

Once Upon a SAINT

by Rebecca O'Loughlin



St. Zakhari, the Faster

My dear children,

One day you may find yourself in Kyiv. Maybe you don't know the Ukrainian language (but maybe you do!). The street you are walking on is cobblestone. But there is something familiar about where you are. You find yourself going down an alley and in front of you towers a beautiful cathedral with golden domes and icons painted on the front. You know these icons, and such a church is your heritage. The Ukrainian monks of old built it for the

future generations to glorify God. They built it in part for you to worship there. While this could describe a few places, in this case it is the Holy Dormition Cathedral.

The Cathedral guards a landmark that is not immediately visible, but is the oldest part of the monastic heritage in Kyiv: a large network of caves, the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra (the Kyivan Caves Monastery).

Nearly a thousand years ago, a hermit named Anthony settled himself in a cave in modern day Kyiv. It was not long before several other monks joined him there. The caves were a place of peace, fasting and prayer, and the monastery continued to grow. It became almost a village, with shops, workshops, and even a hospital. Monks prayed and monks fasted. It was such a place of holiness that it was said that demons would flee from the presence of many of the monks: a single word would send those demons packing for a more friendly face. By the time a few hundred years after St. Anthony dwelt there had gone by, the Lavra had many monasteries, and was a center for worship and pilgrimage for eastern Christians.

At the Lavra was a miraculous icon of the Theotokos. Three visitors had come to pray before the icon of the Holy Mother of God. Their names were John and Sergius, and John was filled with joy by the way the icon seemed to glow with light and glory. With John was his young son, Zakhari.

John turned to his friend. "Sergius, my brother! We have been through much together, and now I am dying. Promise to take care of my five year old son, Zakhari!"

"You need not ask, John. Of course I will."

"I will give you 1000 hryvnias of silver and 100 hryvnias of gold to give to Zakhari as an inheritance when he is old enough."

John died. Sergius cared for Zakhari. It was not long before he became a young man. At fifteen years old, Zakhari approached his foster father.

“Sir, I am a man now!” The young boy said, “I have come to ask for the inheritance my father left for you to give to me!”

But Sergius had come to love the gold and silver he kept hidden in a box by his bed. He dreamt of what he could do with so much money.

“Inheritance? But your father left you nothing! He gave all of it to the poor.”

Zakhari was surprised. “I may have been little, but I remember that my father left me 1000 silver and 100 gold! Well, how about half? You have cared for me well. You certainly deserve half the money.”

Sergius shook his head. “It was all spent by your father! There isn’t any money left! Feel free to ask your dead father for your money. Ask him to give it to you since he gave it away so freely!”

“A third?”

“No!”

“A tenth then?”

Each time Sergius denied that there was any money left.

“Very well.” Zakhari replied. “But see where we are? It was in this very Church, in front of the icon of the Mother of God that you made the promise to my father to care for me and give me inheritance when I became of age. Let us go in, and if you promise that the money is gone with our Blessed Mother as witness, I will not bother you about the matter again.”

“Of course!” The wily Sergius believed he had nothing to fear.

The two walked to the Church, and Sergius stood before the icon.

“I swear! I have taken no money from this boy’s inheritance! It is long been gone and given to the poor.” Sergius leaned forward to kiss the icon but found he could not get any closer. It was as though a wall stood before himself and the image of the Theotokos. He turned away as if to leave.

But at the doors of the Church, Sergius suddenly came to himself and called out: “St. Anthony and Theodosius! I am besieged by demons! Do not allow them to destroy me, but pray to the Mother of God to drive them away from me! I have the gold and silver

that John had me keep for his son, and I do not want it any longer!”

The people in the Church who heard were afraid. Some of them went to get the gold and silver from where Sergius said he had hidden it.

Sergius handed the inheritance to Zakhari. He repented and the demons left Sergius, who wept with relief and joy that he had been freed from their torments.

As for Zakhari, he called the Staretz over to him and handed him the money. “Please take my inheritance! It is everything that belongs to me. All that I am belongs to the Lord.”

Zakhari stayed at the Lavra for the remainder of his life. He fasted all day, eating only uncooked greens after sundown. Zakhari was one of those hermits for whom there is not much written. We do know that he saw Angels, and cast out many demons. His body is kept in the far caves of the Lavra, where his body, and those of 41 other monks, lie incorrupt and oil and heavenly fragrances comes from their bones. There are likely the bodies of many other saints buried there.

We celebrate the feast of St Zakhari on March 24, and the feast of all the Kyiv Lavra saints on the second Sunday of Lent. One thing you may take from this story is that God uses fasting as a powerful weapon against the devil. Offer up whatever you can, whether it be giving up candy, doing homework without being asked, or getting to bed on time, and God may use the sacrifice you give him to save souls.

Troparion of Venerable Zakhari the Faster

For the sake of your life of fasting, blessed Zakhari, you received great power to fight against demons, pray for us to be freed from temptation, and to receive forgiveness of sins and great mercy.

Kontakion

In fasting, you shone brightly and appeared terrible to demons, venerable Zakhari,

strengthen us with your prayers so that we might also have a life of fasting, and be delivered from evil like those who honor you.

*The troparion and kontakion above were written in Ukrainian. Any fault in poor translation is my own.