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PILGRIMAGE TO LESVOS

The Spiritual Treasury of a Greek Island

by Mother Nectaria McLees

Separated by a narrow channel from mainland Turkey, Lesvos is a beautiful, sparsely populated island, the third largest in Greece. The landscape is dotted with Greece's ever-present olive groves, low-growing brush, and stands of tall pines. Known in the classical world as a center of Greek culture, Lesvos housed the famous philosophical academy where Epicurus and Aristotle taught, and it was in Lesvos that Sappho, the seventh-century B.C. poet, made her home.

A shining light of the classical world, Lesvos has been no less a beacon of Orthodox sanctity. From the time of the first martyrs of Lesvos, forty-seven canonized saints have illumined her shores and are commemorated today by the island's faithful. Among the most venerated is St. Olympiada, who, with her nuns, was attacked and martyred by pirates in 1235. Also on Lesvos is one of the original icons painted by St. Luke, enshrined in the village church of Agiassos, and in Mitilene town are the relics of St. Theodore of Byzantium, martyred by the Turks in 1795. In the past thirty years Lesvos has taken on even greater significance for Orthodox Christians as the resting place of the newly-revealed Sts. Raphael, Nicholas and Irene, fifteenth-century martyrs and wonder-workers of our own time.

MONASTERY OF ST. RAPHAEL

At the end of the 1950's, a remarkable discovery was made on a hill above the village of Thermi, fourteen kilometers from the port of Mitilene. Called

Opposite: Sts. Raphael, Nicholas, and Irene.

Karyes (in former times “The Panagia of Karyes”) the spot was well known to the residents of Thermi. Sheep had been pastured there for centuries near a small chapel surrounded by scattered hewn stones that testified to the early presence of a monastery. Often, a beautiful fragrance was reported on the hillside, and there was a centuries-old custom among the local Christians of gathering there with lighted tapers on Bright Tuesday for liturgy. The reason for celebrating the liturgy in the little hill-chapel had long been forgotten, but the tradition was faithfully kept, spurred on by centuries of reports by local shepherds and villagers of the appearance of an unknown monk, sometimes with a censer in hand, who disappeared at their approach in a cloud of radi-



Monastery of St. Raphael.

ant light. The chapel had also been seen shining with otherworldly light and those on the hillside sometimes heard a great chorus of psalmody and bell-ringing from the uninhabited site.

In 1917, several of the Turkish administrators who owned property on the hillside asked the local police to clear up the mystery, but the investigation was brought to an abrupt halt after both the investigating officer and the *Arif-Efendis* saw the monk with their own eyes.

Barbara Economou, a native of Thermi now residing in America, related the experience of seeing this otherworldly monk as a young child. One day when she had lost her pet lamb, she climbed as far as Karyes looking for it. As she was scouring the hillside she saw a priest coming towards her, and assuming he was from one of the nearby villages, asked him, “Father, have you seen my little lamb?” He smiled and disappeared from her sight. At that very moment the lamb bounded to her side, and putting a rope around it, she led it peacefully home. Afraid that her family and neighbors would think her mad, it was many years before she told anyone what she had seen.

After the Greek-Turkish exchange of populations in 1923, the formerly Turkish-owned hillside was given to the refugee Marangas family, and, in 1959, to fulfill a promise made by Angeliki, the mother of the family, a small

church was built there. On July 3rd, while digging the foundations the workmen found a grave containing a sweetly fragrant human skeleton with its skull resting about ten inches away from the body, pillowed on a rock. The skeleton's arms were crossed over its chest in an attitude of prayer, and the jaw bone was missing. Also in the grave was a Byzantine ceramic tile engraved with a cross.

Doukas Tsolakis, the foreman of the crew, collected the bones and threw them carelessly into a sack. When he attempted to move the sack, however, he found that it weighed so much that he could not lift it. Trying again to raise the bag, his hand became paralyzed. Leonidas Sideras, one of the other workers, kicked the sack and his leg immediately went numb. The foreman, petrified with fear, thought to make the sign of the cross, and as he did, he regained the use of his hand. They quickly went to the village and asked the priest to come serve a memorial service. The priest declined, saying, "How can I commemorate him when I don't know who he is, or even his name?" That night, however, the saint appeared to the priest in his sleep, and to others in the area as well, informing them that his name was Raphael and his birthplace the island of Ithaka. The dreams continued for months, sometimes identical dreams on the same night to people who did not know each other. In each dream the message was: "I am the Holy Martyr Raphael. The remains found at Karyes are mine. I suffered martyrdom by the Turks on the 9th of April, 1463. I am the monk they have seen for so many years."

Over the following weeks of repeated appearances, his story emerged. Known in the world as Georgios Laskaridis, the martyr came from a well-off family. After a scholarly education he served briefly in the army as an officer and then became a monk. Following his ordination he was assigned as a parish priest at the church of St. Dimitrios Loumbardiadis at the foot of the Acropolis in Athens, later becoming an archimandrite at the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople. Sent by the patriarchate to a theological conference in Morlaix, France, he met a young Greek student named Nicholas, from Thessalonica. Deeply influenced by Archimandrite Raphael, Nicholas embraced the monastic life and was ordained a deacon. The two became lifelong friends and companions.

When Constantinople fell to the Turks in 1453, the pair fled from north-eastern Greece to Mitilene, which had not yet been occupied. On Mitilene they settled in the Monastery of the Nativity of the Theotokos. For many years the monastery had been maintained by a single monk, but after their

arrival a small brotherhood quickly formed, with St. Raphael as its abbot. The brotherhood lived in peace for nine years, untroubled by the Turks because the island's rulers paid a subjugation tax each year to Mohammed the Conqueror. In 1462, however, the sultan finally took the island by force after a seventeen-day siege. The occupying Turks left the monastery alone until the spring of 1463. In April, a small insurrection in Thermi brought them to the monastery, where the mayor of the village, Vasilios, his family, the local school-teacher Theodoros, and some of the other Christians of the area had gone into hiding.

On Good Friday, the Turks entered the monastery and seized Abbot Raphael, Deacon Nicholas, Vasilios and his family, and Theodoros. The rest of the Christians escaped into the forest. Assuming the monks had sheltered the rebels, the Turks began to methodically torture their captives. Irene, the twelve-year-old daughter of Vasilios, had her right hand cut off to force her parents to disclose the whereabouts of the agitators. Unable or unwilling to become informants, the girl's parents looked on in horror as the Turks, together with a German mercenary named Schweitzer, gathered brush, kindled a fire, and burnt little Irene alive in a large earthen pot. Her father, mother, and Theodoros were savagely put to death as well.

On Tuesday of Bright Week, the Turks brutally beat St. Raphael, pulling him about by his hair and beard. Stabbing him repeatedly with bayonets, they hung him upside down from a nearby tree and sawed through his jaw, thus ending his life. Deacon Nicholas, tied to a nearby tree, died of heart failure when he saw his friend and abbot being tortured. The Turks then set fire to the monastery and fled. The following night, two monks of the monastery, Akindynos and Stavros, who had hidden in the hills, brought an old, blind village priest to read the funeral service over the martyrs. They buried St. Raphael in the center of the church, and the local custom of going to the site on Bright Tuesday was kept for over five hundred years, although its reason was eventually forgotten.

Since the uncovering of the relics, the three holy martyrs, Raphael, Nicholas and Irene, have appeared to many people. Sometimes they appear together, sometimes alone. They appear to adults mostly in dreams but sometimes to children when they are awake. The most frequent apparition is of St. Raphael alone. He is reported as being a tall, middle-aged monk – his nose slightly curved, his hair dark and curly, a moderate beard (black mixed with grey) and noble, otherworldly blue eyes. He sometimes appears

wearing vestments but more often a simple monastic riassa. St. Nicholas is reported as being shorter and thinner than St. Raphael, with blond hair and beard and very delicate looking. Irene appears as she did at twelve years old, often in a long yellow dress girded about the waist. Her hair is divided into two long braids that frame her face.

One of the first people that St. Raphael appeared to after the discovery of his relics was a woman named Ekaterini Lytra in the nearby village of Pamfila. The author was able to spend a day with her in the late winter of 1997 and hear her story. Ekaterini, now in her eighties, is still very active and spends much of her time painting icons in the small studio next to her dining room. Her house is a colorful gallery of her works, which cover the walls from floor to ceiling. She has also written a book, which has been translated into English as, *Messages of the Newly-Appeared at Lesbos, St. Martyr Raphael*, detailing her own experiences with St. Raphael, with an introduction and forward by Bishop James of Mitilene and Archimandrite Ambrosius Lenis. Much of her guidance from the saint has been guidance for Ekaterini's own life: her husband's healing, her spiritual life, wearing modest dress, offering charity and hospitality but also about how to spread the word about the newly-revealed saints and oversee the funds given her to help construct the new monastery.

The visit with Ekaterini was extremely interesting. Her home appears to be an open house for the entire neighborhood. While I was there children continually ran in to say hello, neighbor women sat in her kitchen talking to each other as if they were at home, and old people stopped by for a cup of tea and a meal. Ekaterini served them all calmly and lovingly. When I asked her about the old people who were eating there, she told me that soon after St. Raphael had begun appearing to her in the early 1960's he had said, "You have enough for your daily bread – now every day you must feed the poor."

Speaking of his relics, Ekaterini said that three years after they were disinterred, the earth in the grave still smelled like myrrh, while soil a few feet away was musty and earthy. Ekaterini often sends cotton soaked in holy water from the monastery to people around the world. One Australian woman with cancer received a piece and even before she opened the envelope, smelled myrrh throughout her room – even though there was no myrrh on the cotton, but holy water. After swallowing a small piece of it, she was healed.

One of Ekaterini's most interesting stories, as yet unrecorded, took place in 1992, when two ill priests came to St. Raphael's monastery on pilgrimage to pray for healing and afterwards came to her home. They went to the icon

corner in her studio, crossed themselves, and then sat down at her dining room table, from where they could see into the studio. They were sitting and talking about St. Raphael when he suddenly appeared in front of the icon corner, raised his hand, blessed them, and disappeared. All three saw him, and the two priests felt immediately that they had been healed. Afterwards, Ekaterini put a small wooden barrier around the front of the icon corner to mark the place where the saint had stood.

Soon after the discovery of St. Raphael's relics, many people began having dreams and visions of him. He told several of them that a certain nun, Evgenia Kleidara, who had previously been abbess of the Monastery of the Holy Protection on Chios, was to be the abbess of the revived monastery on Mitilene. Mother Evgenia herself saw the martyr, who told her that she had been chosen to rebuild and lead the new convent. At the same time she began receiving letters and visits from people previously unknown to her, who told her that St. Raphael had appeared to them in dreams and told them to inform her of her heavenly appointment. Mother Evgenia agreed to undertake the task, and on September 12, 1963 the new convent was officially established. Since then, a large complex of buildings – churches, cells and trapezas – have been erected on the site, with the main church directly over the saints' graves. Additional parcels of land surrounding the convent have been acquired through the generosity of the abbess' father, who also funded much of the building. The monastery today has almost forty nuns, many of whom were accepted at the urging of the saint in visions to Mother Evgenia.

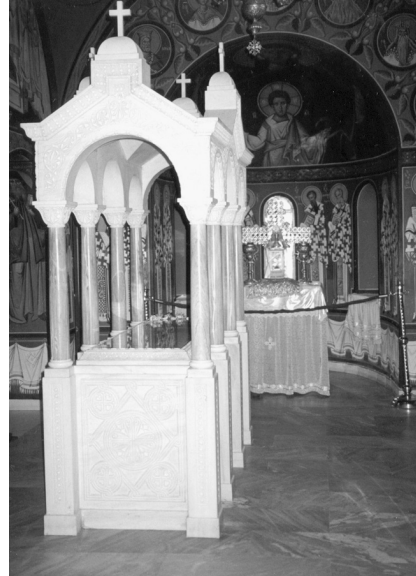
St. Olympiada and Her Nuns

Also found nearby were the relics of Holy Martyr Olympiada, whose story was subsequently revealed by St. Raphael and confirmed the local tradition that there was once a women's monastery on the site. As the revelations of St. Raphael unfolded, it was learned that the foundation at Karyes was originally a convent for women and that it had been destroyed in the thirteenth century by pirates, most likely a mixture of freebooters from the West, Byzantium and the Islamic east, who marauded the coastline of the north-eastern Aegean islands. Among those martyrs known by name are Abbess Olympiada, originally from the Peloponnese, and Sister Euphrosyne. Suffering on May 11, 1235, Sister Euphrosyne was hung from a tree and burnt to death; some of the thirty other nuns were dishonored, and all of them killed.

Abbess Olympiada was burnt with large candles and then red hot iron rods were forced into her skull through her ears. When her grave was found, there were indeed two large nails in the skull where the ears had been, and another in her jaw. Other nails were also found in the skeleton, probably driven into her body when she was tortured. Her relics and the nails are now preserved together at the monastery, along with the relics of Sts. Raphael, Nicholas and Irene.

In 1433, two hundred years after the sisters' martyrdoms, the monastery was rebuilt by a local Orthodox woman, Melpomeni, and it was this monastery that was restored by the young monks Raphael and Nicholas.

There are now three churches. The church in the courtyard as you enter the monastery is dedicated to Sts. Raphael, Nicholas and Irene, and to the left of the door are the relics of St. Nicholas the Deacon – a marble tomb with a clear window at the bottom through which you can view the relics. St. Olympiada's relics are in a wooden box at the foot of St. Nicholas' tomb. To the right of St. Nicholas' tomb is a table with icons and a rounded rock, the same rock that



The relics of New Martyr Priest Raphael.

pillowed St. Raphael's head in the grave. Farther on is a multitude of crutches left by pilgrims who were healed of crippling paralysis, and military caps of soldiers and officials who have had prayers answered. (The sisters say that elsewhere in the monastery is a whole room of crutches and hats – simply too many to keep in the church.) To the right of the crutches, set into the floor, is the huge earthenware pot in which St. Irene was martyred. Across the church from the pot are the relics of St. Irene; they can be seen through the window at the bottom of her sepulchre.

Going back outside, and upstairs, one finds a larger church dedicated to St. Raphael, which enshrines his relics. There is also a "catacomb church," off a small courtyard inside the monastic compound. Ask the nun who sells icons inside the gate if you may see it. This is the site of the original chapel that stood when St. Raphael's grave was found.

Miracles of Saints Raphael, Nicholas and Irene

Although the three martyrs sometimes appear together, it is more often St. Raphael who comes to the sick in dreams and visions, announcing their healing. There have been hundreds of recorded miracles attributed to St. Raphael, making him, along with St. Nectarios of Aegina and St. Ephraim of Nea Makri, a wonder-worker of our own times. The first five of the following accounts are from the volumes of miracles collected and published by Abbess Evgenia.



Relics of St. Olympiada (in small reliquary) and sepulchre of New Martyr Deacon Nicholas.

The First Miracle

The first known miracle, occurring in September of 1959 – only weeks after the relics were found – was the healing of a woman of Thermi, Paraskevi Dourgouna, who was close to death. Her three daughters went to the chapel at Karyes to beg the intercession of the newly-revealed St. Raphael. That night Paraskevi had a dream of a monk who said to her, “Come, venerate my relics and I will cure you.” In the morning the girls carried their mother to the chapel, and after venerating the relics she was completely healed.

A Healing of Faith

Closely following Paraskevi Dourgouna’s healing was that of Vasiliki Rallis of Karyes, who suffered from acute stomach problems and was about to undergo an operation. A few days before she was to enter the hospital, she walked to the chapel and prayed before the icon of the Mother of God and the relics of the saint. When she returned home her husband and her mother-in-law scolded her soundly for having walked up the hill in her weakened condition. She went to bed in tears and that night had a dream in which she saw St. Raphael seated by her bed saying to her, “Don’t weep, Vasiliki. They

slaughtered me for the sake of Christ and they scolded you because of me. I will show them that they are in error.” He raised his arm, and making the sign of the cross three times over her stomach, said, “Vasiliki, you are healed. Keep to this path, my child, and I will intercede for you before the Lord.” In the morning she awoke, feeling herself well, and although her husband and his mother didn’t believe her, she refused to go back to the doctor and was never troubled again with stomach pain.

A Novice From Australia

Abbess Evgenia herself relates that one of the nuns at the monastery, Maria Adamakis, who grew up in Australia, came to the monastery through St. Raphael’s intercession. One night while praying, the abbess seemed to find herself in a strange room, in a foreign country, where a young girl also knelt in prayer. St. Raphael was present and turning to the Abbess he said, “You must admit Maria.” He then turned and tapped the girl on the shoulder, saying, “Come, come, you will find much pasture.” When the abbess came to herself, she told her sisters what



Relics of St. Irene.

had happened, and for months they expectantly awaited Maria’s coming, unable to communicate with her as they knew neither her family name nor her address. When she finally arrived, she described in detail the same scene as the abbess had witnessed from the monastery at Karyes, even down to the dress she had been wearing.

Healing of Tuberculosis

In September of 1961, Maria Varoutelis, from the village of Agiassos on Mitilene, was keeping watch over her husband who was in the last stages of tuberculosis. One night before going to bed she prayed earnestly to St. Raphael to help them. Not long after falling asleep she had a dream of the

saint entering her home, with a gold box in his hand. He came up close to her husband, prayed and made the sign of the cross over him. Maria whispered, "Stay a little longer in my home," but the saint replied, "I must go to heal someone else." With these words, he vanished. When her husband awoke the next morning, he was healed. They went to Karyes to give thanks, and his doctor later verified his complete recovery.

Healing from Burns

A testimony from a Greek woman:

In 1969, my young son Kostas, a high school student, was horribly burnt along with two other students when a nearby cauldron of boiling grease exploded. His body was completely covered with burns and the doctors in the emergency ward said that he would probably die. Even if he did live he would be paralyzed and suffer extensive memory loss. I began praying from



Left: The rock on the table was found under St. Raphael's head in the grave. Middle: crutches left by healed believers, and hats left by military men.

Right: Sunken clay pot where St. Irene was martyred.

the depths of my soul to St. Raphael, that he would have compassion on me and save my child – that Kostas might not have such terrible defects, but if this could not be granted, "let God take him tonight, so that both he and we might not suffer."

That night as I was half asleep I dreamed I was in Mitilene, and that St. Raphael came to me wearing a white riassa and said, "Magdalene, Kostas will be healed, and will return home quickly, with no marks on him." That same night my son also saw St. Raphael, who seemed to pull off a layer of black skin from the top of his body to the bottom, and said to him, "You have become completely well." From that moment he improved rapidly and in fifteen days was released from the hospital with no scars. His physician admitted that this was a great miracle.

Healing of Hepatitis

(The following miracle was related to the author by George Mysiris, who lives in Athens and was healed by St. Raphael in June of 1969. It is recorded in the monastery archives as well as in Mr. Mysiris' own book in Greek, *Thy Will Be Done*, where he describes the healing in full.)

At the age of forty-two, I had suffered for many years from an intestinal amoebic condition that led to chronic amoebic hepatitis and finally cirrhosis of the liver. Even though I was attended by the best specialists and tried many different cures, everything had proven useless, and I knew that unless a miracle soon occurred,

I would die. Having read about St. Raphael in an Athenian newspaper, I went to the monastery and venerated the saint's relics. I begged him to heal me, but, at that time, I was not made well. I believe this is because I had not been particularly religious – I had not confessed or received Holy



Chapel over the site where St. Raphael's relics were found.

Communion since I was a small child and God saw that it was for the good of my soul not to grant my request until I had shown a true change of heart.

I went home and put up icons in my apartment, and began to pray daily to the Lord, the All-Holy Panagia, and St. Raphael to heal me. After a few days I received a letter from a pious woman whom I had met in Lesvos, Ekaterini Lytras. She relayed that St. Raphael had appeared to her and told her to write to me, saying that I must go to confession and receive Holy Communion three times; afterwards my health would be restored. I did this, and at the end of June 1969, as I lay close to death, I had three miraculous visits by the saint on the nights of the 26th, 27th and 28th. Each night, after I had gone to sleep I would awaken to a voice saying that St. Raphael was in the room. My body felt numb and I was unable to move, and even though I could not see the saint, I strongly felt his presence, and that he was gently touching the area of my intestines and liver.

These three visits were all that occurred, but they healed me completely, and the cure was documented by follow-up tests and X-rays made by both specialists and my own physician who had followed my case for years. Glory to Almighty God and His saint.

Saint Irene's Appearance

(Although St. Raphael most often appears alone, sometimes St. Nicholas and St. Irene appear with him also. On one occasion at least, St. Irene appeared alone, a story told to the author by George Mysiris of the above account.)

A few years ago, a man whose leg had been broken was lying in an Athens hospital. He was in pain and moaned loudly, begging the saints to come and help him. In the middle of the night, twelve-year-old St. Irene appeared to him in her characteristic yellow dress, her hair in braids, and said, "Why are you complaining so much? Don't you know that St. Raphael had much worse pain than you do? You should try to bear it more bravely." After a moment she added, "Nevertheless, we will help you," and making the sign of the cross, she vanished, leaving the man's pain greatly diminished.

The feast-day of Saints Raphael, Nicholas, Irene, and New Martyr Olympiada and her nuns is celebrated on Bright Tuesday, the Tuesday after Pascha.

MONASTERY OF ST. MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL (TAXIARCHES)

About an hour northwest of Mitilene by car, near the village of Mantamados, is the monastery known locally simply as *Taxiarches* ("Archangel") dedicated to St. Michael the Archangel. During the centuries of attacks by Cretan-based Arab pirates who ravaged the islands, many of the coastal inhabitants moved inland to avoid being plundered. The pirates knew this and left some of their men behind when they sailed back to Crete for the winter. During their absence the pirates, sometimes with Greek mercenaries disguised as traders, would search out the location of these inland villages in preparation for future pillaging. When they learnt of this, most of the villagers took their possessions and went into hiding.

At the monastery of Archangel Michael, several monks were left behind to maintain the buildings. When the pirates arrived the following spring they threatened the monks with death if they did not reveal the whereabouts of

the hidden villagers. The monks refused and all were slaughtered except for one brother who was working in the hills nearby. He returned to the monastery as the pirates were leaving and, seeing what had happened, he climbed to the roof to be sure that they had gone. Seeing him from afar, the Saracens turned back to kill him, when suddenly Archangel Michael appeared above the monastery and surrounded it with surging water so that the pirates could not reach it. They fled in terror, and according to some accounts, were drowned.

The monk descended to the courtyard, where he buried the bodies of

his martyred brothers, and gathering up the earth that was red with their blood, shaped it into an icon-sculpture of St. Michael. The icon is still in the monastery church and is believed to be wonder-working.

The feast of the icon of St. Michael is celebrated on November 8, the Synaxis of the Bodiless Powers, and September 6, the Miracle at Colossae.



“Taxiarches”—the Church of St. Michael in Mantamados.



Detail of the clay icon of St. Michael the Archangel.

AGIASSOS ICON OF THE MOTHER OF GOD

Considered by many to be one of three extant icons painted by St. Luke,¹ the Agiassos Mother of God was enshrined for many centuries in Constantinople. During the reigns of the iconoclast emperors Constantine V (741-775) and his son, Leo IV (775-780), a hieromonk by the name of Agathon took the icon and fled to Palestine, where he secreted it for twelve years. During the reign of the Empress Irene (797-802), the tide turned against iconoclasm and icon veneration was restored. Father Agathon brought the icon back and settled in Lesvos around 803, where he bought a small piece of land and lived there in a cave, later building a church to house the icon. It is not clearly known why he picked Lesvos – he may have been a native of the island, or the choice could have been bound up with Empress Irene's exile there in 802-3. Fr. Agathon may also have felt that the icon's place was near the empress, who had stemmed the tide of iconoclasm by convening the Seventh Ecumenical Council.

After he had settled on Mitilene, many of the local villagers came to him for spiritual advice and to venerate the icon. A few of the men stayed on as monks and built a monastery after his death. Later, during a temporary resurgence of iconoclasm (813-842) the icon was hidden again until the regency of Empress Theodora (842-855), who fully restored icon veneration as a church practice. In the following centuries there were many miracles for those who prayed before the icon, both Christians and Moslems. In 1170, the church of the Dormition was built at its present location in Agiassos village, at the tomb of Fr. Agathon. This is not the site of the cave and early monastery, which flooded during the spring rains, but higher up on the hill.

Today, the icon is still enshrined in the Church of the Dormition in a glass-covered, ornately framed case directly below the icon of the Mother of God on the iconostasis. The lower half of the icon is covered with a red cloth. Unfortunately, over the centuries the surface of the painting has almost completely worn away; the only identifiable part of the icon is a small portion of the face of the Infant Christ. Two other longish patches remain, too dark to identify, and the rest is bare wood. Directly above the icon is a reproduction of what the original is believed to have looked like, and it is this which is car-

¹ The major icons which are attributed to St. Luke include the Kykko Icon in Kykko Monastery on Cyprus, the Agiassos Icon in the village of Agiassos on Mitilene, the Panagia Faneromeni-Kyzeku in the Church of St. George in the Patriarchate at Constantinople, the Panagia of Soumela in the village of Kastania near Veria, the Mega-Spileon wax relief icon near Kalavryta in the Peloponnese, the Saydanaya Icon of the Mother of God in Syria, and the Icon of the Salutation of the Virgin in Dionysiou Monastery on Mt. Athos (also of wax and mastic). The first three share a long tradition of belief in their authenticity.

ried in procession. The offerings of jewelry and crosses on the red velvet covering the bottom of the original icon were left in thanksgiving for answered prayers and healings. On the icon is written, “Mother of God – Holy Zion.”

In the courtyard of the church is a small book kiosk and two wonderful museums. The ground floor has a lovely folk display exhibiting clothing, utensils and jewelry from the area. The second floor houses an impressive ecclesiastical museum with church vessels, vestments and icons, while black and white photos of church feasts in the 1920’s and 30’s are displayed on the balcony. Both are far above the usual quality of village museums. (If they are closed you can ask the book shop attendant to open them for a few moments. Leave a tip.)

The feast-day of the icon is August 23, the apodosis of the feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God, which the island celebrates with a cross-procession.

METROPOLITAN CATHEDRAL AND STS. THEODORI CHURCH

A few blocks from the port in Mitilene town, are enshrined the relics of St. Theodore of Byzantium. Born in 1774 during the Ottoman occupation, Theodore was a Greek Orthodox youth, apprenticed to an artist commissioned by Sultan Selim III (1788-1807) to fresco his palace in Constantinople with the geometrical and floral patterns so favored by Islamic tradition. During his four years of work in the palace, Theodore was influenced by those around him to convert to Islam. Toward the end of his apprenticeship, however, plague broke out in Constantinople, and witnessing the widespread fatalities, the young man began to think about his own mortality and his apostasy from Christianity. He tried to run away from the palace, but because he was legally bound to serve out his time as an apprentice, he was caught and brought back. Finally Theodore escaped in the guise of a sailor and left Constantinople for Chios.

On Chios he went to the hermitage of St. Macarios of Corinth, where he lived with the saint, repenting deeply of his apostasy. After a long period of prayer and fasting, he was allowed to receive Holy Communion once again and was tonsured a monk. However, this was not enough for Theodore. He felt impelled to publicly renounce his Islamic conversion. St. Macarios told him that this was unnecessary, that he had already repented and would only

be killed needlessly, but Theodore insisted, “It is a very small thing for me to appear before the people, but a very large one for me to appear before God with this sin.”

In 1795, twenty-one-year-old Fr. Theodore, dressed as a Turk, left for Mitilene with another monk. After he said farewell and took a final blessing from his companion, he went to the Turkish magistrate, took off his fez and threw it to the ground, saying, “You made me believe in Mohammed and leave Christ. Now I give you back your Mohammed and I take to myself my belief in Christ.” The magistrate told him that he was mad, but the monk replied, “I am not mad. I was born a Christian and I will die a Christian. My name is not Mohammed but Theodore.” He was finally imprisoned, shackled by the arms and neck, and harshly beaten. A few days later the authorities again sum-



Church of Agiassos.

moned him and asked him to reaffirm his Islamic beliefs. He replied in the same way, “I was born a Christian and I will die a Christian.” The authorities ordered him back to prison and the guards again beat him repeatedly, crushed him under heavy stones, pushed chunks of sharp wood

down his throat and burnt him with lighted torches. A few days later they brought him before the magistrate for his third appearance, giving him a final chance to recant. He again refused, was sentenced to death, and hanged on February 17.

The Turks left him hanging on the scaffold for three days as a public example and then gave his body to the Christians for burial. From the moment of his death, there were miracles, and processions with his relics more than once halted the course of epidemics on the island. On Lesbos the Christians still regularly commemorate St. Theodore’s feast-day with flowers and brightly illuminated lanterns in the church bell tower. In 1888, however, when the region’s newly assigned pasha asked what the Christians were commemorating and was told about St. Theodore, he became angry and for-

bade them to display public veneration for the martyr. The next morning the pasha was found dead, and everyone, both Christians and Moslems, believed this to be an act of God, a punishment for the magistrate's forbidding the commemoration.

The Metropolitan Cathedral (the new Cathedral dedicated to St. Athanasius the Great) and Agioi Theodori (the old Cathedral) are both just a few blocks from the waterfront in Mitilene town. The Metropolitan Cathedral (*Metropoli*), which contains St. Theodore's skull and other relics is open every day. The old cathedral, a lovely church, is one block away from the Metropoli. The old cathedral was officially dedicated to the Annunciation, but local people have always called it "Agioi Theodori," after Sts. Theodore Stratilates, Theodore the Tyro and St. Theodore of Byzantium. It is usually open in the early morning and at evening for vespers.

St. Macarios of Corinth wrote the first life of St. Theodore of Byzantium, whose feast-day is February 17. ✠



Mitilene Port.