

**THE LIFE OF OUR HOLY MOTHER MARY OF EGYPT**  
**BY ST. SOPHRONIOS, PATRIARCH OF JERUSALEM**  
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*“It is good to hide the secret of a king, but it is glorious to reveal and preach the works of God;”* (Tobit 12:7) so said the Archangel Raphael to Tobit when he performed the wonderful healing of his blindness. Actually, not to keep the secret of a king is perilous and a terrible risk, but to be silent about the works of God is a great loss for the soul. And I (says St. Sophronios), in writing the Life of St. Mary of Egypt, am afraid to hide the works of God by silence. Remembering the misfortune threatened to the servant who hid his God-given talent in the earth (*Matthew 25:18-25*), I am bound to pass on the holy account that has reached me. And let no one think (continues St. Sophronios) that I have had the audacity to write untruth or doubt this great marvel—may I never lie about holy things! If there do happen to be people who, after reading this record, do not believe it, may the Lord have mercy on them because, reflecting on the weakness of human nature, they consider impossible these wonderful things accomplished by holy people. But now we must begin to tell this most amazing story, which has taken place in our generation.

There was a certain elder in one of the monasteries of Palestine, a priest of holy life and speech, who from childhood had been brought up in monastic ways and customs. This elder’s name was Zosimas. He had been through the whole course of the ascetic life and in everything he adhered to the rule once given to him by his tutors as regard spiritual labors. He had also added a good deal himself whilst laboring to subject his flesh to the will of the spirit. And he had not failed in his aim. He was so renowned for his spiritual life that many came to him from neighboring monasteries and some even from afar. While doing all this, he never ceased to study the Divine Scriptures. Whether resting, standing, working or eating food (if the scraps he nibbled could be called food), he incessantly and constantly had a single aim: always to sing of God, and to practice the teaching of the Divine Scriptures. Zosimas used to relate how, as soon as he was taken from his mother’s breast, he was handed over to the monastery where he went through his training as an ascetic until he reached the age of fifty-three.

After that, he began to be tormented with the thought that he was perfect in everything and needed no instruction from anyone, saying to himself mentally: *“Is there a monk on earth who can be of use to me and show me a kind of asceticism that I have not accomplished? Is there a man to be found in the desert who has surpassed me?”*

Thus thought the elder, but suddenly an angel appeared to him and said: *“Zosimas, valiantly have you struggled, as far as this is within the power of man; valiantly have you gone through the ascetic course. But there is no man who has attained perfection. Before you lay unknown struggles greater than those you have already accomplished. So that you may know how many other ways lead to salvation, leave your native land like the renowned patriarch Abraham and go to the monastery by the River Jordan.”*

Zosimas did as he was told. He left the monastery in which he had lived from childhood, and went to the River Jordan. At last he reached the community to which God had sent him. Having knocked at the door of the monastery, he identified himself to the monk who was the porter, and the porter told the abbot. On being admitted to the abbot's presence, Zosimas made the usual monastic prostration and prayer. Seeing that he was a monk the abbot asked: *"From where do you come, brother, and why have you come to us poor old men?"*

Zosimas replied: *"There is no need to speak about from where I have come, but I have come, father, seeking spiritual profit, for I have heard great things about your skill in leading souls to God."*

*"Brother,"* the abbot said to him, *"Only God can heal the infirmity of the soul. May He teach you and us His divine ways and guide us. But as it is the love of Christ that has moved you to visit us poor old men, then stay with us, if that is why you have come. May the Good Shepherd Who laid down His life for our salvation fill us all with the grace of the Holy Spirit."*

After this, Zosimas bowed to the abbot, asked for his prayers and blessing, and stayed in the monastery. There he saw the elders proficient both in action and the contemplation of God, aflame in spirit, working for the Lord. They sang incessantly, they stood in prayer all night; work was ever in their hands and psalms on their lips. Never an idle word was heard among them; they knew nothing about acquiring temporal goods or the cares of life. But they had one desire—to become in body like corpses. Their constant food was the Word of God, and they sustained their bodies on bread and water, as much as their love for God allowed them. Seeing this, Zosimas was greatly edified and prepared for the struggle that lay before him.

Many days passed and the time drew near when all Christians fast and prepare themselves to worship the Divine Passion and Resurrection of Christ. The monastery gates were kept always locked and only opened when one from the community was sent out on some errand. It was a desert place, not only unvisited by people of the world but even unknown to them.

There was a rule in that monastery which was the reason why God brought Zosimas there. At the beginning of the Great Fast, on Forgiveness Sunday, the priest celebrated the Divine Liturgy and all partook of the holy body and blood of Christ. After the Liturgy, they went to the refectory and would eat a little Lenten meal.

Then all gathered in church and after praying earnestly with prostrations, the elders kissed one another and asked forgiveness. And each made a prostration to the abbot and asked his blessing and prayers for the struggle that lay before them. After this, the gates of the monastery were thrown open, and, singing, *"The Lord is my light and my Savior; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the defender of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?"* (Psalm 26:1) and the rest of that psalm, all went out into the desert and crossed the River Jordan. Only one or two brothers were left in the monastery, not to guard the property (for there was nothing to rob), but so as not to leave the church without Divine Service. Each took with him as much as he could or wanted in the way of food, according to the needs of his body: one would take a little bread, another some figs, another dates or wheat soaked in water. And some took nothing but their own bodies covered with rags and fed when nature forced them to it on the plants that grew in the desert.

After crossing the River Jordan, they all scattered far and wide in different directions. And this was the rule of life they had, and which they all observed—neither to talk to one another, nor to know how each one lived and fasted. If they did happen to catch sight of one another, they went to another part of the country, living alone and always singing to God, and at a definite time eating a very small quantity of food. In this way they spent the whole of the Fast and used to return to the monastery a week before the Resurrection of Christ, on Palm Sunday. Each one returned having his own conscience as the witness of his labor, and no one asked another how he had spent his time in the desert. Such were rules of the monastery. Every one of them whilst in the desert struggled with himself before God, the Judge of the struggle, not seeking to please men and fast before the eyes of all. For what is done for the sake of men, to win praise and honor, is not only useless to the one who does it but sometimes the cause of great punishment.

Zosimas did the same as all. And he went far, far into the desert with a secret hope of finding some father who might be living there and who might be able to satisfy his thirst and longing. And he wandered on tireless, as if hurrying on to some definite place. He had already walked for twenty days and when the sixth hour came he stopped and, turning to the East, he began to sing the Sixth Hour service and recite the customary prayers. He used to break his journey thus at fixed hours of the day to rest a little, to chant psalms while standing and to pray on bent knees.

And as he sang thus without turning his eyes from the heavens, he suddenly saw to the right of the hillock on which he stood the semblance of a human body. At first he was confused thinking he beheld a vision of the devil, and even started with fear. But, having guarded himself with the sign of the Cross and banished all fear, he turned his gaze in that direction and in truth saw some form gliding southward. It was naked, the skin dark as if burned up by the heat of the sun; the hair on its head was white as a fleece, and not long, falling just below its neck.

Zosimas was so overjoyed at beholding a human form that he ran after it in pursuit, but the form fled from him. He followed. At length, when he was near enough to be heard, he shouted: *“Why do you run from an old man and a sinner? Slave of the True God, wait for me, whoever you are; in God’s name I tell you, for the love of God for Whose sake you are living in the desert.”*

The woman said: *“Forgive me for God’s sake, but I cannot turn towards you and show you my face, Abba Zosimas. I am a woman and naked, as you see, with the uncovered shame of my body. But if you would like to fulfill one wish of a sinful woman, throw me your cloak so that I can cover my body and can turn to you and ask for your blessing.”*

Here terror seized Zosimas, for he heard that she called him by name. But he realized that she could not have done so without knowing anything of him if she had not had the power of spiritual insight. He at once did as he was asked. He took off his old, tattered cloak and threw it to her, turning away as he did so. She picked it up and was able to cover at least a part of her body.

Then she turned to Zosimas and said: *“Why did you wish, Abba Zosimas, to see a sinful woman? What do you wish to hear or learn from me, you who have not shrunk from such great struggles?”*

Zosimas threw himself on the ground and asked for her blessing. She likewise bowed down before him. And thus they lay on the ground prostrate, asking for each other's blessing. And one phrase alone could be heard from both: *"Bless me!"*

After a long while the woman said to Zosimas: *"Abba Zosimas, it is you who must give blessing and pray. You are dignified by the order of priesthood and for many years you have been standing before the holy altar and offering the sacrifice of the Divine Mysteries."*

This flung Zosimas into even greater terror. At length with tears he said to her: *"O mother, filled with the Spirit, by your mode of life it is evident that you live with God and have died to the world. The Grace granted to you is apparent—for you have called me by name and recognized that I am a priest, though you have never seen me before. Grace is recognized not by one's orders, but by gifts of the Spirit, so give me your blessing for God's sake, for I need your prayers."*

Then giving way before the wish of the elder, the woman said: *"Blessed is God Who cares for the salvation of men and their souls."*

Zosimas answered: *"Amen."*

And both rose to their feet. Then the woman asked the elder: *"Why have you come, man of God, to me who am so sinful? Why do you wish to see a woman naked and devoid of every virtue? Though I know one thing—the Grace of the Holy Spirit has brought you to render me a service in time. Tell me, father, how are the Christian peoples living? And the kings? How is the Church guided?"*

Zosimas said: *"By your prayers, mother, Christ has granted lasting peace to all. But, fulfill the unworthy petition of an old man and pray for the whole world and for me who am a sinner, so that my wanderings in the desert may not be fruitless."*

She answered: *"You who are a priest, Abba Zosimas, it is you who must pray for me and for all, for this is your calling. But as we must all be obedient, I will gladly do what you ask."*

And with these words she turned to the East, and raising her eyes to Heaven and stretching out her hands, she began to pray in a whisper. One could not hear separate words, so that Zosimas could not understand anything that she said in her prayers. Meanwhile he stood, according to his own word, all in a flutter, looking at the ground without saying a word. And he swore, calling God to witness, that when at length he thought that her prayer was very long, he took his eyes off the ground and saw that she was raised about a forearm's distance from the ground and stood praying in the air. When Zosimas saw this, even greater terror seized him and he fell on the ground weeping and repeating many times, *"Lord, have mercy."*

And whilst lying prostrate on the ground he was tempted by a thought: *Is it not a spirit, and perhaps her prayer is hypocrisy?*

But at the very same moment the woman turned around, raised the elder from the ground and said: *"Thoughts, tempting you about me, trouble you, Abba, telling you I am a spirit, and that my*

*prayer is feigned. Know, holy father, that I am only a sinful woman, though I am guarded by Holy Baptism. And I am not a spirit but earth and ashes, and flesh alone.”*

And with these words she guarded herself with the Sign of the Cross on her forehead, eyes, mouth and breast, saying: *“May God defend us from the evil one and from his designs, for fierce is his struggle against us.”*

Hearing and seeing this, the elder fell to the ground and, embracing her feet, he said with tears: *“I beg you, by the Name of Christ our God, Who was born of a Virgin, for Whose sake you have stripped yourself, for Whose sake you have exhausted your flesh, do not hide from your slave, who you are and whence and how you came into this desert. Tell me everything so that the marvelous works of God may become known. A hidden wisdom and a secret treasure—what profit is there in them? Tell me all, I implore you, for not out of vanity or for self-display will you speak but to reveal the truth to me, an unworthy sinner. I believe in God, for Whom you live and Whom you serve. I believe that He led me into this desert so as to show me His ways in regard to you. It is not in our power to resist the plans of God. If it were not the will of God that you and your life would be known, He would not have allowed me to see you and would not have strengthened me to undertake this journey, one like me who never before dared to leave his cell.”*

Much more said Abba Zosimas. But the woman raised him and said: *“I am ashamed, Abba, to speak to you of my disgraceful life; forgive me for God’s sake! But as you have already seen my naked body I shall likewise lay bare before you my work, so that you may know with what shame and obscenity my soul is filled. I was not running away out of vanity, as you thought, for of what have I to be proud—I who was the chosen vessel of the devil? But when I start my story you will run from me, as from a snake, for your ears will not be able to bear the vileness of my actions. But I shall tell you all without hiding anything, only imploring you first of all to pray incessantly for me, so that I may find mercy on the Day of Judgment.”*

The elder wept and the woman began her story. *“My native land, holy father, was Egypt. Already during the lifetime of my parents, when I was twelve years old, I renounced their love and went to Alexandria. I am ashamed to recall how there I at first ruined my maidenhood and then unrestrainedly and insatiably gave myself up to sensuality. It is more becoming to speak of this briefly, so that you may just know my passion and my lechery. For about seventeen years, forgive me, I lived like that. I was like a fire of public debauch. And it was not for the sake of gain—here I speak the pure truth. Often when they wished to pay me, I refused the money. I acted in this way so as to make as many men as possible to try to obtain me, doing free of charge what gave me pleasure. Do not think that I was rich and that was the reason why I did not take money. I lived by begging, often by spinning flax, but I had an insatiable desire and an irrepressible passion for lying in filth. This was life to me. Every kind of abuse of nature I regarded as life.*

*“That is how I lived. Then one summer I saw a large crowd of Libyans and Egyptians running towards the sea. I asked one of them, ‘Where are these men hurrying to?’ He replied, ‘They are all going to Jerusalem for the Exaltation of the Precious and Life-giving Cross, which takes place in a few days.’ I said to him, ‘Will they take me with them if I wish to go?’ ‘No one will hinder you if you have money to pay for the journey and for food.’ And I said to him, ‘To tell you the truth, I have no money, neither have I food. But I shall go with them and shall go aboard. And they shall feed me, whether they want to or not. I have a body—they shall take it instead of*

*pay for the journey.' I was suddenly filled with a desire to go, Abba, to have more lovers who could satisfy my passion. I told you, Abba Zosimas, not to force me to tell you of my disgrace. God is my witness, I am afraid of defiling you and the very air with my words."*

Zosimas, weeping, replied to her: *"Speak on for God's sake, mother, speak and do not break the thread of such an edifying tale."*

And, resuming her story, she went on: *"That youth, on hearing my shameless words, laughed and went off. While I, throwing away my spinning wheel, ran off towards the sea in the direction which everyone seemed to be taking. And, seeing some young men standing on the shore, about ten or more of them, full of vigor and alert in their movements, I decided that they would do for my purpose (it seemed that some of them were waiting for more travelers whilst others had gone ashore). Shamelessly, as usual, I mixed with the crowd, saying, 'Take me with you to the place you are going; you will not find me superfluous.' I also added a few more words calling forth general laughter. Seeing my readiness to be shameless, they readily took me aboard the boat. Those who were expected came also, and we set sail at once.*

*"How shall I relate to you what happened after this? Whose tongue can tell, whose ears can take in all that took place on the boat during that voyage! And to all this I frequently forced those miserable youths even against their will. There is no mentionable or unmentionable depravity of which I was not their teacher. I am amazed, Abba, how the sea stood our licentiousness, how the earth did not open its jaws, and how it was that hell did not swallow me alive, when I had entangled in my net so many souls. But I think God was seeking my repentance. For, He does not desire the death of a sinner but magnanimously awaits his return to Him. At last we arrived in Jerusalem. I spent the days before the festival in the town, living the same kind of life, perhaps even worse. I was not content with the youths I had seduced at sea and who had helped me to get to Jerusalem; many others—citizens of the town and foreigners—I also seduced.*

*"The holy day of the Exaltation of the Cross dawned while I was still flying about, hunting for youths. At daybreak I saw that everyone was hurrying to the church, so I ran with the rest. When the hour for the holy elevation approached, I was trying to make my way in with the crowd which was struggling to get through the church doors. I at last squeezed through with great difficulty almost to the entrance of the temple, from which the life-giving Tree of the Cross was being shown to the people. But when I trod on the doorstep through which everyone passed, I was stopped by some force which prevented my entering. Meanwhile I was brushed aside by the crowd and found myself standing alone in the porch. Thinking that this had happened because of my woman's weakness, I again began to work my way into the crowd, trying to elbow myself forward. But in vain I struggled. Again my feet trod on the doorstep over which others were entering the church without encountering any obstacle. I alone seemed to remain unaccepted by the church. It was as if there was a detachment of soldiers standing there to oppose my entrance. Once again I was excluded by the same mighty force and again I stood in the porch.*

*"Having repeated my attempt three or four times, at last I felt exhausted and had no more strength to push and to be pushed, so I went aside and stood in a corner of the porch. And only then with great difficulty it began to dawn on me, and I began to understand the reason why I was prevented from being admitted to see the life-giving Cross. The word of salvation gently touched the eyes of my heart and revealed to me that it was my unclean life which barred the*

entrance to me. I began to weep and lament and beat my breast, and to sigh from the depths of my heart.

*“And so I stood weeping when I saw above me the icon of the most holy Mother of God. And turning to her my bodily and spiritual eyes I said: ‘O Lady, Mother of God, who gave birth in the flesh to God the Word, I know, O how well I know, that it is no honor or praise to thee when one so impure and depraved as I looks up to thine icon, O Ever-virgin, who didst keep thy body and soul in purity. Rightly do I inspire hatred and disgust before thy virginal purity. But I have heard that God Who was born of thee became man on purpose to call sinners to repentance. Then help me, for I have no other help. Order the entrance of the church to be opened to me. Allow me to see the venerable Tree on which He Who was born of thee suffered in the flesh and on which He shed His holy Blood for the redemption of sinners and for me, unworthy as I am. Be my faithful witness before thy Son that I will never again defile my body by the impurity of fornication, but as soon as I have seen the Tree of the Cross I will renounce the world and its temptations and will go wherever thou wilt lead me.’*

*“Thus I spoke and, as if acquiring some hope in firm faith and feeling some confidence in the mercy of the Mother of God, I left the place where I stood praying. And I went again and mingled with the crowd that was pushing its way into the temple. And no one seemed to thwart me; no one hindered my entering the church. I was possessed with trembling, and was almost in delirium. Having gotten as far as the doors which I could not reach before—as if the same force which had hindered me cleared the way for me—I now entered without difficulty and found myself within the holy place. And so it was that I saw the life-giving Cross. I saw too the Mysteries of God and how the Lord accepts repentance. Throwing myself on the ground, I worshipped that holy earth and kissed it with trembling.*

*“Then I came out of the church and went to her who had promised to be my security, to the place where I had sealed my vow. And bending my knees before the Virgin Mother of God, I addressed to her such words as these: ‘O loving Lady, thou hast shown me thy great love for all men. Glory to God Who receives the repentance of sinners through thee. What more can I recollect or say, I who am so sinful? It is time for me, O Lady, to fulfill my vow, according to thy witness. Now lead me by the hand along the path of repentance!’*

*“And at these words I heard a voice from on high: ‘If you cross the Jordan you will find glorious rest!’ Hearing this voice and having faith that it was for me, I cried to the Mother of God: ‘O Lady, Lady, do not forsake me!’*

*“With these words I left the porch of the church and set off on my journey. As I was leaving the church a stranger glanced at me and gave me three coins, saying: ‘Sister, take these.’ And, taking the money, I bought three loaves and took them with me on my journey, as a blessed gift. I asked the person who sold the bread: ‘Which is the way to the Jordan?’ I was directed to the city gate which led that way. Running onward, I passed the gates and still weeping went on my journey.*

*“Those I had met I asked the way, and after walking for the rest of that day (I think it was nine o’clock when I saw the Cross) I at last reached at sunset the Church of St. John the Baptist which stood on the banks of the Jordan. After praying in the temple, I went down to the Jordan and rinsed my face and hands in its holy waters. I partook of the holy and life-giving Mysteries in the Church of the Forerunner and ate half of one of my loaves. Then, after drinking some water from the Jordan, I lay down and passed the night on the ground. In the morning I found a small boat and crossed to the opposite bank. I again prayed to Our Lady to lead me whither she wished. Then I found myself in this desert and since then up to this very day I am estranged from all, keeping away from people and running away from everyone. And I live here clinging to my God Who saves all who turn to Him from faintheartedness and storms.”*