one of Chepelare’s narrow streets. As he walked, he heard a truck behind him, the loud roar and sudden acceleration of which caught his attention. He moved onto the sidewalk, but the truck followed. At the last moment, he managed to climb onto a roadside barrier just seconds before the truck sped past, missing his black cassock by mere inches. This happened in broad daylight, and all who witnessed it were horrified, except for the militia, who simply turned a blind eye.

\* \* \*

**I**n 1952, a week before the start of Great Lent, Father Eustati was summoned to the Asenovgrad diocesan office. When he arrived in the city, he was arrested as he stepped off the bus and taken to the State Security office. Many other priests were arrested as well.

**O**n the very first evening, militiamen<sup>11</sup> flooded the cells and mercilessly attacked the clergymen with batons and fists. After finishing their brutal work, they seemed to leave the priests in peace. But two or three hours later, several dark figures entered the cell where Father Eustati and some other presbyters were lying.

**W**ithout any hesitation, the unknown men headed straight for Father Eustati and began to beat him severely. They kicked him, cursed him,

and spat on him. The holy confessor groaned and cried out loudly in pain. Pleading for mercy, he did not appeal to his tormentors but to God:

**“Lord, have mercy on me! God, do not forsake me! Lord, cast me not away from Thy presence!”** He also uttered other such short prayers, which only made his assailants even more furious and caused them to attack him with even greater rage and malice.

**The** witness of Christ’s faith was severely beaten. Barely breathing, he was left lying on the floor in a pool of blood. If not for the great providence of God, Father Eustati would have been killed by his tormentors.

**Early** the next morning, a young militiaman, a native of Chepelare, entered the cell of the holy sufferer. In horror, he recognized in the beaten priest the face of his spiritual pastor. He immediately contacted his fellow townsmen—militiamen of higher rank—who helped Father Eustati recover somewhat. They then arranged for his release from custody and personally put him on a bus back to Chepelare.

**Upon** returning home, the righteous man did not share a word, even with his closest ones, about what had happened in Asenovgrad.

**The** shirt he had been wearing during the beating, he folded and gave to a close spiritual child with the request to either wash it or burn it if it could not be cleaned. When the woman opened the bundle given to her, she saw not a piece of clothing but what looked like a stone of blood! The shirt, soaked with the confessor’s blood, had hardened so much that it could not be washed.

\* \* \*

**Great Lent began,** and with it—a new, unprecedented feat of selfless pastoral care.

**Despite** unbearable pain, poor health, mental anguish, and suffering, Protopresbyter Eustati Yankov continued to serve diligently morning and evening. He preached, gave talks, and heard the confessions of Orthodox Christians daily, sometimes by the hundreds.

**The** last days of the holy confessor remained forever in the memory of the people of Chepelare: despite his trembling and fading voice, despite his constant sighs and tears, despite the difficulty in moving during the services, he prayed with such love and fervor that he filled the hearts of Christians with faith, hope, and love. His spirit was willing, but the



From the Proclamation  
of the Sanctity of Saint  
Evstati ([see here](#))

flesh was weak (cf. Matthew 26:41). The strength of God's servant slowly waned, but he gave even the last spark of it to God and his neighbors.

**On** Holy Wednesday, Father Eustati was urgently taken to a hospital in Plovdiv. The very next day, the severely ill man was operated on.

**Upon** awakening from the anesthesia, Christ's Righteous one found the strength to speak to the other patients in the ward about what was dearest to his heart—about God, about the sufferings and redemptive sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ.

**On** Good Friday, the holy sufferer lay on his hospital bed, vividly whispering verses from the funeral service for Christ, which he had known by heart since his youth.

**On** the evening of Holy Saturday, shortly before the feast of all feasts—Pascha—Father Eustati asked the patients in the ward:

**“What time is it now?”**

**“Ten minutes to twelve, Father,”** they answered.

The ailing pastor sighed, mysteriously predicting his death:

**“I** have ten minutes left... Please, could someone say the ‘Our Father’ for me?”

**However**, no one wanted to. While the patients refused, making excuses, a young intern, Dr. Hadzhimatev, entered the room, who, as a child, had studied religious education under the guidance of Father Eustati.

**The** doctor gladly fulfilled the request of his former teacher to recite the Lord's Prayer. As he spoke the words of the prayer, the sounds of the first joyful tolls of the bells and the Paschal hymns from a nearby church echoed through the windows of the hospital ward. The young doctor turned to his dear teacher with filial love:

**“Christ is risen, Father!”**

**Father Eustati**, with his last strength, made the sign of the cross, smiled, and replied:

**“Indeed He is risen!”**

**Suddenly**, the hospital ward was filled with a bright light, which caused those present—the doctor, nurses, and patients—to fall into fear and trembling. All eyes were turned to the extraordinary phenomenon. The light slowly condensed into what seemed like a cloud, which appeared to seep through the ceiling of the room and then disappeared. A sweet fragrance spread throughout the hospital ward. When the people regained their senses, they noticed that Father Eustati had given up his spirit to God.

\* \* \*

**On the Resurrection of Christ**, April 20, 1952, Archpriest Eustati Yankov completed his earthly pilgrimage. By God's providence, the one

who always called his flock to unceasing Paschal joy was summoned by the Lord on Pascha itself, to celebrate the “feast of all feasts” together with the holy angels and the company of saints.

**I**n the hospital ward, the medical staff busied themselves around the body of the deceased. When they carried out the holy body of Father Eustati, they carelessly threw his hospital gown onto a neighboring bed. On that bed lay a paralyzed man, who, due to his condition, could neither express his discomfort nor move the garment that had been thrown onto him.

**A**nd then a miracle occurred: the hospital gown turned into a miraculous remedy for the immobilized man. By the end of the day, through God’s great providence, the patient was able to rise and remove the gown from the bed himself. The healed man hurried to bear witness to the holiness of God’s servant Eustati, who, even after his death, showed his boundless love for his neighbor.

● **T**he coffin with the body of Father Eustati was loaded into an ambulance to be taken to the courtyard of the church where he had dedicated his entire life to serving God and others. On the way to the homeland of this warrior of Christ, something miraculous happened on a very narrow stretch of the Asenovgrad-Bachkovo road.

**A** truck was coming toward the ambulance, several turns ahead. Due to the narrowness of the road, it was impossible for the two large vehicles to pass each other. At the only spot where this could happen, the truck driver, unaware that an ambulance was approaching, noticed a man standing in the middle of the road, waving his arms. The heavy truck was



From the Proclamation of the Sanctity of Saint Evstati ([see here](#))



forced to swerve off the road and stop. The man who had been waving approached him and heard the driver ask in frustration:

**“What’s going on? Has there been an accident?”**

The stranger surprised the truck driver with his response:

**“No. Just wait here so that you can pass the ambulance carrying the body of a great saint of God!”**

After saying these words, the stranger became invisible right before the eyes of the astonished driver, who was left frozen in place. Shortly after, the ambulance passed by the stopped truck. Instead of continuing on his way, the driver turned his truck around and followed the ambulance to find out who this “great saint of God” was. Upon arriving in Chepelare, he recounted the event on the road with great emotion.

● The body of the confessor-priest Eustati was buried in the courtyard of the Church of St. Athanasius, where it rests to this day. The funeral procession was unlike anything ever seen in the small town of Chepelare—the length of it far exceeded half a kilometer. For three days, people from all over Bulgaria arrived to bid farewell to their beloved **“Vladyka of the Rhodope.”** Priests took turns reading the Gospel over their departed brother who had closed his eyes. Laypeople fervently prayed over the body of the righteous man with the Holy Psalter. The Paschal Canon, hymns, and chants were sung almost continuously. It was as if it was not a funeral service but a Paschal celebration!

Even during the burial, many noticed that the body of Archpriest Eustati showed no signs of decay, and his face was “bright and pure, like wax.”

Two years later, two fellow countrymen, Todor Sh. and Hadji Nedelcho K., at the request of the Church of St. Athanasius, came to finish decorating the grave of the deceased father. The two stone masons dug deep into the ground to lay a solid foundation for a new marble memorial. Suddenly, the saint’s coffin appeared before their eyes. After a brief hesitation, the craftsmen decided to open the casket of their beloved pastor. When they lifted the lid, they were astonished by what they saw: the saint’s body remained as it had been when it was placed there two years earlier. They testified, saying, “Saint Eustati lies as if he has just fallen asleep!”

But Father Eustati, not sleeping but eternally alive, continues to this day to guide souls weary from sin, constantly reproaching and calling them to salvation:

**“If we want to know the abomination, the fall, the wickedness that lies within a person, we must go to Golgotha. There we see what we, humans, are capable of.**



**We would be mistaken to exclude ourselves. Yes, what we see in the story of Christ’s suffering is a picture of our soul in its untransformed state.”**

\* \* \*

**The humble servant of God,** Eustati, first transformed his own soul, and then took up the spiritual crosses of his brothers and sisters in Christ with all his strength. A true spiritual Simon of Cyrene, he shared in the pain of every human destiny, so that by sharing in their sorrow, he might also share in the joy of leading a soul to the saving path of faith. This is what his heart longed for, what his soul strove for—that, like the God-seer Moses, he too might pass on to the people “the one thing needful” (cf. Luke 10:42)—the holy Orthodox faith, and eternally cry out with the prophet: “Hearken, O Israel, unto the statutes and unto the judgments, which I teach you, for to do them, that ye may live, and go in and possess the land which the Lord God of your fathers giveth you” (Deuteronomy 4:1-2).



The grave of  
St. Eustati



**Let us** also follow in the footsteps of the beloved holy pastor Eustati, so that we may hear his voice:

**“Our calling is to be prophets, priests, and kings. As prophets, to declare the thoughts and works of God; as priests, to dedicate our lives to God; and as kings, to rule the world.”**

**Before us** are the works of the *prophet* Eustati, who throughout his life proclaimed the works of God to the people; who served as a *priest* with full dedication to God, making himself a chosen vessel of grace; and who reigned as a righteous *king* in peace.

**Holy Confessor Eustati,** pray to God, whom you served selflessly, to instill in our hearts the desire to be true Christians—*prophets, priests, and in royal dignity!* That we may be a united Orthodox people—a people in whose hearts, through pain and hope for repentance, is born the immortal **Paschal joy** that you bequeathed to us:

**“My children, have constant Paschal joy!”**

**Amen!**



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- d. Alexiev, Seraphim, Archimandrite. *Selected Poems*. Sofia, n.d.



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(\*) Translate from the *Life of Saint Evstati*, from Convent of the Protection of the Theotokos, in the Knyazhevo district of Sofia. ● Ἐπιμέλ. καὶ προσαρμογὴ ἡμετ.

1. All subsequent dates are given according to the Julian calendar until the moment when the Gregorian calendar was introduced for civil use in the Kingdom of Bulgaria—April 1/14, 1916.

2. In 1934, the town of Stanimaka was renamed Asenovgrad in honor of Tsar Ivan Asen II.

3. *Kellion monk*—a term used for a monk or layperson who lives with their spiritual mentor to assist them. In addition to church obediences, the kellion monk could have a wide range of responsibilities, such as housework, organizing trips, secretarial duties, etc.

4. June 12, 1914.

5. January 11, 1915.

6. *Churchwarden*—a person responsible for the financial affairs of the church; a church steward. In this case, he also served as a sacristan.

7. Typically, in monastic communities, the spiritual father is the abbot or one of the senior hieromonks.

8. Ἀπὸ From the correspondence of Father Eustati Yankov, we understand that he was spiritually close to a number of prominent representatives of Bulgarian clergy in the 20th century, including:

- Bishop of Makariopolis, Dr. Nikolai (Kozhukharov),
- Archimandrite Kalistrat (Nakov), Abbot of Rila Monastery,
- Archimandrite Seraphim (Alexiev),
- Archimandrite Methodius (Zhrev),
- Archpriest Michael Apostolov, and others.

9. Archimandrite Seraphim (Alexiev), *Selected Poems, On the Path of a Monk*, p. 72.

10. The Fatherland Front (FF)—a political coalition, later a social organization in Bulgaria, that existed from 1942 to 1990. Immediately after the coup of September 9, 1944, the FF played an important role as a cover for the takeover by the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP).

11. *Militiaman*—the term used for a police officer in communist countries during the 20th century.



UNTO OUR ALL-HOLY TRINE GOD,  
WHO IS GLORIFIED IN HIS SAINTS,  
BE WORSHIP AND THANKSGIVING,  
UNTO THE AGES OF AGES.  
AMEN!