

Our Venerable Mother Mary of Egypt

A Model of Repentance

3 St. Mary receives Holy Communion from Abba Zossima.

2 St. Mary tells Abba Zossima her life story

1 Encountering St. Mary in the desert, Abba Zossima offers to give her his cloak.



4 Having eaten a bit from Abba Zossima's basket, St. Mary walks back across the Jordan River.

5 An angel carries St. Mary in an hour the distance it took Abba Zossima 20 days to walk.

6 A lion digs the grave in which Abba Zossima buries St. Mary.

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Abba [Father] Zossima was a learned and holy monk who lived about 500 years after our Lord's Resurrection. He hoped to find a teacher who could guide him even further into prayer and service to God. One year during Great Lent he walked from his monastery far into the desert to pray and fast, hoping perhaps to discover a wise solitary monk who could be his teacher.

Abba Zossima walked for twenty days, praying and singing psalms, but not seeing a single person, animal or bird. On the 20th day of his journey, while resting briefly, he thought he saw a shadow behind him. Turning, he saw that it was a person with a thin, naked body darkened by the sun and snow white hair. As he started to approach, the person ran away, and he was soon exhausted trying to keep up. He called out, "Please, stop and speak with a sinful old man!" to which he received the response, "Abba Zossima, I cannot turn around and show myself to you, as I am a woman and have no clothes. Will you throw me your cloak so I may cover myself?" [1].

Abba Zossima tossed his cloak to her, trembling with fear. How did she know his name, or that he was a priest? Kneeling, he asked for her blessing, and she in turn asked for his. When she told him that it was proper for him, as a priest, to bless her, he replied, "Clearly God's grace has been given to you, since you knew my name and my priesthood though you have never seen me. Since grace is recognized not by the office of priesthood but by gifts of the Spirit, I ask you to bless me, and pray for me." She did so, and they sat down together so that Mary could tell him about her life [2].

"My childhood home was unhappy and without much love," Saint Mary began. "When I was twelve I ran away to the city of Alexandria. But I didn't find love there. Instead I gave myself to all kinds of sin: hard drinking, crazy nights, tempting young men to share my bed and waste their money, urging old men to leave their wives and party with me. It all made me sick to my stomach, but I didn't stop.

"One day I saw crowds of people running toward the ships in the harbor," Saint Mary continued.

"Someone told me they were going to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross. I thought a ship voyage might be fun, my kind of fun, so I convinced some young men to take me on board with them. When we arrived in Jerusalem and the feast day came, I again followed the crowd – this time to the cathedral where a piece of the True Cross was being brought out for everyone to venerate. People were pushing their way through the cathedral courtyard to get in. But while others passed easily inside, I was stopped at the threshold by some unseen force. It happened once, twice, three times! I found myself almost alone in the courtyard, sad and worn out.

"Then I saw the icon of the Mother of God, who seemed to look at me with motherly tenderness," Saint Mary related. "I suddenly understood why I couldn't enter the church: my sins were too heavy. I begged the Mother of God: 'Help me, Holy Lady! Let me enter and kiss the Cross so that it may give me life! Then tell me what to do, and I will do it. As if a weight fell from my shoulders, I walked effortlessly into the church and venerated the Cross. And when I came out I heard a voice say, 'Cross over the Jordan and you will find rest.' So I quickly began walking toward the Church of Saint John the Baptist, near the river. As I went, someone handed me three pennies and with them I bought three loaves of bread. I received Holy Communion at the church, and then I got into a small boat sitting by the river bank and crossed the Jordan to begin my long years in the desert.

"I have been here for 47 years," Saint Mary continued. "The loaves lasted me for some time, eating a little each day, and my prayers were also nourishing. But what a struggle with my thoughts, Father! Dirty songs I knew would come into my head, and I longed for wine and fancy food and men's caresses. Crying and sometimes screaming, I would beg the Mother of God to help me. The sun burned up my clothes, and there were only desert plants to eat once the bread was gone. But the Mother of Our Lord sustained me and protected me with her love."

Saint Mary asked Abba Zossima to return in a year and to bring her Holy Communion. A year later, he made the journey, wondering how she would cross the Jordan to meet him. Then he saw her, on the other side of the river. She made the Sign of the Cross, stepped onto the water and walked across. Seeing such a wonder, Abba Zossima realized that this woman was the teacher God had sent him. They prayed together, and Mary received Holy Communion [3]. Then she took a bit of food from the basket he had brought, and walked back over the water into the desert, asking him to pray for her and to come again in another year [4]. After she had departed, Abba Zossima sadly realized that he had not asked her name. That would have to wait till the next year.

Abba Zossima returned a year later, but found the holy woman lying dead, her face turned to the East. He wept and prayed over her body, but then made a surprising discovery. Though he thought she could not read or write, she had written a note in the sand. It said, "Abba Zossima, bury here Mary the sinner, who died after receiving Holy Communion on the fifth of April." Now he knew her name. He realized, too, that as soon as she received Holy Communion the year before she had come to this place, where she died. A journey that took him 20 days of walking had taken Mary just an hour, carried by an angel [5]. Abba Zossima wanted to bury Mary as she had asked, but in the hard dry ground he could only scrape out a small hole. Looking up from his work, dripping with sweat, he saw a lion bounding toward him. Fearful, he made the Sign of the Cross and then watched as the lion went to Mary's body and licked her feet. Abba Zossima said, "Great beast, this is the place where the holy one wished to be buried. But the strength of an old man is not enough to dig. Will you help?" Immediately, the lion began digging, and soon a grave was ready [6]. Abba Zossima said prayers and covered Mary's body with earth while the lion ran off into the desert. Returning to the monastery, Abba Zossima told his fellow monks the wonderful story of Saint Mary of Egypt.

O venerable Mother Mary of Egypt, pray to God for us! ■

