



Beginning of the Church year (Indiction)

Commemorated September 1

"Christ our God, Your kingdom is an everlasting one and Your lordship is over all.

You have made all things with wisdom and have established proper times and seasons for our lives.

We give thanks to You in all circumstances and for all things.

Lord, bless the beginning of our Church year with Your goodness.

Grant that this liturgical year be for all of us a year of grace.

Make us worthy with purity of heart always to praise you. Lord, glory to You! "

Matin Hymn, September 1st

Do you know why the first day of September marks the beginning of the Church year? We are accustomed to think of January 1st as the beginning of the year. But the tradition of computing the start of a new year with autumn was common to the lands of the Bible and to all the lands around the Mediterranean. The summer harvest was at an end, the crops were stored, and people prepared for a new agricultural cycle. It was an appropriate time to begin a new year.

Many of the hymns for the first day of the Church year state that the coming year is God's to give and God's to bless -- A YEAR OF THE LORD! These hymns take their theme from Psalm 65 (64 in the Greek Septuagint), a psalm of praise to the Creator Who is awesome as the Holy Lord but who richly sustains the earth with His abundant goodness.

"Bless, O Lord, the crown (that is, the beginning) of the year with Your goodness!"

The goodness of the Lord is His love, mercy and grace, The Church's prayer is that the coming year will be a year of grace, a year blessed by God. Each year can be a year of grace, a year blessed by God.

The prayers and hymns of the Orthodox Church not only recite the wonderful works of God in creation and history for our salvation but also frequently offer guidance about how to make each year a year of grace, a year of the Lord. For example, the very first hymn of the new liturgical year, chanted at Vespers in the joyful first tone, reminds us that prayerful daily dependence on God is the basic attitude of the Christian and Christian life. This hymn is also interesting because it refers to another key passage in the Bible and addresses all the Orthodox faithful.

"O faithful, having learned true prayer from the very words
and divine teachings of Christ,
let us cry out to the Creator each day:
Our Father, who dwells in heaven,
give us always daily bread,
and forgive us our transgressions".

Vesper Hymn, September 1st

Of course this hymn is making reference to the Lords Prayer, the "Our Father..."

Both the above Vesper hymn and the Lord's Prayer set down three anchors, three great principles, necessary to make the coming year a year of the Lord, a year of grace.

- The teachings of Christ are the source of truth for our lives.
- Our Father in heaven is a personal God who provides for all our material and spiritual needs as we ask Him by faith.
- Daily prayer is the way of ongoing communication and a vital relationship with God.

Prayerful daily dependence on God sanctifies every moment of the day, whether we are at work, at play, at rest or in difficulty; it fills it with the presence of God and makes it God's moment.

"Christ our Lord, You who provide the rains
and fruitful seasons, and hear the prayers
of those who humbly seek You,
accept also our requests about our needs
and concerns and deliver us
from worry, danger and sin.
Your mercies are as abundant as Your works.
Bless all our activities, direct our steps by
Your Holy Spirit, and forgive' our shortcomings.
Lord, bless the year with Your goodness
and make it a year of grace
for all of us. Amen."

Matin Hymn, September 1st

O Lord, Creator of all things,
who by Your authority
have established times and seasons,
bless the beginning of our Church year with
Your goodness; preserve Your people in peace,
and through the intercessions
of the Theotokos, save us. Amen.

Dismissal Hymn, September 1st

The worship of the Orthodox Church is rich in the Word of God. For the first day of the Church year a total of eight readings are designated, three from the Old Testament which are read during Vespers, and five from the New Testament which are read during the Matins and Liturgy. Vespers are chanted on the previous evening (that is, August 31st) because, according to the Bible and the Orthodox tradition, each new day begins after the setting of the sun.

The main Bible reading from the Divine Liturgy of September 1st is Lk. 4:16-22, a passage which marks the beginning of Jesus' public ministry in St. Luke's Gospel. In this reading we see the beginning of Jesus' ministry. He reads from the Book of Isaiah in the synagogue and proclaims to the world that Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled in Him.

See how the beginning of Jesus' ministry and the beginning of the Church year converge! According to Orthodox liturgical tradition, Jesus came to Nazareth to preach the good news of

His mission on September 1st ! This is of course not verifiable but it is spiritually significant that the Church in its worship has joined the first day of the liturgical year with the first day of Jesus' public preaching. In this fashion the Church has Jesus speaking to us today just as He did to His contemporaries in the synagogue at Nazareth. Will we reject Him or accept Him? Will we rebel against His Word actively, will we ignore it, or will we respond to it positively?

Christ's good news demands our faithful response of mind, heart, soul and body. The unconditional love of God, shown by the most precious gift of His Son who shed His blood on the Cross for our salvation, requires a total response on our part. St. Symeon the Stylite, whose feastday is observed on the first day of the Church year, is an example of unwavering devotion. St. Symeon for many years lived on top of a pillar (stylos, therefore he is called the "stylite") in prayer, sustained by the power of God and little else. His ascetic witness was not only a radical denial of all earthly things but also a provocative pointer to the kingdom of God.

His vigil for Christ had a powerful impact upon generations of Christians in the Orthodox tradition who were moved to commit their lives to the Lord. A martyr dies once. St. Symeon was a martyr for Christ for a period of forty years until his death (d. 459 A.D.)!

One of the hymns for the Feastday of St. Symeon compares the Saint with Christ Himself;

"O holy Father, imitating your own Lord,
you ascended on a pillar as if on a cross
by the power of the Holy Spirit.
The Lord wiped away the ancient sentence
against us whereas you destroyed
the rebellion of corruptive passions;
He became as a lamb and you as a victim;
He ascended a cross and you a pillar.
Holy Symeon, intercede with Him
for the salvation of our souls".

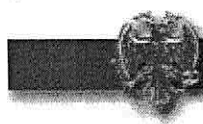
Vesper Hymn,
Feastday of St. Symeon the Stylite

By putting before us St. Symeon's example of extreme asceticism at the beginning of the liturgical year, the church shows how seriously it takes the priority of Christ and how uncompromising our faith is about worldly values.

There is no merrymaking or party revelry on the eve of the beginning of the new Church year. It is an eve which does not call for wine and song but for contemplation, reflection and prayer. It is a time to pause and refresh the spirit and meditate on the new year before us. It is also a suitable time for us as Orthodox Christians to recommit our lives to Christ our God.

adapted from **A year of the Lord**, v. 1
by Prof. Theodore Stylianopoulos

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GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

St Symeon the Stylite

Memory celebrated September 1



There have been men who could call forth enthusiasm for Christ from the pulpit or from monastic cells, but for forty long years one man did so perched atop a sixty-foot pillar from which he never descended. He spent a lifetime of extreme asceticism that spelled out the name of the Saviour twenty-four hours of every day of that long period. In a stint of religious fervour that has been imitated many times since but never duplicated, St. Symeon occupied a confining space above ground. Like a wingless eagle of the Lord, he made a spectacular figure against the sky that reminded everyone below that the only salvation of man could come through Jesus Christ. In his youth, Symeon was an earthbound shepherd who had deep Christian roots originating in the Syrian city of Antioch, the first city to apply the name "Christian" to the followers of Jesus of Nazareth. Such was the depth of his faith that it could find expression only through asceticism. This austerity through monastic life he was to carry to the extreme not only to completely dedicate himself to God, but to call to the attention of the world the need for prayer in Christian worship.

At a time when St. Anthony and St. Savvas were gaining their reputation through monasticism in Egypt, Symeon chose to carry out his ascetic way of life in his native Syria, a land where monastics had been dwarfed by the spiritual giants of other areas. This relative obscurity might have generated his brilliant idea to ascend the pillar, located about sixteen miles from the city of Aleppo on a road leading to Antioch. This was, however, no mere publicity-seeking flagpole stunt. It was a well thought-out plan to present the appealing starkness of a lone figure's vigil for Christ with the bare necessities of life being provided by devoted followers. His self-denial was subordinate to the main purpose of his thought-provoking venture, which was to bring his fellow man an acute awareness of, and a closer proximity to, God. In this he was eminently successful, a price in deprivation he was only too glad to pay.

Symeon's severely restricted abode, in which he could either stand or sit but could not lie down, limited his physical movement, but that seemed only to give him more room for intellectual effort, prayer, and meditation. Known as a stylite, or one who lives on a pillar, he virtually impaled himself physically for a lifetime but thereby gained spiritual eternity. Inured to the hardships of this inhuman existence, he was able to withstand rigours which by any standard would be unbearable, and it is not hard to believe that in one Lenten season he stood erect for twenty days, then sat in meditation for another twenty days, during which time his only sustenance was water.

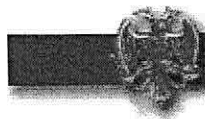
Considered to be by far the greatest ascetic in all Christendom, Symeon sat or stood stoically atop his pillar, which over the years beckoned thousands of Christian pilgrims who came to view this

amazing spectacle and to hear the wisdom of the solitary anchorite, whose weather-beaten visage inspired countless numbers to reaffirm their faith in God and his only begotten Son. Added to the wonder of his durability under the most demanding circumstances was his power of miraculous healing through the power of the Lord, as a result of which he came to be venerated as a saint while still alive. Symeon had spent a number of years in his cramped quarters when he was besieged by his followers to descend back into the society of man, assuring him that his purpose had been more than fulfilled and that he was entitled to the comforts of hearth and home, even perhaps the high post in the hierarchy. Symeon refused to come down, saying only that he had made a solemn vow that his only descent would come after his death.

The ruins of St. Symeon's pillar are still evident in Syria and are considered a shrine to the greatest ascetic of them all who died in A.D. 459 after establishing a precedent which many followed later but none were able to equal.

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GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

St John the Faster Patriarch of Constantinople

Memory celebrated September 2

by Fr George Poulos

If fasting guaranteed an entry into Heaven, lifelong felons and violators of every Christian creed could starve themselves into the company of the righteous. The practice of fasting complements the decent behaviour of the genuine Christian in emulation of the Saviour who fasted in the desert for forty days in warding off temptation. Not for forty days, but for more than forty years a man named John observed the custom of fasting, reserved for certain solemn occasions for the average Christian, in the process of which he also exemplified piety to the degree that he became the ecumenical patriarch of Orthodoxy. His self-denial earned him the name of John the Faster, a man who observed to the letter everything expected of an Orthodox priest but voluntarily went a step beyond in a regimen of diet usually expected of an eremite of the desert and not a man whose high office held forth the dishes that delight a Greek stomach.

Born in Cappadocia, Asia Minor in the sixth century, the remarkably durable John was formally educated in Byzantium where he was tutored by a renowned monk of Palestine whose name was Eusebios and who instilled in John the longing to serve Jesus Christ. It was after he was ordained a priest that John decided that he could fulfill his purpose in the Church with a self-imposed diet that allowed for the barest of sustenance. In resisting the temptation to eat the delicacies that delight the palate, he became inured to hardship and trained to resist any form of temptation, physical or spiritual. He did this in deadly earnestness, with no desire to impress anyone with his hardiness, which was asserted throughout his lifetime in spite of his meager fare.

An unseen hand nourished the dedicated John who was not the gaunt figure people expected to see wherever he went in his service to Christ. His rise through the ranks of the clergy was a rapid one, and it was inevitable that he would be made ecumenical patriarch, serving as spiritual leader of Eastern Christianity for thirteen years -- from 582 to 595. At church and state functions where banquets offered all manner of food, the ecumenical patriarch never went beyond the simple necessities of life which seemed to afford him greater pleasure than the offerings consumed by the heartiest of eaters. When he was referred to as the Faster, it was with reverence because his miraculous state of health was attained through prayer and meditation. This combination seems to have given him a proximity to God which was manifested not only in the miracle of his well-being but in miracles attributed solely to him through the power of the Divine.

It was not miracles but John's hard work that raised the patriarchate to an exalted level, one that is outstanding in a long history of exalted patriarchs. He took personal command of all the projects set forth to improve the lot of the Christians through aid for the poor, the establishment of hospitals, orphanages and churches for the service to all mankind. In the course of these vast undertakings, however, there was more than one manifestation of his ability to summon forth a small miracle, but he did his best to minimise his mystical power, calling on all to give thanks to God for his blessings.

A most holy man, John was quite human and combined his human nature with the mystical one

on an occasion when he was provoked to righteous anger by an action of the state. A day of festivity at the Hippodrome was set by the authorities in a state celebration, but it happened to fall on the day of Pentecost. When a call for a delay of the festivity was issued by an outraged patriarch, it was ignored by those whose interests lay irreverently outside of respect for the holy day. This so distressed John the Faster that he retired to a chapel and prayed for rain so earnestly that he was answered with a deluge that washed out the entire affair. Conversely, he prayed for the safety of a ship on which he was a passenger and which was about to flounder in a storm, the answer to which was bright sunshine and just enough wind to fill the ship's sails.

At odds with the popes of Rome because of his insistence of retaining the title of Ecumenical, which applies to this day, St. John the Faster died peacefully on 3 September 595.

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GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

Nativity of the Theotokos

Commemorated September 8



The establishment of four major feast days to honour the Blessed Virgin Mary took place in the days of the apostolic era and have a significance in the Greek Orthodox Church which has remained unaltered through nearly twenty centuries of Christianity. The mother of the Son of God is honoured on March 25, the day of Annunciation when the Archangel Gabriel told Mary she was to become the mother of Jesus Christ; the Repose of the blessed Virgin Mary on August 15; on November 21, the Entrance of the Blessed Theotokos to the Temple; and on February 2 when the Mother of God brought the infant Jesus to the temple for presentation forty days after His birth.

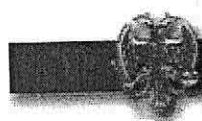
A fifth day of commemoration is celebrated on September 8, honouring the Virgin Mary on the day of her birth. This day was set aside by the Orthodox Church in the early first century, but not observed until the eighth century when Pope Sergios saw fit to join with the Orthodox during his reign which extended from A.D. 687 to 701. All of Christendom agreed on the date that the Virgin Mary was born, but for some reason the date was not an official feast day in the Roman sector for more than a third of the length of existence of the Christian Church. The lack of communication between East and West ended in the Schism of 1054, a break which now appears to be an ever-narrowing gap, hopefully to be closed in a reunion upon which the Mother of God is sure to smile.

The familiar story of Mary's birth has had variations in splinter groups of Christianity, but there is no doubt that her birth came about as an act of God. Her parents, Joachim and Anna, were childless and were fast approaching the years which would place Anna beyond the age of childbearing. Perhaps it was because of the intensity of their prayers that a child be born to them that their prayers were not only answered, but their child would, in turn, bear a child ordained by God as his Son. No one who calls himself a Christian can accept the virgin birth as anything but an act of God.

Although Mary is known as the mother of God, she has been accorded numerous titles in the Orthodox Church of which few are aware. They include, in addition to Mary, Mother of God: The Repose (Koimesis) of the Blessed Virgin, Mary Pantanissa, Mary of Tinos, Mary of Malcheon, and Mary Vlacherne (just to mention a few of the many honours applied to her name). Considered the Mother of Mothers and the Mother of all Mankind, she is venerated in a manner which helps to sanctify the role of motherhood and the preservation of the family as the only hope for civilisation. In an age of equal rights, the God-given right to motherhood, which is the mainstay of Christianity, is lost in a cloud of other 'rights' that have no meaning in the presence of God. Those who clamour for those 'rights' are not aware that there is no inferiority in women, proof of which is an approach to God and a reading of the Bible as a stronger document than any constitution. It is regrettable that the immaculate conception, not to be confused with the virginal birth of the Saviour, is a concept of the Mother of God which the Roman Church assumed in 1854 and with which the Orthodox Church is in total disagreement. This concept holds that Mary was born without the stain of original sin brought upon all mankind by Adam and Eve. But the Orthodox position holds that since Jesus Christ is God, he is, therefore the only one who is without the original stain. The point could be argued endlessly; but in spite of dogmatic

differences, there is no lessening in the adoration of Mary as the Mother of God. There can be no doubt that she was made pure on the day of the Annunciation when told by Gabriel she was going to be the Virgin Mother of the Messiah. The Orthodox position stems from the concept that if the immaculate conception is taken literally, then Mary would assume the stature of goddess alongside God. The popularity of the name of Mary attests to the glorification of the Virgin Mary. The Greek Orthodox can feel exultation from calling out the name "Panagia" which means 'All-Holy' and is the Greek word for the most sacred figure in Christianity, aside from the Son she mothered.

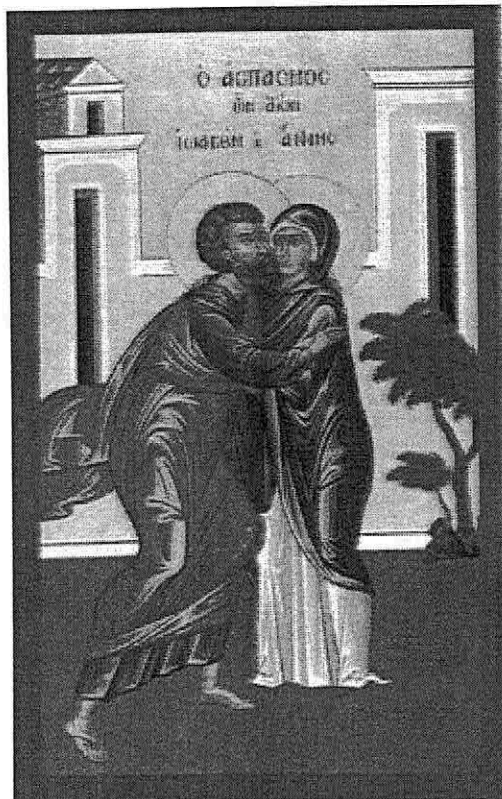
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GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

St Anna

Memory celebrated September 9



St. Anna, the mother of the Theotokos, was the wife of St. Joachim and the daughter of Mattham, a Levi priest. Anna and Joachim were married and childless for about 50 years. This saddened them, and they vowed that should the Lord bless them with a child they would dedicate it to Him. Hoping their prayers would be answered, they brought gifts to the Lord's temple in Jerusalem on the yearly Feast of the Dedication (Hanukkah) and Feast of Lights (c.f. Macc 4:52-59; 2 Macc 10:5). The priests, however, did not wish to accept them, since they were from a childless man, and Joachim was scorned (c.f. St. Romanos the Melodist, c.490-556). Publicly humiliated he soon remembered that Abraham whom God gave a son in his old age. He then retired to the wilderness to pray, where the Archangel Gabriel told him that his prayers have been heard, and that Anna will give birth to a daughter who shall be called Mary.

The Archangel also reminded Joachim that, "according to your vow, she (Mary) shall be devoted to the Lord from her infancy, and she shall be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from her mother's womb. Mary shall not eat or drink anything unclean, nor shall her conversation or life be

among the crowds of the people, but in the temple of the Lord, that it may not be possible to say, or so much as to suspect, any evil concerning her". Again, St. Romanos chants, "Joachim on the mountain prayed to receive fruit from the womb of Anna; and the prayer of the holy man was received".

Anna, meanwhile, went home to her garden weeping bitterly. She sat under a laurel tree and prayed, "O God of our fathers, bless me and hear my prayer, as You opened the womb of Sarah and gave her a son Isaac". She wept asking, "Alas, who begot me? And what womb did bear me, that I should be thus accursed before the children of Israel, and that they should reproach and deride me in the temple of my God? Woe is me, to what can I be compared? I am not like the fowls of the heaven, because even the fowls of the heaven are productive before You, O Lord. Alas! to what can I be compared? I am not like the beasts of the earth, because even the beasts of the earth are fruitful before You, O Lord. Woe is me, to what can I be compared? I am not comparable to the waves of the sea; for these, whether they are calm, or in motion, with the fishes which are in them, praise You, O Lord. Alas! to what have I been likened? I am not like this earth because even the earth brings forth its fruit in season and blessed You, O Lord".

The same Archangel appeared to Anna and told her, "I am the angel who has presented your prayers and alms before God; and now I have been sent to you to announce that you shall bring forth a daughter, who shall be called Mary, and who shall be blessed above all women. She shall be full of the favour of the Lord, even from her birth. She shall remain in her father's house until she is weaned and, thereafter, she shall be delivered to the service of the Lord. She shall serve

God, day and night, in fasting and prayers. She shall abstain from every unclean thing and shall not depart from the temple until she shall reach the years of discretion. She shall never know man, but alone and without precedent, as an immaculate and undefiled virgin, without intercourse with man, she shall bring forth a Son. She, His handmaiden, shall bring forth the Lord, both in grace, and in name, and in work, the Saviour of the world". Gabriel then said, "arise, therefore, and go up to Jerusalem; and when you arrive at the gate that, because it is plated with gold, is called 'Golden', there, for a sign, you shall meet your husband, for whose safety you have been anxious. When, therefore, you find these things accomplished, believe that all the rest which I have told you shall also undoubtedly be accomplished".

On this occasion St. Romanos chants, "the prayer and groaning of Joachim and Anna at their barrenness and childlessness have proved acceptable, and have come unto the ears of the Lord; and they have put forth fruit that brings life to the world. The one offered his prayer in the mountain, the other bore her reproach in the garden. But with joy the barren bears the Theotokos who sustains our life".

On the following day, Joachim brought his offerings into the temple, worshipped the Lord, and then returned home. There was great joy and celebration when it was heard that Anna conceived.

When Mary was three years old, her parents, after offering up their sacrifice, left her to be brought up with the other maidens in the apartments of the temple.

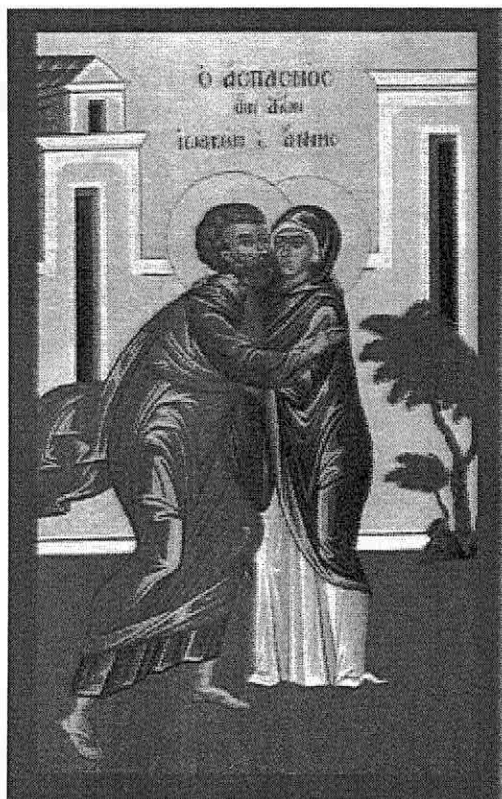
For the next seven years, Anna and Joachim visited Mary often until they reposed, leaving her an orphan. The Orthodox Church commemorates the dormition of St. Anna on 25th of July. Both of the Virgin Mary's parents are commemorated together on the 9th of September.

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Sts Joachim and Anna, parents of Blessed Mary (Theotokos)

Commemorated September 9



So much attention is paid by Christians to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Theotokos, sanctified in every conceivable way, that there is a tendency to overlook her parents. Commemorated the day after the commemoration of their daughter, who is remembered on other days as well, Joachim and Anna were the parents of a flesh-and-blood human being they called Mary and, therefore, the grandparents of a flesh-and-blood human being, in form at least, who died to save the world.

Considered in this light, this couple is appreciated most by the grandfathers and grandmothers of the world.

The spiritual beauty of St Anna is expressed in the Bible, equalled by that of her devoted husband, the too lightly regarded Joachim. Since there is no greater part of the divine plan of the universe than motherhood, it follows that St. Anna is given individual honour with an observance of a feast day in her name on July 26. This in no way diminishes the image of her husband St Joachim.

Shrouded by twenty centuries of legend, close scrutiny by biblical scholars has cleared away legend and established a more accurate and factual account, however meager, of Sts Joachim and Anna. There is no denying the word of the Apostle James, who saw fit to go to great lengths to glean facts about the parents of Mary which he describes in a letter that somehow failed to find official acceptance.

Conflicting views notwithstanding, it is definitely known that St Anna was of the prestigious Hebrew tribe of Levi and that she was the daughter of the high priest Nathan, wed to a namesake Mary. This high priest had two daughters besides the Mary who mothered Anna. They were called Sovin and Anna, both of whom became mothers in Bethlehem, but Anna was married in Galilee where Mary, the Theotokos, was born. There is no denying Joachim was favored of God, who answered his prayer that a child be born to the barren union with Anna. The answer was Mary, of course, and thereafter was set in motion the world's greatest faith, so overwhelming that St Joachim fades from view in misty swirls that surround the sweet mysteries of Christianity. It is enough to know St Joachim was the father of Mary, the mother who bore Jesus Christ, the divine Saviour who changed the course of world history and set it on another path which, if followed, leads to eternal life.

The fact that God moves in a mysterious way was evident when Joachim and Anna prayed for a child they knew not whether they were being granted a son or a daughter so they had no knowledge of what lay in store for them and for the world. The Apostle James has quoted an

angel of the Lord as saying to Anna, "the Lord hath heard thy prayer, and thou shalt conceive and bring forth, and thy seed shall be spoken of in all the world." There was no mention of the sex of the child as the Apostle James goes on to say that Anna accepted with the words: "As the Lord my God liveth if I beget male or female, I will bring it as a gift to the Lord my God; and it shall minister unto him holy things all the days of its life." The use of the word "it" indicates Anna may have had premonitions but certainly no advance notice that 'it' was to be "she," who in turn knowingly brought forth the Son of God. Indeed God does move in a mysterious way.

The Greek Orthodox Church has a hymn which sings gloriously,

"As we celebrate the remembrance of thy righteous grand- parents, through them we beseech thee, O Lord, to save our souls" .

There can be no more touching tribute than to be sung in praise and prayer in the sacred music of the Church. Another hymn contains the words,

"Anna doth rejoice now that she is loosed from the bonds of barrenness, as she nourisheth the most pure one, calling all to praise him who hath given the world her who alone is Mother, yet hath known no man".

The names of Joachim and Anna are an integral part of the Divine Liturgy, always mentioned in the prayerful conclusion of services with the words: "May the risen Christ, our true God, with the prayers of his pure and holy Mother, the power of the precious and life-giving Cross, the protection of the spiritual powers of Heaven...the holy and righteous ancestors Joachim and Anna...and all the saints whose memory we celebrate have mercy on us and save us".

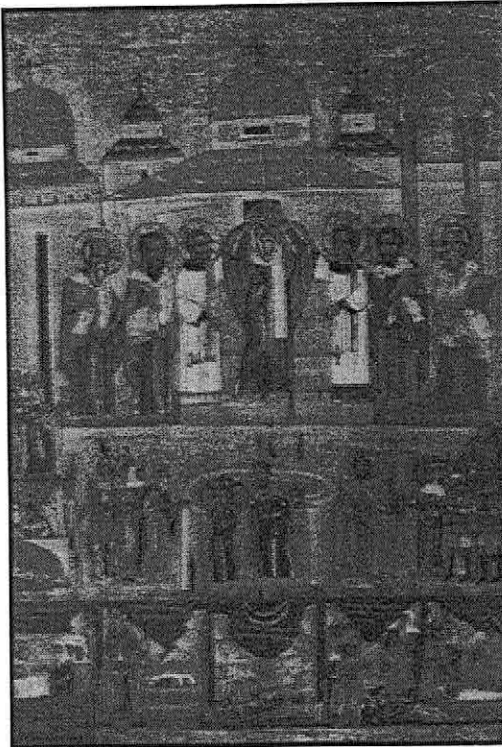
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GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

Feast of the elevation of the Precious and Life-giving Cross

Commemorated September 14



As important as any of the feast days commemorating the exalted saints of the Church is the feast day held annually on September 14 in special tribute to the cross of Jesus Christ, the reproduction of which is worn or displayed in every corner of the earth as a symbol of the mightiest faith in all the universe.

The two timbers on which the Messiah died to save the world, priceless beyond measure, form the most familiar and beloved symbol in a world full of symbols and emblems. For nearly three hundred years after his death the Cross was buried in obscurity, eventually to be salvaged through the efforts of a devout Byzantine emperor and his mother.

The Emperor Constantine the Great was not only the first Christian emperor, but, together with his mother, has been honoured with sainthood. His mother is honoured for her determined efforts in the cause of Christianity. It was Constantine who beheld a vision in the sky in which were emblazoned the words '*en touto Nika*', translating into

"In this Sign Conquer," etched across a brilliant cross of Jesus Christ.

Ordering that all the shields of his army bear the sign of the Cross, Constantine went on to subdue the enemies of the state and to establish the Christian faith, which has outlived his empire and will endure forever. Helen, the mother of Constantine and a saint of the Church, had the full support of her son when she decided to recover the cross of Christ, and although nearly three hundred years had elapsed since the Crucifixion, she was optimistic in her resolve to find the Cross and return it to the city of Constantinople.

After months of diligent search, painstakingly following every historic clue as to its whereabouts, Helen and her dedicated group of searchers discovered the Cross on 14 September 325 AD in the vicinity of Golgotha, where it had been buried in the dust of the centuries. On the spot where the Cross was discovered there was found to grow a hitherto unknown flower of rare beauty and fragrance which has been named *Vasiliko* (Basil), meaning the flower of royalty, out of respect to the Dowager Queen who led the expedition.

This flower, since that memorable day over 1600 years ago, has been the official flower of the Orthodox Christian Church and is in evidence when Clergymen engage in the age-old tradition of blessing homes or the waters on which seamen ply their trade.

Helen afterwards made countless pilgrimages to the Holy Land and was responsible for the

establishment of churches at the sites of the Nativity, Holy Sepulchre, Ascension, and at many other places. For the next three hundred years the Cross stayed in the possession of the Christians in Jerusalem, but after a series of forays the city of Jerusalem was captured by the Persians in 614 AD and the Cross fell into the hands of an enemy that for years prior and since has scoffed at the faith of Jesus Christ.

Several attempts were made by devout and bold Christians to recover the precious Cross, but they were no match for the Persian hordes. Finally, the Byzantine Emperor Heraklios, in the tradition of his ancestor Constantine, amassed an army of size and equipment to match that of the Persians, and after months of planning, launched an attack on the Holy City - but with no immediate success.

What the Persians lacked in faith they made up for in numbers of trained warriors who respected nothing but the sword, and because of this relentless defence the tide of battle wavered over an agonising fifteen years until at last the Christian forces broke through the Persian defences and regained control of the Holy City and its priceless treasure. The successful outcome of the campaign is celebrated jointly with the finding of the Cross by St. Helen on September 14, and the veneration of the Precious and Life-giving Cross is again celebrated by Christians on the Third Sunday of Lent.

With the sign of the Cross so much in evidence in the daily life of a Christian, the celebration seems to extend over every minute of every day of every year, but the official days underscore the magnitude of the Cross in the Christian concept. With the perilous conditions prevalent in a land where the fortunes of a menaced society were subject to sudden change and mood, depending on who held the upper hand, the Fathers of the Church decided to divide the Cross into small sections, thereafter to repose in the safety of the great spiritual centres of Constantinople, Mt. Athos, Alexandria, Rome, and Antioch.

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Saints Faith, Hope, and Charity and their Mother Sophia

Memory celebrated September 17

The story of a second-century Roman mother who sacrificed herself and her three children in the name of Jesus Christ is not the often repeated family tale, principally because it is anything but a bedtime story, which for sheer horror is unsurpassed even in the imaginations of today's writers of grisly screen scenarios. It would be far better to tell of the family delights and Christian fidelity and to mention in passing that they were put to death for their faith, but the stark truth has to be faced to underscore the depth of belief in the Saviour. The spiritual attainment of this alone is positive proof that Christianity transcends every aspect of human life to focus on the eternity of the soul.

The mother of this rare family bore the classical Greek name of Sophia, her three daughters bear the familiar Anglicised names of Faith (Pisti), Hope (Elpitha), and Charity (Agapi). This quartet of frail females stood up to the brutal might of Rome at a time when a mere whisper of dissent could mean death to a Roman citizen, Christian or pagan. Sophia was a widow under whose loving care her three daughters acquired a poise and Christian virtue looked upon with respect by the village which they left for the more rewarding city life of Rome, the Eternal City.

Sophia and her three lovely little girls milled about unobtrusively in the teeming city, but in the Christian community that gathered in candlelight in the catacombs to worship the Messiah, they became highly respected figures, the children all the more so because of their display of deep devotion to the Saviour and to their mother. In the dark recesses of the subterranean shelters, the family drew themselves closer to God and to their fellow man emerging into the light to convert others, who preceived the glow of happiness which was not to be found in the pagan temples nor in the company of those who shared their spiritual darkness. Fate decreed that this blessed family would be called upon to assert their faith in an incredibly monstrous test of Christian endurance.

The Emperor Hadrian did not share the majority view that Christianity was a harmless form of worship practised by patriotic Romans, but looked upon them as enemies of the state whose Kingdom of Heaven sought to displace his authority. He instituted a sweeping wave of persecution with an army of operatives infiltrating all sections of the city, spinning a giant web which caught up with Sophia and her children. Not even the most hardened pagans anticipated that three girls, aged twelve, ten and nine respectively, would be punished for what could be construed as the offense of the mother.

The magistrate Antiochos on the other hand saw in the arrest of the entire family an opportunity to wrest from the mother a disavowal of Christ rather than allow her flesh and blood to be punished. Sophia and her three daughters appeared as a group before the judgment of the pagan court which offered to release the entire family providing that the mother would deny the Saviour and raise her children as pagans. All three daughters looked up to their mother to assure her that they would remain as steadfast Christians with her and that she should feel no guilt should they be put to death.

The agonised Sophia was torn between the love for her children and the love for Jesus Christ. She

turned to the court to plead that her children be released, and they could inflict their tortures upon her. In a chorus of small voices that would have melted the hardest of hearts, the youngsters cried out to their mother that they would rather join her in death to be reunited in the Kingdom of God than to remain behind without her. Sophia's glance at the magistrate told her the next move was his.

Incredibly the magistrate was unmoved and ordered the first of the girls, Faith, to be put to torture before the eyes of her mother. When this failed to bring the mother to pleas for mercy but instead the praises of the Lord, Faith was put to the sword. Hope followed her sister in death, as did her sister Charity, three innocents whose horrified mother was dragged to the side of their bodies, over which she continued to pray as she herself also died for the Lord. The commemoration of these sweet saints on September 17th has an added solemnity when their complete story is unfolded.

from **Orthodox Saints**, v. 2
by Fr George Poulos, Holy Cross Orthodox Press

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GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

Holy Protomartyr and Equal-to-the-Apostles Thekla

Memory celebrated September 24

According to her biographer, St. Epiphanius, Thekla was born of humble parents in the town of Ikonion in Asia Minor about a quarter century after the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Like other girls of her class, she had no formal education and was unfamiliar with any of the arts or the classics. A dutiful peasant girl, she was resigned to one day becoming a wife and nothing more was expected of her, but she showed an intellectual curiosity which was frowned upon by her friends but was encouraged by her mother. She attained a degree of literacy, which was rare for a girl in those days, and with the help of her mother found some of the answers she eagerly sought in quest of the real meaning of life.

It was not strange, therefore, when Thekla was eighteen years old that her mother took her to listen and learn about the new faith that was bringing joy to those who were poor in spirit. She and her mother were privileged to listen to the mightiest missionary of them all, no less than St. Paul himself, whose message of Christ so moved the young girl that she sought out the company of St. Paul, who personally converted her to Christianity. She had much to learn about the teaching of Jesus and his true light and attended every meeting held in the area by St. Paul and spoke with other converts in whom she found the love of God.

When Paul was preparing to leave the area to continue his work for Jesus, Thekla ran to her mother and begged her for permission to go with the holy man and take up the cause for Christ in her own way, if St. Paul would let her. Her mother, a devout Christian herself, told her daughter she was free to go anywhere to serve the Lord. The delighted girl then overtook the missionary party of St. Paul and was welcomed into the group, thereafter to become so deeply involved that she was soon one of the ablest of the missionaries.

It was suggested to Thekla that she undertake her own missionary work in other parts of the lands hitherto unreached, while the rest of the missionaries did likewise and split up into groups that fanned out into all directions of the pagan countries. With St Paul's blessing she set out on a journey into many strange lands, some of which were hostile and others of which were anxious to hear the words of the girl whose reputation had preceded her. She won countless numbers of pagans to the new faith but was finally apprehended by an unnamed pagan ruler whose barbarism struck terror into the hearts of his subjects.

There ensued a series of tortures that would have ended the life of any mortal at the outset, but the Lord had seen fit to make Thekla superhuman, in answer to the cruelties of the enemies of early Christianity. When she was cast into a fire, she walked away unscathed. Lances bounced off her and nails could not penetrate her skin. When the onslaught on her person had been thwarted at every turn, her pagan foe retreated in awe. She died of natural causes at the age of ninety and was declared a Saint and Isapostolos (Equal-to-the-Apostles).

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GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

Repose of the Apostle and Evangelist John the Theologian

Commemorated September 26

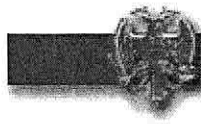
According to tradition, St. John the Apostle was assisted by St. Prochoros in writing the Gospel According to St. John. St. John, "Son of Thunder" (Mark 3:17), was one of the Twelve Apostles of Jesus. John and his brother, the Apostle James, were fishermen by trade, like their father Zebedee. John is believed to be the youngest Apostle and also "the beloved disciple" of Christ (John 13:23; 21:7,20). On the Cross, Jesus entrusted His mother, the Virgin Mary, to John's care (John 19:26, 27). John was a "pillar" of the church in Jerusalem, and later moved to Ephesus. He served as the leading authority ("Elder," lit. "presbyter," in 2 John 1) of Ephesus for the remainder of his ministry. During the reign of the tyrannical Roman Emperor Domitian (A.D. 81-96), John was exiled to the nearby island of Patmos, where he wrote Revelation (also called the Apocalypse). Upon the emperor's death he returned to Ephesus to resume his episcopacy and to write his Gospel.

John is the first of only three saints in history to be named by the Church "the Theologian," because of the profundity of his Gospel, which has been called "the spiritual Gospel." The new Testament contains four other books attributed to John: three letters (1, 2, and 3 John, written about 90 A.D., and the Book of Revelation, written about 95 A.D.

St. John the Apostle was almost one hundred years old when he died, about 96-100 A.D.

from **The Orthodox Study Bible**
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GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

St John the Apostle

by the Late Very Rev N Patrinos

Like most of the other disciples, John, the son of Zebedee, was a Galilean fisherman. He was among the earliest disciples 'called to follow Jesus'. The behaviour of the two brothers, John and James, (Mark 9:38; Luke 9:52-56), revealed their fiery nature for which they earned the name from Christ 'Sons of thunder'. They are portrayed as having claimed for themselves special honours, but also as having stated to be ready to face death for Christ. In the lists of the Twelve, John always appears among the first four. We have every reason to believe that he was one of the inner circle of three, as it appears from the story of Jairus daughter, the Transfiguration and the scene at Gethsemane. That John was the unnamed 'beloved disciple' is supported by the following: he leaned on Jesus' breast during the Last Supper; it was he who alone remained faithful at the Cross and was entrusted by Christ with the care of His Mother; he was the first to believe in Christ's Resurrection at the Tomb; he first recognised the Lord at the Sea of Tiberias; of the three prominent members of the Twelve - Peter, James, John - only John appears to answer the description of the 'beloved disciple'. He was, according to Acts 1:18, one of the small group who waited in Jerusalem after Christ's Ascension. He appears twice in company with Peter: when the two went up to the Temple to pray and healed there the lame man; when they were sent to Samaria to investigate the progress of the Gospel there and bestow on newly baptised the Spirit by the 'laying on of hands'. The earliest mention of the name of John in the New Testament occurs in the Epistle to the Galatians; 2:9, where St. Paul states that when he visited Jerusalem, John together with Cephas (Peter) were reputed to be pillars of the mother Church.

We have a strong tradition supported by early authorities which connects John the Apostle with the city of Ephesos. According to Eusebios of Caesarea - perhaps the earliest historian of the Church true to name - Polycrates (bishop of Ephesos at the end of the 2nd century) claimed his city to be the home of John, of that particular John 'who reclined in the bosom of the Lord'. Irenaeus the bishop of Lyons and a contemporary of Polycrates, said that when a youth he himself had heard Polycarp (bishop of Smyrna) speak of having known John in person. Irenaeus concludes that this John, the disciple of the Lord, lived in Ephesos until the reign of Trajan and published his Gospel there. According to tradition, during the persecution of Domitian John was exiled to the small island of Patmos (one of the present Dodecanese Islands) where he put in writing his Christian visions in the form of the Revelation as we have it today. According to the same tradition, John died in Ephesos about the year 104 A.D. over 100 years old. His evangelical symbol is the Eagle, apparently because of the 'high flying' introductory ideas of his Gospel and because of the sky-dwelling visions' of his Revelation. His memory is celebrated by the Orthodox Church on May 8 and September 26.



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