

# THE LIVES OF THE SAINTS

— Part Two —

by Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

Recently, someone wrote and told me that, in their opinion, the Lives of the Saints contain "pious stories." Nice, edifying tales, in other words, appropriate for children, perhaps, but not to be taken seriously by grown-ups.

It is true that when we are trying to determine the authenticity of a Life of a Saint, the basic rule is: the closer the author of the Life is to the time when the Saint lived, the better. If the writer *knew* the Saint in person, that's better yet. Once in a while, as odd as it may seem, we even have a Life that was written by the Saint himself!

Now, before you start getting ideas about composing an *autobiographical* Life about your own virtues and supernatural accomplishments, allow me to explain myself.

We have, for example, the Life of Saint Perpetua of Carthage. She was martyred A. D. 203. She herself describes in the first person her interrogation and imprisonment by the Roman authorities. As for her martyrdom, it was described for us by someone who was right there and saw it.

You can't get more authentic than that.

In other accounts, you have to remember that some of the Lives may have been passed down orally from generation to generation before they were finally written down, and some historical facts may have gotten a little jumbled along the way.

At this point, it is useful to bring to mind the Parables of our Saviour. We know that the Publican and the Pharisee of the Parable, or the Prodigal Son, or the Sower, or the Good Samaritan, are not historical, actual people. But the Parables are true and instructive, and lead us to God.

The Lives of the Saints, on the other hand, *are* historical and factual, but, as we said, on occasion some of the historical details may have become blurred in the long transmission or by scribal errors. Nonetheless, we look to them as guides and beacons that bring us to the Truth, which is Christ Himself.

The fact that the Lives often recount miracles and supernatural events is a matter of concern and consternation only to the rationalists among us, who assume they know it all anyway. After all, these folks may have attended a university, and that often means that they now understand the laws of nature. Well, believers understand the laws of nature too. That's precisely why miracles make such an impression on them and they remember them, and record them in accounts such as the Lives of the Saints.

For Orthodox Christians, the Lives of the Saints, like the Holy Scriptures, are a treasure-trove of wisdom and spiritual insights. Since we admit that we don't understand all the mysteries of the universe, or how God governs His world, we are eager and willing to learn something about God's mysteries. That is why we painstakingly search the writings of the Church Fathers and the Lives of the Saints to see what they can tell us.

It is at this point where our correspondent objected that the Lives contained "pious stories."

Tsk. Tsk. Tsk.

"Pious stories" should lead us to *piety*, not error, or heresy, or some misleading teaching. If these "pious stories" lead us astray, then they are not "pious stories" at all, but *prelest* stories.

If they are *prelest* stories, why are they allowed to be in the published Lives of the Saints in the first place? And why are they recommended to Orthodox believers by such eminent and holy men, such as Father Justin Popovich and the Athonite Elder Joseph the Cave-dweller, and quoted by prominent Church Fathers, and cited in the resolutions of the Ecumenical Councils?\*

As Photius Kontoglou says, unbelief is very deeply rooted in some people — even people who call themselves Orthodox Christians. Unfortunately, the rationalistic spirit of the society in which we live has affected some more than they realize.

But the God Who is "wondrous in His Saints," as the holy Psalms say, is still alive and well, and He is able, now as always, to work signs and marvels as He did in the times of the Prophets and Apostles. He can still do things which "pass all understanding."

As Saint Paul says:

Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool that he may be wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.

(I Cor. 3:18-19)

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\**Prelest* is a Slavonic word, meaning "error", or "delusion."

\*\* Some of these Lives have been around for *centuries*: for example, Palladius' *Paradise of the Fathers*. One should see the marvelous accounts that are recorded *there*! Despite the disdain that these accounts receive from modern "theologians," this literature has been accepted by the Church for some one thousand, five hundred years.