

Once Upon a SAINT

by Rebecca O'Loughlin



ST PHANOURIUS

My dearest children, today we read about a saint who was lost.

“Lost?” You think. “How can you lose a saint?”

I’m not sure, but we found his body.

“When did he live?”

I have no idea!

“Where was he born?”

I don’t know.

“Well!” You tell me, feeling put out, “this is turning out to be a boring story.”

Alright! Alright. Let me tell you what happened.

At the end of the fifteenth century, the Muslim ruler of the island of Rhodes looked out upon the city, and saw that the walls were crumbling.

“This city has seen a lot of war,” he thought to himself, “and it could use a little cleaning up and repair.”

He commanded that the walls be rebuilt. But why haul in new stone, when so much of the fallen stone was good? So wherever possible, the builders reused the fallen stones.

One day, the Muslim workers uncovered the ruins of a beautiful Christian Church. Most of the Church was pretty destroyed. But in the rubble there was an icon that miraculously looked as though it had just been painted. Years of destruction and weather had not harmed it at all.

The workers called for the Christian bishop, whose name was Nilus.

“Bishop Nilus, what do you think about this image?”

The bishop carefully inspected the icon. The image depicted a young soldier with a cross in his right hand, the top of which was lit like a candle. Twelve scenes surrounded the icon:

1. Being questioned by an official.
2. Being stoned.
3. Being whipped.
4. Being raked with hooks.
5. Imprisoned.
6. Standing before the official again.
7. Tied to a rack.
8. Burned with candles
9. Given to wild animals.
10. Holding burning coals in front of idols while being mocked by a demon.
11. Being crushed by a rock.
12. Standing in the midst of fire with arms raised in prayer.

“Hmmm. This is clearly the image of a great martyr. Look at how many times his persecutors tortured him, and only the ninth time did he perish in the fire. It says Saint Phanourius on it. I don’t know who this is! I will take the icon home and pray for understanding.”

After taking the icon home, the bishop prayed. That night, he had a dream.

St. Phanourius stood before him. "Rebuild the Church where my bones lie, where you found my icon."

Although it took a bit of time, and lots of permission from authorities, Bishop Nilus rebuilt the Church.

Meanwhile, three newly ordained priests had been captured between Crete and Kythera by Muslims, who brought them to Rhodes to be slaves. They each had different masters, but when they heard of St. Phanourius, each prayed and wept for freedom. They felt lost in Rhodes because it was a place that enslaved and persecuted Christians. One day, each priest found a moment they were able to sneak into the Church to pray at the tomb of St. Phanourius, and each left feeling at peace.

That night, the three masters were awakened. St. Phanourius appeared before them.

"Set free the Christian priest you have enslaved in your home. If you do not, you will be punished."

None of the masters believed the saint, and in the morning they chained and beat the priests. After all, they were sort-of responsible for a poor night's sleep. That night, St. Phanourius came and comforted each priest. He healed them and broke their chains.

"Do not worry. You will soon be free."

Then, appearing to the Muslim masters, St. Phanourius scolded them and told them that they had only one last chance to free the priests and avoid a serious punishment. To prove he was serious, Saint Phanourius would send a warning: each master became paralyzed from the neck down, blind and full of pain.

In the morning, each master in turn called their priest slave to him, and begged them to heal and bless them. They ordered documents with their freedom written on it, and sent them to the tomb of St. Phanourius. Then the former masters were suddenly and miraculously healed!

The priests returned joyfully to Crete with a new icon of St. Phanourius and they spread his devotion. "Phaneronο" means "to reveal" in Greek. So between finding his lost body and his name, St. Phanourius is invoked to help find lost objects or people. I suspect those Muslim masters may have become Christian too, because of St. Phanourius appearing to them and working miracles. They too would then be "found," in the sense of finding themselves in the True God and with True Faith.

It is traditional to make Phanouropita on the feast of St. Phanourius on August 27th, and the priest blesses it after Church services. Phanouropita has nine traditional ingredients to represent the number of tortures Phanourius was put through and yet remained steadfast in the Lord. The number nine also represents the angels assisting St. Phanourius in carrying out God's blessings. Before you begin baking, say a prayer to ask St. Phanourius for his intercession.

PHANOUROPITA

1 cup oil or butter, plus a little for greasing the cake pan (for the Great Fast you can use a can of coconut cream)
1 cup orange juice
½ cup brandy (or juice)
1 cup sugar
¼ tsp of salt
4 cups flour
1 ½ tsp baking soda
1 cup chopped walnuts or raisins
2 tsp ground spices (at least 1 tsp of the spice should be cinnamon, but ¼ tsp of cloves, mace or ginger is also appropriate).
Powdered sugar for dusting (optional)

Mix wet ingredients first, then add in all the dry ingredients except the powdered sugar. Put batter into a greased 8-9 inch dish. Bake at 350° for 45-60 minutes. After the cake has cooled, sprinkle powdered sugar on it through a sieve to make it extra beautiful, and you can decorate it with fruit and flowers too!

Sharing is an important part of the tradition, so don't forget to offer the cake to others, traditionally at least eight other people!

