

The Life and Struggles of Our Holy Mother Among the Saints, CASSIANE of CONSTANTINOPLE,

**Whose Memory the Holy Church Celebrates on the
7th of September**

INTRODUCTION AND EARLY YEARS

Our holy Mother Cassiane was born in Constantinople some time before 805. Her father, an aristocrat, held a high position at the imperial court. Cassiane's parents had her receive an excellent education, which included not only secular knowledge but the study of the sacred Scriptures. From her youth, though an exquisite beauty, she desired to dedicate her life to Christ and the Church, and often considered becoming a nun.

The marriage of Emperor Michael II the Amorion (820-829) and Thecla produced Theophilos, the future iconoclast. Upon the death of Thecla, Emperor Michael kindled a heated dispute when he decided to marry a nun, Evfrosyne. This highly irregular choice was allowed because Evfrosyne was the offspring of the unhappy marriage between Emperor Constantine VI (780-797) and Maria of Amnia. Evfrosyne's father detested her mother, and compelled Maria to enter a convent, so he might marry Theodote, one of her ladies-in-waiting. This act was denounced by the Orthodox as bigamous.

The Mortal Bridegroom

With the death of Michael of Amorion, Theophilos succeeded him (829-842). Theophilos' step-mother, Evphrosyne, desiring to find a suitable match for him, arranged a "bride show" where she gathered the most lovely of maidens. Theophilos narrowed the contestants to six semifinalists, of which Cassiane was one. In the final choice, Evphrosyne wished Theophilos to use a custom that dated back to ancient times; that is, a golden apple was to be given to the future Empress. With all the maidens lined up, Theophilos was impressed most with Cassiane's beauty. .

Theophilos was also aware of her wisdom and knowledge. He went up to her, and said, "From woman flowed corruption" (meaning the fall of Eve). Then the most wise Cassiane, modestly blushing, answered Theophilos, saying, "But also from woman sprung forth what is superior" (meaning the Theotokos gave birth to God in the flesh). At the over-boldness and wisdom of Cassiane, he was tongue-tied and withdrew from her. He then approached the modest Theodora and offered her the apple, as a symbol of his choice.

Cassiane, far from being vexed at being eliminated, had no desire to be Empress. Acknowledging God's providence in Theophilos' rejection, she was now free to pursue the monastic life and spiritual scholarship as a bride of the King of kings. Therefore, she departed from the palace relieved and excited about her future prospects.

The Heavenly Bridegroom

Cassiane then renounced the world and built a convent on Xerolophos, the capital's seventh hill. She was then tonsured a nun "and led an ascetical and philosophical life, "pleasing to God." The energetic foundress presided over the sisterhood, regulating their manner of life and the divine offices in the convent.

CASSIANE, THE ORTHODOX CONFESSOR

When Theophilos, a harsh enforcer of his religious policy against veneration of the icons, chose Theodora, he did not know that she venerated the sacred images. Theodora managed for many years to hide her veneration of the icons, yet she brought up her five daughters and one son to respect them. Unlike Theodora, Cassiane had strong convictions as an iconodule which she openly professed.

Early in life, Cassiane proved her dedication to their veneration. She publicly defied imperial policy against the sacred images. In defense of the icons, she was subject to persecution and was once scourged with the lash. Undaunted, she persisted in resisting the iconoclasts. She often visited banished monks in prison and would support and comfort them by her letters and gifts. She was known as a sharp observer of human frailties, and expressed her opinion of those that lacked courage and commitment, when she said, "I hate silence, when it is time to speak!"

CASSIANE, THE HYMNOGRAPHER

During this time when the Church was embattled, Cassiane, inspired by God, pursued her diverse literary and musical interests. Her works may be found under the names, "Cassiane", "Cassias the Nun", or "Ikasias". Even as a young girl, St. Theodore the Studite was impressed with her learning and literary style, which he found rare at that time in one so young. As a God-gifted composer, she wrote music for her spiritual poems. Abbess Cassiane provided many new hymns for the services conducted in her convent.

In time, Cassiane established herself as a hymnographer. Her ecclesiastical music drew the attention of the Church fathers, who recognized her unique gift. She was encouraged to compose hymns for the various feasts. Her reputation is such that she is Orthodoxy's only female hymnographer of distinction. According to many opinions, she was an "exceptional and rare phenomenon" for contemporary poetical competition. As Byzantium's best known woman composer, twenty-three genuine hymns ascribed to her exhibit her attention to the many facets of Orthodox liturgical cycles.

Among the services she provided to the convent, her canon for the reposed is her longest hymn. This piece contains 32 strophes which were chanted in the convent

cemetery for their weekly Saturday memorial services.

Hymns For The "Menaia"

She also composed hymns honoring the saints in the Menaia,' such as Saints Samonas, Gurias, and Abibus, Saints Evstratios, Avxentios, Evgenios, Mardarios and Orestes," and the St. John the Forerunner," to mention a few. For the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ in the flesh, Cassia the nun composed this Vespers hymn in Tone Two:

When Augustus reigned alone upon earth, the many kingdoms of men came to an end: And when Thou wast made man of the pure Virgin, the many gods of idolatry were destroyed. The cities of the world passed under one single rule; and the nations came to believe in one sovereign Godhead. The peoples were enrolled by the decree of Caesar: and we, the faithful, were enrolled in the name of the Godhead, when Thou, our God, wast made man. Great is Thy mercy: Glory to Thee."

Hymns For The "Triodion"

The abbess and poetess is also credited with the eirmoi" of the Matins Canon" chanted on Great and Holy Thursday, in Tone Plagal of Second, which begins: He Who in ancient times hid the pursuing tyrant beneath the waves of the sea, is hidden beneath the earth by the children of those Whom once He saved. But as the maidens, let us sing unto the Lord, for He is greatly glorified.

The most famous poem and musical composition of the saint from the Triodion, is the doxastikon idiomelon of the Aposticha of Great and Holy Wednesday, also known as the Troparion of Cassiane, based on the sinful woman who is introduced by the Evangelist Luke in his Gospel [7:36-50]. Cassiane will also contrast the sinful woman with Eve's fall [Gen. 3:8-11]. With characteristic feminine insight and sympathy, Cassia the nun, embellishes this familiar story. This compunctionate and moving hymn, in Tone Plagal Fourth, is chanted by anticipation on the evening of Holy Tuesday:

O Lord, the woman who had fallen into many sins, perceiving Thy divinity, took upon herself the duty of a myrrh-bearer; with lamentation she bringeth Thee myrrh oils before Thine entombment. "Woe unto me," she said, "for night is become for me a frenzy of licentiousness, a gloomy and moonless love of sin. Receive the fountains of my tears, O Thou Who dost gather into clouds the water of the sea. Incline unto the sighings of my heart, O Thou Who didst bow the heavens by Thine ineffable kenosis (self-emptying).

"I shall kiss Thine immaculate feet, and wipe them again with the tresses of my head, those feet at whose sound Eve hid herself for fear when she heard Thee walking in Paradise in the afternoon. The multitude of my sins and the abyss of Thy judgments, who can search them out, O my Savior of souls? Do not disdain me, Thy handmaiden, O Thou Whose mercy is measureless.

One story relates that Abbess Cassiane spent the afternoon in the garden composing this hymn. As she finished writing that verse which says, "I shall kiss Thine immaculate

feet, and wipe them again with the tresses of my head," she was informed that Emperor Theophilos arrived at the convent. Not wishing to see him, in her haste to conceal herself, she left behind the scroll and pen.

Theophilos, having entered the garden, found her half-completed poem, and added the phrase, "those feet at whose sound Eve hid herself for fear when she heard Thee walking in Paradise in the afternoon." After he departed, Cassiane came out from hiding. When she took up her composition, she beheld the phrase written in his handwriting. She retained it and went on to complete the poem."

St. Cassiane Thus, we are told in this hymn that the sinful woman approached Christ in love, whereas Eve hid from Christ in fear. In many Lenten sermons and hymns, Eve, the archetypal sinful woman, and the repentant harlot appear together. The unrestrained vision and desire of the first woman is to be avoided, whereas, the repentance of the second woman is to be emulated.

THE SUNDAY OF ORTHODOXY

Emperor Theophilos, on his deathbed in 842, designated Theodora as a regent for their son Michael III. With the death of Theophilos, the iconoclastic madness ended. Empress Theodora restored veneration of the icons. In the well-known icon of the Sunday of Orthodoxy, commemorating the restoration of the icons, we see St. Methodios the Patriarch. Garbed in bishop's robes, he is either depicted holding a crozier or Gospel. Other bishops behind him are holding icons and Gospels. In front of him are portrayed either two deacons or two angels holding an icon of the Christ Child and Virgin (Odegitria Icon)."

Opposite the Patriarch are the Empress Theodora and her son Michael, a small boy, who are either holding icons or scepters. Behind them may be seen priests with censers and lamps. We may also see the ascetics, Saints John, Arsacios, and Isaias with a crowd of other monks. Near them is the holy woman Cassiane, holding an icon, standing with a crowd of female solitaires. There may also be seen other laity, men, women, and children holding crosses and lamps.

One biographer comments, "She (Cassiane) lived only for God, to the end of her life." Thus, after dedicating her life to Christ and the Church, and adorned with the chaplet of virginity, and the crowns of a confessor, an ascetic, and a hymnographer, our holy Mother Cassiane reposed in the Lord.

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