

# INSCRUTABLE MERCY

or

Saint Thecla to the Rescue!

Part One

by Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

We are led to believe that God, in His inscrutable mercy, and by the prayers of the Saints, will, at some point, grant mankind the opportunity to follow or to reject His teaching. We are led to this conclusion by the teachings that we find in the Lives of the Saints and in the writings of the Church Fathers.

With the help of God, we hope to provide these texts to you in installments, as we prepare them.

Below, as a first taste of these sacred texts, we provide some portions from the Life of Saint Thecla, the first woman martyr, and also some commentary on her life by another great Saint and Father of the Church:

## **From the Life of Saint Thecla**

The holy Thecla, receiving the same sentence as those committing sacrilege, was to be cast to the beasts; since she dared to tear the raiment of the governor. The holy maiden, desiring a favor from the proconsul, asked that she might be kept in the custody of some honorable woman. Thecla desired to safeguard herself from defilement until the third day, when she would contend with the wild beasts. He hearkened to her request and remanded her to a noble and wealthy widow, named Tryphaena, who recently had lost her daughter, Falconilla.

Tryphaena then took Thecla home. During those three days, Tryphaena came to love Thecla greatly. When Tryphaena beheld Thecla's angelic face and heard her mellifluous words, it pained her soul to be separated from her. Tryphaena wept when Thecla was led to the place of condemnation. Putting aside her high rank, Tryphaena went with other women to the amphitheater to witness the spectacle. All the young women, sympathetic toward Thecla, wept and denounced this unjust sentence.

The servants of the court bound the martyr and cast her into the arena with the wild beasts. One of the beasts was a fierce lioness

which, as she approached the holy Thecla, abandoned her innate ferocity and became tame, licking the maiden's feet. A placard was written above, denoting Thecla's crime: "Sacriligious: Death Penalty." Viewing this harsh sentence, the crowd was taken aback, and said, "Unjustly is the innocent one condemned!" Tryphaena, endued with divine grace, went into the arena with the beasts. She took hold of the martyr and went to her house rejoicing.

That night, by God's economy, Tryphaena beheld in a vision her daughter Falconilla,\* who said, "My mother, love the stranger, Thecla. Take her as thy daughter in my place; for she is the handmaid of God. She can entreat the Lord to place me with the righteous." Tryphaena then awakened, and related the matter to Thecla, saying, "O Thecla, my second child, I beseech thee to do me this one benefaction: Pray to Thy Christ to grant rest and eternal life unto my daughter; for this is what she requested in a vision." Straightway, the holy maiden raised her hands and voice in prayer to the Heavens, and uttered, "My Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of the true and living God, hearken unto thy handmaid and grant rest to the soul of Falconilla in life eternal, according to Thy holy will."

When Tryphaena heard this entreaty, she rejoiced. Soon afterward, however, she felt sorrow and wept for Thecla. She remembered that Alexander was coming again to arrest Thecla, so they might put her to death.\*\*

### **From the Writings of Saint John of Damascus**

Did not the first female martyr (Thecla) save Falconilla after death? But you will say that she was worthy to do so, since she was the first female martyr, and it was fitting that her prayer be heard. But I say to you, yes she was the first female martyr, but look at the sort of person for whom she made the request: a pagan idol worshipper, an altogether unholy servant of another lord!

(St. John of Damascus,

*Concerning Those Who have Died in the Faith* PG 95. 261-64)

St. Thecla reposed in the year 90 A. D. This is some six decades "after" Christ's Resurrection and Descent into Hades. And, as we shall see, there are more such cases, as the Church Fathers testify.

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\* Falconilla was a young, pagan woman who died unbaptized.

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