

# THE THREE-HANDED ICON OF THE MOTHER OF GOD

—Commemorated July 12th—

The miraculous icon of the Mother of God referred to as “three-handed” (τριχερούσα) originally belonged to Saint John of Damascus (†749 AD). Saint John lived during a time when there was widespread iconoclasm in Constantinople, which quickly spread to the west. At that time, Saint John was the chief advisor to the ruler of the Saracen Arabs in the city of Damascus. When he learned of this, he began to write letters daily and send them to the faithful in Constantinople, proving with irrefutable testimonies that it is proper and necessary to venerate the holy icons of Christ, the Mother of God, and the Saints—something that infuriated the emperor Leo. The emperor found a way to acquire one of Saint John’s letters, and he commanded an experienced master of calligraphy to forge a document, supposedly authored by Saint John and addressed to himself. The letter read as follows:

*“May you live many years, Most Esteemed Emperor! I, your servant John from Damascus, convey the deserved homage to Your Majesty! The purpose of this letter is to advise You that our city is currently undefended, as the majority of the Saracen soldiers are at war. If you decide presently to send a small fleet, you will easily conquer it; and I can help you in any way possible with this campaign because the entire city is under my control.”*

The cunning emperor then composed a second letter addressed to the Saracen Ruler, containing the following:

*“To the Most Beloved and Gracious Emir of the City of Damascus, Hail! I have known nothing to be more blessed than mutual love, nor more praiseworthy and pleasing to God than maintaining peaceful relations with others. Thus, I do not wish to ruin the friendship that exists with your Graciousness, despite the fact that one of your close friends has sent me letters repeatedly, pressuring and inciting me to come attack you. To verify the truth of the matter, I am sending you one of his letters, so that you may perceive my genuine affection for you, and also be aware of the author’s guile.”*

As soon as the Saracen ruler read these letters, he was overcome with rage, and he ordered his soldiers to cut off the Saint John's right hand and hang it in the city square of Damascus. That evening, John sent messengers to the Emir requesting that his hand be given back to him, and when he received it, he kneeled before the holy icon of the Mother of God, and beseeched her with faith and tears to heal his right hand so that he may continue to write and thus advocate on behalf of the veneration of sacred icons.

Having prayed in this manner Saint John fell asleep—at which time the Mother of God appeared to him, assuring him that his hand was healed and encouraging him to continue championing the Orthodox faith. Immediately, Saint John woke up to find his hand intact, with a scar line present at the point of re-attachment. On account of gratitude to the Mother of God, Saint John fabricated and affixed a silver plaque in the form of a hand to the bottom corner of the icon, and hence the icon became known as the “three-handed” icon.

This miracle became the cause not only for the Emir to ask Saint John for forgiveness, but also for the Saint to abandon his worldly affairs and become a monk at the Monastery of Saint Savvas the Sanctified.<sup>1</sup> Saint John gifted the “three-handed” icon to the Saint Savvas Monastery, wherein the icon remained up until the thirteenth century. At that time, during a visit of the most-holy Archbishop of Serbia, Saint Sava, to the Saint Savva Monastery in the Holy Land, it was given to him as a blessing and honorary gift. The Archbishop in turn offered it to the Serbian Monastery of Hilandar on Mount Athos, where it remained until the year 1347.

During that year a Serbian nobleman named Dusan visited Hilandar Monastery, and he was given the “three-handed” icon, which he took back with him to Serbia, and which ended up in the Serbian Monastery of Studenica by the end of the 14th century. At the beginning of the 15th century, Studenica Monastery was invaded by Muslim Turks, and the fathers of the monastery, in order not to have the icon desecrated, tied it to the back of a mule and then let

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<sup>1</sup> This Monastery is located halfway between Bethlehem and the Dead Sea. It was founded in 483 AD and is considered as one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited monasteries.

the mule loose to go wherever the Mother of God would lead it. The mule then journeyed through Serbia, and guided by divine providence it arrived on Mount Athos, stopping just outside the Monastery of Hilandar. When the monks of this Monastery realized what had happened, they proceeded to take the sacred icon from the mule, which immediately fell to the ground and died. Ever since, the sacred icon of the “three-handed” Mother of God is found in the Hilandar Monastery’s *catholicon*<sup>2</sup>, where it performed and continues to perform countless miracles for people who call upon the Mother of God with faith.



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<sup>2</sup> Catholicon is a term used to refer to the main church or cathedral found in a Monastery.