

Disturber of the Peace

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On January 19 the Church honors two saints named Macarius.

The first is Macarius the Great, to whom a demon once said, "There is only one thing in which I cannot excel you. It isn't in fasting, because I never eat, and it isn't in keeping vigil, because I never sleep." When Macarius asked what it was, the demon replied, "Your humility."

The second saint remembered on this day is Macarius of Alexandria. Born there in 295, he was a merchant until he was forty, when he was baptized and went into the desert to begin a life of prayer.

Even though he began his monastic effort later in life, Macarius was so conscientious in prayer that he came to have great spiritual power, and one story about him gives a good example. As he was crossing the Nile on a ferry boat, another passenger, a military officer, noticed him. The officer was wearing his gold-braided uniform, encircled by a gold belt, and carrying his handsome sword at his side. He said to Macarius, whose monastic clothes were simple and almost ragged, "You are blessed in being scorned by the world."


Macarius told the official, "Your words are prophetic, for my name is Macarius, which means 'blessed.' But if, as you say, I am happy and blessed in being scorned by the world, are you not miserable in being so obviously enslaved by the world?" These words had such a profound effect on the officer that he left the military, gave his possessions to the poor, and became a solitary monk.

But the devil, always trying to disturb our peace, sometimes tries especially hard with people like Macarius. For a long time, the saint was tempted by lustful dreams and desires, and had a hard struggle to overcome them. He also was struck by a longing to leave his cell and travel to faraway places, which is dangerous for any monk trying to keep his life focused on God and prayer.

Macarius had to work so hard against these temptations that his efforts became legendary. He sat in a swamp and let himself be almost devoured by mosquitoes. He ate practically nothing, and tried, until it became impossible, to go without sleep. Once he spent many months walking in the desert with a heavy basket of sand on his shoulders. When another monk asked him what he was doing he replied, "I am wearing out him who wears me out."

Because his efforts to overcome temptations were sincere, Macarius reached a point where the devil could no longer disturb his peace so easily. He even became able to recognize and heal others possessed by demons or afflicted by serious temptations of the devil.

In a verse from one of this day's readings, Saint Paul tells us to "let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts" (Colossians 3:15). The disturber of the peace will keep trying, but saints like Macarius are with us in the fight to snatch victory out of his evil hands.



Troparion - Tone 1

Dweller of the desert and angel in the body
you were shown to be a wonder-worker,
our God-bearing Father Macarius.
You received heavenly gifts through fasting, vigil, and prayer:
healing the sick and the souls of those drawn to you by faith.
Glory to Him who gave you strength!
Glory to Him who granted you a crown!
Glory to Him who through you grants healing to all!