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NEW MARTYR EPHRAIM OF NEA MAKRI: *A Greek Saint for Troubled Youth*



ALONG THE COAST OF ATTICA, a little to the north of the port at Rafina, lies the village of Nea Makri. Behind it rises Mt. Amman, in whose foothills rests the Monastery of the Annunciation, known to Orthodox Greece as simply “Saint Ephraim’s.” Previously unknown, not only in the secular West but throughout the Orthodox world, over the past thirty years St. Ephraim of Nea Makri has become one of the most beloved saints in Greece, and the monastery a center of pilgrimage for the entire country.

In 1950 Sister Macrina, a Greek nun, believed that she was being led by God to restore the Monastery of the Annunciation at Nea Makri, which had been destroyed by Turkish pirates in the 15th century. With the permission of the local bishop, she took possession of the partially rebuilt chapel and monastic cells that same year. Sister Macrina sensed she was on holy ground and as she worked, day after day, clearing away the rubble, she prayed that she might learn something of the monks who had once lived there.

One morning, as she was working in the monastery courtyard she had a strong thought that suggested, “Dig up the earth here and you will find what you are looking for.” A little time went by, and again the thought urged her to dig. She called to a young worker who had come to the monastery to do some repairs, but too embarrassed to tell him the real reason for her request, she

asked him to dig in hope of finding the original monastery well. He refused, saying there were other places where he was more likely to find water, and for several hours he dug in different locations without success. That afternoon he returned to the courtyard to dig in the spot Sister Macrina had indicated.

They quickly uncovered a fireplace, three small windows, and a partially ruined wall—indications that the site had once been the cell of a monk. As Sister Macrina and the worker cleared away the rocks, he dug so energetically that she became fearful that he might damage something holy and begged him not to rush. He wouldn't listen until finally she said, "Perhaps there is someone buried in these ruins and you might strike his remains; I beg you to be careful." He looked at her in surprise and said, "Do you really believe you are going to find someone buried here?" Sister Macrina recounts:

I was very sure, and I could almost visualize the monk. We continued the holy work of digging, and at one hundred seventy centimeters [about five and a half feet] we first glimpsed the head of the monk of God. As we uncovered it, a wonderfully fragrant smell surrounded us. The worker was pale—he couldn't speak. I asked him to leave me alone and he departed. With great devotion I kissed the Saint's relics and felt deeply that he had endured some mysterious torment. I was filled with holy joy—as if I had acquired a divine treasure.

I had felt that he was a monk, and then, as I gently moved the

sand away I saw the hem of his cassock still intact. The fabric was clean and intricately worked on an old-fashioned loom—the threads were larger than a millimeter in thickness. When he was buried the ground had hardened around his hands and feet, and the prints were still there... I tried to clean the mud from the bones of his fingers but they were so fragile that they began to crumble. It began to rain and the water moistened the grave so quickly that I left the relics as they were to allow the rain, which had been falling gently, like little silver leaves, to cleanse the Saint and his grave.



Later that evening as I was reading the Vespers Service, alone in this holy place where God had led me, I suddenly heard footsteps approaching the church from the side of the courtyard where the grave was. I knew it was him, the unknown Saint. His steps echoed in my ears and I was tremendously frightened. The blood rushed to my head and I felt numb, unable to even turn around. Suddenly behind me I heard a voice asking quietly, "How long do you intend to keep me out there?" I turned and looked. He was tall with dark hair and had round, heavy-lidded eyes. His black, curly beard amply covered his neck. In his left hand was a bright light and with his right hand he blessed me.

With his words, my fear vanished, and in its place was an overwhelming joy as if I was again meeting someone I knew well. I said to him, "Forgive me, tomorrow at dawn I will take care of your holy relics." He faded from my sight and I continued to read the evening service...

In the morning, I reverently cleaned the mud from his relics, and then washed and placed them in the church where I lit a lampada. That night I dreamt I saw the monk again, standing inside the church, holding in his arms a large, beautifully-worked silver icon. Next to the icon was a candle holder, where I lit a large beeswax candle and heard him say, "*Thank you very much. I am Ephraim.*"

Over the next few years in visions and dreams, St. Ephraim told Sister Macrina and others the story of his martyrdom.

Born on the 14TH of September, 1384, the Saint lost his father when he was a young child, and he and his six brothers and sisters were raised by his pious mother. At fourteen, St. Ephraim went to the Monastery of the Annunciation of the Mother of God, where he lived in prayer and asceticism for twenty-seven years. He was granted the grace of the priesthood and became guardian of the monastery. It is unknown whether he was alone or if there were other monks there as well.

On his birthday in September of 1425, the Feast-day of the Exaltation of the Cross, Fr. Ephraim was taken captive by Islamic pirates and tortured, his captors insisting that he deny Christ. He refused and his torment lasted for eight months, his captors allowing his wounds to heal a little and then torturing him anew. On May 5, 1426, he was taken out into the courtyard and hung upside down from a tree that is still to be seen at the monastery. Nails were

¹Paraphrased from *The Miracles and Sightings of The Miraculous and Great-Martyr Saint Ephraim, the Newly Revealed (1384-1426)*, Vol. II, Holy Monastery of the Annunciation, 1994, and verified in 1995 interview with Abbess Macrina.



Monastery of the Annunciation of Nea Makri

driven into his hands and feet and he was pierced through the center of his body with a sharpened pole that had been fired until it was red-hot.

Thus did the Great-Martyr give his soul up to the Lord, and five hundred years later, by God's providence, his relics and martyrdom were revealed. Not only has the account of the martyrdom been given, but the Saint—glorified by God for his suffering—is renowned as a healer and wonder-worker, restoring the sick in soul and body. This grace has been testified to in hundreds of accounts recorded by the monastery since the uncovering of his relics.

Since 1950, Reverend Mother Macrina (now the abbess) has worked to restore Annunciation Monastery. She and her sisters carry out the monastic cycle of church services and care for the hundreds of pilgrims who come daily to pray before the relics of the Saint, which lie in the monastery church. The author herself was able to visit Abbess Macrina in 1997, and she reconfirmed the appearances and words of St. Ephraim which she had recorded years before.

Behind the monastery is an ancient wood of pine and oak trees. In the midst of the trees stands a stone chapel dedicated to St. John the Theologian, and surrounding it, the monastery graveyard. The chapel was built before St. Ephraim's time and the Saint himself loved to walk there. As the sun sets in the late evening, the trees are often drenched in a warm, golden light, giving the surrounding woods an otherworldly luminescence.

Following are a few of the hundreds of miracles recorded by the monastery that have been attributed to the intercession of St. Ephraim. Those below particularly reflect his care of the young.

A SWEDISH PRISONER

My name is Th. M. and although Greek by birth, I live in Sweden. Twelve years ago I was convicted of a crime I did not commit and sentenced to three years in prison. I was locked up in a dark cell for five months awaiting my appeal, which had been set for Friday, December 18, 1981.

On Thursday night at 3:00 AM, I woke up suddenly, startled, and was on my feet before I fully realized I was awake. Standing in front of me was a man, barefoot and dressed in a white robe, who was smiling at me. He was tall and thin and had a full beard. He wore no hat; his eyes were clear blue and he seemed kind.

I asked in Swedish, "Who are you?" He smiled again, and raising his hands, replied in Greek, "Tomorrow in court you will be released." I repeated, "Who are you? How do you know?" Smiling he said again, "Tomorrow you will be released." I turned to the door in amazement to see if it had been left open. It was locked. I turned back to the visitor and experienced something I will never forget as long as I live: the figure of the man rose to the upper corner of the cell; there, it vanished. I was convinced I had just witnessed a miracle worked by Christ. I made the sign of the Cross and fell asleep.

The next morning I was taken to court, where, after several hours, the judge stood up and said, "You are free." I knelt down and made the sign of the Cross and left the courtroom. I called my parents to let them know I'd been released. To my surprise, they already knew. "How? How did you find out?!" I exclaimed. They told me they had been informed by my sister, who had prayed to St. Ephraim in Nea Makri the day before.

I called my sister. She told me that on Thursday evening she had gone to the Monastery of St. Ephraim to pray for me; there she felt St. Ephraim promising her I would be released from prison. She had called to tell my parents about an event that only transpired the following day! It was especially remarkable because no one knew the appeal had been scheduled for the next morning.

Some days later I received a book and icon of St. Ephraim from my sister through the mail. I recognized him at once as my mysterious visitor. I left for Greece and as soon as I arrived went straight to the monastery to thank the Saint for the great gift I had received from God through him.

Th. M. Carussell
2131 Hagersten, Stockholm Sweden

THE EXPECTANT MOTHER

June, 1983. In my village a very pious girl of seventeen was pregnant. The doctor had informed her that she wouldn't be able to give birth naturally and she was terrified, knowing the labor would be painful and end in a Caesarean.

One day she decided to visit a relative in the hospital, and hoped while she was there to meet some woman who had recently given birth and could encourage her. She had also been praying to St. Ephraim, as we had told her, with the words, "Saint, may I give birth to this child in the easiest possible way."

Although she had been examined by the doctor that day, who had noticed nothing unusual, during the evening the girl became anxious. She had no symptoms of being in labor but her husband, as if guided by God, insisted on taking her to the clinic. On the way his wife teased him because the doctors and nurses would make fun of their needless visit.

When they arrived the girl was examined by a nurse who, surprised, said that she was going to give birth very soon. When the doctor arrived, the frightened girl began praying, and within three minutes the baby was painlessly in the doctor's hands. He later assured the new mother that her most difficult birth had turned into the easiest of his twenty-five year practice.

Maria
Kalamata City
September 16, 1983

A NON-BELIEVER

A friend of mine came over one day and gave me an icon of a Saint named Ephraim. I accepted it graciously but secretly thought of how to get rid of it quickly, because I didn't believe in God. For the time being I placed it on the dining room table.

A few days later, at midnight, I saw a pale red light in front of the Saint's icon. I was frightened at first but soon felt a kind of inner joy. I could see the red light burning all night like a candle. The following day I told my neighbors about the miracle. They were all surprised because they knew I didn't believe in God.

A few more days went by but I didn't see the light again. I didn't want to touch the icon as I had become very frightened. I decided to give the icon away because I didn't want to see the red flame again. When I went to sleep that night I had a dream of St. Ephraim. He was tall and looked austere. He wore a long tunic that reached to his feet and had a knotted rope around his waist—I particularly remember his Byzantine sandals. I felt sinful and couldn't look him in the face. He said in an imposing voice, "You will not see the light

again because you said you wished it so, but be aware—you may remove my icon, but I shall always be here."

Thanks to Saint Ephraim, I now believe in God.

Catherine Kalogeratos
Neos Kosmos, Athens

PASSING A CHEMISTRY EXAM

My name is Helen Voulgarakis. I was applying to enter the university and took my entrance exams in June of 1985. I had not done well in physics and on this day I was to take a chemistry exam. I remember it was a Thursday and I was very nervous. Although I had studied hard, chemistry was not my best subject and I was very unsure of myself. By noon the test was almost over, and I was not at all confident that I had answered correctly. I prayed intensely to God for help.

Then, as if I was listening to a silent voice that spoke in my ear, I erased what I had written. It was almost as if someone was narrating the correct answers.

I returned home and found out that during the test a relative of mine had telephoned the monastery and asked Abbess Macrina to pray to St. Ephraim to help me. It was he who stood next to me during the test and helped me with the answers. He did this out of his great love for people.

I fervently thank the Saint, who gave me 90% on my chemistry exam.

Helen Voulgarakis
Nekea, Athens

"I AM EPHRAIM"

The following account was told to the author in the fall of 1992 by a nun in the Holy Angels Convent in Kalamos, Attica, who was told the story by the taxi-driver who had taken the youth in the narrative on his first visit to Nea Makri in 1990. It is timely for us who are worried about the souls of our own young people because it occurred not to a pious Orthodox youth in Greece, but to a nonpracticing Greek-American teenager, heavily addicted to drugs. The taxi-driver wrote the story down word-for-word as the boy told it to him and it was published in the Greek newspaper "Orthodox Typos."

To begin with, it has been two months since I've stopped taking the poison, and now I feel like any other normal healthy person. I have no desire whatsoever to put it into my bloodstream again, and I owe this not to any effort of my own, but entirely to the miraculous power of God and His Saint.

I was born and raised in Athens, in Koukaki, until the age of eight. I am an

only child and my parents love me passionately and never denied me anything I wanted. When I was eight years old my parents and I left for America for a better life. With the help of relatives there they found jobs and I attended school.

As I grew up, however, there also grew within me many absurd desires and vices. Due to my character I was easily caught up in bad company and soon tried marijuana and hashish. As the years went by the light drugs didn't satisfy me or my companions. So, we got into the heavy drugs we found in the same surroundings. We had access to them as easily as the light drugs. These, however, were more expensive, and I didn't have a job. In the beginning I stole from the wallets and pockets of my parents. However, when with time I had need of greater doses, and after I had been caught by my parents, I even began beating them to get the money. My condition was critical; I understood that, but I couldn't turn back. My parents rushed me to doctors and psychologists, hoping they could do something, but there was nothing, no light from anywhere. The doctors told them that if I didn't get out of that environment, my life would be very short.

Once, during that time, as I sat at home alone in a state of despair, a strange visitor whom I had never seen before appeared in front of me. He was of medium height, and had very large round eyes that kept rolling about. He had long black bushy hair on his body. Also he had horns and a tail. He had



Old sepulchre of St. Ephraim in monastery church
a very loud, strong voice and a frightening persuasiveness that didn't leave

room for disagreement.

He began to give a detailed account of my life from the time I was born until that moment, and I could only agree. "You've enjoyed everything," he told me at the end, "there's nothing left for you at all, only that you come with me..." I asked him, "How?"

"You will take the car," he said, "and you will follow such-and-such a road. You will drive along it for so many miles (I don't remember the number) and there I will be waiting for you..." This road was straight for many miles, and at a certain point had a slight bend, where many drivers going too fast had skidded off the road, crashed into a wall and died. I had already heard of many such unfortunate accidents that had occurred at that same place. I did exactly as he told me, and I too crashed into the wall. The car ended up almost unrecognizable, but they took me out with only minor injuries. After they gave me first aid, I went home.

About ten days after my accident, the same unusual visitor reappeared, this time in the kitchen. He had a frown of anger on his wild, imposing face, and with a nod of the head backwards,² said in the same peculiar voice, "You didn't do anything." I sat looking at him petrified, and just managed to ask, "What should I do?"

"Right now—take a triple dose of what you usually take and you'll come with me for sure." He vanished and I didn't even bother to ask myself how he got into my house, or who he was—I just put the plan into action.

I got the drug ready in the syringe and I searched to find a place on my much-pierced body. The dose was large and I immediately fell unconscious. When I was still unconscious I saw a tall man with a cassock and a black cap, who had a cross engraved on his forehead. "Don't be afraid," he said, "you will get well, and when you return to Greece, come to my home. I am Ephraim."

I got up as though I hadn't even taken any of that accursed poison. I felt a strong desire to leave for Greece, and, as soon as I told my mother, she was amazed and thought it a miracle because they had tried to send me away from that environment many times before without success. I told my mother everything that had happened to me, and she decided to accompany me on my trip. When we came to my old neighborhood [in Athens], we went to the priest of the parish there, and from him I learned who the strange visitor was, and what he wanted from me. It was the devil and he wanted my immortal soul. I thanked God from the depths of my soul. I confessed and fasted, and after fifteen days the priest gave me Holy Communion. When I saw the icon of St.

² "A nod of the head backwards": A common Greek gesture implying "No" or simply displeasure, as the American habit of shaking the head slowly from side to side.



Courtyard where St. Ephraim's relics were found

Ephraim, I knew that it was he who had saved me from that terrible poison.

I went to Nea Makri and had a liturgy served to thank the Saint. Now I come to the monastery sometimes to get away from the world a little, and to be reassured that I don't need the drugs anymore.

HOLY FATHER EPHRAIM, PRAY TO GOD FOR US!

St. Ephraim's feast days are January 3, the finding of his relics, and May 5, the date of his martyrdom.