

Hence, the holy Akakios received the crown of the contest of martyrdom. As to his sacred relics, there was a priest named Leontios who collected them. He anointed them with myrrh, and had them treasured in the city of Synnada.¹² The narrative of this saint's life was also kept at a site which was the property of a citizen named Dorymedon, who was martyred later with Saint Trophimos in 278.¹³

**On the 28th of July, the holy Church commemorates
the holy Martyr DROSIS
suffered martyrdom when cast into a
furnace where gold was smelted.**

**On the 28th of July, the holy Church commemorates
our venerable Mother IRENE of Cappadocia,
Deaconess of Chrysovalantou.¹⁴**

Irene, our holy mother, the abbess of the Convent of Chrysovalantou, lived after the death of the Christ-hating and avaricious Emperor Theophilos (d. 842). With the death of the harsh iconoclast Theophilos came the end of Iconoclasm. The successor of his realm, but not his impiety, was the devout and beloved of God, Empress Theodora of Paphlagonia, the designated regent for their little son, Michael III. The empress-regent confirmed Orthodox veneration of icons and rightfully restored them again to the adorn Orthodox churches. Under her leadership, the deposition of Patriarch John VII Grammatikos (836-842) had been achieved, and the holy Methodios I (842-846) was installed as patriarch. A synod then proclaimed the solemn restoration of the icons in March of 843. Since Michael had not reached his majority, Theodora capably governed the empire. When Michael was still fifteen years of age, his mother decided to have him betrothed to a suitable maiden. The empress dispatched agents to the various provinces to find a beautiful damsel, both noble and virtuous, who would be worthy as the imperial spouse. Qualifications for the competition in the bride show were as follows: "The maiden should belong to the illustrious and outstanding, and to a pious family who took pride in the Orthodox Faith. She should excel in moral beauty and spiritual nobility, and be distinguished by corporeal fairness so as

¹² Synnada or Synada (38°31'N 30°29'E) of Phrygia was at an important highway junction.

¹³ Saints Trophimos, Savvatos, and Dorymedon, who lived during the reign of Emperor Marcus Aurelius Probus (276-282), are commemorated on the 19th of September.

¹⁴ The Life of this saint was recorded in Greek. The text was rendered in simpler Greek by Agapios the Cretan, who published it in his *Kalokairine*, which was edited by the compilers of *The Great Synaxaristes* (in Greek).

to surpass all girls of her age.”¹⁵ People who reared such girls prepared them and had them escorted from their various lands to the imperial city.”

Early Years of Saint Irene

At that time, in the mountainous region of Cappadocia, in central Asia Minor, there dwelt our Irene. As a pre-adolescent, she was the very beautiful



Saint Irene

and upright daughter of highborn parents.¹⁶ Theodora's agents, surmising Irene to be a suitable candidate, spoke of their mission to her family, who gladly accepted the proposal. Rejoicing and hoping that she would be the future empress, the imperial representatives would escort the modest, docile, and well-behaved maiden to the capital. Together with Irene, they also invited her sister who later came to marry Empress Theodora's brother, Bardas. As the company traveled westward, they passed majestic Mount Olympos of Bithynia in northwest Asia Minor. During this period, multitudes of monastics came to that mountain and founded monasteries. Now Irene heard of the good report and fame of the great and holy

ascetic Ioannikios who struggled on that mountain.¹⁷ All those found worthy were vouchsafed to behold him, whereas to others he was invisible. Irene, desiring to receive the holy man's blessing, constrained her imperial escort to direct her to the saint. Coming to the mountain, the venerable Ioannikios knew of their arrival. Ioannikios had been counted worthy by God to receive the gift of foresight. Beholding Irene, the holy man foresaw the maiden's future spiritual advancement, and uttered, "Welcome, handmaid of God, Irene! Go to the imperial city rejoicing, for the Convent of Chrysovalantou needs thee to shepherd the virgins found therein!" Upon hearing this, the damsel marvelled at the clairvoyance of the man; for he knew her name and her future state. Thereupon, Irene prostrated herself before his feet and sought his blessing.

¹⁵ Carolyn L. Connor, *Women of Byzantium* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2004) p. 174.

¹⁶ The aristocratic family of Gouber.

¹⁷ Saint Ioannikios is commemorated by the holy Church on the 4th of November.

The man of God then raised her up, strengthening her with spiritual counsels, and uttered prayers and blessings. Irene then proceeded joyously to the capital.

Arrival in Constantinople

When Irene arrived in the imperial city, her relatives, those living in the city, went to meet and greet her with exceeding honor. Some of her kinfolk held various ranks within the empire: for example, one was a patrician, and another was a senator. Together with them were a company of friends, also holding prominent stations, who received Irene, as was meet, with great esteem. However, the King of kings, Who calls into being what was not, brought all things about. According to His dispensation, He dispensed that the earthly Emperor Michael III take another for his wife—even before Irene's entry into the capital.¹⁸ Thus, the eternal and immortal God would take Irene into His heavenly and noetic bridal chamber. The praiseworthy maiden, rather than sorrowing over this seeming disappointment, offered up thanks to the benevolent God Who enlightened the emperor to be yoked to another. Shortly thereafter, because of her beauty and distinguished lineage, many grandees and chiefs, including leading senators and wealthy men of the city, sought Irene in marriage. However, the maiden wanted none of them. Disdaining everything temporal and earthly, the ever-memorable maiden, most wisely, solely desired the heavenly Bridegroom. She now sought a suitable place to pass her life in a quiet and God-pleasing manner.

The Saint's Struggles at

The Holy Convent of Chrysovalantou

Irene then brought to mind the prophetic words uttered by the great Ioannikios. Therefore, Irene sent certain servants to survey the Convent of Chrysovalantou (at that time dedicated to the Archangels Michael and Gabriel),¹⁹ so they might report to her their findings. In addition to the convent's excellent location and mild temperature, they marvelled at the nuns'

¹⁸ As a young adolescent, Michael III, enamored with a lowly-born girl named Evdokia Ingerina, took her as his mistress. His mother, Empress Theodora, promptly enjoined him to marry an aristocratic young lady named Evdokia Decapolitissa in 855. Michael, nevertheless, continued his involvement with her. He had her married to a son of Caesar Bardas to legitimize her social status. Bardas took up with her after his son's death. Ingerina then finally married Basil I.

¹⁹ The remains of the Convent of Chrysovalantou, located near the cistern of Aspar, have yet to be discovered. The cistern is in the northwest corner of Constantinople, on the fifth hill, just north of the Church of the Holy Apostles on the heights. The name of the convent, meaning "golden purse," originates from an account that Irene of Bithynia, needing the funds to complete her convent, beheld a vision that she would find the required money at a site close to the Church of the Holy Apostles. She went to that place and discovered a golden purse. C. L. Connor, p. 349, notes 34, 38.

manner of life. Therefore, the servants related to their mistress the exceptional and lofty conduct of the convent's sisterhood. They recommended that it was according to her desire, and that it was located in a serene and suitable place. Upon hearing this excellent report, Irene rejoiced and distributed among the poor all that she possessed. This included not only the rich garments, gold ornaments and jewelry from her parents, but also valuable items that Empress Theodora lavished upon her. Irene then freed all her servants and slaves. Irene hastened to the convent and cut her blond tresses which were the color of gold. Together with discarding her clipped hair, she turned away from every worldly vanity and earthly thought. The tender, noble, and lovely Irene then was garbed in a coarse hair shirt and *rason*,²⁰ resolved to take up the good yoke and

²⁰ To have an intelligent understanding of the Monastic Habit (Schema, Σχήμα) in today's three grades, we offer a brief list of the various articles that make up the Great and Angelic Habit. Though the garb has evolved for some centuries, it has been subject to little change. The origin of the Habit may be found in the early monasticism of Saints Anthony and Pachomios of Egypt, that is in the dress of the hermit and coenobite.

(1) A nun, such as Saint Irene, who wore the Great Habit, first dons the Inner *Rason*, *Zostikon* or *Girded Rason* (Ἐσώρασον, Ζωστικὸν Ράσον; Slav. *Podryasnik*) which is a garment with narrow sleeves, which reaches to the ankles.

(2) The Outer *Rason*, *Mandorrason* (Ἐξώρασον, Ἐπανόρρασον, Μανδόρρασον; Slav. *Ryasa*) is an over-garment reaching the ankles and having wide sleeves.

(3) The Cowl or *Koukoulion* (Κουκκούλιον; Slav. *Koukoul*) is a thimble-shaped cap which is fitted and fastened to a black Veil (Ἐπανωκαλυμμαύχιον; Slav. *Klobuk*), running up into a peak.

(4) The distinguishing mark of the Schema nun is the *Analavos* (Ἀνάλαβος; Slav. *Analav*). The *Analavos*, of leather or wool, is the mystical Cross which the nun takes up daily to follow Christ. Resembling a long apron or yoke, upon it are representations of the Cross, the spear, reed, sponge, skull of Adam, etc. Letters, such as ICXC (Jesus Christ) NIKΑ (Conquers), appear with several acronyms: ΤΤΔΦ (Honored Trophy, Terror of Demons), ΦΧΦΠ (The Light of Christ Shines on All), ΤΗΠΓ (The Place of the Skull Becomes Paradise), ΞΖ (Tree of Life), etc. The *Polystavrion* (Πολυσταύριον), lit. "many crosses," is a long cord that has been plaited with numerous crosses forming a yoke that is worn over the *Analavos* to hold it in place.

(5) Leathern Girdle (Ζώνη, Δερματίνη Ζώνη; Slav. *Poyas*) girds the loins.

(6) Though ancient monastics were ordinarily barefoot, yet sandals were allowed for journeying. Modern-day monastics might be seen wearing slippers.

(7) The *Mandyas* (Μανδύας; Slav. *Mantiya*) is a large black woollen cloak without a hood.

(8) The following cannot claim ancient precedent: the *Paramandyas* (Παραμανδύας; Slav. *Paraman*) and the wooden Cross. Today, however, it is worn over the shoulders above the Inner *Rason*. It is fastened to the body by means of strings or cords.

The prevailing color of the Monastic Habit is black, a color betokening

(continued...)

light burden of Christ²¹ the only sweet One. Irene then submitted to all the nuns with amazing humility. She diligently and untiringly ministered, without contradicting or objecting, in all convent obediences. Never giving any thought to her former aristocratic lineage, she performed the most servile and lowest tasks without murmuring. In fact, her countenance was very joyous, and her soul was filled with a gladdening compunction. Her mistress, the abbess, virtuous and tested in spiritual warfare, counseled and encouraged Irene to pursue always what was good. However, Irene possessed the grace of God Who secretly protected and taught her what was beneficial. The Lord Himself said, "Apart from Me ye are not able to do anything," for "the one who abideth in Me, and I him, this one beareth much fruit [Jn. 15:5]." The ever-memorable Irene, therefore, as good and fertile earth, brought forth an abundance of fruit in Christ, pleasing to God and awe-inspiring to all the sisterhood. Irene's conduct was as a captive who was bought with silver; thus, she submitted to all with unheard-of humility, without ever offending or sorrowing anyone. All the nuns loved and revered her. Irene was tireless in physical work, but more so in spiritual labors; she also was never absent from the divine offices. In her cell, Irene would read the lives of the venerable saints, so that she might emulate their manner of life and, in turn, incite and motivate the nuns to similar achievements.

One day, as she was reading the life of Saint Arsenios the Great,²² she understood that he oftentimes remained praying from Vespers until the morning. Inflamed with zeal for this marvellous practise that imitated the angels, she sought from the abbess a blessing to undertake this arduous struggle. The abbess, at first, hesitated to give her permission. She feared that Irene might become exhausted and ill from the exertion of such a feat. However, later when she observed Irene's great eagerness, she allowed her to do as she chose. She knew full well Irene's humility and moderation in all things. Irene, therefore, commenced this superhuman and painful contest, though she was not yet quite one year in the convent. Nevertheless, divine grace empowering her, she made progress. Irene was enabled to stand from evening until morning

²⁰(...continued)

penitence and deadness to the world. The *Rason* of the nuns was originally made of a coarse material, usually of goat's hair, and undyed. For more information with modern photographs, see N. F. Robinson, *Monasticism in the Orthodox Churches* (London, UK: Cope & Fenwick at the Faith House, 1916; reprint, NY, NY: American Review of Eastern Orthodoxy, 1964), pp. 37-55.

²¹Mt. 11:30.

²² Saint Arsenios the Great is commemorated by the holy Church on the 8th of May.

with her hands lifted in prayer, as did Moses of old.²³ At times, she would practise this well into the morning hours; whereas, other times she would remain in prayer day and night, without moving, to the great astonishment of the abbess.

Three years of this practise passed from the day Irene commenced. The hater-of-good, the devil, dissatisfied and greatly vexed at this feat, attempted to ensnare her by some fault in her soul. He was unable, however, for the thrice-blessed one subdued the passions and her body to the spirit. She disdained and even hated all things of the flesh. She scorned its enjoyments, comforts, luxury, glory, money, and fashions. In fact, she did not possess a second garment. Every Pascha, when she received a new Habit, she wore it for that whole year without removing it for cleaning. Upon receiving a new one, she would donate that past year's clothing to the poor. Nun Irene's diet consisted of only bread and water, with a few vegetables, once daily. Despising every vanity and high-mindedness, Irene accepted the cleaning of the latrines. She gave no thought to her family's high station. The enemy was unable to defeat her by his machinations into committing some sin, though he sowed his tares by suggesting her former comforts. The hater-of-mankind would also attempt to arouse thoughts of physical pleasures; but, as one without strength, he troubled her in vain. Irene, perceiving these attacks as demonic, confessed them to the eldress; thus, she was delivered from the demon's temptation and continued to struggle as before.

One evening, as Irene was praying to God in her usual manner, the devil assumed the appearance of a dusky and terrifying Arab. He began to denounce the maiden from afar. Desiring to frighten her, he boasted that he would bring harm upon her since she was weak and helpless. He declared, "Dost thou, O hapless woman and sorceress, battle with me? Wait a little, and thou shalt know who I am and how great is my power!" The crafty enemy posed this and many other threats. The saint, however, immediately made the sign of the Cross; and, instantly, the specter vanished. The following day, violent thoughts mightily assailed and perturbed her. So much did the aggressor combat with her that she was thrown into incomparable perplexity. She, thereupon, fell prone to the earth and prayed with tears before the Lord. She invoked the aid of the all-mighty Theotokos and the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, to whom their convent was dedicated. She not only prayed to them, but she supplicated all the saints that they might deliver her from demonic designs and unclean attacks. Praying to God, she uttered, "O all-holy and almighty Trinity, by the mediation of the Theotokos, the Archangels

²³ Ex. 17:12.

Michael and Gabriel, all the heavenly host, and all the saints, help Thy handmaid. Deliver me from the contrivances of the devil.”

In this manner, for many days and nights, the blessed Irene entreated God with warm tears. She persevered until she received divine enlightenment from on high, which overshadowed her soul and cast out evil thoughts. Thus, delivered, Irene struggled and labored for God with increased enthusiasm. The Lord, beholding her intense desire, bestowed upon her rich gifts of the Spirit, rendering her a universal vessel of election,²⁴ as the great Paul was a vessel of the Holy Spirit; for Christ lived and dwelt in her soul. Irene, in imitation of the Apostle Paul, could say, “I no longer live, but Christ liveth in me; and the life that I now live in the flesh I live in faith, in that of the Son of God [Gal. 2:20].” Irene was filled with light; or, much rather, shall we say she was illuminating, leading many souls to the light of the truth. Among the leading senators and prominent ladies and virgins, her name was celebrated. Mother Irene, in a sensible and sweet manner, taught numerous people; and, in fact, many resolved to renounce the world and receive the holy Tonsure in that same convent. The demons no longer dared to approach her, but fled as though they were chased by fire.

The Repose of the Abbess

It happened at that time that the eldress of the convent became gravely ill. Therefore, the abbess gathered the nuns into her cell. They all wept at their pending loss, because their spiritual mother was virtuous and beloved. However, though all wept inconsolably, yet it was our humble Mother Irene who lamented the most. At a moment when Irene was absent from that holy assembly, the abbess, with unfeigned meekness disclosed, “Do not sorrow for my departure, because you have a good abbess who is far superior and wiser than I. Submit yourselves to her with all your souls. The one whom I am referring to is our sister, Irene, the daughter of light, the lamb of Christ, and the vessel of the All-Holy Spirit. Do not make bold to elect another as your superioress!” This was the abbess’ last command. She then uttered to the Master Christ, “Glory be to Thy mercy, O Lord,” and surrendered her soul into the hands of the holy angels who stood by her.

The holy Irene was not present to hear the abbess’ final words concerning her. Consequently, the other nuns did not mention this final disclosure—for fear that Irene would flee. On the one hand, they were cognizant of Mother Irene’s good judgment and moderation; but, on the other hand, they were well aware that she was extremely humble and without vainglory. Thus, after they buried their former abbess in a fitting manner, the

²⁴ Acts 9:15.

sisterhood gathered in church for prayer that the Lord might enlighten them how to proceed.

Patriarch Methodios

At that time, the Patriarch of Constantinople was Saint Methodios.²⁵ After undergoing many torments for Orthodoxy at the hands of the iconoclasts, his body bore the marks of our Lord. As a vessel of the Spirit, he wrought miracles and was a clairvoyant. The nuns, therefore, believed it prudent to consult with their illustrious patriarch. As the nuns were preparing to set out for the patriarchate, Irene gave various excuses why she could not accompany them. Indeed, only by compelling her did they succeed in bringing her along. Arriving before the patriarch, the nuns made the customary prostration. He inquired of them as to who was their preference to take the office of eldress. They answered, "No one, O holy Master. We, first, place our hope in God; and second, we trust in thy holiness, for thou art inspired by the Holy Spirit Who shall enlighten thee as to whom we should elect." The God-bearing father responded, "I know that you all desire the honorable and modest Irene. Good and God-pleasing is your judgment. Glory be to the Lord Who enlightened me concerning the virtuous acts of His handmaiden!"

When the nuns heard this pronouncement, they were taken aback and venerated him, saying, "Verily, God, Who enlightened thee, dwells in thy blessed soul; for He has revealed those things to thee which were hidden." The holy man, rising from the patriarchal throne, took the censer. Glorifying God with the appropriate hymns, he ordained Mother Irene to the diaconate of the Great Church. By the power of the Holy Spirit, knowing her to be pure and irreproachable, he elevated her as *hegumene* or abbess. Patriarch Methodios then instructed Irene how she should conduct herself, and lead and guide the sisters in the law of salvation. He then dismissed in peace Abbess Irene and the sisterhood. Though the sisterhood rejoiced on their return to the convent, Irene wept. Due to her soberness and temperate disposition, she believed herself unworthy to have received such distinction. The others were astonished at her humility and, consoling her, they said, "Do not, O lady, be saddened on account of the command with which thou hast been commissioned, for we shall never disobey thee. We only desire that God help thee."

Saint Irene Redoubles Her Labors

Arriving at the convent, they embraced one another and gave thanks to the Lord. Rejoicing, the nuns then escorted Irene to the abbess' quarters. Continuing to weep, Mother Irene closed the door and fell prostrate to the floor, praying, "O Master, Lord Jesus Christ, the good Shepherd, the Door of

²⁵ Patriarch Methodios I (842-846) is commemorated by the holy Church on the 14th of June.

the sheep, our Guide and Teacher, help me, Thy handmaid, and this, Thy little flock, and deliver us from being seized by the noetic wolf. Thou knowest our weakness and that we have no strength in ourselves to do what is good, without Thy help and grace." After praying for a long while before the Lord, she then changed the conversation, saying to herself, "Arise, lowly Irene. Dost thou know the burden which Christ has placed on thy shoulders? Entrusted to thee are souls for whom God took on flesh and became Man, and shed His all-immaculate and most precious Blood. If, in that day of the Lord, thou must give an account of each soul, what damnation awaits thee if thou dost injure even one soul because of thy carelessness? Indeed, for 'what shall it profit a man, if he should gain the whole world, and lose his soul? Or what shall a man give as an exchange for his soul [Mk. 8:36, 37]?' Therefore, be vigilant, fast, and pray. Take heed from this day that thy faults not become the reason for the destruction of any nun, lest thou shouldest fulfill the words of God in thyself, 'If the blind guide the blind, both shall fall into a pit [Mt. 15:14].'"

Abbess Irene increased her fasting and prayers. She made many prostrations throughout the night, refusing to give her body even a little rest. Hoping to attract and move the pity of the Lord by her struggles, she sought the gift of understanding from Him. It was her sincere desire to govern the flock in a manner pleasing to Him. According to her pious desire, the Lord gave her wisdom to govern the sisters in a wonderful manner. She taught them with such wisdom that she surpassed teachers and rhetors. To ensure you of our credibility, let us listen to a few of the exhortations spoken by Mother Irene, worthy of blessing.

The Spiritual Counsels of Saint Irene

"I know very well, O my sisters in Christ and precious offerings to God, that it is inappropriate and unreasonable that I, the unworthy and unlettered one, should teach you. However, inasmuch as the judgments of God are unsearchable and incomprehensible, by the grace of His dispensation, I, your contemptible handmaid, have become your superioress. I beseech you to obey and listen to the words of my humbleness. If we do not preserve the laws and orders of this *Schema*, which we are wearing, and do not perform whatever we vowed before God and the angels, we benefit nothing;²⁶ for, as

²⁶ In the profession rites of the Order of the Great Habit, in the tradition of the Habit and in the prayers while receiving the clothing, we are told the significance of each article. When the candidate receives the Inner *Rason*, she is told that she is clothed with the tunic of righteousness and gladness. Receiving the Outer *Rason*, she is told it is for a robe of incorruptibility and modesty. Receiving the *Koukoulion*, she is told that it is the cowl of guilelessness, for a helmet of the hope of salvation. Receiving the *Analavos* in the name of the Holy Trinity, she is told to take up her cross upon her shoulders and

we have heard, 'even so faith, if it not be having works, is in itself dead [Jas. 2:17].' The Lord has ordained that for a little labor, which we temporarily endure in this life, we shall be vouchsafed the kingdom of the heavens, life everlasting, ineffable delights, and endless rest. As is fitting, we believe these promises of the Lord. Therefore, let us leave all the sweet pleasures of the world, as false and short-lived, that we may inherit what is true and ageless. Now if we do not keep the commandments of the Lord, then we are hapless wretches, Indeed, because not only have we lost those temporal delights, but, as nonsensical and unworthy ones, we shall be deprived of those eternal good things, together with the foolish virgins.²⁷ The soul is unable to divide itself into two segments. It cannot have a portion that desires pleasure and the other self-control. One side cannot be high-minded and the other humble-minded. Nor can we obtain the other virtues if we do not entirely abandon and despise those vices contrary to them. Let us cast out every worldly desire from our souls, so our inner state might also bespeak our outer appearance. The virtues of the soul are preferable to those of the body. It does us no benefit, no matter how much we fast, keep vigil, and practise other bodily mortifications, if we lack the virtues of the spirit. This includes the virtues of humility, prudence, love, sympathy, charity toward the needy, and other such effective and godly works. Let us be diligent in these virtues; whereas, those of the body, such as fasting, let each do according to her strength."

This and many other edifying counsels were uttered by the all-wise abbess. She, oftentimes, taught them with the tenderness and pity of a mother for her spiritual children. Her words were readily received by them; and thus, they marvellously bore the fruit of virtue. The righteous one, beholding that her edifying talks were cultivating a rich crop in their souls, rejoiced and thanked the Lord Whom she loved with all her soul and strength.

The Gift of Clairvoyance

Due to her unadulterated love for God and her boundless love for the nuns, she dared to seek one great and magnificent gift of the Holy Spirit: she desired to be vouchsafed the gift of foresight. Thus, she would know with surety the secret faults of all in the sisterhood. Now she desired this not to receive human praise, but that she could correct them lest any one of them should perish. The Lord, beholding her good intention, hearkened speedily to her request and sent a light-bearing angel from on high. The angel approached the holy deaconess in radiant white garb. Irene was neither troubled nor fearful

²⁶(...continued)

follow our Lord Jesus Christ. Girded about her loins with the power of truth is the Leathern Belt or Girdle. Putting on the sandals, she is shod with the sandals in preparation for the Gospel of peace. See, N. F. Robinson, op. cit., pp. 114-116.

²⁷Mt. 25:1-12.

at his form; much rather, she rejoiced. The angel greeted her, saying, "Rejoice, faithful and useful handmaiden of God! The Lord that sent me to minister unto thee, in accordance with thy request, for the sake of those that shall be saved through thee. I have been commanded to stand by thee always. Indeed, daily, I shall wisely reveal to thee those things that are hidden."

From that hour, the angel became invisible. The saint fell prone to the ground with joy, thanking the Lord. Henceforth, the angel was never absent from her side. Then—O the wondrous boldness of the holy woman before the Lord!—as a friend would converse with a friend, the angel revealed the secret works of each. The angel not only disclosed the thoughts and actions of those members of her sisterhood, but of all that came to see her and hear her golden words.

Whenever someone came visiting, the iniquitous things done by that guest were revealed to Mother Irene. The saint would then instruct them in a fitting manner. She would speak concerning everlasting torments which condemn all those who die unrepentant. As an example, she would make use of that particular sin in a parable, especially to those who fell into grave sin. She censured no one, nor did she shame individuals before others; but, in an appropriate manner, she would bring the sinner to repentance. She continued her prayer rule from Vespers until the hour of Orthros. After that divine office, she would take a little sleep. Later, she would enter the church and invite each nun, one by one, for confession. If it happened that a nun did not disclose her sin, the holy abbess would relate it as the angel advised her. As a result all the nuns revered her as a saint and as superhuman. Therefore, from one mouth to the next, her fame reached all in the city. All who learned of her, hastened to behold her honorable and reverent countenance. Included among the pilgrims, both young and old, were senators, leaders, women, and virgins. The sagacious one taught them with such understanding and compunction that they repented of their sins and were being saved. Hence, the name of the wondrous Irene went about everywhere.



*Saint Irene
with an Angel of the Lord*

A Temptation for Abbess Irene

The blessed woman never left off from her prayer and thanksgiving to the Lord. One night, the demons assembled in her cell that they might create an annoyance. As Mother Irene was praying with her hands lifted heavenward, some of them let out wild and shameless yells. The demons, overfull with evil intentions, attempted to hinder her prayer; but they were unsuccessful. The most audacious of the demons then went beside her. Ridiculing her as would a mimic, the demon said, "O stiff-as-wood Irene, who is held up by wooden feet, how long wilt thou afflict our race? How long wilt thou burn us with thy prayers and give us so much sorrow and a bad time?" The other demons commiserated with this audacious creature. Nevertheless, the righteous nun continued to stand, without flinching in the least. Then that audacious demon lit a candle from the oil lamp, and set fire to the saint's covering and her *koukoulion* (cowl). The flames, consuming her Habit, also touched her skin, shoulders, chest, back, and kidneys. In no time, her entire body would be consumed. One of the nuns, who happened to be awake and praying in her cell, detected the smell of burning flesh and clothing. She ran to the holy abbess' cell.

Upon entering, she beheld a strange sight, yet a fearful wonder. Mother Irene was completely enveloped in flames; but, as a pillar, she did not move from her posture of prayer. Immediately, that nun began to extinguish the flames. The holy woman then moved a little and, lowering her hands, uttered, "Why, my child, hast thou ushered in such an evil, thereby depriving me of those good things? We must not have the understanding of man, but those things of God. Till this very hour a holy angel stood before me, plaiting a crown with various flowers. I never sensed such marvellous fragrances. When he stretched forth his hand to place that very precious and beauteous crown upon my head, thou didst come to attend unto me out of kindness; but it was ill-advised. When the angel saw thee, he departed; thus, thou hast brought me immense loss and sorrow." That nun then began to weep. She then detached the singed pieces of the *rason* which adhered to Mother Irene's skin. Now as this took place, a fragrant scent emitted which surpassed all myrrh and precious spices. The bouquet of the scent permeated the atmosphere of the convent for many days. Since the abbess did not have a second Habit, a disciple brought a replacement and dressed her. After a few days, the Physician of souls and bodies not only healed all the burned members of Irene's body, but increased the grace of prophecy in Irene.

The Cappadocian Nun

A noble and comely woman, from the same Cappadocian city as Abbess Irene, was engaged to be married. The woman, however, changed her mind and did not wish to marry her fiancé. In order to escape the pending

wedding, the woman ran away from Cappadocia and became a nun in the saint's convent. The envious demon, however, incited the abandoned fiancé to embrace even greater desire for his runaway betrothed. Though unable to wrest her from that pious assembly, the man remained intoxicated with his desire to have her. Thereupon, he found a sorcerer, an experienced minion of the devil. He agreed to pay him a huge sum, if, by his spells, he could bring his former betrothed under his will so that she should take him as her husband. The sorcerer then plied all his black arts upon the Cappadocian woman. As a result, she went out of her mind. She went about the convent, screaming and crying aloud the name of her longed-for fiancé. She then made fearful oaths that if the convent doors were not opened unto her, so she might go to him, she would strangle herself by hanging.²⁸ When the venerable Irene heard this, she wept and struck her own face, saying, "Woe is me, the miserable one! Due to the negligence of the shepherdess, the wolf seizes the sheep. Nevertheless, in vain dost thou labor, O malevolent devil, for Christ shall not permit thee to swallow His lamb!" Mother Irene then assembled all the sisterhood. She exhorted and admonished them to guard themselves against the schemes of the devil. Afterward, she ordered that all fast for the entire week and pray to God. Furthermore, on behalf of their afflicted sister, they were each, with tears, to make one thousand prostrations daily. Thus, each nun performed this addition to her rule inside her own cell.

On the third night, as the saint prayed at midnight, she beheld the great Basil²⁹ approach her and say, "Why dost thou blame us, O Irene, that we have abandoned our homeland to the defiled and profane? When day breaks, take

²⁸ This sudden reversal of the woman's sane behavior to that of one possessed by a demon is explained by Saint Hilarion the Great (commemorated by the holy Church on the 21st of October). In a similar situation in his life, a young maiden, became a victim of the magical arts perpetrated by a spurned suitor. Smitten in her heart with carnal desire by demonic complicity, she, too, exhibited wild behavior and began to call out the name of the young man whom she now desired. Her relatives took her to that great monastic of the desert, Saint Hilarion, who healed her that was bound by some objects upon which a spell was woven. When the maiden was delivered of this tyranny, Saint Hilarion admonished her to take precautions in the future to guard herself against every sin, because unless a demon can use some occasion he cannot enter into a person.

The saint then addressed some bystanders, saying, "The demons have no authority over us, unless we give them the means. And why do I say unless we give them the means? Not even over the unreasoning animals do they have power, unless the Lord permits it—as in the case of Job's possessions [Job 1:11-12] and in other instances mentioned in the Gospel."

²⁹ Saint Basil the Great (ca. 330-379), Archbishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia, is commemorated by the holy Church on the 1st of January, and as one of the Three Hierarchs on the 30th of January.

thine afflicted disciple and lead her to the Church of the Theotokos at Vlachernai. It is there that the Mother of the Master Christ chooses to reveal her power to heal the suffering nun." After uttering this, Saint Basil disappeared. The abbess then made arrangements to take the sufferer with two selected nuns. Coming to the church at Vlachernai, they prayed all that day with tears. From their exertion, in the middle of the night, they fell asleep. In her sleep, the holy abbess beheld a great crowd of people bedecked with gold and garments full of light. They scattered fragrant flowers and incense on the path as they tread. The saint then asked why they were making so many preparations, paving the way in this manner. They replied that the Mother of God was coming. They also told Irene that she also should make ready to venerate her. Then the Queen of all proceeded, followed by numberless light-bearing multitudes. Her divine and august countenance emitted so much light that it was impossible for human eyes to behold her. When the Lady of all observed the infirm, she came to the disciple of Irene. The holy Irene then fell before the undefiled feet of Panagia (the All-holy one), overcome with fear and trembling. She then heard the Theotokos call the great Basil, who asked Irene what she needed. Irene then related the entire matter. Our Lady Theotokos then continued, "Call Anastasia." When Saint Anastasia came forward, the Theotokos said, "Go with Basil into Cappadocia and examine the matter diligently, so you may heal this maiden; for my Son and God has vouchsafed this to you."

Then, both Anastasia and Basil venerated the Theotokos and quickly departed to do as they were bidden. A voice then came to Saint Irene, saying, "Go to thy convent, and there she shall be healed." When Mother Irene woke from her sleep, she revealed the vision to the others. Thereupon, they departed rejoicing. It was Friday and, at the hour of Vespers, all the nuns gathered inside the church. The abbess then related the vision to the sisterhood. She then commanded that all of them raise their hands and eyes heavenward in prayer. Then they were to cry aloud with all their hearts and with tears, "Lord, have mercy!" After a long while, when the floor of the church was soaked by their tears, there appeared aloft—O Thy wonders, Christ the almighty King!—the goodly Martyr Anastasia and Basil the Great. A voice was heard from them, saying, "Spread forth thy hands, O Irene, and receive these things and reprove us no longer unfairly." This was uttered by Saint Basil, because it was before his icon that the saint prayed, asking him to cast out the sorcerers from Caesarea. The blessed Irene then spread forth her holy hands and received out of the air a package weighing three pounds. When they opened the package, they found the various objects used to weave the spell, such as string, hair, lead, magic knots, and the written appellations of demons. What mostly stood out, however, were two images of lead that were fashioned so that one

resembled a man and the other a nun. Now the one figure was forged to the other in a sinful pose. The nuns, amazed by this, remained all that night offering thanks to the almighty Queen.

The following morning, Mother Irene sent two nuns with the afflicted nun to Vlachernai. She gave them the aforementioned mediums by means of which the spell was cast, together with oil and prosphora.³⁰ After the service of the divine Liturgy, the suffering nun was anointed with oil from the oil lamp. Afterward, the objects of magic were cast into the coal-fire. As the objects were being consumed by the flames, so did the lovesick nun gradually become unbound from the bonds of that invisible spell. She then came to her senses and glorified God Who had redeemed her. When the statuettes were completely reduced to ashes, a great cry could be heard among the coals, resembling the squeal of pigs when they are slaughtered. Those present, who heard and saw the dissolution of the spell, departed trembling and glorifying God Who does such paradoxical wonders. The nuns then returned to the convent and related to the others all that had taken place. The humble-minded Irene, when she observed that they revered her because of this holy achievement, so condemned herself that tears never left her eyes.

During the divine Liturgy, when the priest places the offering to be sacrificed before God on the holy Table, she would bring to mind how God condescended to become man and, because of His love, submitted to crucifixion. When she prepared to receive holy Communion, she was filled with such compunction that it was impossible for her to hold back her tears. Consequently, concealing her face that none might see her, she wept as though she were a robber, a criminal, and as one who committed lawless deeds.

Nicholas the Gardener

Let us now speak of another miracle. Nicholas, a young man who cultivated the convent vineyard, fell in love with one of the nuns. He had no rest, day or night, figuring how he might fulfill his desire. Now this was perpetrated by the accursed demon, who sought to bring distress to the holy abbess by rousing such emotions in the heart of Nicholas. One evening, the gardener had become so benighted from his passion that he hastened to the convent thinking that he would find the door open. He then thought that he went to the cell of the nun whom he desired. When the demon assumed her form, he thought he was about to fall with her and fulfill his desire. However, the hapless one, in reality, fell to the ground and shattered his body. Not only was his body inflicted with wounds and injuries, but the demon, finding him in this immoral state, entered into his intestines and agitated him.

³⁰ Prosphora (lit. "offering") is the bread used for the divine Liturgy.

The following morning, when the convent doorkeeper opened the door, she found Nicholas, demonized, lying before the entranceway. As Nicholas foamed at the mouth and gnashed his teeth, the abbess was told of his behavior. The holy woman, perceiving the origin, bowed in prayer, and uttered, "Blessed be God, Who has not left us to be prey and victims of the devil!" To flee the praise of the community at the healing of Nicholas, Abbess Irene, straightway, sent him to the Church of Saint Anastasia to be restored. After a few days, in a vision, Saint Anastasia appeared to the holy Irene, and said, "In order to test me has thou sent the demonized man? Know, my beloved sister, that only thou art able to give him his health." The holy abbess then sent for Nicholas and had him brought bound. However, she did not immediately cure him; she did not wish to receive credit. Therefore, she had the nuns chain him to a column in the church. Thereupon, daily, before the demonized Nicholas, Mother Irene would pray with the rest of the sisterhood on his behalf. As the priest celebrated the divine Liturgy and placed the holy gifts upon the altar after the Great Entrance, the demonized man went wild with fury. After managing to break the chain, Nicholas fled into the altar and, seizing the celebrant, bit him, as though to devour his flesh, in the shoulder and upper arm.

The saint, however, caught up to him and commanded him to remain still. When Nicholas saw Mother Irene, he was terrified and wanted to flee. However, he was unable to move from his place, since he was invisibly held by her command, as though her word were the strongest chain. When the Liturgy was completed, the saint remained alone in the church with the demonized man. Prostrating herself on the floor in prayer, she entreated the Lord. Later, after she arose and examined the demonized Nicholas, she ordered the demon to tell her the reason and the manner in which he entered into the man. Compelled by divine power, the demon, though unwilling, gave her a truthful answer to every question. Next, the holy nun ordered that the demon, the hater-of-man, come forth from Nicholas. As a result, the demon, after tearing and wrenching at Nicholas, cast him to the ground and fled. The saint then helped him to his feet. She then instructed him that, henceforth, he was to refrain from overeating and from drinking too much wine. She also advised him never to be absent from the Church feasts and to pray unceasingly. In so doing, the demon would not find the opportunity to trouble him again. If he were asked who wrought the cure, he was to answer, "The almighty Lord through the intercessions of His angels." Nicholas then departed thanking and glorifying the Lord. Our Mother Irene, the wonder-worker, however, continued in her customary ascetic struggles.

The Prayers and Struggles of Saint Irene

According to her prayer rule, Mother Irene would pray with her hands elevated. Ofttimes, she would remain in this posture for a day; other times, however, she took this stance in contemplative prayer for two or three days, and even for an entire week. When she desired to lower her hands, she was unable to move her shoulders, elbows, and other joints, due to their extended time in that elevated position. Therefore, Mother Irene would bid one of the nuns to assist her. As her hands were lowered, the clashing and snapping sound of the adjusting joints could be heard from outside her cell.

During the whole time of the Great Fast until Pascha, Mother Irene would partake of food once weekly. Her diet then consisted only of a little fruit and vegetables, and an even smaller amount of water. Due to her extreme abstinence, she was rendered just skin and bones. When the Church celebrated the feasts of our Lord, Mother Irene would keep vigil throughout the night without any sleep. She would pray and chant alone. Ofttimes, she would enter the convent courtyard at midnight, where she would continue praying with profound compunction. When the holy woman would behold the stars and the beauty and breadth of the heaven, she rejoiced and glorified the Creator Who in wisdom made them all.

By divine dispensation, so that no witness would be lacking at the following remarkable wonder which often took place in the front of the courtyard, the Lord did not permit the following incident to go unnoticed. Once, it happened that one of the nuns quietly walked out of her cell late one evening. She beheld Abbess Irene praying, but the holy woman's feet were not touching the ground; in fact, they were two cubits in the air.³¹ Nearby to Mother Irene in the forecourt were two towering cypress trees, which bowed so that the crowns of these trees touched the earth. O, the extraordinary wonder of it! The cypresses remained in that position, as long as the saint was in an attitude of prayer. When Mother Irene arose from prayer, she went over to the two cypress and touched the treetops by blessing and making the sign of the Cross over them. Only then did the trees resume their former place.

The nun who beheld this inspiring and wondrous sight, feared and trembled, thinking that she saw some apparition for the past three hours. Thereupon, to confirm the matter, she hastened to the cell of the holy abbess which was empty. She then understood that what she observed was neither a lie nor an apparition, but a genuine wonder. Thenceforth, she was filled with fear, but revealed the matter to no one. She, instead, planned to be prepared the next time the trees paid homage to her abbess. After a certain number of

³¹ The cubit was an ancient linear unit based on the length of the forearm, usually from 17- to 21-inches.

days, when the extraordinary event occurred again, the watchful nun tied two large kerchiefs (*mandylia*) to two of the cypresses as their lofty top branches

bent over and touched the earth. The following morning, the other nuns beheld the two kerchiefs wafting in the breeze as they were hanging from the tops of the cypress trees, which that blessed nun had tied to the branches to the glory of God. She did this because many times the cypresses bent, as we described above, in homage to Irene. All the nuns in the sisterhood questioned one another as to when and how someone was able to climb such a height and fasten the kerchiefs to the tops of those tall coniferous evergreens. The watchful nun, who previously witnessed the saint in the courtyard at night, then related all she had seen and done.

This filled them with awe and, from their joy, they wept. They then began



Saint Irene of Chrysovalantou

to chide that nun for not waking them up to behold such a remarkable sight. When Abbess Irene learned that the nun who had seen her disclosed the matter to the others, in her modesty she was scandalized. Mother Irene corrected her, saying, "If thou didst see me sinning, as a human, wouldest thou make manifest my sin?" The nun then fell to the ground in fear, begging forgiveness. Mother Irene then warned her and the rest of the sisterhood not to divulge the miracle to anyone, as long as she was among them in this life. In fact, many other signs took place; but the nuns did not reveal them, fearing the penance of the saint.

Mischief in the Sanctuary

On the 1st of January, Saint Irene had the custom of celebrating the memory of Saint Basil the Great whom, as a compatriot, she exceptionally revered. After the priest finished celebrating the Mysteries and as he was getting ready to depart, he mentioned that there was a mouse in the sanctuary, which defiled the holy vessels. He then told the nuns that they should take measures to kill it. The saint went to her cell and prayed about this small mischief. After the nuns gave hospitality to the priest, as he was leaving, Abbess Irene sent for the *ecclesiarchissa* (sacristan). Mother Irene then instructed her, saying, "Go to the door of the sanctuary and remove the mouse,

which is lying dead and cast it upon the dunghill." The priest also went, so he might kiss the holy Table. When he beheld the dead rodent, he exclaimed, "Wondrous is God in His saints!"³²

Saint John the Evangelist

Later that day, during the fourth watch at night,³³ a bodiless voice was heard by the saint, saying, "Receive the sailor who shall bring thee fruit today. Eat the fruit rejoicing and let gladness fill thy soul!" After the nuns chanted the office of Orthros, the abbess sent two nuns, saying, "Go to the door and permit entry to the sailor whom you shall find outside." When the sailor approached the holy abbess, they bowed to one another and, praying, they sat. The saint then inquired of him how he came to the convent. He answered, "Milady, I am a sailor from the island of Patmos. On account of my work, I took a ship bound for the capital city. As we were sailing past the tip of my island, I observed a handsome and godly looking elder, who called out to us to wait for him. Now we were unable to drop anchor because we had a strong wind as we were racing to pass by the rocks. Nevertheless, the elder, shouting louder, commanded the ship to halt. Forthwith, we stopped—lo, the wonder!—until the old man walked upon the waves. When he came up to our vessel, he took out three apples from his breast and gave them to me, saying, 'When thou shalt arrive in the imperial City, give these to the patriarch (Methodios), and tell him thou didst receive them from the all-good God and His servant John from Paradise.' Then, he took out three similar apples, and said, 'Give these to the abbess of Chrysovalantou, named Irene, and tell her, 'Eat from these and whatsoever thy good soul desires shall be realized; for now I am come from Paradise bringing them.' After he said this, he blessed God and bade all on board Godspeed. Straightway, the ship then moved and he became invisible. I gave the three apples to the patriarch; therefore, I brought thy holiness the other three."

When the venerable Irene heard this, from her joy, she wept and offered up many thanks to the beloved disciple and apostle of Christ. The sailor then took out a gold-colored silk handkerchief where he kept and valued the three apples as divine objects. He then gave them over to the saint with extreme reverence. She reverently received the fruits as divine gifts from God. The three holy apples from Paradise were superior to the earth's fruits in the following areas: first and foremost, in their beauty; second, in their fragrance; third, in their markedly larger size. Thus, at that time, in the capital, none was holier than Methodios and Irene. The sailor then took the abbess' blessing and, by her leave, he departed. The holy Irene then fasted for one week, offering

³² Ps. 67:35.

³³ The fourth watch, or the last division of night, before early morning.

thanks unto the Lord for the gifts which He sent. Afterward, to His glory, she began to eat a little from one of the apples everyday, without tasting bread or vegetables or any other food. She did not even partake of water for forty days. The extraordinarily magnificent fragrance that emitted from her mouth was sensed by the nuns and all in the convent, as though myrrh and precious spices were prepared by her daily. The atmosphere itself was permeated with this sweet and wondrous scent of Paradise.

Great Thursday at the Convent

After this, Holy and Great Thursday of Holy Week arrived. The abbess bade all the nuns receive holy Communion. After they communicated the Mysteries, the saint divided the second apple and gave each of the nuns a slice to partake. However, from whence the apples came they were not told. They only wondered at the fragrance and sweetness they sensed in their mouths; and, much rather, they marvelled at the delight and joy in their souls. The third apple was preserved as a precious keepsake; and whenever she inhaled its outstanding fragrance, she received rest and joy in her soul.

Great Friday at the Convent

On Holy and Great Friday, when our Master suffered the Passion, the holy abbess beheld a vision as the nuns were chanting with great compunction. Mother Irene beheld countless handsome and luminous young men, dressed in white garments, enter the church. In their hands, they were holding citharas (zithers) and chanting, sweetly and superbly, melodious hymns to the glory of God. They were bearing phials filled with myrrh which they poured upon the holy Table. Mother Irene then beheld a certain great Man, handsome and light-bearing, Whose countenance shone as the sun. The young men went up to Him, rendering Him great honor and reverence. They then gave Him a beautiful and precious fine linen that He might command the covering of the holy Table. Then, the angel, who was in attendance in the altar, cried aloud to the great Man with exceeding sorrow and dejection, "How long, O Lord?" A voice was then heard, saying, "Until the coming of the second Solomon, when the heights will be united with the depths; so both shall be one. Then the Lord shall be in this place to exalt and magnify the memory of His handmaiden." After the voice spoke thus, the youths in white shouted aloud, "Glory to God in the highest...", as they ascended into the heavens.

By this vision, the holy abbess understood that neither she nor the convent and its disciples would be glorified in their lifetimes. Indeed, only a few days earlier, Mother Irene supplicated the Lord not to glorify her before people in this temporary life. She desired this only in the kingdom of the heavens. The holy abbess also taught this to the nuns, saying, "Flee the honor of people, as much as possible; for the soul that craves the honor of people is not vouchsafed to be glorified by the Lord."

At another time, one of the nuns implored the abbess with open-hearted sincerity to bestow health upon her body. Mother Irene then gathered all the sisterhood, and said, "Believe me, if I had a certain confidence and boldness before God, we would pray for illness all the days of our lives. This is because I know how soul-benefitting is bodily sickness; more so is this evident when the sick one thanks God, glorifying and confessing that God justly chastises."

A New Dynasty

In April of 865, the eunuch Kyril of Mother Irene's sister according to the flesh, who originally accompanied her to the capital, came to visit the convent. Now the saint's sister had married Caesar Bardas, the uncle of Emperor Michael III (842-867). When Mother Irene saw Kyril, she had him summoned to her secretly. When he came, she disclosed, "Kyril, tell my sister to get her things in order, because in a few days her husband shall die, due to the intriguing of Emperor Michael. However, in a short while, the emperor himself shall justly fall before the treachery of others for his unholy acts; thus, he shall lose both his life and his kingdom. Take heed not to divulge these events to anyone, including our relatives. Do not by any means oppose the new emperor, who shall come to the throne, though murder be at the root of it. The holy God has preferred and chosen him, so the enemy himself will not benefit." When these words were related to Irene's sister, she was overcome by love for her husband; and, thus, she communicated the prediction to him. Bardas, as one who was unduly proud and void of understanding, did not hasten to seek God's mercy. Instead, he remained carefree. He was only interested in learning the name of the future emperor. Therefore, many times, he sent messages to Mother Irene to discover the identity of the new emperor. The holy abbess, nonetheless, did not desire to disclose this to Bardas, who would shortly be murdered.

Now, to his personal ruin, Emperor Michael III befriended Basil of Macedonia who secured the imperial favor and confidence. With Basil's fabulous ascent inside the imperial court and insatiable desire for power, he necessarily came into conflict with the equally ambitious Caesar Bardas. With treachery, therefore, both Basil and Michael trapped Bardas; but it was Basil who slew Bardas with his own hands on the 21st of April, in the year 865. As a reward, Basil was crowned co-emperor in Constantinople on the 26th of May, in the year 866. However, events soon proved that Emperor Michael III began to change toward his co-Emperor Basil I, and plotted to have Basil slain. Warned in time, Basil, on the night of 23-24 September, in the year 867, after a banquet and getting Michael drunk, had his henchman murder him in his bedchamber. Thus, the Amorion dynasty came to an end, and the dynasty of the Macedonians was about to begin. Nonetheless, in the end, Basil would die

while hunting. Thrown from his steed, his belt caught onto the antlers of a stag, which toted him sixteen miles before the beast was caught and slain. Emperor Leo VI, the Wise (886-912) would then come to the throne. Thus, all the foregoing events, are sure evidence of Saint Irene's gift of prophecy. However, let us now relate other miracles of the saint, before we bring this edifying account to a close.

Saint Irene's Kinsman is Falsely Accused

There were certain ill-intentioned men who, from malice, falsely accused one of Abbess Irene's kinsmen, a nobleman, before the Emperor Basil I (r. 867-886). He formerly held a glorious rank and title, and descended from a splendid and celebrated parentage. Now the emperor imprisoned him inside a dark cell of the palace. Having been told that the man plotted against the emperor's life, the emperor was intent on having him cast into the sea as one unworthy of burial. The relatives and friends of the accused were unable to effect his release by any means. Wearied from anxiety, they hastened to the holy abbess. They kneeled before Mother Irene's feet, begging her with ardent tears to pity their beloved kinsman and to rescue him from an unjust death. As one sympathetic, she sighed and wept. Then, consoling them, she said, "Do not sorrow, but return to your home hoping in the Lord; for He shall render help." Mother Irene then immured herself inside her cell. Entreating God's speedy help, she prayed on behalf of the wronged man. The Lord Who does the will of His servants, speedily hearkened and delivered the nobleman in the following wondrous way.

It was midnight and the emperor was fast asleep. He, at first, beheld Mother Irene in a dream, and then with his eyes open. With a frightening loud voice, she said, "O emperor, arise this minute and release him whom thou hast unjustly jailed; for he was slandered on account of malice. Now if thou wilt not hearken unto me, I shall beseech the King of the heavens to take thy life and to give thy body to the beasts and fowl." When the emperor heard this, he was filled with wrath and demanded, "Who dost thou think thou art that thou shouldest dare threaten me? How dost thou venture into my bedchamber with such insolence at this hour?" The abbess answered, "I am the abbess of Chrysovalantou; my name is Irene." The holy Irene then repeated this twice and struck him in his side. From the pain, he arose infuriated. He, then—O Thy wonders, almighty Christ!—beheld before him the saint who again repeated her words. Next, she went to the door and departed. The emperor, gripped with fear, shouted for his servants. They soon arrived, at which point he questioned the night guard whether he noticed a nun who came within the hour into his bedchamber. The guard was astonished at the peculiar inquiry. He swore that all the doors were locked and that the keys were in his bedchamber. The emperor then perceived that what he had seen was a vision

from God. In the morning, the emperor commanded that the accused be brought to him for examination. He interrogated the prisoner concerning the plot and whether that night he practised sorcery, so that he might escape death. The condemned nobleman replied, "As God is my witness, I have not ever practised magic or schemed against thy realm." The emperor, his anger somewhat appeased, asked in a soft voice, "Dost thou know the abbess of Chrysovalantou?" The nobleman answered, "Yea, she is my kinswoman and a virtuous handmaid of Christ." The emperor continued, "If I send a man, shall he find her there?" The nobleman stated emphatically, "She never leaves the convent."

Following this interview, the emperor dispatched certain magistrates and noblemen with a skilled artist to portray her face, so he might verify the truth of the matter concerning the condemned nobleman. Now Mother Irene, by the grace of the Spirit, knew all these things. Consequently, when they finished the office of Orthros at the convent, the abbess addressed the nuns: "This evening I beheld a vision. The emperor sent so many noblemen that they filled our courtyard. However, do not fear when they enter, for God has dispensed this to our benefit." In a short while, the emperor's entourage arrived. The abbess came out of the church and informed the noblemen to enter the church that they might speak. They then bowed before her and, as soon as they rose up, they beheld the lightning-flash brilliance of her countenance. The noblemen then fell backwards, unable to endure such radiance. The saint then helped them up, saying, "Do not be afraid, my children, for I am a person with weaknesses as yourselves. However, why has he, that unfaithful one, put you through this trouble? Tell him again those very things which I told him in his dream: He is to free from prison the man who did him no harm. If he disobeys me, then all those things that I prophesied shall befall him; for the Lord does not slacken, but 'He is nigh unto all that call upon Him in truth [Ps. 144:19].'"

When the noblemen heard this, they were even more terrified and remarked, "We shall tell the emperor all according to thy holy command. However, we beseech thee to sit with us a short while that thou mightest teach us with soul-benefitting and saving words." Now they also said this because they desired to have the artist depict her features exactly. This all took place, and then they departed to the emperor. Upon their return, they reported to the emperor all they had seen and heard. However, as they were about to exhibit her portrait, a light as brilliant as lightning emitted from the image. The brilliance of the light, as it gleamed directly into the emperor's large pupils, so dazzled him that he temporarily lost his eyesight. Thereupon, the blinded emperor, succumbing to a state of trembling, cried out in fear, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to Thy great mercy [Ps. 50:1]!" A little later his

vision was restored. Then, the emperor, who was heavy set with a broad chest, just stood a long while as one in a trance and state of wonder. Then, looking at the image of Mother Irene from every angle, he declared that the portrait resembled her with whom he spoke. Then, forthwith, he had the former titled man removed from prison and asked his forgiveness. The nobleman then gave thanks unto the Lord, Who saved him from such a grave and unjust death. The emperor, as well, was relieved that he not only was prevented from committing an unjust execution but also was delivered from the future evils described by the sacred nun.

The emperor then resolved to send an epistle to the holy woman. He wrote using the royal "we": "We have released, according to thy holy command, O handmaid of God, the guiltless one; and, thus, we thank thee that thou hast saved us from wrongdoing and danger. Hence, we ask pardon of thy holiness, since we did not give credence to the first vision; but, instead, we have given thee trouble by bothering thee. Therefore, supplicate God on our behalf. The empress and I beseech thee to visit us here at the palace and bless us with thy holy hands. Now if thou dost not wish to come here, we shall come to reverence thee." The above epistle was sent to Abbess Irene with imperial gifts. Thereafter, the holy woman wrote back the following: "God condescends, O emperor, to our weaknesses, since He loves mankind; for He is 'not willing to have any perish, but to have all come to repentance [2 Pe. 3:9].' Therefore, not I, but it is He Who ought to be thanked and glorified. Moreover, it befits neither Your Majesty to come here nor I to visit you. Thou dost not need a blessing from His sinful and humble handmaid, since thou dost have the most holy patriarch,³⁴ the other hierarchs of the Church, and the spiritual fathers of the monasteries. If thou wilt hearken to their admonishments and govern thy kingdom piously, wisely and righteously, God shall heal thee. If thou wilt not perform my word, but choose to come, it shall not fare well with thee. Instead, thou wilt usher in the wrath of God upon thyself. If thou wilt hearken to me, may the right hand of the Most High shelter thee and save thee from every temptation forever!"

The holy abbess then sealed the epistle and sent it together with certain blessed objects, which he piously received. However, the emperor was mostly saddened by the fact that he was not vouchsafed to behold her holy countenance. But so as not to offend her, he no longer troubled her. Nonetheless, oftentimes he sent his respects and gifts with a messenger. Thus, the emperor enjoyed the saint's intercession and help. Meanwhile, the formerly accused nobleman, who was delivered from peril by her timely intervention, went to Mother Irene and made a prostration before her feet. He wept so hard that he

³⁴ Saint Photios the Great, Patriarch of Constantinople (858, 867, 877-886).

washed her feet with tears. Mother Irene then exhorted him to preserve the commandments of God, so that a similar temptation should not assail him; for such trials come as punishment for our sins. After she instructed him satisfactorily, she detained him that the entire sisterhood might offer him hospitality, to the glory of God and for the salvation of his soul and his body. After the meal of thanksgiving, the nobleman went down to his relations rejoicing in spirit.

Christopher

Let us now relate one more wonder before we tell of the saint's repose. Christopher, a good and pious lover of Christ, was a friend of the saint. Since he was a virtuous person, he often visited and was received at the convent that he might converse on spiritual matters with the more mature mothers. One time when he visited, they spoke for a considerably long time. When it came time for him to leave, he made his customary prostration and asked leave to depart. Mother Irene said to him, "Go, child, and may the Lord grant thy soul rest with the righteous!" When Christopher heard this benediction, he became alarmed and sorrowful; for as one discreet, he knew that the saint said nothing without a certain meaning. When Mother Irene beheld his anxiety, she made the excuse that her mind was elsewhere when she said it. After sufficiently consoling and encouraging Christopher, she sent him to his house. Now he went to his home without a trace of any weakness or sickness, since he enjoyed good health. Arriving home, he ate well. Then, at the hour of Vespers, he suddenly surrendered his soul. Now no one else knew of his repose, only the saint by the grace of the Holy Spirit. One of the nuns—who happened to be present when Mother Irene said, "May the Lord grant thy soul rest with the righteous!"—cast in her teeth, "Why, milady, didst thou utter those words sending Christopher away saddened?" The saint answered, "Do not think that I said those words haphazardly or by accident. I said them because I saw a splendid youth standing behind Christopher, holding a sharpened scythe. There were other radiant youths next to him who were counting with their fingers the years of Christopher's life. They revealed that today would be his last day. Now if thou dost not believe me, call the servant girl Eftheia, and have her go to his house to see whether or not he has died." Eftheia was then sent to Christopher's house and, indeed, she found him dead. Following this discovery, all were sore amazed and glorified God Who counted them worthy to have such a teacher as Mother Irene. Henceforth, they heeded her every word. Whenever the holy woman would speak those same words, that is, "May the Lord grant rest...", that very day, the person would repose.

Saint Irene's Imminent Repose

Since the blessed Irene was also human, it was necessary that she, too, depart this world. It was the 26th of July when Mother Irene celebrated the

consecration of their convent Church of the Archangels. The angel that always accompanied her revealed her repose when he said, "Know that in the coming year, on the 28th day of this month, that is, after thou wilt celebrate the Feast of the Great-martyr Panteleimon,³⁵ thou wilt come before the throne of God. The following year, according to her custom that July, Mother Irene would communicate the divine Mysteries, after fasting and praying for one week. Indeed, she ate nothing and did not even drink water. At that time, she partook of that marvellous third apple, sent from Paradise by the beloved disciple of the Master Christ. She, undoubtedly, knew the time arrived to depart to her much-desired Bridegroom. We know how she partook of the two previous apples. The third one she saved, so that in this place of exile she might have it in the event of faintheartedness and discouragement, which she suffered at least once as is human. Then there were other times when she needed consolation because of the sorrows and complaints of the nuns. Whenever she would take the apple into her hands and perceive its inexhaustible fragrance, all bitterness and irritability vanished. Mother Irene's sorrow and faintheartedness would then turn into cheer and joy. This is because she would rejoice upon remembering the future rest she would inherit forever in the heavenly kingdom.

After the saint partook of the third apple, again, all of the convent was replete with an otherworldly fragrance. The saintly nun then began to agonize and fear death. Weeping, she looked heavenward. The nuns, not knowing the reason for her mourning, likewise shed tears and asked what embittered her. She answered, "Today, my children, I shall depart from this world and you will no longer see me; for my hour is come to enter into eternal life." She then paused and said, "For thy superioress, vote in support of Lady Mary, whom God has chosen before others; for she shall govern thee in a God-pleasing manner. Pursue zealously to walk the narrow and straight path,³⁶ so you may find the breadth of Paradise. 'Do not keep on loving the world, nor the things in the world [1 Jn. 2:15].' For all that is temporal 'is vanity [Eccl. 1:2].' For what profit is there, if you gain the world, but destroy or lose yourselves?³⁷ Do not the will of the flesh, but only the will of God.³⁸ Be mindful of these things and that only God can help you in the hour of judgment." This and other soul-benefitting advice was uttered by the blessed Irene during her final hour.

³⁵ Saint Panteleimon is commemorated by the holy Church on the 27th of July.

³⁶ Mt. 7:14.

³⁷ Lk. 9:25.

³⁸ 1 Pe. 4:2.

The Repose of Saint Irene

Mother Irene then elevated her hands and eyes heavenward, and prayed before the Lord with this entreaty: "O Master Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, the good Shepherd, Who delivered us through Thine all-holy and precious blood, into Thy hands I commend this small flock. Shelter them in the shelter of Thy wings,³⁹ and preserve them from the haughty dealings of the devil; for Thou art our sanctification and redemption, and unto Thee do we send up thanksgiving and glory forever." After praying thus, she sat down and began to smile when she beheld the holy angels who greeted her. Straightway, her face shone like the sun. She then closed her eyes as though to sleep. She then surrendered her sacred soul to the Lord, after having lived one hundred and three years. Notwithstanding her advanced age, her beauty had not withered. In fact, the blessed one appeared as a most beautiful young woman, because of the grace of virginity. This was also due to the most modest one's not knowing the world or the things of the world; but, mostly, it was due to the exceptional grace of God that she remained until the end with such facial and bodily beauty. A fact which most especially bespoke the beauty of her soul was that she was counted worthy of many gifts by her heavenly Bridegroom.

There was inconsolable wailing and lamenting among the nuns, which was only met upon being deprived of such a spiritual mother. The mourners were not only those of the sisterhood, but the whole city including both senators and the nobility. In fact, from every class and age group, there hastened those who wished to pay their respects upon learning of her divine translation. For their sanctification, all desired to embrace her august relics. Such a huge multitude of men and women converged that they could not all enter the convent. It was not even possible to bury Saint Irene until nightfall; and, then, it was only by force that they were able to accomplish all according to the customary order of our Church. Though the hierarchs brought myrrh, precious spices and frankincense, their scents were incomparably transcended by the fragrance that issued from her honorable and most revered relics.

After they chanted the Funeral Service, they made ready a casket where they temporarily laid the saint. This was because they planned to build her a new tomb in the Church of Saint Theodore, nearby the convent Church of the Archangels. After the interment, an ineffable fragrance lingered, manifesting the boldness of the holy abbess and deaconess before the Lord. Saint Irene's relative, the nobleman whom she saved from death, remembering the great benefaction he received through her, desired to show his gratitude. Therefore, every year, he celebrated the memory of the saint in a munificent and grand manner. Now this nobleman did not alone enjoy the beneficence of

³⁹ Ps. 16:9; 60:4.

the saint. But for all those who in faith invoke her name, she grants what is in the interest of the petitioner. Indeed, until this day, for all those in need and who have been wronged, she assists them when they approach in faith. To record all the miracles is not the object of this narrative. Certainly, a volume of this size could not hold all her wonders. Nevertheless, the miracles are well documented and recorded in many books and pamphlets.



The Dormition of the Venerable Irene of Chrysovalantou

Pertaining to the saint's miracles, to the present day, well-documented records of her many miracles have been registered, including the names, addresses and photographs of all those that have received the succor of Saint Irene. Many children in modern-day Greece have been named after Saint Irene Chrysovalantou, in answer to parental prayers. The compilers of *The Great Synaxaristes* (in Greek) have selected the following wonderworkings performed by Saint Irene, which took place during World War II, when Greece was occupied by the Nazis.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Two convents that bear the saint's name are located in southeastern Greece. One is situated at Karelas between Paiania and Koropio. The oldest and largest is that in Kifisia of Attika, in a place called Lykovrysis, where a wonder-working icon is located. A biography and Supplicatory Canon was published in 1958 at the Paiania Convent, by Abbess Matrona Kountakes (a former teacher of Chios). The Lykovrysis Convent printed five editions, from 1937 to 1959, of a divine office to the saint. The publication also included Saint Irene's biography, with a host of miracles, a Supplicatory Canon and salutations, a canon in the eight modes, and other articles that were collected together with the work of Athonite Father Gerasimos Mikrayiannanites. From the divine office, printed by Abbess Meletia Kontaxis, there is included the well-known miracle for
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On the 14th of July, in the year 1944, Nicholas Mavromatakes resided in Kifisia, Athens. He was a pious Orthodox Christian, married with seven children. His wife was expecting their eighth child. Nicholas, with a companion, took a position at Dow Pentele of Attica (Attike), hauling wood and wood charcoal. It was during that time that a member of the Greek Resistance had slain a German garrison commander of Rafina in Attica and his driver while in an automobile. The German high command ordered the arrest of all those found in the vicinity of Dow Pentele. Approximately forty men were rounded up, including Nicholas Mavromatakes. None of the forty suspects had any connection with the killing of the two Germans. The forty were now prisoners who were transported to the village of Harvati by the large property of Levides. The men were ordered to strip naked and fall prone to the uneven ground below. They were ordered to drag themselves, on their bellies like snakes, across uneven terrain. After the passage of considerable time, they were all exhausted and bruised from that martyric trial. They were then directed to stand on their feet in rows of three. The beastly tormentors then shot them in the back with their automatic weapons, reaping a bitter harvest among those innocent victims. As the Nazis were mowing down the men, row after row, Nicholas knew his turn was coming to join the other corpses. He made the sign of the Cross and invoked Saint Irene, saying, "O my Saint Irene of Chrysovalantou, as many times as I could, I worked at thy monastery and helped with its needs in order to win thy favor. So now I beg thee not to forsake me. But bring to remembrance my past toils at this critical moment, lest the Germans should murder me unjustly and leave my children unprotected and orphaned of their father." Having uttered this prayer, he collapsed to the ground as one dead. Mentally, however, he kept calling upon the name of Saint Irene. Behold the wonder of Christ the King! Those rolling from being shot were all around him. Nicholas, however, did not sustain any injury. He sensed a spiritual calm and valor despite the carnage that was surrounding him.

He beheld before his eyes one very lovely and tall nun. She passed by him with a gladsome countenance. He immediately understood that it was Saint Irene, who had hearkened to him and had come to empower him. It was not possible for a mortal man to avoid or flee the bullets of the executioners. A great joy filled Nicholas' soul as he addressed her, saying, "My holy Irene of Chrysovalantou, if the child about to be born is a girl, I shall dedicate her to thy convent." He prayed for one hour without moving. He did not wish for the

⁴⁰(...continued)

Nicholas Mavromatakes, which was included in *The Great Synaxaristes* (in Greek) [taken from note 1, p. 569, 5th ed. (1979), VII:569].

Nazis to see that he was still alive. In the meantime, he could hear the woe-filled cries of the injured.

After that terrifying noise from the machine guns, a long time passed before German soldiers came to collect the corpses after the cries died out. It was as if they waited for the injured to bleed to death. All, save Nicholas, succumbed to their mortal injuries and died. The soldiers, seeing that Nicholas was still alive, wondered at how he survived the spray of bullets. They brought him to the Levides property, where they had a tent. He was kept under guard lest he should escape. The entire night Nicholas kept vigil in prayer to Saint Irene that she might speedily work a miracle and deliver him again from certain death.

At the break of day, the tormentors took him outside of the tent and forced him to stand in the brilliant sun from five in the morning until noon. After this, they escorted him to the office where many German officers were ready to examine him. One of them, who acted as a translator, questioned him with a very rough accent. He declared, "We have heard that thou art a big communist!" Nicholas immediately responded: "You are ill-informed in this. I am the unworthy slave of God, and I have been proclaiming His Gospel for many years." The Nazi continued, "Dost thou know what Christ was teaching?" Nicholas answered, "Indeed, peace to you and love for one another." The translator then asked, "Art thou married?" Nicholas replied, "Yes, I am married with seven children, and an eighth is soon expected." The Germans, hearing his answers, marvelled at him. The translator commented, "It appears that thou art a good Christian. So take thine identity papers and thy things, and go to thy house."

Nicholas thought it appropriate to thank them for granting him his life, though he knew full well that Saint Irene acted as his shield and go-between. As soon as he was out of their sight, he took to his heels and sped off like a hart from that accursed camp, giving glory and thanks to the all-good God and His handmaid, Saint Irene of Chrysovolantou. Thereafter, Nicholas kept his promise to the saint when the newborn was a female. Though his wife was not keen on dedicating the little girl to the convent, Nicholas persuaded her that it was only right and proper that he pay his vow.⁴¹ The girl, when she came of age, was presented to the Lykovrysis Kifisia Convent, where Nicholas continued to volunteer his services in performing manual work for the sisterhood.

Not only this miracle but a multitude of others were wrought by our saint in these latter days, for those that call upon her with faith. She has been

⁴¹ See how Old Testament Jephthae, similarly, gave his daughter to the Lord [Judg. 11:34].

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invoked successfully in court cases for the proper verdict of those falsely accused, in long-standing arguments that finally came to an amicable reconciliation, and in harassment from demonic warfare, complicity, and possession that was dispelled. She also is effective in cases of barrenness. She is entreated by those seeking cures from all manner of disease. Her speedy and salutary wonderworkings are renowned and to the glory and honor of our all-good Lord, now and ever, and to the unending ages. Amen.

**On the 28th of July, the holy Church commemorates
the Consecration of the Church of our most holy Lady
the THEOTOKOS in the Diakonissa Quarter of Constantinople.⁴²**

**On the 28th of July, the holy Church commemorates
our venerable Father PAUL,
who founded two Athonite monasteries:
Xeropotamou and
Saint Paul (which is dedicated to Saint George).**

Paul, our venerable father, who struggled in asceticism is the saint whom we commemorate today. The Greek texts of *The Great Synaxaristes*,⁴³ the *Neon Eklogion*,⁴⁴ and the *Synaxaristes* of Constantine Doukakes⁴⁵ maintain that Saint Paul Xeropotamenos was a distinguished personality of royal descent. They also comment that, due to this, he was made a eunuch at an early age by contenders to the Byzantine throne to prevent his accession. This, conceivably, could be the reason why he is depicted beardless in his icons.

Panagiotis K. Christou, a contemporary writer on the subject of Mount Athos, states that the foundation of Xeropotamou Monastery is complicated and has not yet been explained in its entirety. The historical snarl is compounded by the existence of two monasteries with the same name at the end of the tenth century and the beginning of the eleventh century, and of at least two saints with the name of Paul who are reputed to have been founders of monasteries with the common name Xeropotamou, but different second names.

⁴² In the year 597/598, Patriarch Kyrikos built the church in the quarter of Diakonissa (Deaconess), which church came to be associated with the Blues and a number of ceremonies. See R. Janin, *Géographie ecclésiastique de l'Empire byzantin*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1969), pp. 174, 175; *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, AM 6090, A.D. 597/598, by C. Mango and R. Scott (Clarendon's Press Oxford, 1997), pp. 401, 402.

⁴³ *The Great Synaxaristes* (in Greek), 5th ed. (Athens, GR: M. Langes, 1977), VII:572, 573.

⁴⁴ Nikodemos the Hagiorite, *Neon Eklogion* (Venice, 1803; Constantinople, 1863; Athens, 1974).

⁴⁵ Constantine Doukakes (1840-1908), *Megas Synaxaristes* (Athens, 1889-1896).