

The Temptations of Thais

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In one of the readings for May 10, Saint Luke mentions "not a few of the leading women" and "not a few Greek women and men of high standing" who became believers after hearing Saint Paul preach (Acts 17: 4, 12).

On this same day we remember someone who was one of the "leading women" in the Church several centuries later. She is the Blessed Thais, born to a wealthy family of believers in fourth-century Egypt.

Thais followed her parents' example of generosity and piety after they died, leaving her very wealthy. She worshipped and prayed, cared for the poor, supported monasteries and churches, and welcomed spiritual pilgrims by housing them on her estate. Like many other female saints we know of, Thais decided not to marry so that she could devote her life and effort to Christ.

But the story of Thais' attitude toward money is one that does not appear in many saints' lives. We know of several holy men and women who gave away everything they had, treating riches as a temptation with which they could not or did not wish to wrestle. Thais also gave away her inherited wealth, but the result was not that she stopped being concerned with having money.

Instead, she wanted more. Thais fell into a kind of greedy, obsessive desire for wealth that drove her to seek ways of getting money in any way she could. For those who think that having great riches brings some sort of peace, her experience is a good one to remember. When people are seriously and deeply tempted by money, there is no rest, and there is no amount that is "enough." That's why Saint Paul, telling Timothy how to teach, urged him to be content with little, and wrote that "the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains" (I Timothy 6: 10).

But God will use any scrap of goodness we have to save us, and Thais was saved through her generosity to the monasteries in earlier years. The elders of a monastery in Alexandria heard that this fine woman had fallen into ugly temptation. They knew her kind heart and deep faith because of her gifts to them. So they asked the great monastic John the Dwarf to go to her and lead her to repentance. He did so, reminding her that Jesus Christ came to seek and save those who were lost—and that she was certainly lost.

Thais felt his words like arrows, and went to the desert to live in penitence. She was there only one night, after which she died. But that short time was sufficient. John said later that angels assured him Thais was in paradise, having really repented. It isn't always years we need, but a heart still open to God, no matter how temptations have twisted it temporarily out of shape.