

THE MOTHER OF GOD HELPS SAINT ATHANASIOS THE ATHONITE

Saint Athanasios the Athonite was born to pious and God-fearing parents. He was enrolled in school, and continued his studies in Constantinople. He quickly became very knowledgeable, and, despite his very young age, he nonetheless possessed the demeanor of a mature and prudent adult, living with modesty and monastic asceticism. Desiring perfection of the spirit, he proceeded to become a monk at a monastery located in Asia Minor, where, in a short time, he surpassed everyone in virtue and abstinence, disregarding all earthly cares and only looking toward the heavenly Kingdom of Christ. On account of the respect everyone had for him, he secretly left this monastery and went to Mount Athos, where he initially submitted himself to an elder, and later, in accordance to God's will, retreated to a remote location on the Holy Mountain where he lived as a hermit for a period of time. Subsequently, after repeated requests and fervent pleas by his friend, the Emperor Nikiphoros, he built a magnificent church dedicated to the Mother of God, and a large monastery (which became known as Great Lavra¹) containing several buildings to accommodate the numerous monks flocking to the Saint. The Mother of God appeared to Saint Athanasios and helped him complete the building of the church in the following manner:

Having spent all the gold and silver that Nikiphoros had sent him, Athanasios was saddened because he had not been able to fully complete the construction of the church. Uncertain of how to proceed, he set out from his monastery to Karyes,² in order to seek the opinion of the *protos*,³ to ask whether or not he should send representatives to the Emperor to request more help. When he was approximately 4 kilometers away from the Monastery, he encountered a radiant lady who said to him: "Where are you going, Athanasios?" Astonished, the saint replied, "Who are you, and why do you ask?" The lady answered, **"I am the Mother of your Lord."** Then the saint said, "Forgive me,

¹ Lavra is a special title for a large and very important Eastern Orthodox Christian monastery.

² Karyes is the capital of Mount Athos.

³ Protos is the traditional head of the monastic community of Mount Athos, Greece.

my Lady. I will not believe you, unless I see a sign; for the devil often sets many deceitful traps.” Next, the Theotokos instructed him, “Tap this rock with your staff, making the sign of the cross and calling upon the name of the Holy Trinity, and with the grace of Him Who came forth from me, refreshing water will flow forth from it.” After Saint Athanasios did so, plentiful water sprang forth. Having seen this, the saint fell to the ground and asked the Theotokos for forgiveness. She in turn asked him where he was headed, and the saint described the entire situation to her. The Theotokos subsequently instructed him, “Go back to your Monastery, and you will find all the storage rooms filled with wheat, all the vessels filled with wine and oil, and everything else you are in need of, all of which will last, with the blessing of my Son and Lord, until you complete the construction of the entire monastery. **Henceforth, no one should appoint a steward of the Monastery, because I will be your stewardess from now on. I will take care of all your needs, as long as you do not disregard the vows you made during your monastic tonsure and do not neglect going to the services and completing your prayer rule.**” Having said this, she disappeared. The Saint then returned to his Monastery, where he found everything just as the Mother of God had described, and all the provisions lasted up until they finished building the church and the other buildings within the monastery.

This miracle of the water that sprang forth from the rock is preserved through oral tradition on Mount Athos, and every monk who lives on Mount Athos knows about it. This miracle is also depicted in an icon of the Theotokos kept in the Monastery’s church. In this icon, the saint is humbly standing before the Panagia with much reverence. She in turn is stretching out her right hand to the saint, and the following caption is written below: “The Mother of God: the stewardess of this Monastery.” And, on the border of this same icon, where various miracles from the life of Saint Athanasios are depicted, the following two icons are included: in the first one, the Theotokos is showing Saint Athanasios the rock with her finger, as he hits the rock with his staff and water gushes forth. In the second icon, both are standing next to the monastery, and the caption reads, “The Panagia is stewardess of the monastery; the saint is the assistant steward.” Henceforth, a steward has never been appointed at this Monastery

built by Saint Athanasios, and to this day the brotherhood only designates an assistant steward.

As long as St. Athanasios was alive, his monastery would celebrate its feast day on the Dormition of Mother of God; and the brethren continued celebrating on that day even after his death. One year, however, the Theotokos appeared to the abbot in a vision, and instructed him thus: **"From now on, your primary feast day will not be my Dormition, but instead will be dedicated in honor of my servant Athanasios. For he labored in this monastery until his death, and it is fitting for him to receive homage on account of his efforts and all the sorrows he endured."** Henceforth, the brotherhood celebrates the memory of Saint Athanasios joyfully on July 5th, with an all night vigil, unto the glory of our Triune God, Who is glorified in His saints. To Him is due all glory, honor and worship to the ages of ages. Amen.