

ST. THEODOSIUS THE GREAT

An article by Heba Hrimat

He was the founder of cenobitic monasticism, and the cave he settled into for over thirty years was, according to tradition, the place where the three Magi spent the night on their way back from the Nativity of the Lord.

Born in Cappadocia to pious parents, Saint Theodosius who lived in the fifth-sixth centuries, was gifted with a beautiful voice; he zealously toiled at church reading and chanting. However, deep in his heart he always yearned for the solitary life, and therefore he returned to the Holy Land which he had visited once in his youth, to permanently settle there, coincidentally in the same cave which hosted the three wise men.

When the cave could no longer hold all the monks, Saint Theodosius established the first cenobitic monastery, or Lavra (meaning 'broad' or 'populous'). Soon the Lavra of Saint Theodosius became renowned, and up to 700 monks gathered there.

A certain miracle would take place at the Lavra repeatedly every time Saint Theodosius wanted to help the destitute. It first started when there was a famine in Palestine and a multitude of people gathered at the monastery, Saint Theodosius gave orders to allow everyone into the monastery enclosure. His disciples were annoyed, knowing that the monastery did not have the means to feed all those who had come. But when they went into the bakery, they saw that through the prayers of the Saint, it was filled with bread.

Saint Theodosius was extremely compassionate. He built a home at the monastery for taking in strangers, separate infirmaries

for monks and laymen, and a shelter for the dying. Seeing that people from various lands gathered at the Lavra, the Saint arranged for services in the various languages: Greek, Georgian and Armenian. All gathered to receive the Holy Mysteries in the large church, where divine services were chanted in Greek.

The Saint along with his monks suffered persecution on the hands of the Byzantine Emperor Anastasius (491-518). A period where the sacraments nor the clergy were recognized. The emperor accepted the false teaching, and the Orthodox began to suffer persecution. Saint Theodosius stood firmly in defense of Orthodoxy and wrote a letter to the emperor on behalf of the monks, in which they denounced him and refuted the heresy with the teachings of the Ecumenical Councils. The emperor showed restraint for a short while, but then he renewed his persecution of the Orthodox. The holy Elder then showed great zeal for the truth. Leaving the monastery, he came to Jerusalem and in the church, he stood at the high place and cried out for all to hear: "Whoever does not honor the four Ecumenical Councils, let him be anathema!" For this bold deed the monk was sent to prison, but soon freed after the death of the emperor.

The area of Palestine witnessed numerous miracles during the time of the holy Saint. He once destroyed, through his prayers, the locusts devastating the fields in Palestine, soldiers were saved from death, and he also saved those perishing in shipwrecks and those lost in the desert.

Saint Theodosius died at the age of 105, exactly three days after revealing to his beloved bishops that he would soon depart to the Lord. His body was buried with reverence in the cave in which he lived at the beginning of his ascetic life, now enclosed underneath the large monastery named after him on the road to Bethlehem.

More about the monastery of Saint Theodosius:

Known in Arabic as the monastery of Dossi or Ibn Ubayd, the monastery is located 10 km east of Beit Sahour, and is built on the ruins of the monastery founded by Saint Theodosius himself in the year 465 AD. The cave in which the three wise men rested from their journey, remains as one of the most important parts in the monastery. During the 5th and 7th centuries, the monastery witnessed its best era where it contained four churches with 700 monks living inside the Lavra, while 2500 monks and nuns lived around the monastery.

Besides the main church where the service was held, there used to be a school for theology, workshops, animal stables and other facilities, all of which were short-lived due to the Persian invasion of the region in 614 CE, which also resulted in the massacre of 5,000 monks. The monastery slowly returned to prosperity in the 11th and 12th centuries. In the time of Crusaders in the 15th century, the monastery became a refuge for Bedouin tribes of Ibn Ubayd, hence the name.

In 1881 AD, the director of the Holy Cross Theological School purchased the ruins of the monastery from the Bedouins, and in 1896 AD the Patriarch of Jerusalem at that time laid the foundation stone for the new monastery. The current building dates to 1952 AD.

Annual Patriarchal vigil is held at the monastery on January 10/23 to commemorate the great Saint Theodosius, while the monastery opens its gates to believers and visitors daily from 8 am – 3 pm.