

Icon Not-Made-By-Hands

One of the earliest Icons witnessed to by Church Tradition, is the Icon of the Savior Not-Made-By-Hands. According to Tradition, during the time of the earthly ministry of the Savior, Abgar ruled in the Syrian city of Edessa. He was afflicted with leprosy over his whole body. At this time report of the great miracles performed by the Lord extended throughout Syria (Matt. 4:24) and as far as Arabia. Although not having seen the Lord, Abgar believed in Him as the Son of God and wrote a letter requesting Him to come and heal him. With this letter he sent to Palestine his court-painter Ananias, entrusting him to paint an image of the Divine Teacher.

Ananias went to Jerusalem and saw the Lord surrounded by people. He was not able to go to Him because of the great throng of people listening to His preaching; so he stood on a huge rock and attempted to produce a painting of the image of the Lord Jesus Christ, unable, however, to succeed. The Savior Himself called him by name and gave for Abgar a beautiful letter in which, 'having glorified the faith of the ruler, He promised to send His disciple in order to heal him from the leprosy and instruct him in salvation.

After this, the Lord called for water and a towel. He wiped His face, rubbing with the towel, and on it was impressed His Divine Image. The towel and the letter the Savior sent with Ananias to Edessa. With thanksgiving Abgar received the sacred object and received healing, but a small portion, only a trace, remained of the terrible disease on his face until the arrival of the promised Disciple of the Lord.

The Apostle of the 70, Thaddeus, came to them and preached the Gospel, baptizing the believing Abgar and all living in Edessa. Having written on the Image Not-Made-By-Hands the words, Christ-God, everyone trusting in Thee will not be put to shame, Abgar adorned it and placed it in a niche over the city gates.

For many years the inhabitants preserved a pious custom of venerating the Image Not-Made-By-Hands whenever passing through the gates. But a great-grandson of Abgar, ruling Edessa, fell into idolatry and resolved to take the Image away from the city walls. In a vision, the Lord ordered the Bishop of Edessa to conceal His Image. The Bishop, coming at night with his clergy, lit before the Image a lampada and then blocked up the niche with clay tablets and bricks.

Many years passed by and the inhabitants forgot about the Holy Object. But then, when in 545 the Persian King Chroses I besieged Edessa, the position of the city seemed hopeless. But the Most-Holy Sovereign Lady manifested Herself to Bishop Evlavios and commanded him to get from the enclosed niche the Image with which to save the city from the adversaries. Dismantling the niche, the Bishop found the Holy Image; before it burned the lampada and on the clay tablets, with which the niche had been enclosed, was a similar image. After preceding with the Cross and the Image Not-Made-By-Hands around the walls of the city, the Persian army miraculously departed.

In 630, Edessa was seized by the Arabs; but they did not impede veneration of the Image Not-Made-By-Hands, glory of which extended out into all the East. In 944 the Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus (912-59) requested that the Image be redeemed from the Emir the ruler of the city of Edessa and brought to the Capital of the Orthodox. With great honor the Image of the Savior Not-Made-By-Hands and the letter which He wrote to Abgar, were brought by the clergy to Constantinople. On Aug. 16 the Image of the Savior was placed in the Pharos Church of the Most-Holy Theotokos.

Concerning the subsequent fate of the Image Not-Made-By-Hands, there exists several traditions. According to one, it was carried away by Crusaders during the time of their dominion over Constantinople (1204-61), but the ship on which the Holy Objects had been taken, sank in the Sea of Marmora. According to another, the Image Not-Made-By-Hands was taken about 1362 to Genoa, where it was presented to and preserved in a monastery dedicated to the Apostle Bartholomew.

In the time of the iconoclastic heresy, the defenders of icon-veneration, shedding their blood for the Holy Icons, sang the Troparion to the Image Not-Made-By-Hands. The Image (the Holy Face) was put up as an emblem of the Russian armies, defending them from the enemy; and in the Russian Orthodox Church there is a pious custom that before entering a church, the faithful read together the prayers and the Troparion to the Image Not-Made-By-Hands. The Feast of this Icon is celebrated on Aug. 16, during the Afterfeast period of the Feast of the Dormition, and is popularly called the Third Feast-of-the-Savior in August.

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