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ST. NICHOLAS MONASTERY AND THE ISLAND OF THE WINDS

by Mother Nectaria McLees

My first visit to St. Nicholas Monastery was a pure act of providence. In the fall of 1992, my traveling companion and I were picked up on Gavrion's wharf by two unknown Greek women driving off the ferry in a small rented car, who insisted that we must be going to "the holy monastery." Knowing that each Greek island has at least a dozen monasteries, I asked them, "Which monastery?" but they only replied in broken English, "The holy monastery. Come with us." So, we did. Although I've followed the same route dozens of times since, I can still see the otherworldliness of that first fall morning: twisted pines, low bush and scrub oak, slate-roofed stone houses with terraced fields whose stone walls mark out thousand year-old farms, and winding coastal roads courting sheer drops to the brilliantly blue Aegean. Even more, it felt as if we were driving into holiness, something divine and unknown.

Following is the first contemporary history of St. Nicholas Monastery, material that I have gathered from monks and pilgrims over a decade of pilgrimage.

Saint Nicholas Monastery on the island of Andros is one of the gems of the Aegean. One of a group of islands to the east of Athens known as the Cyclades, Andros, with its fertile hills and flowing streams, is patchworked with centuries-old stone agricultural terraces set against the steep hillsides. As the northernmost and largest of the Cyclades, the island was first inhabited by the Ionians. It was captured by a combined Roman, Pargamese, and Rhodian fleet in 200 BC and eventually became part of the Roman-Byzantine Empire. The island was a protectorate of Venice from 1207 until it fell to the Turks in 1566; in 1829 it became a part of modern Greece.

Opposite: Courtyard of St. Nicholas Monastery.

The approach to the monastery is a journey through the heart of Andros. The hour-long bus ride from the port at Gavrion to Andros Town (Chora) is arguably one of the most beautiful in Greece. The coastal road, with its unearthly blue sea and sky, winds through roadside hamlets towards the southern tip of the island. From Chora another beautiful ride into the eastern hills takes the pilgrim through the small town of Apikia, the bus finally dropping you at the gravel road leading to St. Nicholas Monastery. The road runs slightly downhill into the gorge, makes a hairpin turn, then a final descent into what seems a deep valley full of scrub brush, with no monastery in sight. It is only when you reach the far end of the road that the descending flight of stairs comes into view, with the roofs of the church and cells below. Well-hidden from both the upper road and the ridge above, the whitewashed monastery survived many pirate incursions because of its remote location. During winter and spring, the Aegean's dramatic winds buffet the island, cutting Andros off from the outside world for weeks and leaving the monastery without electricity or telephone.

The earliest monastery records are from the eighth century, when two unnamed monks renovated an existing church of wood or stone, dedicating it to St. Nicholas. A holy spring still flows under the altar of the church and out into the courtyard, and the location of the original church directly over it may have been prompted by miraculous events associated with the effects of the water, or with the appearance of the spring itself. The present church on the same spot and the high-walled monastery are of native slate and date from the eleventh century. The monastery was renovated and enlarged again in the seventeenth century by Abbot Jakovos Raises, who gathered about eighty monks and guided the monastery through its most flourishing period. Because of its relatively small size, many of the monks lived as semi-recluses in cells and caves in the gorge below.

Although occupied successively by the Ionians, Spartans, Venetians and Turks, the island had a relatively peaceful history and was not nearly as affected by the fortunes of war and occupation as other parts of Greece. As with all of the Greek islands in the Aegean, however, Andros was prey to Saracen pirates. Although the monastery is not readily seen from the road above, it was discovered by pirates in the seventeenth century. Climbing down the hill to loot it, they were warded off by a vision of St. John the

Opposite: Abbot Dorotheos Themelis, St. Nicholas Monastery.



Forerunner (the Baptist), who appeared clothed in light on the opposite side of the ridge. Terrified, the pirates fled. The chapel to St. John erected by the monks on the site of his appearance still stands today. Near the monastery's outer wall is the extremely old church of St. Michael the Archangel, which covers the monastery's ossuary, and a few hundred meters away, overlooking the ocean, is another chapel dedicated to the Prophet Elias (Elijah).

A little to the east of the monastery stands Samweil's tower. Samweil, a monk of the monastery, is a national hero and his death one of the sparks that ignited the Greeks into rebellion after centuries of Turkish occupation. Samweil was probably a follower of St. Cosmas of Aitolia, a portion of whose relics are enshrined in the monastery. The relics may have been brought there by Samweil himself, for it is known that St. Cosmas sent several of his spiritual sons to St. Nicholas Monastery for tonsure. After some years Samweil left the monastery and later came to the aid of the Suliot Christians, encouraging and leading them in their 1804 fight against Ali Pasha, the Turkish ruler of Epirus whose reign St. Cosmas had predicted thirty years earlier. When Suliot resistance finally broke, Samweil and five other men waited in the fort at Kunghi – some say in the Church of St. Paraskeve. When the Turks reached the door, the men inside blew up the fort, the enemy, and themselves, rather than surrender. The tragic Suliot uprising and Samweil's part in it was an oft-heard battle cry leading to the Greek revolution.

The present abbot, Archimandrite Dorotheos Themelis, came to St. Nicholas Monastery as a novice in the early 1960's, living alone there with his first abbot. Since its seventeenth-century renovation, the monastery had deteriorated badly, with the front gate, many walls, and parts of the roof crumbling from neglect. After the departure of two succeeding abbots, Fr. Dorotheos was himself ordained and appointed archimandrite. Working alone for almost thirty years, he not only directed the massive restoration but also offered hospitality to pilgrims and maintained the entire monastic cycle of church services, including daily liturgy. In 1990 young novices began to arrive and now the monastery, including Abbot Dorotheos, numbers five monks.

Besides massive repairs to the roofs of the church and refectory, and the reconstruction of the main gate, monks' cells and pilgrims' quarters, Father Dorotheos has built or renovated almost twenty chapels dedicated to Greek and Russian Orthodox saints. In 1994 the monks broke down a wall during

the renovation of the old cells and found a small, cave-like room with a hard rock bed chipped out of the wall, belonging to a former ascetic.

Monastery Relics

The devotion of the monks for the Orthodox saints is seen in their frequent all-night vigils and loving veneration of the many saints' relics given to the monastery over the centuries. Among the most important of these are relics of the monastery's patron, St. Nicholas, Archbishop of Myra and Lycia, and the skull of New Martyr Nicholas of Vounina (near Larissa) who was killed in 720 by pirates. (To this day, holy water, red like blood, flows from the tree in Vounina where the saint was martyred and pilgrims collect it for healing.) His relics were brought to the monastery in the fifteenth century.

As we mentioned, the monastery also enshrines the lower jaw of the "Apostle to the Greeks" St. Cosmas of Aitolia (1714-1779), who, like a new St. Paul, traveled the length and breadth of Greece in the darkest years of the Turkish occupation.¹ Encouraging Christians to maintain their faith, he established hundreds of schools to revive the Greek language, culture, and catechesis. St. Cosmas' influence was arguably the single most important factor in maintaining Orthodox tradition and practice in mainland Greece during the difficult centuries after the fall of Constantinople, and his relics are particularly treasured here because of his connection with the monastery. On one of his many travels St. Cosmas sailed into the nearby port of Akhla, where the monks maintain a small chapel dedicated to St. Nicholas the New. It is very likely that the saint visited the monastery and was acquainted with the abbot, for later, when some of his followers from Epirus wanted to follow him into monasticism he sent them to St. Nicholas Monastery. Although his time on Mt. Athos preceded the height of the Kollyvades movement,² St. Cosmas was zealous to restore the spiritual inheritance that had "bled out" during the centuries of occupation. That he found this traditional spirit at St. Nicholas Monastery is certain, for it was here that he sent his own spiritual sons. Within a few years after St. Cosmas' martyrdom, these same monks went to Kilikontas and brought back a portion of his relics as a priceless treasure for the monastery.

¹ See *The Prophet and the Pasha: Saint Cosmas of Aitolia and Ali Pasha, the Lion of Ioannina, in Road to Emmaus #6*, Summer 2001.

² *The Kollyvades Movement: A movement originating on Mt. Athos in the late 18th century to revive traditional piety and church practice. Within a few decades its influence was felt throughout Greece.*



Saint Nicholas Church: Icons and Frescoes

The monastery now attracts many pilgrims who come to venerate its well-known icon of the Mother of God, “The Root of Jesse” (Feast day, July 2). Dating from the fifteenth century, this icon is on the iconostasis in St. Nicholas Church, to the left of the royal doors. Originally given to the monastery’s Constantinople metochion of “Vlachseray” by the famous Church of the Mother of God at Blachernae, it was brought to the monastery for safekeeping when Constantinople fell to the Turks in 1453.³ Covered with a silver riza, the icon depicts the Theotokos seated on a throne, holding her Divine Son in her arms. At her feet lies the Prophet Jesse, the father of King David, from whose lineage it was prophesied the Messiah would come. From Jesse, as if from the root of a tree, springs the trunk depicting the Lord and the Mother of God; both sides shoot forth branches portraying the prophets who foretold the coming of Christ. A matching icon of Christ stands to the right of the royal doors.

One morning in 1986, Archimandrite Dorotheos found a tear of blood flowing from the right eye of the Mother of God on the icon. The following day the flow of blood ceased and a strong, unearthly fragrance began coming from the icon itself. Since then the riza has been almost continuously covered with a fine mist of myrrh that miraculously flows from the icon. The monks collect the myrrh and give it out as a blessing to pilgrims. Small silver *ex-voto* plaques (*tamata*) hang before the icon, testifying to the hundreds of miracles granted through the intercession of the Mother of God.

One of the most startling miracles occurred in 1991, when Anne Guillez, a French physician and acquaintance of the author, was miraculously healed. Diagnosed with a quickly spreading form of cancer, Anne, who has a medical practice on Corsica, had driven to the monastery from France with her mother, sister, and young son to pray before the icon and consult with her spiritual father, Abbot Dorotheos. They were present for the Dormition Vigil on August 15, and after the service they went back to their room. They

³ The monastery’s Constantinopolitan metochion, called “Vlachseray” was located about 300 meters from the famous church of the Mother of God at Blachernae, which had originally given the icon, and 200 meters from the Patriarchate. The buildings still remain, although they were closed and locked by the Turkish government, which does not permit them to be used as a church.

Opposite: St. Nicholas Monastery in the hills of Andros.

had already fallen asleep when Anne was awakened by seeing who she firmly believes was the Mother of God. In appearance she was dressed as an abbess and very tall. Anne's mother, sister and young son could hear her talking at length with someone, although the other voice was not distinct; but they could not turn their heads to see – all three say that it was as if an invisible force kept them from looking.

Anne has never remembered what the conversation was about, only that she answered, "Yes" many times, and she believes she was asked, and that she promised, to do something. The next morning she told the abbot of her experience, and he too felt that what she had seen was in fact the Mother of God. When she arrived back in Corsica just days later she went to the hospital again for tests and found that the tumor had completely disappeared. Her physicians were disbelieving and repeated the tests several times, but finally had to admit that she was perfectly well.

Another woman from the nearby village of Stenis had a son who was declared insane and committed to an asylum. She went to the asylum, crossed him with cotton soaked in the myrrh, and he recovered immediately.

A third account, well-known to many people in southern Greece, involved a woman from Athens who, unable to bear a child, came to the monastery to pray and ask for a piece of the myrrh-soaked cotton. The abbot blessed her and gave her the cotton to take home. Instead of anointing herself with it, as is the usual practice, she prayed and swallowed the cotton. Within a short time she conceived, to the great joy of herself and her husband. When the child was born nine months later, the doctor noticed something in the baby's hand, and opening it up, found the still-fragrant myrrh-soaked cotton. The miracle was reported in the Athens newspapers and the woman herself testified to it in an affidavit to Archimandrite Dorotheos.

There was a sequel to this astonishing miracle however, and not in Greece, but in far-off Russia. In Moscow, friends of the author, Irina and Vassily Timokhin, were troubled that Irina had not yet conceived a child after several years of marriage. When they learned that I was returning to Greece and the Holy Land, they asked me to pray for them at the holy places. On my return to Moscow I brought back five or six "blessings": oil from the lampadas of miraculous icons on Andros and Zakynthos, date leaves from the tree of St. Sabbas in Jerusalem, oil from the *kandili* hanging over



the relics of St. Charalampos in Meteora, a cloth that had lain in the tomb with the relics of St. Spyridon... I gave them to Irina and explained to her the story behind each one. About five months later I called her and asked if she had any news yet. She replied, "No, I haven't even tried them, because I want a baby so badly that I'm afraid if they don't work, I will lose my faith." We spoke for a while about how God answers prayers and about his providence when they aren't answered the way we hope. That afternoon, Irina went to the drawer where she kept the various packages I had given her, and taking out the myrrh-soaked cotton from St. Nicholas Monastery, she prayed, cut it in half, and like the woman from Athens, swallowed it. As she pragmatically explained later, "I didn't want to use up the whole piece if it didn't work." That very night she conceived. She is convinced of the accuracy of the date because the Dormition Fast began the following day, and her husband had just returned from an absence of several weeks.

Once she conceived, however, Irina was very nervous about giving birth. I suggested that towards the end of her pregnancy we could begin saying a daily Akathist to the Mother of God for a safe, easy birth. About a month before the due date I called to arrange the akathist, only to have her mother-in-law tell me that not only was Irina unexpectedly in the hospital, but that after an easy four-hour labor she had given birth to a small but very healthy baby boy!

It is known that in the mid-sixteenth century, when St. Philothei of Athens was collecting alms for her charities, she came to Andros and walked many miles from the port at Gavrion to the monastery to ask the brothers for assistance. St. Philothei was not only a capable, self-sacrificing abbess in her own right, but she also maintained what we would now call an "underground railway" – escape routes to help Christian slaves and Moslems who had converted to Orthodoxy, reach safety and freedom.⁴ The Root of Jesse icon was already at the monastery and she would certainly have venerated it.⁵

In the narthex of the church is a fresco of the Mother of God, dating from the fifteenth century, which has miraculously wept several times over the past decade, notably during the Gulf War of 1991 and at the beginning of

⁴ See the chapter on Athens for the life of St. Philothei.

⁵ For any of our readers who would like a piece of the myrrh-soaked cotton from the Icon of the Mother of God, Root of Jesse, send a self-addressed envelope with your request and a donation for international postage to: St. Nicholas Monastery, Andros, Greece, 84500.

the Serbian conflict. The fresco, painted directly onto the stone wall, has a continual fragrance of lilies, although the scent is lighter and more delicate than the flower, and distinctly unlike perfume. The author herself has seen the icon weep, tears running from the eyes of the Mother of God so copiously that they formed a small pool on the floor, which the monks carefully wiped up. The marks of the tears stayed for several days.

Also in the narthex of the church is a remarkable embroidered icon of St. Nicholas. In the seventeenth century, when the abbot went to Smyrna on monastery business, he met an uneducated woman, Triandaphyla, who had gained a reputation for healing the sick, not only with herbs, but also with magic. Among those she had helped was a wealthy Turkish Pasha who, in gratitude, had given her a bag of gold. Abbot Jakovos spoke to her about the dangers to herself and others of using magic, and repenting, she returned with him to Andros where she lived in the village of Messarion and was tonsured a nun with the name Leonida. She spent eleven years sewing the icon of St. Nicholas, and the threads of the hands and face are her own hair. One of the chandeliers in the church is also her gift, as well as the silver rizas over the icons of the Lord and the Mother of God on the iconostasis.

A Short Life of St. Nicholas the Wonder-Worker,

Archbishop of Myra

The Holy Hierarch and Wonder-worker, Saint Nicholas, Archbishop of Myra, was born in Lycia in the town of Patara. Much tradition surrounds his birth. His pious parents, Theophanes and Nonna, finding themselves unable to conceive, begged God for a child, and in answer to their prayers He sent them a son whom they named Nicholas, meaning “the conqueror of nations.” Sanctified by God’s grace from the womb, the child showed extraordinary piety and abstinence even from birth. On Wednesdays and Fridays he partook of his mother’s milk only once, after evening prayers.

Receiving a good education and endowed with many natural gifts, Nicholas grew in honor and virtue. His uncle, Bishop Nicholas of Patara, after whom he had been named, advised Theophanes and Nonna that when their son came of age they should bless him to enter the service of God. They heeded his advice and gladly dedicated the boy to the Lord. On the



day of Nicholas' ordination, his uncle addressed those assembled in church, speaking prophetically of his nephew:

I see, my brothers, a new sun rising above the earth and manifesting in himself a gracious consolation for the afflicted. Blessed is the flock worthy to have him as its pastor, because this one will shepherd well the souls of those who have gone astray. He will nourish them in the pastures of piety and will be a merciful helper in misfortune and tribulation.

Desiring to go to Palestine to venerate the holy places, Bishop Nicholas handed over the rule of the diocese to his nephew, who, in his absence, administrated it almost as skillfully as his uncle. Inheriting his parents' estate upon their deaths, Father Nicholas sold it and distributed the proceeds to the poor. His *Life* states, "his hand was outstretched to the needy, on whom it poured alms richly, as a water-filled river abounds in streams."

The official *Life of St. Nicholas*, handed down by the Church from the fourth century, is filled with accounts of miracles and acts of mercy. Following are some of the most well known:

During Father Nicholas' time in Patara, a prominent merchant of the town fell into extreme poverty. When he was finally lacking even the barest necessities and did not know how he was to feed his family, he fell into despair and resolved to turn his house into a brothel and his three young daughters into prostitutes. When the man's poverty and his evil intentions toward his daughters were revealed to the saint in prayer, Fr. Nicholas hastened to assist him secretly, so as to spare him the humiliation of openly accepting charity and that his own almsgiving might remain unknown.

That same night the saint took a large sack of gold and threw it through the window of the house. In the morning when the man awoke he found the gold and wept for joy, unable to imagine who would do such a kindly deed. With this gold he was not only able to feed and clothe his family, but to provide his eldest daughter with a dowry that she might marry.

When St. Nicholas heard of this he was pleased that the money had been so well used, and resolved to do a like favor for the second daughter, that in a later time of need she might not be drawn into sin. Preparing another

Opposite: Ossuary of former monks, some of whom were perhaps new martyrs. St. Nicholas Monastery.

bag of gold he went again to the house and dropped it through the window. Again, the man awoke in the morning astonished to find the bag, and thanked God for his unknown benefactor who had given him the means to provide for his second daughter.

Hoping in God that his third daughter might receive a like benefaction the man began to keep vigil at night, anxious to discover whom his mysterious benefactor was. After a few more weeks passed, the blessed visitor arrived, and when the father heard the clink of the bag on the floor he ran after the saint. Throwing himself at his feet, he thanked Fr. Nicholas for delivering his household from material and spiritual ruin. The priest made him promise not to reveal what had happened during his lifetime, and after admonishing him for his soul's sake, blessed him and sent him home

This was only the beginning. The saint's later generosity to the destitute was renowned. Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and ransoming the poor from unscrupulous moneylenders, Fr. Nicholas was a spiritual and material benefactor for his people.

After his uncle's return, Fr. Nicholas also departed to Jerusalem. There, he hoped to seclude himself in one of the desert monasteries but was deterred by a divine voice instructing him to return to his fatherland. When he boarded the Lycia-bound ship, however, he found that he had been deceived by the crew, who had taken his money while planning to sail for another port. As they pulled away from the harbor, St. Nicholas saw they were going in the wrong direction and begged the sailors to turn the ship towards Lycia. They ignored him and continued on their course until a great storm arose, forced the ship around, and violently carried it in the direction of Lycia, depositing it in one of the coastal ports. Fr. Nicholas did not report the sailors, who by now were thoroughly chastened, but dismissed them with a blessing to their own homes.

Saint Nicholas went straight to Holy Sion Monastery, founded by his uncle in Lycia, where he hoped to lead a quiet monastic life. Once again, however, he heard a divine voice, this time saying, "Nicholas, if you desire a crown from Me, go and struggle for the good of the world... here is not the fruit I expect, but turn back to the world and let My name be glorified in you."

Myra, the capital of Lycia, was a well known and prosperous city of Asia Minor, and it was there that Fr. Nicholas went in obedience to the voice he had heard. He was unknown in Myra, and by his own desire lived as

Opposite: Hieromonk Bonnifacio with relics of St. Nicholas. St. Nicholas Monastery.



a pauper, homeless and in want, waiting upon the will of God. Soon, the archbishop of the region died, and when the senior clergy came together to choose a new hierarch, they decided to fast and pray to God to reveal His will. Within a few days, one of the bishops, standing at prayer, saw a figure clothed in light who told him to go to the door of the cathedral during the night: “The first man to enter is My choice, receive him with honor and install him as archbishop – his name is Nicholas.” That morning, following his usual habit, Father Nicholas came early for liturgy. As soon as he entered the narthex, the bishop stopped him and asked him his name. The young priest remained silent. The bishop asked him again and he answered softly, “My name is Nicholas, your Holiness. I am your servant.”

The pious bishop knew that before him stood the one revealed in the vision, and with great joy led him to the other bishops, who also saw in this the providence of God. Father Nicholas was consecrated archbishop with the approval of both the clergy and lay-people, all of who had heard of the wondrous vision. Their trust was well repaid; Nicholas became a father to all, a benefactor to the poor, a consolation to widows and orphans, and for the wronged, a just judge.

During his reign as archbishop of Myra, however, the Roman emperors Diocletian and Maximian⁶ raised a fierce persecution against the empire’s Christians. Those who would not worship idols were imprisoned, tortured, and if they did not submit, executed. Fearlessly continuing to preach in Myra, St. Nicholas was seized and thrown into the city’s prison, already crowded with many of his flock. Suffering hunger and thirst with hundreds of other Lycian Christians, he consoled and inspired them by his own willingness to suffer for Christ’s sake. Although we do not know how long his imprisonment lasted, with the ascent of Constantine the Great to the imperial throne the persecutions ceased and the entire empire was dedicated to the Christian God.

Many contemporary Christians do not realize that St. Nicholas also took part in the First Ecumenical Council, convened by Emperor Constantine in Nicea in AD 325. The Council affirmed the basic Christian doctrines relating to the nature of Jesus Christ and the Holy Trinity, as well as codifying the Bible as we know it today. One of the 318 fathers of the council,

⁶ The Emperors Diocletian and Maximian co-ruled the Roman Empire from AD 285-305, one in the east and the other in the west. The persecution of Diocletian was especially notorious and began in the city of Nicomedia where, on Pascha, he burnt twenty thousand Christians to death in their own churches.

Archbishop Nicholas stood courageously against the teaching of Arius, who denied both the divinity of Christ and His co-substantiality with the Father. At one point in the midst of a heated debate with Arius, who refused to renounce the heresy that had caused so much confusion and turmoil, Nicholas, impassioned for the truth, slapped him resoundingly across the face. The fathers of the council were indignant that he had struck a fellow cleric, and as punishment deprived him of his hierarchical rank. That night, however, several of the council members had a dream of the Lord holding the Holy Gospel, and beside him standing the Most Holy Virgin with an *omophor* (bishop's stole), emblems of the episcopal rank. Understanding this as a sign from God that the saint's boldness was pleasing to Him, they reinstated St. Nicholas with honor.

During his episcopate a famine struck Lycia, and in Myra there was great hunger. Grieved for his famished people, the saint appeared at night in a dream to an Italian merchant who had a boat already loaded with grain that he intended to sell abroad. Pledging him three gold coins, Archbishop Nicholas told him to sail to Myra, where he would receive a good price. When he awoke the merchant was amazed to find the three gold pieces in his hand. He did as he had been bidden, and sold his grain to the hungry people of Myra, eagerly relating his dream. The story spread rapidly and the entire region gave thanks to God for their grace-filled bishop.

Another time, when the archbishop had traveled to a distant point in Lycia, certain citizens arrived from Myra in search of him. In great despair they related to St. Nicholas that in his absence, the ruler of the city, Eustathius, bribed by envious and evil people, had condemned three innocent men to death. The bishop set out immediately for home, and reaching the outskirts of the city asked passing travelers if they knew what had happened to the prisoners. Informed that their punishment was to be carried out that very morning, St. Nicholas hurried to the executioner's field, where he found a large crowd of people in mourning and the three men kneeling with their arms bound behind them, awaiting the blows of the sword. The saint passed through the crowd, snatched the sword from the executioner's hand, and threw it to the ground, ordering that the condemned men be set free. Informed of the exposure of his wicked deed, Eustathius himself arrived quickly. He threw himself at the saint's feet, who roughly shoved him aside, threatening him with the vengeance of God and a report to the



emperor about his unjust rule. Only after a period of public repentance and many pleas for forgiveness did the archbishop finally absolve him.

In a similar occurrence, three commanders of Emperor Constantine's army who had recently returned from successfully putting down a revolt in Phrygia were accused of treason by those jealous of the honor paid them for their faithful service. Eulalius, the city ruler of Byzantium, was bribed to report the accusation to the emperor, who ordered the men imprisoned. Afraid that his deception would later come to light, Eulalius urged Constantine to condemn them, insisting that even in prison they continued to plot against his life. The alarmed emperor sentenced them to death, but the same night the saint appeared to him in a dream and told him how and why the soldiers had been defamed, adding, "If you do not let them go, I will raise a revolt against you like the one in Phrygia and you will perish by an evil death." Astonished at his boldness, the emperor wondered how this cleric had gained entrance to his bedchamber and asked, "Who are you who dare to threaten us and our power?" The saint replied, "My name is Nicholas, I am the bishop of Myra.

In the morning the emperor ordered the commanders to be brought to him. Questioning them closely, he recognized their innocence and repented of his rash judgment. As he spoke to them compassionately and with regret, the commanders suddenly saw Archbishop Nicholas sitting beside the emperor, promising him God's forgiveness. They told the emperor what they saw and he replied, "It is not I who grant you life, but the great servant of the Lord, Nicholas, whom you called upon for help. Go to thank him, and tell him also from me, 'I fulfilled your command, servant of Christ. Be not angry with me.'"

The saint worked many other miracles in his own lifetime, and after his repose, the recorded instances of his intercession have been countless. He is the patron saint of travelers, fishermen and sailors, the young, the orphaned, unwed girls, those in exile and prisoners. Saint Nicholas reposed in Myra in about 341.

His feast-days are celebrated on December 6, the day of his repose, and May 9, the feast of the translation of his relics from Myra to Bari, Italy. (St. Nicholas Monastery celebrates the translation of the relics on

May 20.)⁷ May 9 is also the feast-day of St. Nicholas the New, whose relics are enshrined at St. Nicholas Monastery.

Contemporary Miracles of Saint Nicholas (Recorded at Saint Nicholas Monastery)

The Holy Oil

Every year on St. Nicholas' feast-day, Abbot Dorotheos gives out little packets of blessed wheat from the *lity* in honor of the saint. A few years ago, just as he had given out the last packet, a local fisherman came in and hurried to the altar to receive his wheat. Instead, the abbot gave him a small bottle of oil from the *kandili* hanging over the saint's icon. The fisherman put it in his coat pocket and left. A few weeks later he was at sea when a sudden storm arose. Although he was a skilled sailor, the storm became violent and, unable to get to shore, he feared that his boat would capsize. He began to pray to St. Nicholas, and remembering the holy oil, took the bottle from his pocket and poured it into the sea. Immediately the wind ceased, and in a short time the water around the boat was as smooth as glass. The fisherman sailed back to Andros, giving thanks for the saint's intercession.

Fish for the Feast

In the 1980's, Father Dorotheos was acquainted with the abbot of a small skete on Mount Athos near Karelia where there is a church dedicated to St. Nicholas. On one of the saint's feast-days, however, there was no fish, and the monks were left with only beans and bread for the celebration. Abbot Damaskinos was unhappy about keeping such a poor feast, and prayed to the saint, "I'm sorry, but we have no fish to honor you with." A few hours later a fisherman walked into the skete carrying a large bag of fish. Setting the bag down, he said to the abbot, "This is for you."

⁷ The translation of St. Nicholas' relics is celebrated in Greece between May 9 and 20, depending on local custom. As the relics were translated from Myra on May 9 and arrived in Bari on May 20th, many Greek regions celebrate the feast on the day the relics passed through their area.

Opposite: Young monk. St. Nicholas Monastery.



The abbot asked where he had come from and the man replied that he was from the middle peninsula⁸, but had been blown off-course while fishing and landed miles away on the Athonite coast. Knowing that he was too far from any settlement to get his fish to market before they spoiled, the fisherman was surprised to see an old man suddenly emerge from the woods, who asked him where he was from. The fisherman told his story and the old man replied that he would buy the fish. He paid him, and told the fisherman to take the fish to the skete “for my feast.” The simple fisherman didn’t think about the strange words until the abbot asked him what the old man had looked like. Pointing to an icon of St. Nicholas, he replied, “Like that.” The monks celebrated the feast with great joy, and the abbot, in relating the story to Father Dorotheos, told him that to his great regret, he had not thought to ask the fisherman to trade him the money given to him by the saint.

The “Old Grandfather”

One woman from Thessalonica came to the monastery a few years ago and told Abbot Dorotheos and the monks that one day, while walking to church with her four year-old son, the child was attracted by something in the road and letting go of her hand, darted into the busy street. A huge truck was approaching, and just before it hit him she screamed out for St. Nicholas. After the truck passed over her son’s body, she ran terror-stricken into the road, expecting to find him dead. Instead, he stood up seemingly unscathed, and when she asked him if he was hurt he said matter-of-factly, “Oh no, the old grandfather laid on top of me in the road.”

The Guardian at the Gate

About twenty years ago, when Father Dorotheos was living alone in the monastery, two of the monastery’s tenant farmers became dissatisfied and irrationally demanded that they be granted free title to their farms. If this didn’t happen, they threatened, they would make trouble for the monastery. They were as good as their word and one night showed up intending to break in. As they approached the big front gate (now fitted with a heavy wooden door and iron bars, but then only an open archway) they were met

⁸ Mt. Athos is the most eastward of three peninsulas that jut out of the mainland of northeastern Greece.

by an old man, slightly balding, with gray hair and beard, wearing a long brown cloak. He stopped them and said, "Go away, I'm here." The men rudely replied, "What's that to us? Out of the way, old man!" and started to push past him. He answered with the compelling command, "Look at me!" Surprised, they turned, and as they looked at him, rays of light shot from his eyes. Terrified, they ran to Apikia, the nearest village, where they told everyone that they had seen the saint.

On the next St. Nicholas Day, not long after, one of the men brought a huge *artos*⁹ for the feast, and the abbot, smiling, asked him, "Are you still planning to make trouble for me?" Embarrassed, the man replied softly, "No," and gave the abbot his offering for the saint. ✦

⁹ *Artos*: A round loaf of bread (sometimes very large) that Greek Orthodox Christians bring as an offering during the lity, at the end of the Vespers service. The blessed bread is eaten after the vigil.