

## 20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost



### St. Demetrios and the Gift of Myrrh

**NOTHING WAS WRITTEN IN HIS OWN TIME** about one of the more popular saints in the Byzantine Churches, the Great Martyr Demetrios. The oldest written life of this saint dates to the ninth century, some 700 years after his lifetime! Earlier witnesses to this saint include the seventh-century *Miracles of St Demetrios*, a testimony to the protection afforded to that city by its patron, St Demetrios. The *Miracles* consists of two books: the first is a compilation of homilies by Archbishop John of Thessaloniki praising the saint for his intercession for the city. The second is a slightly later

account of the Slavic invasion of the Balkans in which the saint once again protected his city from destruction.

Older than these written works, however, is the archaeological record some of which came to light only in the twentieth century.

#### Life of St Demetrios

St Demetrios is said to have been born in Thessaloniki in about AD 260 to an aristocratic family. The oldest icons we have (7<sup>th</sup> century) depict him in upper class dress. He is said to have been an officer in the Roman army and many icons portray him in a military uniform. During the Great Persecution of the early fourth century Demetrios was appointed pro-consul of the city, charged by Emperor Maximian with exterminating the Christians there. When it became known that Demetrios himself was a Christian, he was seized and imprisoned in the bathhouse complex at the Roman forum.

Demetrios was executed when his influence over the martyr Nestor became known. Nestor had accepted a challenge to fight the gladiator Lyaeos, a favorite of the emperor. Blessed by Demetrios, Nestor defeated the gladiator but was himself slain by the military commander. Soldiers sent to the prison impaled Demetrios on their lances and disposed of his body. Demetrios' servant Lupos dipped his garment in the saint's blood and preserved it along with the earth soaked in the martyr's blood.

#### The Great Church in Thessaloniki

The Great Church of St Demetrios is part of the World Heritage site incorporating the Roman forum, palace, temple, hippodrome, and a bathhouse used by the athletes competing there. This was the place where the Saint had been imprisoned and martyred. The complex was excavated by archeologists in 1966.

A church incorporating the old Roman bathhouse was constructed in the early fifth century, by the prefect Leontios, in gratitude for a healing received through the saint's intercession. This church was enlarged several times over the centuries and attained its present form as a major basilica in 629-634.

By then the ground had so risen that the Roman era bathhouse was actually underground. The basilica was built over the site of the saint's martyrdom, which was now housed in a crypt.

Over the centuries the church and its surroundings experienced major changes. From 1493-1912, under the Ottomans, the church was used as a mosque. The crypt was filled in with dirt and forgotten. In 1912, when Thessaloniki was joined to the Greek state, the structure became a church again. In 1917 a house fire spread unchecked and destroyed two-thirds of the city, severely damaging the Church of St Demetrios. Archaeological work in the church over the next few decades unearthed the forgotten crypt and a Roman-era well where, scholars believe, soldiers disposed of the saint's body after his martyrdom.

### The Relics of St Demetrios

The life of St Demetrios described how his servant had dipped his garment into the saint's blood. This was confirmed in the twentieth century restoration of the church and crypt. The first chapel built over the place of the saint's martyrdom was discovered. Its Holy Table was found to contain an earthen vessel containing earth impregnated with human blood.

When the Great Church was built, its shrine contained only a carved bed, a classical architectural device. When a body reported to be that of St Demetrios was put forth for veneration in the seventh century, the archbishop dismissed its authenticity. The body was proclaimed to be that of the saint after it started exuding perfumed myrrh. The relics were placed in the shrine where they are venerated to this day. This is why St Demetrios is known as the Myrobelite (Exuder of Myrrh).

For centuries, these relics have been exuding this fragrant myrrh and have been the occasion of many healings. Every year around the feast of the saint (October 26), the reliquary chest is opened and the fragrance of the myrrh can be detected for blocks around.

### Exudations of Myrrh

Christians, particularly in the East, have long considered the exudation of myrrh a sign that God confirms the holiness of a saint. From time to time streams of a unique viscous liquid emitting a beautiful aroma have appeared in connection with the relics or icons of certain saints. Healings and other seeming miracles have often accompanied this phenomenon.

Perhaps more famous than the relics of St Demetrios are the myrrh-exuding remains of St Nicholas the Wonderworker, Archbishop of Myra. Housed in the crypt of the basilica in Bari, Italy, St Nicholas'

relics continually exude myrrh. Every year on May 9, commemorating the transfer of the relics from Myra to Bari in 1087, the aromatic liquid is collected from the tomb and distributed to the faithful.

Other saints whose relics have reportedly exuded myrrh include:

- St. Clement the Confessor, Pope of Rome;
- St. Juliana the Compassionate;
- St. Peter the Wonderworker, bishop of Argos;
- St. Simeon of Serbia, founder of Mt. Athos' Hilandari Monastery;
- St. Simon, founder of Mt. Athos' Simonopetras Monastery.

### Myrrh-Streaming Icons

Even more common are myrrh-streaming icons, some ancient and many modern which exude this aromatic liquid in churches, monasteries and even private homes. Widely revered today are:

- A manufactured copy of the icon of the **Theotokos, "Softener of Evil Hearts"** bought by Anastasia Basharinaya at the glorification of St Matrona the Blind and touched to the saint's reliquary. At the family home, the icon began exuding myrrh. Taken throughout Russia and to Russian churches abroad, the icon has been the occasion of healings and unusual manifestations. Before the 9/11 tragedy, for example, the icon gave off the smell of blood.
- A modern copy of **the Iveron icon of the Theotokos**, given on Mount Athos to José Muñoz-Cortés in 1982, which began exuding myrrh a few weeks later. It has been taken for veneration around the world ever since.
- **A similar depiction of the same icon** at Holy Theotokos of Iveron Church in Honolulu, which has exuded myrrh intermittently since October, 2007.
- A framed paper **print of the Kazan Icon** purchased by Nicholas and Myrna Nazzour on their honeymoon in 1980, began exuding myrrh in November, 1982 at their home in Soufanieh, a Damascus suburb. Since then this liquid – scientifically analyzed as olive oil – has streamed from the icon, from numerous copies, and from Myrna's hands during prayer.