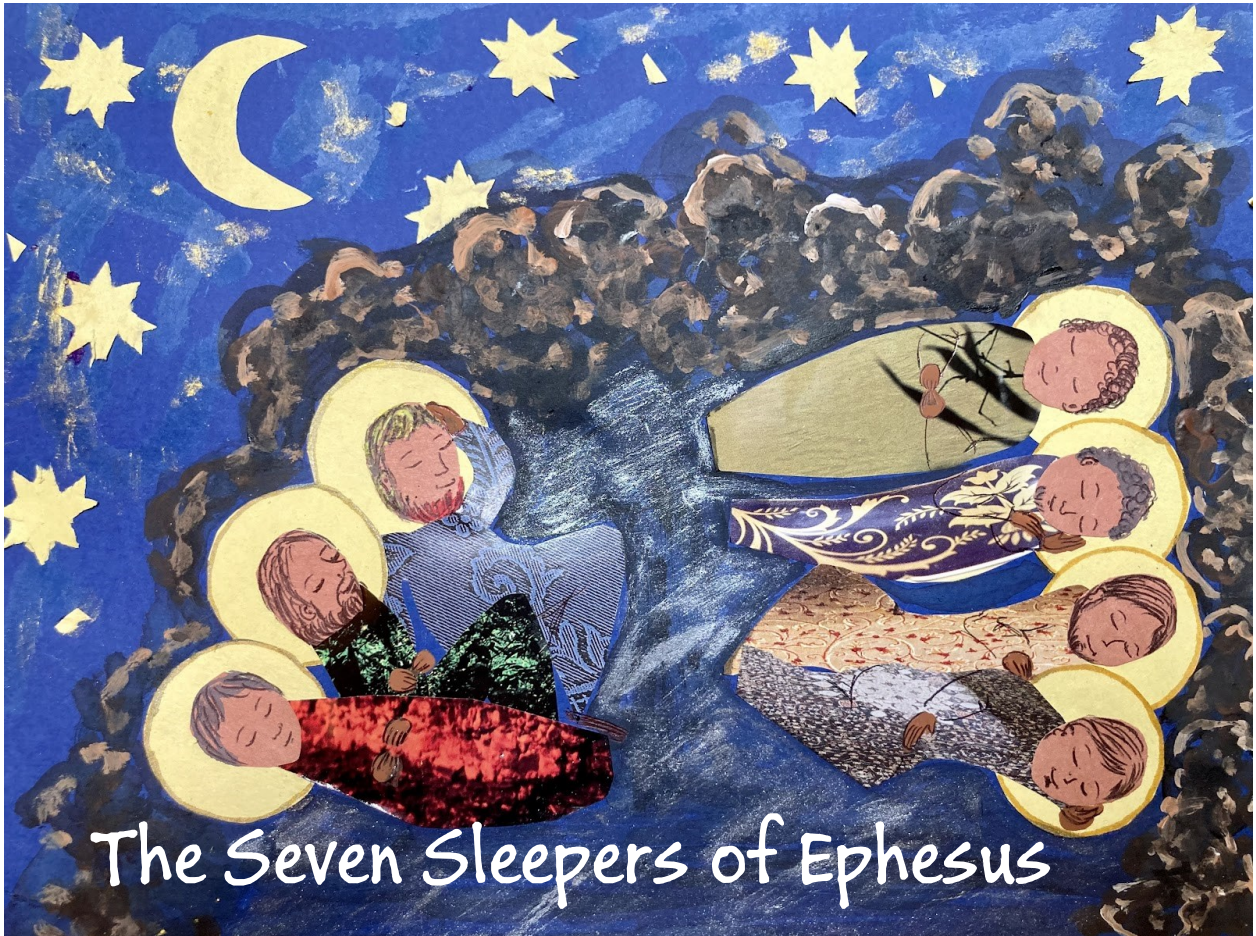


Once Upon a SAINT

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The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus

Dearest Children,

A long time ago, in third century Ephesus (which was a part of Greece under the Roman Empire, now a part of Turkey), lived seven young friends. Maximilian was the leader. The other boys were Iamblicus, Martinian, John, Dionysius, Exacustodianus (Constantine) and Antoninus. They did everything together. They joined the military together. Best of all, they were devout Christians.

The seven youths gave to the poor as often as they could. They defended the weak when they were being bullied. And when they heard people blaspheme (blaspheming is when you speak disrespectfully about God or sacred things), such as saying "O my God!"

without praying, they kindly asked the blasphemers to say the Lord's name with love and would pray in reparation for the sin committed: "Blessed be the Name of the Lord!"

When the Emperor Decius came to visit Ephesus he was disappointed to see how few pagan sacrifices there were. He proclaimed that anyone who refused to sacrifice to the gods would be tortured and killed. It didn't take long for people who were jealous of the seven companions to tell the emperor about them, and the young men were brought before him.

Emperor Decius stroked his trimmed beard: "I have heard about you youths. You take care of the poor, and

you serve the sick. You are brave in the face of extreme danger. You are Roman nobles in all that you do. However, I have also heard that you are Christian. Ridiculous! No true Roman is Christian. This statue is the god Mars, light some incense before him and I will promote you."

The boys looked at one another, and Max spoke for all of them: "My Emperor! With all due respect, we serve and obey you as best we can. But we do not believe in the power of the god Mars nor any god other than the God of the Jews and Christians. Our God can perform great miracles, even raise a person from the sleep of death."

"Enough!" replied Decius, "I hereby strip you of your military belt and insignia. But I will have mercy: I am about to go on a campaign. When I return, I hope you will have thought about our conversation and renounce this Christian God of yours."

The seven young men did not want to deny Christ. So they went to a nearby cave on Mount Ochlon to fast, pray, and prepare for martyrdom. Campaigns often last many months, so they took turns going into the city for news and necessary food.

One day, Iamblicus, who was the youngest, took his turn to dress as a beggar to buy bread. He heard that the emperor had returned. He told the others. Max wanted to go out immediately and present himself to the emperor for martyrdom, and urged his friends to do the same.

But the emperor had already heard that the seven friends were not going to deny Christ. So he ordered that the entrance of the cave be sealed with stones so that the saints would die from hunger and thirst. Christians snuck a sealed container in the cave which contained two metal plates upon which was written the names of the young men and their story. The cave was then sealed shut.

The youths fell asleep in the cave, excited that it was time to meet the Lord.

Meanwhile, almost two hundred years went by. The persecution of the Christians was over. The emperor was now a Christian himself, and very holy. His name was Theodosius, who we call "the Younger."

The city of Ephesus was in turmoil! Theologians were arguing about the Final Resurrection. You see, when we die, although our souls live on in Heaven or Hell (or for a short time, purgatory), our physical bodies (the part of us that hugs our loved ones and eats food) decay and become a part of the earth. At the Final Resurrection we get our bodies back, although our bodies will be glorified (so we can fly and breathe under water) or damned (so we can feel the pain of our hatred all the more deeply). Some of the scholars in Ephesus didn't believe we could get our actual bodies back since our bodies would have decayed and disappeared into the earth long ago. How can we separate that dust belonging to one body from another? It hurts our heads just trying to think about it!

Emperor Theodosius was at a loss.

"Please, Lord!" Theodosius prayed: "please show me how to teach this impossible mystery of the Final Resurrection to my people!!"

Meanwhile, the owner of Mount Ochlon accidentally opened up the sealed cave where our friends lay during construction. It was October 22.

Seven young men sat up, yawning and stretching.

Antoninus touched his toes. "I say, Max! What a glorious nap!"

"It was a lovely sleep, Antoni, but look! The cave has been opened!"

John smiled: "I'm ready for martyrdom, fellows. Let's go!"

Iamblicus, shook his head, "I'm all for martyrdom, guys, but I'm really hungry! It feels like a century since I last ate. How about I sneak down to the city and buy bread first?"

Since all the other young men were hungry too, they agreed and Iamblicus went into Ephesus. Everything looked so different. When he paid for his bread, the baker called over soldiers and Iamblicus was brought to the city administrator, who also happened to be the Bishop.

"Why did you pay with coins with the head of Emperor Decius on it?" the Bishop asked.

"Oh dear!" replied Iamblicus. "Is Decius not the emperor any more? I didn't mean to offend! You see, we were trapped in the cave to be martyred for professing Christianity, and then we slept. I don't know how many days. But everything is so changed! I'm terribly sorry... this is Ephesus, isn't it?"

Being astonished by this answer, the Bishop got the emperor, and together with many scholars and theologians, followed Iamblicus to the cave. There they saw the six remaining youths, who were praying, laughing and singing. The Bishop found the sealed container and read the metal plates aloud. The Emperor soon realized that God woke the youths from sleep after two hundred years as an answer to his prayer requesting how a decayed body could rise again: For God, to make a body whole and undecayed even from dust is as simple as waking it from sleep.

In the sight of everyone, the youths, having accomplished this mission of teaching about the Final Resurrection, lay down together and fell asleep, this time, not to return into their bodies until the Final Resurrection. The Emperor dreamt that the youths wanted their bodies to remain on the ground in the cave, so he sealed the cave back up. We celebrate the feast of the true life sleeping beauties on October 22.