

WEEKLY MEDITATION

JANUARY 27: THE TRANSLATION OF THE RELICS OF ST JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

During the course of the church year, we find on the calendar feasts that are called 'the translation of the relics' of this or that saint. The word 'translation' in this context means the removal of the remains of a saint from one place - for example, his or her tomb - to another place - usually a reliquary in an important church or cathedral. Sometimes the translation of relics takes them very far away indeed.

There has often been pressure to bring the relics of popular saints from their resting place to a more central and accessible location. It must also be said that the possession of relics can bring a certain prestige - and no doubt income, even today, at least at pilgrimage sites - to the communities that have them. Not surprisingly, the circumstances of some of these translations have been rather unseemly. For example, the relics of St. Nicholas were actually stolen and brought (from Myra, in modern day Turkey) to Bari on the southern Adriatic shore of Italy. Oddly enough, we celebrate this theft - the feast of the translation of the relics of St. Nicholas to Bari (May 9, the so-called 'summer feast of St. Nicholas') and the relics of St. Nicholas in the crypt chapel at the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Bari are still a major magnet for pilgrimage. There is an Orthodox shrine within the Cathedral and the shrine itself is in the custody of the Russian parish nearby.

The relics of St. John Chrysostom were brought from his tomb in Georgia, where he had died in exile, back to Constantinople. Although a much loved patriarch, he had made some very powerful enemies in imperial circles. There was a certain irony in this. While a priest in Antioch, St. John had become an extremely popular preacher. His fame so excited the interest of the Empress in Constantinople, that she had him kidnapped, brought to the imperial city and consecrated bishop just so that she could have him as her court preacher. However, the very characteristics that made his preaching popular in Antioch and among ordinary folks in Constantinople - his strong moral teaching and condemnation of luxury, injustice and corruption - soured his relations with the Empress and her circle. He was exiled three times, and although brought back by popular demand after the first and second exile, he died during his third exile. The translation of his relics is in a sense the vindication of the saint - and the preaching and teaching of the church - in the face of social pressure and the temptation to compromise.

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