

Recognizing a Gift When We Get One

Department of **CHRISTIAN EDUCATION**
ORTHODOX CHURCH in AMERICA

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October 8th is the feast day of the Venerable Thais, an Egyptian woman who lived in the fourth century.

Thais was pushed into prostitution at an early age by her family's desperate poverty. She had little time to figure out how to care for her soul, and counted success by the number of men who paid for her favors. She knew no other way.

Her story is tied up with that of two other saints, both of whom were disciples of the great desert dweller, Saint Anthony. The first is Saint Paphnutius, who heard about this attractive young woman who had such an ability to draw men—young, old, married, single—into sinfulness.

Paphnutius did not condemn her, or deem her unworthy of his attention. He recognized his awareness of Thais as a gift from God, because it was a chance to save her soul and the souls of the men who came to her.

So he visited her one evening, and let her assume that he was a potential customer. She must have had some minimal understanding of God and the Church's teachings, because she gave a surprising answer to Paphnutius' request that they find a private place. She said, "You know that if you believe in God, there is no place to hide your deeds." Paphnutius built on this answer to remind her forcefully that she must, for her own salvation, give up the way of life that was harming her soul as well as the souls of so many others.

Thais, too, recognized a gift from God. It came in the person of this unusual visitor. She didn't take offense at Paphnutius, or tell him not to "judge" her. She took his words to heart and changed her life, retiring to a solitary cell in a women's monastery near Paphnutius' hermitage. The rest of her life was spent there in repentant prayer.

After about three years, Thais died with a purified soul that was ready to meet God without fear. We read that the second disciple of Saint Anthony, who is known as Paul the Simple and whose feast day is October 4th, had a wonderful vision of Saint Thais. He saw her among the angels in heaven, where a beautiful dwelling had been prepared for her.

On this day we read words from Saint Paul that remind us to recognize the great gift God has given all of us. Paul writes in Galatians 5: 13, "For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another."

The gift of freedom can be used in any way we choose. After years of using her freedom in a way that was actually bondage, Saint Thais learned about a new way to use it. She chose to serve God and the people around her through the prayerful, repentant tears that can cleanse the soul—those tears that are yet another gift of our generous Lord.

Troparion — Tone 4
O God of our fathers,
Do not take your mercy from us,
But ever act towards us according to your kindness
And by the prayers of your Holy Thais,
Guide our lives in peace!
Kontakion — Tone 2
Let us praise the blessed Thais,
The truly fruitful branch from a corrupt root,
The sweet stream from a salty source,
The image of repentance and rule of patience!
Once a vessel of sin, she is now the chosen vessel of grace!
Let us cry aloud to her:
O Venerable Thais, entreat Christ God that our souls may be saved!