



GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

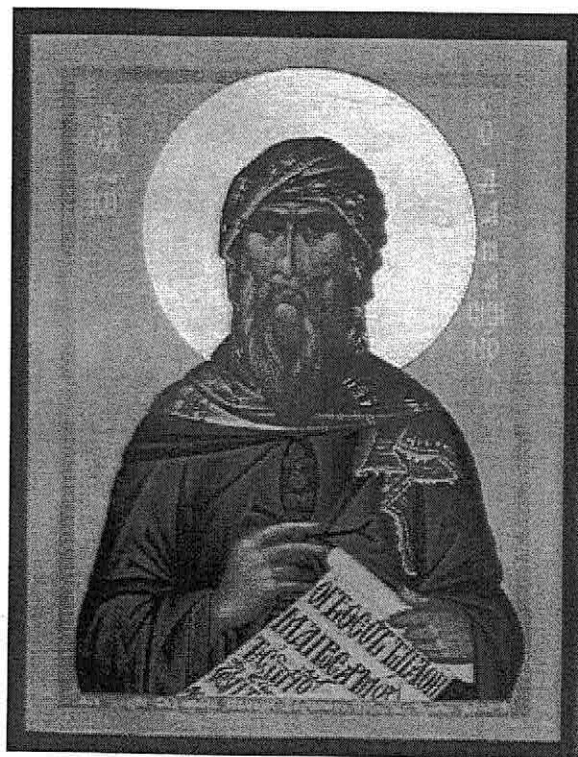
St John Damascene (~750 AD)

Commemorated December 4

St. John Damascene was born in Damascus in 690 AD. His father was John al-Mansur, a Christian official in the court of the Moslem khalif.

St. John was baptized in infancy, and had a tutor called Cosmas who taught he the sciences and theology. Cosmas became a poet and singer, and subsequently accompanied his adopted brother (St. John) to the monastery in which both became monks.

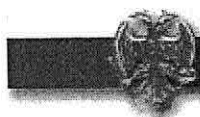
In spite of his theological training St. John does not seem, at first, to have contemplated any career except that of his father, to whose office he succeeded. Even at court he was able freely to live a Christian life, and he became remarkable there for his virtues and especially for his humility. Nevertheless, after filling his responsible post for some years, St. John resigned office, and went to be a monk in the lavra of St. Sabbas near Jerusalem.



John and Cosmas settled amongst the brethren, and wrote books and composed hymns. Patriarch John V of Jerusalem knew them well by reputation and wished to have them among his clergy. First he took Cosmas and made him bishop of Majuma, and afterwards he ordained John priest and brought him to Jerusalem. St. Cosmas ruled his flock admirably until his death, but St. John soon returned to his monastery.

St. John's three letters in defence of the holy icons, for which he was slandered before the khalif and his hand was cut off, had become known and read everywhere, and had earned him the hatred of the persecuting emperors. If his enemies never succeeded in injuring him, it was only because he never crossed the frontier into the Roman empire. After his miraculous healing by the Theotokos, he spent the rest of his life writing many books on theology and poetry at St. Sabbas, where he died around 750 AD. His most famous work is the *Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, which is the best summary of the teachings of the early Church Fathers. He also wrote polemical works against various heresies and sermons on feast days. He is renowned as the writer of many feast-day hymns and canons (including the Pascha service), and as the compiler of the *Octoechos*, whose verses are a summing up of Orthodox teaching.

[Return to homepage \(framed\)](#) | [Return to homepage \(no frames\)](#) | [Return to home page](#)



GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

St Barbara

Memory celebrated December 4



During the rule of Maximius, in the year 290 AD, the governor in the Anatolian city of Heliopolis was Dioscuros. He was a wealthy man who was originally from the nearby village of Galassos. He had only one child, a very beautiful girl named Barbara. Her parents were extremely proud of her, not only because of her beauty, but of her virtuosity as well.

To protect her, her parents erected a fortress in which they placed Barbara while still young, as was the case with Saint Christina. They supplied her with all her needs; servants, food and clothing. When Barbara came of age, many military officers of Heliopolis asked her father for her hand in marriage, for they had heard of her great beauty and charm. He refused, however, to give his promise to anyone until he conferred with his daughter. Barbara responded by telling her father that if he forced her to marry she would commit suicide. Dioscuros left the fortress believing that in time he could convince her to consent to marriage.

Dioscuros, deciding to add a bathing house to the fortress, left the plans with the builders and instructed them to begin work while he departed for another city where he had some pressing business. During her father's absence, Barbara had the opportunity to leave her living quarters and observe the erection of the bathing house. Upon discovering that the building was to have only two windows, she asked the builders to install a third, and that she would assume the responsibility.

Our God, who knows everything before it occurs, was extremely pleased with Barbara's innocence and filled her heart with the Holy Spirit and with the love of Christ. While standing by the pool of the bath house, Barbara made the sign of the cross on the marble with her finger. Miraculously, her finger chiselled the cross deeply into the marble.

One day, returning from the bath house, Barbara noticed the false gods which her father worshipped and she spat at them. She returned to the fortress, fasting and praying that she would receive Divine Guidance.

When her father returned, he saw the third window in the bath house and questioned the builders, who informed him that his daughter had ordered the third window installed. After questioning Barbara whether there was any particular reason for three, she told him that Three Lights guide everyone who walks the earth. Making the sign of the cross with three fingers she said that one signifies the Father, one the Son, and the other the Holy Spirit, and with these three Lights the

whole world is guided. These words angered her father and made him forget that Barbara was his daughter. Drawing his sword and threatening to kill her, Barbara fled to a nearby mountain. Reaching the top, she raised her arms and prayed to God for help. The earth parted and swallowed most of her body. In the meantime, her father asked two shepherds whether they had seen his daughter. The first told him that he hadn't, so that she might be spared, however, the other pointed in the Saint's direction.

Finding his daughter, Dioscuros forced her back to the fortress and locked her up. He then went to the ruler of the city named Marcus and informed him that Barbara was a Christian. She was then given to Marcus with her father's damnation. Marcus had the Saint stripped and beaten with sticks, then her wounds rubbed with vinegar. She was then imprisoned. Towards midnight a bright light appeared to Barbara and a voice told her not to fear, Christ was always with her. As soon as the words were spoken, all her wounds disappeared. A God-fearing woman, named Julia, who was imprisoned with Barbara, saw the miracle. She praised God with all her heart and decided to martyr for her Christian beliefs.

The tortures continued for Barbara. The ruler ordered his soldiers to tear the Saint's body with iron claws, to burn her with torches and to hit her head with a spiked club.

Julia, witnessing the torture felt so much sorrow that she began to cry uncontrollably. Discovering that she was also a Christian, Marcus ordered that she be hung beside the Saint to suffer the same tortures. He then had his soldiers cut off the martyr's breasts then taken back to prison.

St. Barbara was stripped of her clothing to be marched throughout the city. Seeing though that he could not overcome the Saint with threats and tortures, Marcus ordered his soldiers to behead both Barbara and Julia.

Present at all these tortures was Dioscuros, Barbara's father. He felt neither pain nor remorse for what he had done to his only child. When the ruler sentenced them to death, Dioscuros requested that he be permitted to perform the execution of his daughter. Barbara and Julia were taken to the mountain where Dioscuros had previously captured his daughter. He beheaded St. Barbara and a soldier beheaded St. Julia. For several seconds the earth shook. The earth then opened and swallowed the bodies of the two martyrs.

God was quick with Divine Retribution to Dioscuros, for as he was descending the mountain, a thunder storm arose. A bolt of lightning descended from the heavens and killed this bloodthirsty tyrant. A second bold of lightning immediately descended and murdered St. Julia's executioner.

When Marcus heard of the events which occurred at the execution he became psychologically distressed and soon afterwards died of his remorse.

After several days, a pious Christian named Valentios saw in his dream two white robed virgins who instructed him to go to the mountain on which the Saints had been executed and to dig to find their bodies. Valentios immediately arose from his bed and with several other Christians, went to the mountain to carry out the Saint's instructions. After digging for several hours, they found the holy bodies of Sts Barbara and Julia. With great respect and reverence, they venerated the bodies of the Saints. The holy bodies of the martyrs were taken to the village of Galassos where they were entombed with honour.

St. Barbara is considered one of the major Saints of our Church and her memory is celebrated on December 4.

Translated by Christina Dedoussis

[Return to homepage \(framed\)](#) | [Return to homepage \(no frames\)](#) | [Return to home page](#)



GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

St Sabbas the Sanctified (532 AD)

Commemorated December 5



St. Sabbas the Sanctified was an instructor of the desert, adornment of monks and luminary of the inhabited earth. He was born at Mutalaska in Cappadocia, in 439 AD. He entered a monastery near Mutalaska at an early age, where he stayed for 10 years. He then went to Jerusalem to learn from the example of the solitaries of that country. He passed the winter in a monastery governed by the holy abbot Elpidius, but his love of silence and retirement made him prefer the manner of life practised by St. Euthymius. Euthymius judged him too young for an absolutely solitary life, and therefore recommended him to his monastery below the hill, about five kilometre distant, which was under the conduct of St. Theoktistus. When Sabbas was 30 years of age he obtained leave from Euthymius to spend five days a week in a remote cave in prayer and manual labour. After the death of Euthymius, Sabbas retired further into the desert towards Jericho, where he spent four years in total isolation.

After Sabbas had lived there for some time, many came to him desiring to serve God under his direction. He was at first unwilling, but eventually founded a new lavra (now called the lavra of St. Sabbas). The number of his disciples increased to 150, but no priest served the community, for he thought that no religious man could aspire to that dignity without presumption. This provoked some of the monks to complain to Sallust, Patriarch of Jerusalem. The bishop found their grievances groundless, except that the want of a priest was a trouble in the community. He therefore compelled Sabbas to receive ordination at his hands in 491 AD. The abbot was then 53 years old. The reputation of his sanctity drew people from remote countries to his lavra. In 493 AD the Patriarch of Jerusalem established St. Sabbas as archimandrite.

St. Sabbas, like St. Euthymius, left his disciples every year, of more often, and at least passed Lent without being seen by anyone.

At this time the Emperor Anastasius was supporting the Eutychian heresy, and banished many Orthodox bishops. In 511 the Patriarch Elias sent St. Sabbas with other abbots, to endeavour to stop this persecution. Sabbas was 70 years old. He stayed the winter in Constantinople, and often visited the emperor to argue against the heresy, but Anastasius procured the banishment of Patriarch Elias and put one John into his place. St. Sabbas and other monks hastened to Jerusalem and persuaded John at least not to repudiate the Council of Chalcedon. Sabbas is said to have been with the exiled Elias at his death at Aila on the Red Sea; in the following years he went to Caesarea, Scythopolis and other places, preaching the true faith, and bringing back many to Orthodoxy and right living.

In his 91 year, at the request of Patriarch Peter of Jerusalem, St. Sabbas undertook a second

journey to Constantinople, in connection with troubles arising out of the Samaritan revolt and its violent repression by the emperor. Justinian received him with honour and offered to endow his monasteries. Sabbas gratefully replied that they did not need such revenues so long as the monks should faithfully serve God, but he begged a remission of taxes in favour of the people in Palestine in consideration of what they suffered on account of the Samaritans; and that he would build a hospital at Jerusalem for pilgrims, and a fortress for the protection of hermits and monks against raiders.

Very shortly after his return to his lavra he fell sick, and the Patriarch persuaded him to be taken to a neighbouring church, where the Patriarch served him with his own hands. Finding his last hour approach, Sabbas begged the Patriarch to be returned to his lavra. He appointed his successor, and then lay four days in silence so that he might concern himself with God alone. He died on December 5, 532 AD, at an age of 94.

In the life of St. Sabbas the Sanctified there is an interesting story that shows how he inspired his monks to be thrifty and frugal.

In the lavra's guest-house there served James the monk. This monk once cooked a large amount of beans, and he threw the leftovers out of the window into a ditch. The Saint saw this from the tower opposite the guest-house. Later, without being seen, he gathered them up.

A few days later he invited Fr. James to dinner. When the monk finished eating, the Saint said, "Forgive me, brother, that my cooking did not please you".

"On the contrary, Holy Father, I was very pleased. I confess I haven't tasted such delicious and well-cooked food for many years".

"So you liked it! Do you know which beans those were?"

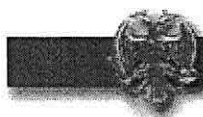
"Which ones?"

"The ones you threw into the ditch a few days ago!"

The monk felt badly when he heard these words. Ashamed, he pondered the lesson that the Saint had given him. He understood that what belonged to the monastery, whether food or anything else, must be used carefully and economically.

St. Sabbas is commemorated on December 5.

[Return to homepage \(framed\)](#) | [Return to homepage \(no frames\)](#) | [Return to home page](#)



GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

St Nicholas the Wonderworker

Commemorated December 6



The true greatness of this beloved Saint is hidden in the shadows of legend, obscuring the identity of one of the most endearing of our saints.

Nothing is known of the early life of Nicholas, except that he was born at the turn of the fourth century, during the reign of the Emperor Diocletian, in Asia Minor and was a **Bishop of Myra**, in that area which is now Turkey. Of a quiet and studious nature, he attended the Synod of Nicaea in A.D. 325. On that momentous occasion he was so withdrawn that he is not even mentioned in the account of the proceedings recorded by St. Athanasios the Great; however, his behind the scenes activity did add to the luster of this memorable convocation. His importance was recognised by the Emperor Justinian, who had a magnificent cathedral erected in his

memory in Constantinople.

Prior to his elevation as Archbishop, Nicholas had suffered imprisonment, harsh treatment and torture at the hands of the enemies of the Church. It was not until the reign of the Christian Emperor Constantine that he was able to lead the normal and peaceful life of a prelate. His leadership in Myra, which did not offer very hospitable surroundings for the Christians of the day, was so effective that his fame and popularity gave rise to many legends that were well intended but served only to screen the true character of this very real and industrious saint who laboured for Christ all the years of his life, echoing the truth of Christianity uttered centuries before by the apostles.

So great was St. Nicholas' popularity that he became the symbol of protection of children, which led to many of the legends about him. After his death by natural causes at a venerable age, the legends and myths multiplied, but they only demonstrate how dearly loved he was for his great work. He became not only the patron saint of children, but also of merchants, sailors, and scholars, and was a protective symbol for travellers against highwaymen.

In a fascinating and daring enterprise in the late eleventh century, the residents of Bari, Italy, where Nicholas' popularity had grown with the years, hatched a plot to recover the remains of the saint from Turkey. Through guile and ruse they were able to outwit the unwary but dangerous natives of Asia Minor and succeeded in removing the body of Saint Nicholas and transporting it to Bari. There it was paraded in triumph through the streets before being properly enshrined on 9 May 1087, after which a magnificent basilica was erected in his honour.

from **Orthodox Saints**, v. 4,
by Fr George Poulos, Orthodox Press

[Return to homepage \(framed\)](#) | [Return to homepage \(no frames\)](#) | [Return to home page](#)



GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

St Ambrose, Bishop of Milan (397 AD)

Memory celebrated December 7

St. Ambrose was probably born in 340 AD at Trier. He learned Greek, became a good poet and orator, and went to the bar. The emperor Valentinian made him governor of Liguria and Aemilia, with his residence at Milan.

Auxentius, an Arian, who held the see of Milan, died in 374 AD. The city was distracted by party strife about the election of a new bishop. To prevent, if possible, too outrageous a disorder Ambrose went to the church in which the assembly was held. There he made a speech, exhorting the people to proceed in their choice in the spirit of peace and without tumult. While he was speaking a voice cried out, 'Ambrose, bishop!', and the whole assembly took up the cry with enthusiasm. Although still a secular priest and catechumen, St. Ambrose was raised in eight days to the rank of bishop at the age of about 35.

Ambrose at once applied himself to the study of Holy Scriptures and the works of religious writers, particularly Origen and St. Basil. His personal life was one of simplicity and hard work.

He was a leader in the west of the battle against Arianism and paganism. He is one of the greatest Fathers of the Church, wrote many commentaries on Holy Scripture, dogmatic works, books on the sacraments and the duties of the clergy, and writings on monastic and moral life. He introduced antiphonal singing and other liturgical influences from the east into the west, and himself wrote hymns.

When Ambrose fell sick he foretold his death, but said he should live until Easter. On the day of his death he laid with his hands extended in the form of a cross for several hours, in constant prayer. The last thing he said was, "Arise! Make haste! He is going" and soon after he died. It was Good Friday, April 4, 397, and he was 57 years old. He was buried on Easter Day

[Return to homepage \(framed\)](#) | [Return to homepage \(no frames\)](#) | [Return to home page](#)



GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

St Spyridon

Commemorated December 12



In the holiest shrine on the island of Kerkyra (Corfu), just off the western coast of Greece, rest the Holy Relics of St Spyridon, which after sixteen centuries, are still in such a remarkable state of preservation that every year he is carried in solemn triumph through the streets on the occasion of his feast day.

St Spyridon's place in the holy company of saints would be assured and his prominence established even if the whereabouts of his holy remains were unknown. St Spyridon was thrust into prominence by the climatic events just prior to and including the historic Synod of Nicaea of 325 AD, after a somewhat prosaic and less-than-spectacular service to the Lord in the obscurity which he seemed to prefer.

Born on the island of Cyprus, he preferred the tranquility of the countryside he roamed as a boy while shepherding his father's flocks, and even after he rose to the office of bishop he would find the time to tend the sheep on a hillside, where he knew complete

contentment.

St. Spyridon's beginning were inauspicious enough, coming from a rural family which for generations had lived in such remoteness that there was no school for miles around and what little education there was to be had was imparted by parents whose knowledge was severely limited by their illiteracy. Although he was exceptionally bright, Spyridon was no exception to the rule that doomed most youngsters who were never taught to read or write.

The communities that lacked a school never lacked accessibility to a countryside church, and as a boy Spyridon's church attendance was regular. He displayed considerable fervor and remarkable intelligence, which enabled him to memorize long passages from the Bible simply by listening. Although he was needed at home, Spyridon was not denied the formal education he deserved. His parents, not wanting to see his great talent and love for Christ restricted, sought counsel from their priest, who in turn arranged for the boy's education and religious training.

Ordained a priest just after the turn of the fourth century, Spyridon was assigned to a rural community much like the one in which he had been reared and made it his first act to use the church as a school for the education of children whose parents he convinced that their offspring could be made more useful citizens if they were given time enough from their chores to learn at least the rudiments of education, particularly how to read and write. His dedication to the people and his complete commitment to the Savior did not go unnoticed, and he was appointed bishop of his province, a post in which he won the admiration of his flock and prominence in the international Christian community.

Whenever he could get away from the responsibilities of his office, he chose to rest and refresh himself by returning to the hillside and to the sheep on his family farm. It was in 325 AD that the momentous Synod of Nicaea (First Ecumenical Council) was convened at the request of the Emperor Constantine to resolve the issues so divisive in that era, a conclave to which the greatest figures of Christianity were invited. Among them was the shepherd-bishop Spyridon, whose reputation preceded him and who was therefore made one of the directors.

At this meeting Spyridon met St. Nicholas, with whom he formed a lasting friendship, one destined to form a parallel of their lives which comes down to us as a glorious part of the rich heritage of Christianity.

St Spyridon acquitted himself most honorably at his meeting and was instrumental in settling a heated debate on the Mystery of the Holy Trinity, which allowed for a successful conclusion to the most important council in early Church history.

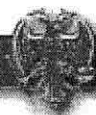
Like his friend St Nicholas, St Spyridon fell victim to pagan persecution and was one day hauled off to prison, where he was so brutally beaten by the guards that he lost the sight of one eye.

Years of misery were to follow then, for rather than execute him the Romans consigned him to the mines. There the gentle bishop lived in squalor and labored in agony for many years before at last he died. Faithful to the end, his last words were in praise of the Lord.

His body was cast into a ditch from which it was taken by friends for Christian burial. Later removed, his body lies intact to this day, preserved by the hand of God.

from **Orthodox Saints** Vol 4
Fr George Poulos, Orthodox Press.

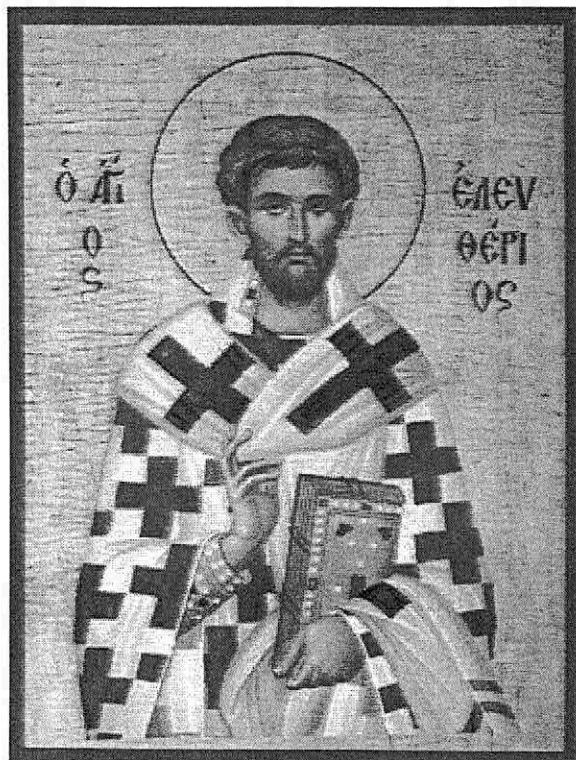
[Return to homepage \(framed\)](#) | [Return to homepage \(no frames\)](#) | [Return to home page](#)



GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

St Eleutherios

Commemorated December 15



Eleutherios was born in Rome in the second century AD. He was among the first and youngest to carve a niche for himself in Christianity in the eternal city of Rome, where he astounded his elders with his prodigious intellect and early development. Had his father, a high public official of pagan Rome, lived to guide his immensely talented son, things might have taken a different turn for the boy and for Christianity, but his widowed mother, the beautiful Anthia, had accepted Christianity with all her heart. It followed, therefore, that the boy's talents would be applied to Christian endeavour, and he was as quick to embrace the Messiah as he was quick to acquire knowledge. His enormous capacity for learning so accelerated his intellectual pace that he outdistanced his teachers, one of whom suggested to Anthia that she take this marvelous boy to the bishop of Rome, Aniketos, who after witnessing the boy's intellectual display took him under his personal supervision. With a desire to serve the Saviour that was as profound as his learning, Eleutherios embarked on a meteoric career as a man of the cloth, acquiring

before he was twelve the equivalent of a college education and with such impressive credentials was tonsured a reader at the age of thirteen. When he was fifteen years old he was ordained a deacon and at the age of seventeen was ordained a priest of the Christian Church.

With such early momentum propelling him and with an ever-increasing hope to serve Christ in the highest tradition of the apostles, he was elevated to the episcopacy at the age of twenty, the youngest bishop ever to reach that pinnacle through his own efforts. As bishop in Illyricum, Eleutherios promoted the cause of Christianity with the adroitness of a seasoned campaigner, giving added impetus to the Christian movement at a time when the merciless persecutions not only made it difficult to win and hold converts, but also at a time when the gravest danger was in being a high-ranking prelate of the Church. Oblivious to this threat, he was acclaimed in the inner circle of Christianity as the brightest luminary of Christian Rome since the apostles.

Even those whom he failed to convert held him in the highest esteem, and with this immense popularity he grew bolder and thereby more offensive to the state. This outstanding theologian, orator and benefactor of Christian and pagan alike was finally mentioned to Emperor Hadrian, who ordered his arrest. Ordinarily the emperor would have questioned him personally because of his high station, but fearing a reprisal because of the prelate's popularity, Hadrian dispatched his most trusted centurion, a man named Felix, to bring the bishop before the prefect of Rome for trial and punishment. The centurion decided that rather than run the risk of seizing Eleutherios publicly he would seek out his place of worship and arrest him there. After some time Felix found the well-hidden church and crept in just as the bishop was commencing a sermon. The oratory of the brilliant Eleutherios was spellbinding, and when the sermon was over Felix came forth and

asked to be converted to Christianity. This done, Felix exposed his purpose and apologised for having come to the house of God with treachery in his heart. He was easily forgiven by Eleutherios, who thereafter instructed the centurion to return him to the prefect lest judgment be passed on both of them. With a great deal of reluctance Felix took the bishop to what appeared to be a sealed fate, offering along the way to help Eleutherios escape. But the proud prelate would not hear of it.

With the emperor conspicuous by his absence, St Eleutherios went on trial before the prefect, but not even his oratorical power could save him. The bishop was cast into prison, tortured, and put to death. He died for Christ on December 15.

[Return to homepage \(framed\)](#) | [Return to homepage \(no frames\)](#) | [Return to home page](#)



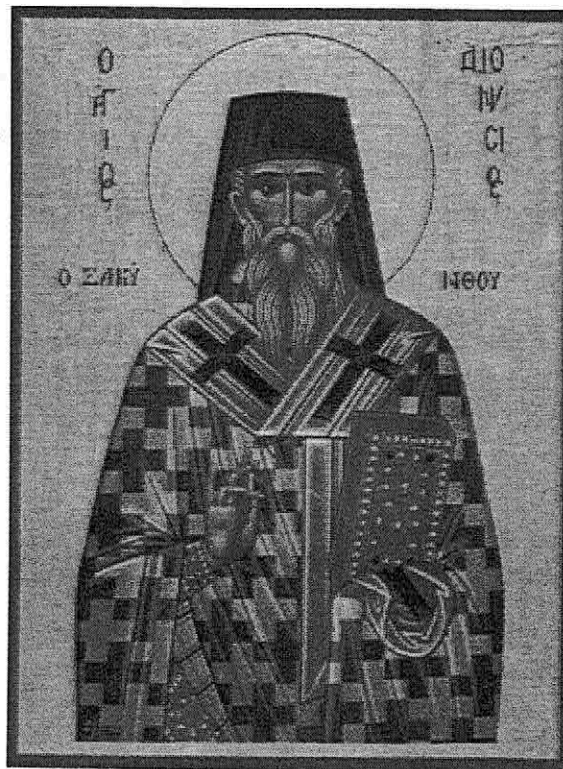
St Dionysios of Zakynthos

Memory celebrated 17 December

St Dionysios, a spiritual giant, seems to be among the living through the miraculous preservation of his holy body. He was born on the Greek island of Zakynthos in 1546 but whose ancestry is traced back through the Venetian conquerors in a family tree whose roots lay in part in Italy and in part Normandy. Born into the ruling class at a time when Venice was a dominant force in the area, Dionysios is said to have been baptised into the Christian faith with the name Draganinos by no less a godfather than Gerasimos of Kephallonia, who was himself destined to become a venerated saint of the Church.

Dionysios came of the royal household of the Venetians through his mother, but he led no one to believe - from childhood through maturity - that he was anything but a child of God. He formed lasting friendships with his fellow islanders from all walks of life.

He refused to take advantage of his social position other than to avail himself of a full education which brought out the power of his extraordinary intellect. By the time he was twenty-one he had not only established himself as a deep thinker and profound theological scholar, but has also mastered several languages.



With the encouragement of the entire population of the island, he set a course of service to Jesus Christ which was to bring him sainthood.

With the death of his parents, Dionysios entered the Monastery of Strophades, where he was in due course tonsured a monk with the name of Daniel. By the time that he was ordained priest in 1577, he was already a seasoned campaigner for Christ and was highly respected not only for his piety but also for his wisdom and beneficence. He had long since given his entire worldly goods to the poor and had earned a reputation for kindness and charity which had carried to the mainland among the clergy and laity alike.

On a mission to the Holy Land where Dionysios anticipated the exhilaration of walking where Jesus had trod, he stopped over in Piraeus to book passage to Palestine but never completed his journey. Greeted warmly by church dignitaries, he was prevailed upon by Archbishop Nikanor of Athens to assume the episcopacy of the island of Aegina, an appointment that was heartily approved by the Ecumenical Patriarch. In 1572 he assumed the post and with it the name of Dionysios. The saintliness of this prelate had been evidenced in many ways throughout his service to the Messiah, but as Archbishop it took on greater proportions. As a result he was sought out by pilgrims from all around seeking his blessing and benediction that seemed to produce true

miracles. While he found these manifestations gratifying, he was overwhelmed by his immense popularity, and after much soul searching asked for and was given permission to return to the comparative tranquility of his native island.

Dionysios seemed to have the favour of the Lord and emerged from the seclusion of his monastic retreat from time to time to share this divine spark with his fellow Christians. He died peacefully at the age of seventy-five and reposes in the Church of Dionysios on the island of Zakynthos in the sparkling Ionian Sea.

from **Orthodox Saints**, v. 4,
by Fr George Poulos, Holy Cross Orthodox Press

[Return to homepage \(framed\)](#) | [Return to homepage \(no frames\)](#) | [Return to home page](#)



St Sebastian, the martyr

Memory celebrated 18 December

The Praetorian guard of the Imperial Palace of the Roman Empire was an elite group culled from many applicants thoroughly screened for their loyalty to the emperor and for their extreme courage. In the third century one of these stalwart protectors of the emperor was a fearless young officer named Sebastian of Milan who coupled his loyalty to the emperor with an even greater devotion to the Saviour, a dual nature he was able to assume under one regime but which cost him his life in another.

Sebastian, who had been born of Christian parents, had been recruited for military service and served with such distinction that he rose to prominence in the Praetorian guard of Emperor Carinus, a ruler who saw no great harm in Christianity and who dismissed complaints about his having a Christian officer in the guard on the grounds that his religion did not seem in any way to affect his efficiency and bravery. As a result of this attitude, Sebastian, who had access to the prisons as well as the palace, was able to seek out imprisoned Christians and do what he could to ease their troubled minds and, in extreme cases, to secure their release.



The presence of a member of the Praetorian guard in the secret places of Christian worship in the catacombs of Rome seemed quite strange to new converts but to those seasoned followers of the Saviour accustomed to seeing him, candle in hand, he was a welcome figure whose humility was reassuring. It soon became common knowledge that any Christian who found himself victimised by vindictive captors had a friend at the palace who would come to see him in his hour of trial. Sebastian could not sway the emperor to the point where a royal amnesty would be declared for all Christians, but he did have enough favour to allow him to roam freely to help not only Christians, but the cause of the Saviour as well.

On one occasion Sebastian, accompanied by Archbishop Calus of Rome, went to a prison which held captive two brothers named Marcellinus and Markos, whose only crime was that they were Christians. Sebastian addressed himself to the jailer and his wife who were named Nikostrator and Zoe, the latter suffering from a speech defect. After speaking of the miracles of the Saviour, Sebastian knelt in prayer with the couple and to their extreme joy the impediment which had slurred the speech of Zoe all of her life vanished and she spoke clearly for the first time. Not only the jailer and his wife, but all other non-Christians in the small jail were converted to Christianity. The jail was emptied of its human contents who went in a body to the house of Nikostrator to be met by a priest named Polycarp who baptised the entire group into Christianity.

Not long after this event, Emperor Carinus died. He was succeeded by Diocletian who was a vowed enemy of Christianity and who would tolerate no one in his personal guard who did not

bow to the idols. Informers lost no time in revealing Sebastian's true religion.

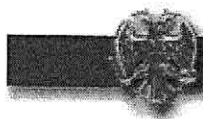
Diocletian then turned his attention to Sebastian whom he had brought before him to say he had personally selected a method of execution for the former soldier. Sebastian was made to stand in the courtyard before a veritable phalanx of archers who loosed a hail of arrows into their human target. Left for dead, he was taken away for burial when one of the martyr's widows noticed that there was still life in a body so riddled with quills he looked more like a porcupine than a man. Carefully removing all the arrows, the widow nursed Sebastian back to health, insisting he remain in hiding to seek safety elsewhere at the proper time.

Sebastian was very grateful but said that he was not accustomed to hiding, and on the occasion of a festive banquet held in the palace he strode in to face the man who had supposed him long since dead. The incredulous Diocletian stood transfixed at the presumed sight of a dead man and was taken aback when the former guard berated the emperor for his callous treatment of the Christians. Recovering from his stupor, the angered monarch ordered that Sebastian be beaten to death and thrown in a sewer.

A basilica in memory of St Sebastian now stands by the Appian Way of Rome.

from "**Orthodox Saints**, v. 4,
by Fr George Poulos, Holy Cross Orthodox Press

[Return to homepage \(framed\)](#) | [Return to homepage \(no frames\)](#) | [Return to home page](#)

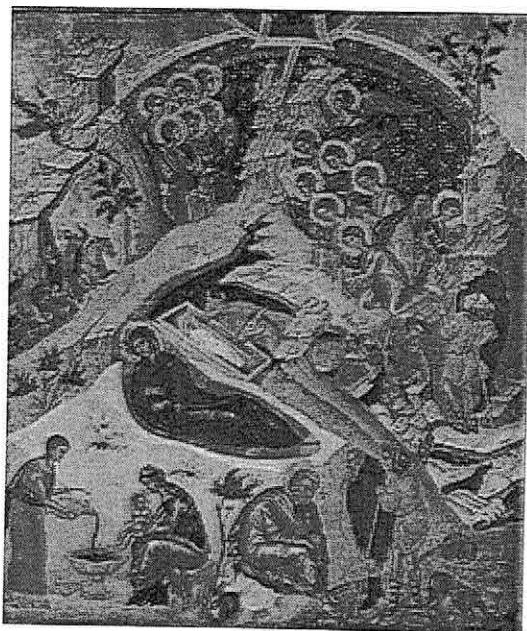


GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

Feast of the Nativity (Birth) of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ

Celebrated December 25

by Fr George Poulos



The birth of Jesus Christ of Nazareth has split history in two so that each calendar is reckoned before or after His birth. The year in which He was born marks the period known as Anno Domini, and the years before that as BC. ('Before Christ')

Our Lord's Nativity is observed on December 25. The early church fathers made the birthdate of our Lord deliberately to coincide with and offset the pagan celebration of Saturnalia, that festive pagan day of celebration in which the sun crossed the imaginary line drawn on the later-day maps as the equator.

To the pagans it signified a rebirth of the sun, now returning to the north to assert its full power and bring on the spring season; but to the Christians it marked the birthday celebration of Jesus Christ, the Son of God who had created not only the sun, but all the other stars and

planets of the universe.

Jesus Christ who on more than one occasion said simply, "Follow me," leaving no chart but that which lies in the true Christian heart and which requires no formula beyond that which we call "love."

The Old Testament abounds in testimony of the coming Messiah, long anticipated by the prophets, who were aware that the original sin of man who was stained by evil in the Garden of Eden could only be cleansed by the blood of a Messiah sent by God. The theological recognition of God as representing universal love also recognised that God chose to share love with man, and for that purpose was man and woman created.

A second premise is that man has it within his grasp to find happiness; and a third, that in doing so he glorifies God in whose image he was created. That placed man in harmony with God and nature; but this harmony was shattered by Adam and Eve who, in the disobedience of God in paradise, lost their membership in the alliance and were at the mercy of nature, as well as the mercy of God.

Man had fallen from grace and had no mastery over nature; but God, in his infinite mercy, was not about to obliterate that which was cast in His own image. Therefore, He saw to it that with the ascendancy of a sun in winter He gave to the world His only begotten Son.

The Christian soul has been spared because on December 25 the Saviour was born, and God so loved the world He had created that He sacrificed his Son thirty-three short years later for the redemption of all mankind. The star that shone over Bethlehem on the eve of the Saviour's birth to light the way for the Wise Men of the East still shines as an eternal beacon in the hearts of all those who have Jesus Christ in their hearts.

from **Orthodox Saints**, v. 4,
Holy Cross Orthodox Press

[Return to homepage \(framed\)](#) | [Return to homepage \(no frames\)](#) | [Return to home page](#)



St Stephen, First Martyr for Christ

Commemorated December 27



The saint whose name leads all the rest who have sacrificed their lives for Jesus Christ is Stephen, the first martyr of Christendom because he would have been the last to deny him.

Stephen was one of the seven deacons of the original Church of Christ in Jerusalem, sharing his duties with six others - Philip, Prochoros, Nikanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas.

It was the function of the deacons to assist much as they do today in such matters as communion but with the additional responsibility of spreading the new faith and at the same time being ever on alert for the imminent danger that came with being a Christian in those early days.

Before entering the service of Christ, the young Stephen had studied under the renowned rabbinical tutor Gamaliel, who had been the mentor of the great St. Paul.

Not unlike Paul he was a qualified religious scholar who once sought to discredit the Saviour, until he came to know Jesus Christ and to embrace him as Paul did in that dramatic confrontation on the road to Damascus.

The full attention he had been giving to the Law of the ancient covenant he now directed to the new faith with zeal equal to that of those who enjoyed the company of the Messiah. There was no hint that he would be the very first casualty in the cause of the Nazarene, but each and every one of the missionaries was aware of the danger involved and chose to ignore it in their anxiety to serve.

Stephen seems to have confined his missionary work and preaching to the city of Jerusalem, the city in which he had prepared himself under the Pharisee Gamaliel for quite another career.

Well versed in the Scriptures, he used the Old Testament to full advantage in promoting the Messiah, citing the passages that were ample evidence out of the mouths of the ancient prophets of God that a Saviour would be born and that the Saviour was among them even now in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

It was with considerable anger and frustration that the men who had studied with him under Gamaliel now viewed the defector from their ranks, being particularly piqued when Stephen boldly challenged them in the synagogues.

He must have done this several times and, in all probability, been unceremoniously ushered from the premises more than once, but there came an occasion when he addressed himself to an extremely hostile Council of elders whose anger drove them to more than just having Stephen put out.

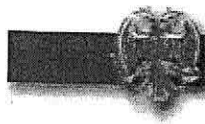
The mob that turned on Stephen worked itself into such a feverous pitch that by the time he had been seized and dragged into the street a cry went up for his blood and grew into a crescendo demanding his death. Dragged to the gates of Jerusalem and stoned him to death.

The gallant young Stephen died a brutal death at the hands of those with whom he had grown up. In the Book of Acts there is an account that Paul was among the onlookers who made no effort to save Stephen.

The early Christians buried Stephen in a small chapel in Jerusalem which was dedicated to his memory and was known as the chapel of St. Stephen the Protomartyr (First Martyr).

from **Orthodox Saints**, v. 4,
by Fr George Poulos, Holy Cross Orthodox Press

[Return to homepage \(framed\)](#) | [Return to homepage \(no frames\)](#) | [Return to home page](#)



GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

The Holy Infants

Commemorated December 29

Although St Stephen is generally recognised as the first martyr, he was preceded by a host of innocent babes slaughtered by the infamous Herod whose fearful uncertainty drove him in panic to commit the most heinous of crimes.

It is not generally known that the barbarous Herod, who reigned over the Jews at the time when Christ was born, was not by descent a Jew himself, but a member of a tribe that had been absorbed into Judaism.

Hence, he zealously relished his role as king of the Jews under the Roman Empire. The news of the coming of a Messiah, so alarmed Herod that he hastily assembled about him his close associates, including priest and scribes from whom it was ascertained that the newborn king was coming into the world in the obscure village of Bethlehem.

Still sceptical, he consulted the wise men of the East and asked them to seek out this Christ child. However, these Magi, from various countries, not only venerated the Messiah and bestowed gifts upon them, but returned to their homelands rather than betray Him Who was the King of Kings.

Up to this point Herod had been guilty of atrocities of such vile nature that it came as no surprise that, in order to protect his position, he ordered the massacre of every Jewish male infant under the age of two not only in Bethlehem but for miles around. It is estimated that 14,000 infants were put to the sword.

These holy innocents were the first victims of a persecution that proved itself relentless for centuries.

Pilgrims to the Holy Land discover that entombed deep in the grotto of the Church of the Nativity are many of these Innocents, appropriately enough, beneath the now vanished stable where Christ was born.

At this sacred spot the Patriarch of Jerusalem conducts special commemorative services each year on the 29th of December, a day in which Christians of all denominations can- not fail to pause in respect, in whatever part of the world they might be.

from **Orthodox Saints**, Vol 4
by Fr George Poulos, Holy Cross Orthodox Press

The Holocaust of Innocents continues today with **abortion!**

[Return to homepage \(framed\)](#) | [Return to homepage \(no frames\)](#) | [Return to home page](#)