

The Return to Tradition

Sainthood in the Greek Orthodox Church

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I. Introduction

As discussed in “Icons in the Greek Orthodox Church”, Saints play an important role in the Greek Orthodox Christian’s life, with many having days dedicated to them, and being venerated in the church. They are the role models of the church, celebrated for how God used them for His glory and to assist the church in the spreading of the Gospel. In this article I will look at Sainthood as a whole, and then go into some case studies of particularly interesting Saints. Exploring their story and how God worked through them.

II. Theology of Sainthood

Sainthood has been largely disposed of by modern protestantism, but is very important for the rest of Christianity and has existed since Saint Stephen was the first martyr. Of course, we are all saints, in that we are sanctified by the blood of Christ, His sacrifice meant we are all holy and therefore saints. Indeed, Paul himself refers to the church in his letters as «ΑΓΙΑΙΣ» which you may recognise from icons of saints that say the name, such as «Ο ΑΓΙΟΣ ΠΑΥΛΟΣ» which is «Saint Paul».

However, in its endless wisdom the church “canonised” those she recognised as saints in the eyes of God. There are many measures one must fulfil in order to be deemed as one who God has chosen as a Saint. We only venerate those who are Saints as such because God himself has first glorified them and raised them up due to their faith and dedication.

III. Saint Francis of Assisi

This Saint inspired me personally for his ready embrace of Christ’s calling to abandon earthly possessions and follow Him. After living with a rich father who wanted his son to socialise with the nobility, he gave up his life of money and possessions to help a priest with his tiny stone chapel. He then eventually went on to start multiple monastic movements which are widely practiced today. With the mighty words of the Gospel on their lips his followers still evangelise to the world today.

Saint Francis also showed a lot of compassion for creation, being famous for preaching the Gospel even to birds, showing both his high value for evangelism and also God’s creation as a whole. Saint Francis had a simple but effective faith built on faith and experience rather than solid theology, which worked well enough for his monasticism and evangelism.

His fascination for animals affected his language as well, he called his own body “Brother Ass” in his old age as it would not be as strong and willing to work for God as his mind

was. His unrelenting determination to serve God is a great model for Christians now to observe their own actions and correct them for the glory of God.

IV. Saint John the Baptist

Saint John the Baptist was chosen by God to be the forerunner for Christ, fulfilling the prophecies of Malachi and Isaiah.¹ He was the first to preach the Gospel, in the form of a promise that the one who will come after “will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.” (Mark 1:8b ESV) which puts him in high place among the saints. Indeed, on any iconostasis, as mentioned in “Icons in Greek Orthodoxy”, you will find him at the left side of the icon of Jesus (from Jesus’ perspective).

He was widely known for his asceticism, choosing to live in the wilderness eating locusts and honey. He taught near the river Jordan and baptised people and preached to the masses, and even had a small following as we know from the gospels.

He is remembered and celebrated on his nativity, traditionally recorded as the 24th June, in a feast. The church celebrates the divine liturgy and wine and oil is allowed if it’s a fast day. The whole church also prays to him and ask for him to pray for them.

V. Saint Mary Mother of God

Saint Mary has always been given the most veneration of all the saints. This is because she gave birth to the Lord and Saviour Jesus, who is God. To deny Mary’s title as Theotokos (that is, Mother of God) is to deny Jesus as God.

There are also a lot of traditions surrounding Mary and her life, that she was always a virgin and herself stayed sinless. The Orthodox church do not accept that all people are

¹ Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3

guilty of the first sin, but that all people face the consequences of it by God's divine judgement, and therefore do not support the idea of original sin. The Orthodox church also believes that Mary resisted sin her whole life, however Mary still accepts Jesus as her saviour, as recorded in the Magnificat.

Mary has a lot of feasts associated with her as a result of her significant role in Christian life, not least the Nativity of our Lord, in which Mary is celebrated for saying "yes" to God where Eve had said "no".

In the reformations of the church, which turned out to be splits from the church rather than actual reforms, intended to turn far from Orthodoxy due to their distaste for how they saw the behaviour of their spiritual leaders. For this reason, they neglected Saint Mary and indeed all the other saints to an extreme extent and so the doctrine of saints in most protestant denominations has been rather weak.

I think the protestant church seriously needs to think about reforming their attitude so saints, and looking at the theological reasons and arguments that the Church have always held them in such high regard.

VI. Conclusion

Sainthood is a much larger part of the Christian life in Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism, and even some high Anglican Churches than the rest of Christianity. A poor doctrine and teaching on how the saints should be viewed in our lives has left us in a state of turning away from what supported the church for so long. I encourage the protestant churches to look at what exactly sainthood is and why it is such an important part of the Church, and reconsider their role in your own.