



## ON READING THE LIVES OF MARTYRS AND SAINTS\*

*By Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna*

In a time of anti-religious cynicism and at a time when we, who are emerging from one of the most violent, barbaric, and bloody centuries in human history, nonetheless consider ourselves quite civilized and advanced, the lives of Saints and Martyrs—religious fairy tales, as some call them—appear to many as naive and meant for the ignorant and superstitious. Given this perception, it is all the more important that we learn to read and enjoy, as well as fully understand, the lives of those who embody and exemplify the virtues of our Faith.

In many ways, hagiographical accounts, which, like Icons, have a style, a language, and an imagery of their own, are the literary counterpart of Icons. Through the symbolic, stylized lives of the heroes of our Faith, we are inspired to imitate the ways of pure and guileless believers. We are lifted up, through the agency of hagiography, to the very archetypes of those perfected, deified, and made perfect, by Grace, in Christ. Hagiography has the ability to present, in a purified medium, the witness of Saints and Martyrs who transformed themselves in Christ, becoming "small Jesus Christs" in Jesus Christ (the actual meaning of Christocentric sanctity).

If these lives seem at times fantastic, this is because we are so mundane. If they seem terribly improbable, it is because our limitations, pretensions, and pride are so horribly and inevitably probable. In the forgotten past, Aesop's tales, fabrications, taught virtue and values to generations of human beings. In our nearer, if fading, Christian past, the lives of Saints and Martyrs served the same purpose, though they were not fabricated, but derived from actual lives and actual events. They may, once more, be told in an "iconographic," stylized way, but they rise out of real lives in real time; and, beyond this, they take on spiritual dimensions by virtue of the Grace that they convey.

I think that we all need to return to an understanding of what hagiography teaches us; of how it cleanses our minds and subdues our passions; of how it reinforces our faith in things beyond the natural and beyond the limitations of the world. We need those things that speak of simplicity of spirit and that starkly contrast human good and faith against the demonic, fallen ills of human resentment, jealousy, and evil, which we cover with the myth of being sophisticated creatures living in a civilized time. Reduced to a simple struggle between good and evil, life can tell us much about what lies beyond good and evil. It can speak to us of spiritual perfection. And life does, indeed, speak quite clearly to us Christians through the lips, lives, and lucidity of the Saints and Martyrs, if we heed what they tell us with childlike wonderment.

\* This short essay, which the English-language editors of this website consider of particular value to the contemporary Orthodox reader, was appended to His Eminence's translation of the Greek-language life of St. Greca of Sardinia, which was circulated by way of the private "Clergy and Faithful List" of the American Exarchate of our Church. His translation also appears on the English version of Holy Synod's website, along with the original Greek, in the section Theology > Calendar > Synaxarion > January as the entry for January 12.

