

TRANSLATION OF THE RELICS OF SAINT SABBAS: A JOURNEY BACK HOME

An article by Heba Hrimat

26 October, 1965 marked the most important event for the Holy Lavra of Saint Sabbas in recent years. The relics of the great Saint, which were longing for their original and rightful resting place for centuries, were finally brought back from Italy to their home in the desert monastery near Bethlehem. It was during the reign of the Crusaders in the 12th century that the sacred and holy relics (whole body) of Saint Sabbas were taken to Constantinople and later to Venice. For over 800 years, the relics were kept away from the Orthodox monastery Sabba founded himself, which currently houses around 20 monks, who continue to follow in his footsteps, embracing his legacy.

This great event was the fruit of brotherly negotiations and combined efforts between the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem and the Latin Catholic Church in Rome, which were preceded by the historic visit of Pope Paul VI to the Holy Land in 1964, where he met with Patriarch Benedictos I of Jerusalem and the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I. As a gesture of good will towards the Orthodox Church, the Pope decided to return the relics of Mar Saba to the Holy Land.

Those who attended the event that year recalled that it put on 'a celebratory character'. And according to Dr. John Tleel, author of 'I Am Jerusalem' he noted "the translation of Mar Saba's holy relics was an event the Holy City had not seen in recent times."

The journey home to the monastery of Saint Sabbas began from the church of St. Anthony in Venice, Italy, where the relics were kept. Passing through the rivers of the city by a gondola

reaching Rome where awaiting was Pope Paul VI and the Greek Orthodox delegation of clergymen headed by Archbishop Vasilios of Jordan, the chief secretary of Jerusalem Patriarchate at that time. Soon the relics arrived to the Katholikon of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, where they stayed there for a week to allow people to venerate, before transferring them one last time to their final resting destination at the Lavra of St. Sabbas near Bethlehem.

Today our Patriarchate celebrates this historical event on an annual basis, through an all-night vigil which starts on the evening of 25 October and ends at the early hours of the next day, 26 October. This year, the vigil will be less crowded as the Patriarchate carefully follows the government safety rules as the world continues to suffer from the on-going pandemic of COVID-19. On this holy occasion, His Beatitude Patriarch Theophilos III raised his prayers for all people and families suffering from the virus, praying to God to lift their suffering and for life to go back to normal.