

The Holy Fire of the All-Holy Sepulchre

A Great Miracle Attested
“at Sundry Times and in Divers Manners”

by Archimandrite Cyprian

I. Our participation in the debate

In recent years, and especially in 2002, certain otherwise respectable correspondents to the well-known newspaper *Ὁρθόδοξος Τύπος* have made a number of references to the miracle of the Holy Fire, which takes place every year on Great Saturday at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

These references have brought to the forefront a debate that has been going on since the nineteenth century concerning the provenance of the Holy Fire: Is this a real miracle, or is it the result of human fabrication?

We hope that the present text will gain us admittance to this very interesting debate, which is quite timely in view of the Paschal season.

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II. An erroneous and impious opinion

1. It should be noted, first of all—and indeed, very emphatically—, that the Holy Fire, as a great miracle attested “at sundry times and in divers manners” was not a fabrication on the part of ninth-century Latin (then Orthodox) monks, which the Orthodox allegedly inherited after the sacred shrines of the Holy Land in the twelfth century had been ceded to them.

2. The following erroneous and impious opinion was put forward by Kyriakos Simopoulos in 1981:

The inventors of this custom were the Franks themselves. In the reign of Charlemagne, the lucrative shrines of the Holy Land had been given by the Arabs under Haroun al-Rashid to Latin monks. But after the deaths of the Caliph (809) and Charles (814), the financial perquisites of the Frankish monks were abolished. It was precisely then that the Latin monks invented this pseudo-miracle.

In 1118, Saladin handed the shrines over to the Greeks: ‘The Patriarch of the Greeks will be the lord of the Kamare [the Church of the Holy Sepulchre] and he himself will take the holy light from the tomb of Ikas in order to distribute it to the Nazarenes

[Christians].’

In this way the Eastern Church inherited from the Franks the lucrative rite [of the Holy Fire] and exploited in like manner the simple goodness, ignorance, naïveté, and piety of the Orthodox to such an extent that, with the passing of the years, the ‘miracle of the Holy Fire’ has been transformed into a religious hoax.¹

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III. The Rite of the Holy Fire as a pre-Frankish custom

1. Nevertheless, it is well known that the special sacred rite of the Holy Fire during the evening of Great Saturday at the Life-giving Sepulchre of our Savior Christ was instituted by the Orthodox from very ancient times, “as is proven by a multitude of historical records in which we come across descriptions of the rite of the Holy Fire.”²

As evidence of this, we refer both to the *Ἱεροσολυμιτικὸν Κανον-ἀριον*, the *Typikon* of the Church of Jerusalem, which dates back to the second half of the seventh century, and to the *Typikon* of the Church of the Resurrection, which was written in 1122, but was already in use in the Church of Sion in the ninth and tenth centuries.²

2. Also well-known are at least two incidents preserved in Orthodox sources which offer indisputable testimony to the “distribution of the heavenly Fire” and the “Divine manifestation of light through an Angel” at the Life-giving Sepulchre on Great Saturday.

Since the details of these significant incidents have been mentioned by the esteemed correspondents of *Ἱεροδόξος Τύπος*, we will simply recall, here, these two miraculous events, the testimony of which is fundamental to the debate about this issue and which certainly have no connection whatsoever with “the false miracles of Latin monks.”

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IV. Two miraculous events

1. On the one hand, there is the testimony from the life of St. Theodore the Sabbaite (an incident mentioned by Basil, Bishop of Emesa, in the first half of the ninth century): “On Holy Saturday, following the distribution of the heavenly Fire from the vigil lamps of the holy Resurrection...”³

2. On the other hand, there is the testimony of one Niketas, an imperial cleric of the Church of Constantinople, who visited Jerusalem in 947 during the Patriarchate of Christodoulos I: “For, everyone, both citizens and visitors, know about the radiant moment on the day of the Resurrection during the sacred burial of the Lord, when a sublime and extraordinary effulgence (of light in that place, I mean) occurs by Divine inspiration”; “the most wise Archbishop...sees the manifestation of Divine light,” and “one could see the entire Church

of God suddenly filled with an inexpressible and Divine light.”⁴

3. This extraordinary miracle of 947 during the Patriarchate of Christodoulos I of Jerusalem (937-950) is very significant, because many simultaneous miracles associated with the Holy Fire are described in the course of the narrative.

Humbly wishing that this narrative might at some time be published in modern Greek, let us dwell on two very interesting aspects of the miracle of the “manifestation of Divine light” which the “imperial cleric Niketas” relates to the Byzantine Emperor.

4. A testimony is preserved, according to which the “manifestation of Divine light” on Great Saturday at the Life-giving Sepulchre in 947 occurred simultaneously also on Mount Sinai, the place where God walked!

Archbishop John bears witness that the miracle of the Holy Fire was manifested that day also on Mount Sinai; having read this, and reading it again, I, Hieromonk Moses of Sinai, found it to be true and reliable.⁵

5. That year, that is, 947, through the envy of the Devil, “a certain Amir from Baghdad,...filled with rage and fury” came to the Holy City and ordered that he be led before “the God-pleasing and truly scrupulous Archbishop” Christodoulos, to whom he said:

I do not permit you, O Archbishop, to celebrate the feast now; it is for this reason that I have come; for, in performing this celebrated miracle through magic artifices, you have filled all of Syria with the religion of the Christians and have all but turned it into a ‘Romania’ [a Christian land] by overturning our customs.

6. The response of the most holy Patriarch was brief, but magnificent and stirring:

If you had experienced this miracle only once or twice, and not a thousand times been assured of it from the very events, then it would have been easier for us to endure your saying that this is accomplished through magic artifices; but since, even during the time of the previous Archbishop, you ordered iron instead of wicks to be placed in the vigil lamp adjacent to the Holy Sepulchre, and we saw how, by Divine behest, it suddenly burst into flame like wax, how long do you intend to tyrannize us because of a supernatural marvel?⁶

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V. “A curious episode”

1. It would be worthwhile to complete our discussion of the miracles surrounding the great miracle of the Holy Fire with a “curious episode that confused the Latins,” as the then Archimandrite Chrysostomos (Papadopoulos) wrote in 1910. This episode occurred in 1101 during the Great Saturday ceremony. That year

the Holy Fire did not appear at all, despite the litanies performed [by the Latins and the Greeks together], during which ‘Lord, have mercy’ was chanted by all of the participants.

They were overcome by the utmost grief and distress. How many cries were uttered to the Lord! How many groans! How many laments! For, we all chanted ‘Lord, have mercy’ amid lamentations, so that through our chanting we might beseech the Lord’s mercy, but even when we entreated Him we did not receive that which we sought. Evening had already come and the day was over, and when we reflected that, on account of our sins, what had never happened at other times had now happened, each of us decided to correct within himself those faults whereby he had sinned against God.

The Holy Fire did not appear even during the early hours of Pascha, and King Baldwin, in despair, prayed in front of the Holy Sepulcher, while the Latin clergy found themselves in a very disconcerting position, not knowing whether or not to celebrate the Feast of Holy Pascha without the Holy Fire. Being in such an agonizing situation, the Latins decided to leave the Church of the Resurrection.

But the Greeks who remained there became more ardent in their prayers; followed by the Jacobites and the Armenians, they chanted litanies and implored God, and the Holy Fire appeared, filling the entire Church. With shouts of joy the Latins ran to receive the Fire from the Greeks.⁷

2. On the basis of this very telling account, there are at least three points to be observed if we are to take this subject any further and draw the relevant conclusions.

First. This episode is recounted by a Latin eyewitness, Fulcher of Chartres, who subsequently became Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem (the foregoing section of the narrative, “They were overcome...against God,” is from Fulcher).

Second. On account of this miracle, the prestige of the Greeks was elevated, and “ever since then, the rite of the Holy Fire, even during the Crusader era, remained a purely Greek celebration.”⁷

Third. If there were any question of a “pseudo-miracle,” supposedly “invented by Latin monks” (Kyriakos Simopoulos), or of an “impious and shameless fabrication” and “alien offspring of Frankish provenance” (Adamantios Koraës), anyone with a rudimentary grasp of logic might reasonably ask:

Why would they have had recourse to such persistent expressions of repentance if they were waiting for the Holy Fire to appear by some kind of legerdemain? Why would they have had to prolong such desperate prayers until the early hours of Pascha? What was the crowd expecting while it prayed, if not a miracle? Finally, would it have

been so “difficult,” as some allege, to take and distribute the Fire from the perpetual vigil lamp of the Life-giving Sepulchre?

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VI. The dispute about the prayer

1. The controversy over this great miracle unfortunately includes, among other spurious arguments, the prayer which the Patriarch of Jerusalem or the Hierarch representing him reads during the ceremony.

2. However, in our humble opinion, this dispute about the prayer amounts, at the very least, to a kind of scholasticism that is inconsistent with Orthodox theology and disregards certain other hermeneutical “dilemmas” which liturgiologists not infrequently confront, for the following reasons, which we will set forth concisely.

3. The prayer in question does not constitute a reliable basis for drawing conclusions, because it was not sanctioned by a pan-Orthodox decision, nor was it ever considered a common possession of the worldwide Orthodox Church, such that it could be regarded as an infallible dogmatic text, or, at any rate, as one suitable for this particular occasion.

4. The true meaning of any ecclesiastical text, including the prayer in question, is to be interpreted and understood from its practice and use, and also on the basis of the authentic Orthodox spiritual and intellectual criteria that are necessary for one who undertakes such an interpretation.

5. If the “logic” of those who draw conclusions against the Holy Fire, basing themselves only on the prayer appointed for the rite (which does, perhaps, contain phrases that are unidiomatic or capable of being misunderstood), were applied to liturgical texts in general, then we would, for example, “discover” a dogmatic error in the prayer of the *Anaphora* in the Liturgy of St. Basil:

Be mindful, O Lord, of mine unworthiness, according to the abundance of Thy tender mercies; forgive me every transgression, both voluntary and involuntary, *and withhold not, because of my sins, the Grace of Thy Holy Spirit from these Gifts that have been set forth.*

The serious hermeneutical difficulty of this phrase has already been commented on in a responsible way, since at first sight it creates the mistaken impression that the unworthiness of the serving Priest affects the celebration of the Mystery.⁸

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VII. “Strange statements”

1. Finally, the appeal to the “strange statements” that various individuals, especially Hierarchs belonging to the Jerusalem Patriarchate, have at times made regarding this great miracle, through which

doubts have been spread about the mighty acts of God, we do not think that they constitute a strong argument against the authenticity of the Holy Fire.

2. To begin with, these statements should not occasion any surprise, because they are “ancient history,” almost as old as the miracle itself, and, besides, those who doubt or reject the Holy Fire have not always belonged to the school of Adamantios Koraës.

3. Statements about a supposed “sleight of hand” (Patriarch Ephraim II of Jerusalem and Neophytos Kavsokalyvites) or that the Hierarch at the *Kouvouklion* allegedly uses a lighter (“he produces fire over the Life-giving Sepulchre by striking a flint”—Nicephoros Theotokis), and other, similar statements, both ancient and contemporary, do not carry the slightest weight with us, even though they were uttered “by the leading lights of that place [Jerusalem], and men who are reliable and worthy of all respect and reverence, at that.”⁹

4. Both the Christian experience of many saintly individuals over the centuries and the sincere piety of innumerable faithful children of the Orthodox Church bear witness to the great miracle of the Holy Fire, with fear of God, with the confidence born of faith, and always within the parameters of the Hesychastic Tradition concerning the Uncreated Light.

5. Consequently, those who possess genuine ecclesiastical piety simply ignore the statements of clergymen who are usually motivated by a worldly mentality (“the initiates are in the know”); as for statements by “luminaries” who are “reliable” and “have the reputation of being pillars of the Church,” whether ancient or modern, they judge and scrutinize them on the basis of purely spiritual criteria, which have been stored up in our Tradition through revelation, and assuredly always on the solid ground that even the Saints were not “infallible” in every respect (*a fortiori*, neither were the “luminaries” in question).

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VIII. The “infallibility” of the Saints

1. In order to avoid any misunderstanding, we will refer to the Great Elder Barsanouphios, who deals radically and decisively with the question of the “infallibility” of the Saints and speaks from revelation, that is, from the Holy Spirit and in the Holy Spirit.

2. The response of the Great Elder to certain pious monks who had asked him how it was possible for St. Gregory of Nyssa to express opinions at odds with Orthodoxy (about “universal restoration”), is truly revealing:

‘Hear the Divine revelation that came to me three days before you wrote down your question: Let all of the Fathers who have been pleasing to God, the Saints, the Righteous, and the true servants

of God, pray for me; do not suppose that, although they were holy, they were genuinely able to comprehend all the depths of God....'; 'They did not ask God about their teachers, whether the things that they said were uttered through the Holy Spirit'; 'the doctrines of their teachers were mingled with their own teachings'; 'not taking into account that they ought to seek assurance from God through entreaty and supplication as to whether these doctrines were true....'¹⁰

25 April 2003 (Old Style)
St. Mark the Evangelist

Notes

1. Kyriakos Simopoulos, *Ξένοι Ταξιδιωτές στην Ελλάδα, 333 μ.Χ.–1700* [Foreign Travelers to Greece, 333 A.D.–1700] (Athens: 1981), Vol. I, pp. 548-549.
2. Archimandrite Kallistos Meliaras, "Τὸ Ἅγιον Φῶς" ["The Holy Fire"], *Νέα Σιών* (1933), pp. 242, 243.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 244-245.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 245-247, 280-282. A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus (critical edition), "Ἱστορία Νικήτα Βασιλικοῦ Κληρικοῦ–Ἐπιστολὴ πρὸς τὸν Αὐτοκράτορα Κωνσταντῖνον Ζ' τὸν Πορφυρογέννητον περὶ τοῦ Ἁγίου Φωτός, γραφεῖσα ἔτει 947ῳ" ["An Account by Niketas the Imperial Cleric: An Epistle to Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos Concerning the Holy Fire, Written in 947"], in *Pravoslavnij Palestinskij Sbornik*, Vol. XXXVIII (St. Petersburg: 1894), pp. 1-6.
5. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, "Ἱστορία Νικήτα Βασιλικοῦ Κληρικοῦ," pp. v, 1.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3, §2.
7. Archimandrite Chrysostomos Papadopoulos, *Ἱστορία Ἐκκλησίας Ἱεροσολύμων* [History of the Church of Jerusalem] (Jerusalem and Alexandria: 1910), p. 390.
8. Ioannes Fountoules, "Ἀπαντήσεις σὲ Λειτουργικὰς, Κανονικὰς καὶ ἄλλας Ἀπορίες" ["Answers to Liturgical, Canonical and Other Questions"], No. 411, *Ὁ Ἐφημέριος* (1 March 1983), pp. 60-61.
9. Nicephoros Theotokis, in K.I. Dyobouniotes, "Περὶ τοῦ ἐν Ἱεροσολύμοις Ἁγίου Φωτός" ["Concerning the Holy Fire in Jerusalem"], *Ἐπετηρὶς Ἐταιρείας Βυζαντινῶν Σπουδῶν*, Vol. XII (Athens: 1936), p. 5.
10. [Sts.] Barsanouphios and John, *Βίβλος Ψυχοφειλεστάτη* [A Most Soul-Profiting Book], §604 (Volos: S. Schoinas, 1960), 2nd ed., pp. 286ff. It is very beneficial to the soul to study responses 603 through 605 all together and the commentary on these sections by St. Nicodemos the Hagiorite, which is found in the footnote.