

THE BRANCHES OF THE CHURCH

by Father Frank Marangos

“At that time, Jesus was passing through Jericho. And there was a man named Zacchaios; he was a chief tax collector, and rich. And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not, on account of the crowd, because he was small of stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him.”

Luke 19:1-10

Holy Scripture describes three trees. The first was planted in the Garden of Eden from whose fruit of disobedience humanity lost their intimacy with God. The second is rooted on a Jerusalem hillside called Golgotha and continues to provide the blossoms of forgiveness and resurrection. The branches of the Sycamore Tree stand between both and invites generations of Zacchaeus-like searchers the spiritual vantage point to have access to Christ.

The Church is the Sycamore Tree of life. Like the branches of the sturdy sapling that provided a tax collector named Zacchaios the opportunity to rise above the crowd, the arms of the Church are capable of sustaining humanity's need to intimately encounter our Heavenly Father.

An old tale tells that when Zaccheus grew old he lived in Jericho as a humble and devout believer. Every morning at sunrise, so the story goes, he went for a walk carrying a pitcher of water. Upon his return, he always seemed happy and radiant. His wife, with usual curiosity, followed him one morning. She saw him go to the sycamore tree in which he was seated when he first saw Jesus passing by. He poured the water about the roots of the tree and bowed for a moment of silent prayer. Then, placing his hands fondly upon the tree trunk, he smiled in satisfaction and returned home. He could not forget what Christ had done for him.

The Orthodox Church commemorates the holy life of Saint John “The Short” on the 9th of November. Surnamed Kolobos, Saint John “The Dwarf” (339) was among the most eminent saints that inhabited the desert of Skete with his spiritual father. One day, planting a piece of dry wood in the arid ground, his spiritual guide exhorted his spiritual son to water it every day until it bears fruit.” Although the reservoir was far from their location, John obediently departed every evening and returned with a bucket of water each following morning. According to the legend, at the end of three years the wood came to life and bore fruit. Saint John took some of the fruit and carried it to the local monastery church. “Take and eat,” he said, “the fruit of obedience.”

The tree of Saint John the Dwarf, known as the Tree of Obedience, still exists today in the deserted Monastery of Saint John the Dwarf in the Nitrian Desert.

The Sunday of Zaccheus provides each and every Orthodox Christian an opportunity to assess our relationship to the Branches of the Church. The liturgical reading of the scriptural narrative invites parishioners to re-commit ourselves to the Wood of the Holy Cross. Like Zaccheus and Saint John, both of small stature, we too must obediently respond to Jesus's invitation to “dine with Him” in our respective homes.

As we prepare to embark on yet another Great Lenten journey to Golgotha, let us do so by expressing our love and thankfulness for resurrecting the dry wood of our souls by dedicating our time, talent, and resources to lovingly irrigate the root system of our local parish.