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# THE TINOS ICON “OF GREAT JOY”

*by Mother Nectaria McLees*

Known in antiquity as the “Island of the Winds” (a name now given to its near neighbor, Andros), Tinos was first inhabited by the Ionians, and from classical times the islanders have been known for their abundant vineyards and orchards, and as skilled stone artisans. Later it was part of the Roman and Byzantine empires until it fell prey to Arab pirates who raided it time and again until it was left uninhabited in the ninth century. Tinos was taken by the Venetians in 1207, who maintained sovereignty over it until 1714 when it fell to the Turks, and was only restored to Greece after the 1821 War of Independence. Little is known of the island’s early Christian history, and its fame as the most frequented pilgrimage site in Greece dates only from the last century, when the Megalochari icon (Icon of Great Joy) was discovered through a revelation of the Mother of God.

## The Icon’s Finding

When we stepped onto Tinos’ port from the Greek state ferry (appropriately called *Evangelismos* — The Annunciation), I felt the waves of excitement generated by a crowd of pious Greek Christians intent on pilgrimage. The voyage from Athens had been three hours of brilliant sunlight reflecting painfully off the blue water, with only small groups of islands breaking the Aegean horizon. We waited impatiently through the Andros docking; the next stop was ours. Finally, as the port came into sight the ferry swung about and the landing ramp banged onto the dock; the crowd behind us pushed forward expectantly. Old Greek women in black, young people with backpacks, families with children, a few European pilgrims; all looked out eagerly to catch sight of the bell-tower of the Cathedral of the Annunciation, enshrining the wonderful Tinos icon of the Mother of God.

Disembarking was a Mediterranean version of Chaucer. Some of the passengers were obviously in search of a cure, in wheelchairs and on crutches, parents carrying ill children. An old, wizened Greek woman held a hand-

kerchief to her eye, and I wondered if she was coming to pray for a relative, sick or dead, or if after living through her country's tragic twentieth-century history she had come for comfort herself. A few Greek nuns and monks hovered at the back of the crowd expectantly, the older ones serious and pensive, the younger laughing and talking animatedly as Greeks do everywhere.

Somewhere to the left was the famous street leading to the cathedral, and seeing from their impatient faces that my fellow-pilgrims wanted to reach it as quickly as I did, I followed their eager, rushing lead. In a few hundred meters we reached the long uphill slope to the church, a road lined with every conceivable ecclesiastical knick-knack: holy water bottles imprinted with the Annunciation icon, oil lamps, icons, postcards, prayer ropes, candles — paraffin and beeswax, as small as your finger or as tall as a man. Many pilgrims rushed for the tallest, threw down their drachmas, and started up the street like unhorsed knights advancing with their lances.

On either side, merchants shouted out their goods, the nearest proclaiming that her candles were the best and least expensive anywhere, that it was no good looking further. Suddenly next to me a woman fell to her knees. I thought she had tripped in the rushing crowd and stopped to help her up, but



Church of the Annunciation

she ignored my hand, crossed herself and began crawling up the street on her knees. A man went down beyond her, and then a girl and her young husband. Looking up the hill, I saw, amidst the walking-running crowd, at least a dozen people on their knees in the street, and realized this was a *podvig*, an ascetic (and in this case physical) offering, not unlike fasting, and that these people were preparing themselves to meet the Mother of God in her icon. Later, I was told, pilgrims did this quarter mile on their knees in supplication, in thanksgiving for prayers answered and sometimes in repentance. Halfway up the hill a well-dressed “society” woman in a tailored suit was also on her knees, weeping, and I wondered what it was that she begged for so urgently. Others thanked the Virgin aloud, “*Epharisto, Panagiamou.*” What is it that has brought about such fervent veneration for this particular icon, and made Tinos the most visited pilgrimage site in Greece?

### The Icon's Finding

In 1822 the Mother of God appeared to Sister Pelagia, a nun from the Kechrovouniou Monastery on Tinos, requesting her to tell the island's clergy that the time had come to unearth a wonder-working icon buried on the site of a church that had been burnt down by tenth-century Arab pirates. Although she received this message more than once, Sister Pelagia hesitated, fearing that the visions were either her imagination, or worse, inspired by demons. The Holy Virgin appeared a final time, rebuked the nun for her disbelief, and warned her that she would fall ill if she continued to resist. Sister Pelagia hastened to the bishop, who listened attentively and told her that a few years earlier an old man on the island had had a similar vision in which the Mother of God had made the same request.

Believing the appearances to be authentic, the bishop rang the church bells to summon the Christians of Tinos and told them of the miraculous visions and of the Virgin's request. The Tinoites responded with enthusiasm and the excavations began in September of 1822. When the icon was not found within a few weeks, however, inspiration waned and the work was abandoned. Illness soon struck the island, and the Orthodox villagers, afraid that they had lost the protection of the Mother of God by abandoning the search for her icon, began to dig again. The illness abated at once and the excavations were reorganized. This time, a team of inspectors directed work crews sent on a rotating basis from the outlying villages.

While searching for the icon, the work crews decided to build a small chapel over the Byzantine ruins of the tenth-century church, which in turn had its foundation over a fourth-century edifice dedicated to the Mother of God and St. John the Baptist. The original church had been built in the first years of the Byzantine Empire over the ruins of a pagan Greek temple dedicated to Dionysios. The cornerstone was laid on January 1, 1823, and, because of an ancient well found at the site, the chapel was named "Zoodogos Pigis" in honor of the Mother of God of the "Life-Giving Spring." Although the well was dry, its incorporation into the structure of the earlier churches, rather than in the courtyard, was evidence that its waters either had had curative properties or that there was some early miracle attached to it.

On January 30, the feast-day of the Three Holy Hierarchs,<sup>1</sup> the excavations were continued by men from the village of Phalatas. While leveling the foundation two meters from the well, one of the workers suddenly felt his shovel strike wood. Digging gently, he uncovered half of an icon of the Annunciation — Archangel Gabriel holding out a lily to the Mother of God. Overjoyed, he called the other workers and they soon discovered the matching half: the kneeling Virgin accepting her role in the Incarnation. They joined the two pieces together and placed the icon on an *analogian* at the construction site.

The news of the discovery spread like lightning to the nearby villages and hundreds of people arrived to venerate the icon. The bishop who had encouraged the excavations immediately began a service of thanksgiving. Although the icon had lain in the earth for over eight hundred years, contemporary witnesses said it was almost completely undamaged, the colors bright and vibrant.

The icon portrays the Mother of God kneeling in a small room, her head bent in prayer. She wears a gown of green and gold, and on a small stand in front of her is an open book in which are written the words of the Magnificat, spoken by the Virgin at the Annunciation. Opposite stands the illuminated figure of Archangel Gabriel, also wearing a gold-green robe and holding a lily, the symbol of purity. Above them is the Holy Spirit descending in the form of a dove. To the right of the Virgin is a horizontal rod from which hangs a light, almost transparent, curtain folded towards the wall. In the background one can distinguish the outlines of windows.

Some historians date the icon to a period earlier than Byzantium, possibly the first or second century of Christianity. It has also been suggested

<sup>1</sup>Feast of the Three Holy Hierarchs: An annual church feast honoring St. Basil the Great, St. John Chrysostom and St. Gregory the Theologian.

that it may be one of the original icons painted by St. Luke, but this is considered to be only a pious hope of local Christians; it was not stated by the Mother of God during her appearances to Sister Pelagia, nor are there any other clues to the icon's origin. Nevertheless, it is a wonder-working icon, and since its discovery thousands of verified miracles have been reported by those who have prayed before it for the intercession of the Mother of God.

After the Megalochari icon was found, the islanders decided to build a large church over the Chapel of the Life-Giving Spring. The chapel was extended by the construction of porticos, and a larger church dedicated to the Annunciation was erected over it. Marble columns from the ancient temples of Delos and Poseidon at Kionia (on Tinos) were used in the construction, as was local marble from the quarries of Panormos. The news of the icon's discovery spread quickly through Greece, and almost every ship passing Tinos with a load of lime, timber, or other building materials docked there to donate part of its cargo to the construction effort. Volunteer workers came from distant parts of Greece. Skilled artisans donated their labor; master builders and carpenters worked for a pittance of their normal salary. Although the Greek War of Independence was still being fought, and tiny Tinos was inundated with thousands of needy refugees escaping the Turkish massacres on Chios and neighboring islands, the magnificent church with its imposing courtyard of church offices, museums and galleries was completed in only eight years. At the church's dedication, the icon was placed with reverence and honor in the Cathedral of the Annunciation where it remains today.

Sadly, in 1842 the icon was stolen by Christodoulos Dimitriadis, a young Greek criminal passing through Tinos. As it is today, the icon was then covered with gold and precious stones given in thanksgiving for answered prayers. Dimitriadis hid in one of the overhanging balconies, waiting for the church to close. After dark he lowered himself by a rope and fled with the chalice, altar utensils, and the wonder-working icon. When the loss was discovered the following morning, church bells tolled mournfully throughout the island, announcing the theft. Patrols were organized in all the villages and Dimitriadis was caught at noon, trying to escape with his stolen goods across the narrow straits separating Tinos and Andros. The recovery of the icon was a cause for general rejoicing and the Megalochari was triumphantly returned to its place in the cathedral.

Today the Cathedral of the Annunciation (*Panagia Evangelistria*) is probably the single most visited pilgrimage site in Greece. Well over a million

Greeks come annually, and on feast-days the population of the port of Tinos explodes tenfold overnight. The small town cannot provide accommodation for such a huge influx of people, and pilgrims sleep everywhere: on the sidewalks, streets, dock, and in the church itself.<sup>2</sup> Even the ferry companies have not excluded themselves from paying their respects to the Megalochari icon — one of the huge superferries that carry passengers from Athens to Tinos, Andros, and Siros is named *Evangelismos* (the Annunciation).

Disembarking from the ferry you find yourself facing a row of shops lining the harbor. The second large street to the left will be Leoforos Megalochares (the Street of Great Joy), leading up to the neo-classical facade of the church at the top of the hill. In the summer, so many devout Greeks make their way up the hill to venerate the icon on their knees, either in petition or out of gratitude for an answered prayer, that there is a special “lane” made for them, and a first-aid station at the top of the street to dress bruised and bloody knees. Running parallel to Leoforos Megalochares is Evangelismos Street, where a long row of shopkeepers sell icons, candles, bottles for holy water, and religious books.

## Miracles of the Megalochari Icon

### *The Life-Giving Spring*

The miraculous well, located beneath the floor of the chapel of the “Life-Giving Spring” (Zoodogos Pigis), has its own story that is worth recounting.

On the day the Annunciation icon was found, the bishop sent a small boy to bring water from town for a water-blessing service. Shortly, the child ran back and told the bishop that the old well near the foundation was full of water. The bishop, accompanied by the townspeople, hurried to the spot and saw with surprise that the dry well was filled to the brim with good, clear water. From that time the well water has been considered holy, and many pilgrims take it home as a blessing.

<sup>2</sup>Modern European historians have tried to correlate the Christian custom of pilgrims sleeping in the church to which they have made their pilgrimage with the ancient “temple sleep” of classical Greece and Rome, when the ill, or those seeking guidance, would sleep in the temple hoping for a dream cure or advice. The Christian tradition is at once more prosaic and transcendent. With beds at a minimum, the church floor is often the only accommodation that a church or monastery can make for large crowds. This is a common practice throughout all Orthodox countries, including Russia, Eastern Europe, Greece and the Holy Land. It is also true, however, that the human heart craves rest and hope, and where better to find it than by sleeping on holy ground, and being able to leave one’s cares, at least in sleep, at the foot of an icon or shrine? Many pilgrims also spend the night awake in vigil, prayer, and fasting.





Silver lampadas and boat given in thanks for answered prayers.

#### *Rescue of an English Trading Ship*

The construction of the Annunciation Church was concurrent with the War of Independence, and many Greek refugees flooded the island during this time. Money was scarce and at one point the treasury was so depleted that it seemed that the construction would stop. One day, a large English trading ship, the *As You Like It*, anchored off the beach of Tinos town. On board was the English vice-consul to Greece, H. Flick, a Catholic by birth. A sudden storm broke out that within hours threatened to dash the frigate against the sharp rocks. Disaster seemed inevitable. The vice-consul, standing on deck, saw the half-constructed church in the distance and spontaneously prayed for the ship's deliverance, promising a large sum of money if they were saved. Eye-witnesses from the ship later said that, although the storm continued to rage, the water around the frigate became absolutely calm, as if a divine hand had touched it.

The ship was saved and, faithful to his promise, the vice-consul went to the church, venerated the icon, and left one hundred Spanish gold pieces to continue the construction.

#### *Healing of a Moslem Colonel*

It is not only among the Orthodox that God's grace acts for those who pray to the Virgin. In the nineteenth century, a Turkish Moslem colonel who suffered from an incurable disease visited the icon and asked the prayers of the Mother of God. He was healed and out of gratitude constructed the marble fountain near the staircase leading to the church. The water in this fountain is blessed every year on Theophany.

#### *The Sinking Ship*

Around the mid-1850's, a ship sailing in the Mediterranean met with a cyclone. The ship's crew struggled to keep the vessel afloat, but the stormy waves forced a breach in the hold and the ship began to sink. Bailing and pumping, the frantic crew prayed fervently to the Mother of God and finally managed to sail the listing ship to harbor. As they began to repair the damage caused by the storm, they found to their amazement that a huge fish had swum into the breach of the ship and was trapped so tightly that it had stopped the influx of water. The crew immediately saw the hand of the Mother of God in this and in thanksgiving sent the church a model of the ship made of gold and silver with a fish hanging out of the breach. The silver ship can still be seen hanging from one of the large vigil lights in the Church of the Annunciation.

#### *The Orange Tree*

A Greek-American lost his sight after a serious illness. He had heard about the miracles performed for people who prayed before the icon "of Great Joy" and begged the Mother of God to restore his sight, promising to offer her the first thing he saw. God's grace manifested through the Virgin's prayers, and when he regained his sight, the first thing he saw was a beautiful orange tree. Within a few months, he sent his offering to the church — a meticulously crafted miniature orange tree worked in silver, with small replicas of fruit and miniature lampadas on the uppermost branches. The tree can be seen to the right of the main doors of the Church of the Annunciation.

#### *The Dying King*

In 1915, King Constantine of Greece was stricken with a serious illness and his condition quickly deteriorated. The nation was heavy with expectancy, fearing that even worse news might follow. The royal family begged that the holy icon be brought to him, and for the first time the Megalochari left Tinos — transported with honor to Athens, where thou-



Late 19th century silver Greek figures offered as symbols of thanks for answered prayers for healing or help. Here are figures of children and adults.

sands of people accompanied it from the port to the palace. The king, who had been unconscious with a high fever, slowly became conscious of the blessing that had come to him and asked with trembling lips to kiss the icon. From that moment the illness began to recede and within a few days the king was healthy again. He expressed his gratitude by presenting a golden plaque on which he is depicted on horseback. The offering is affixed to the wooden kneeler near the icon.

#### *Healing of a Crippled Child*

When I visited the Kechrovouniou Women's Monastery where St. Pelagia had lived, I asked the nuns if they knew of any contemporary miracles. One old nun, Sister Paisia, told me that a few years ago she had been in the Church of the Annunciation when she saw two women carry in a paralyzed boy. As they set him on the ground in front of the icon, the child's legs buckled under him and the women had to lift him to kiss the icon. The women prayed fervently and departed — as usual there was a long line of pilgrims waiting to venerate the icon. As Sister Paisia continued working, she heard a scream from the porch. She ran outside and the two women were shouting and sobbing, pointing at the young boy who was now running from one end of the porch to the other, completely healed. When she finished the story, Sister Paisia added in her mild way, "These events are so common they often aren't recorded."

#### *The Cathedral of the Annunciation*

The feast-days of the Cathedral of the Annunciation where the icon is enshrined are January 30 (the anniversary of the finding of the Megalochari icon), March 25 (the feast of the Annunciation), July 23 (the anniversary of the vision of St. Pelagia), and August 15 (the Dormition of the Mother of God).

As you approach the steps leading to the church, on the ground level in front of you is the chapel of the Life-Giving Spring where the miraculous well is located, and near it, the site where the holy icon was found. To the right of the Chapel of the Life-Giving Spring is a memorial shrine to the sailors of the Greek cruiser *Elli*, which was sunk in Tinos harbor by the Italians on Dormition, 1940, the feast-day of the icon, to provoke Greece's entrance into the war. Upstairs is the Cathedral of the Annunciation, with the Megalochari icon enshrined under an elaborate canopy of gold lampadas. The icon itself is small and so bejeweled with pearls and precious stones given by grateful pilgrims that you must look closely to make out the faces of the Holy Virgin and Archangel Gabriel.

In the summer there is a steady line of pilgrims waiting to venerate the icon, but during the winter the church is less crowded and one can spend more time praying. Annunciation Cathedral is one of the most remarkable churches in Greece. Besides its beautiful icons and frescoes, there are literally hundreds of silver lampadas with small ex-voto plaques hanging from the ceiling in thanksgiving for answered prayers. If you ask, the man at the desk will give you a small book in English on the history of the church, and oil from the lampada hanging before the icon.

#### *Kechrovouniou Women's Monastery*

A half-hour outside of town by bus is the Kechrovouniou Women's Monastery where Sister Pelagia lived. She was canonized by the Church some years ago, and, if you ask, the sisters will allow you to see her cell and venerate her relics. The monastery itself is lovely. Over a thousand years old, its peaceful winding streets give it more the air of a small whitewashed village than a monastery. Dedicated to the Mother of God, "Queen of the Angels," the forty small houses (kellia) and five churches now shelter fifty nuns, including Igumena (Abbess) Theoktiste, who has been at the monastery since she was three years old, first coming there as an orphan. Even now the nuns have orphans living with them, including children displaced by the Serbian war. ✦

*St. Pelagia's feast-day is celebrated on July 23.*