



St. Theodora of Sihla

August 7

In her youth, St Theodora went through a great trial in her family. Her sister, Marghiolita, had a tragic death which affected her deeply. At this point, the thought of retreating from the world blossomed in her heart. She wished to atone for her parents, for her sister, for herself. But her grieving parents did not agree to her decision, since she was now their only child. They entreated her, and, at the proper time, they married her to a young man who often went to venerate the holy sites. After entering into a lawful marriage, they lived together in her husband's house.

St Theodora and her husband did not have any children, so they decided to enter the monastic life. In just a few short years, she advanced in obedience, prayer, and asceticism, acquiring the grace of unceasing prayer of the heart.

When her skete was destroyed by the Turks, she fled to the mountains with her Spiritual Mother. They lived for several years in fasting, vigil and prayer, enduring cold, hunger, and demonic temptations. When her Spiritual Mother fell asleep in the Lord, St Theodora was led by God to the mountains of Neamts. After venerating the wonderworking Neamts Icon of the Mother of God in the monastery, she was told to seek the advice of Hieromonk Barsanuphius of Sihastria Skete. Fr Barsanuphius advised Theodora to go and live alone in the wilderness for a year. "If, by the grace of Christ, you are able to endure the difficulties and trials of the wilderness, then remain there until you die. If you cannot endure, however, then go to a women's monastery, and struggle there in humility for the salvation of your soul."

Fr Paul left Theodora on Mount Sihla, blessing her before he returned to the skete. St Theodora lived there thirty years. Strengthened with power from on high, she vanquished all the attacks of the Enemy through patience and humility. She never left the mountain, and never saw another person except Fr Paul, who visited her from time to time to bring her the Spotless Mysteries of Christ and the supplies she needed to survive.

St Theodora made such progress in asceticism that she was able to keep vigil all night long with her arms lifted up toward heaven. When the morning sun touched her face, she would eat some herbs and other vegetation to break her fast. She drank rain water which she collected from a channel cut into the cliff, which is still known as St Theodora's Spring.

When Turks attacked the villages and monasteries around Neamts, the woods became

filled with villagers and monastics. Some nuns found St Theodora's cell, and she called out to them, "Remain here in my cell, for I have another place of refuge." Then she moved into a nearby cave, living there completely alone. An army of Turks discovered the cave, and were about to kill the saint. Lifting up her hands, she cried out, "O Lord, deliver me from the hands of these murderers." The wall of the cave opened, and she was able to escape into the woods.

As St Theodora grew old, she was forgotten and there was no one to care for her. Placing all her hope in God, she continued her spiritual struggles, and reached great heights of perfection. When she prayed her mind was raised up to Heaven, and her body was lifted up off the ground. Like the great saints of earlier times, her face shone with a radiant light, and a flame came forth from her mouth when she prayed.

In time her clothes became mere rags, and when her food ran out, she was fed by birds just as the Prophet Elias (July 20) was. They brought crusts of bread to her from the Sihastria Skete. Seeing the birds come to the skete and then fly away with pieces of bread in their beaks, the Igumen sent two monks to follow them. Night fell as they walked toward Sihla, and they lost their way in the woods. They decided to wait for daylight, and began to pray. Suddenly, they saw a bright light stretching up into the sky, and went to investigate. As they approached, they saw a woman shining with light and levitating above the ground as she prayed.

St Theodora said, "Brethren, do not be afraid, for I am a humble handmaiden of Christ. Throw me something to wear, for I am naked."

Then she told them of her life and approaching death. She asked them to go to the skete and ask for Fr Anthony and the hierodeacon Laurence to come and bring her Communion. They asked her how they could find their way to the skete at night, for they did not know the way. She said that they would be guided to the skete by a light which would go before them.

The next day at dawn, Fr Anthony went to Sihla with the deacon and two other monks. When they found St Theodora, she was praying by a fir tree in front of her cave. She confessed to the priest, then received the Holy Mysteries of Christ and gave her soul to God. News of her death spread quickly, and people came from all over to venerate her tomb. Her holy relics remained incorrupt, and many miracles took place before them. Some kissed the relics; others touched the reliquary, while others washed in her spring. All who entreated St Theodora's intercession received healing and consolation.

Our Venerable Mother Theodora was glorified by the Romanian Orthodox Church in June 1992.¹

¹ www.oca.org