

DEMETRIUS: A SAINT IN PROGRESS

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"It was the nineteenth year of Diocletian's reign and the month Dystrus, called March by the Romans, and the festival of the Saviour's Passion was approaching, when an imperial decree was published everywhere, ordering the churches to be razed to the ground and the Scriptures destroyed by fire, and giving notice that those in places of honour would lose their places, and domestic staff, if they continued to profess Christianity, would be deprived of their liberty. Such was the first edict against us." [Eusebius *History of the Church* 258]

For months after that edict, and through several others, the priest, deacons and bishops of the Christian communities of Thessalonica as everywhere in the Empire had lived with the imperial command to sacrifice to the emperor, and prevaricated or bribed or just waited. The unlucky - or the zealous volunteers - had been seized, tortured, sometimes barbarously executed, then went straight to heaven. The repressions petered out, flared again, there would be panic and flight, then the incumbent authorities fell afoul of palace or army intrigues or the Persians burst over the borders again or the emperor died....But on this April day 304 the situation had become much more dangerous: every citizen of the Empire was under order to sacrifice.

I.

At first I thought Demetrius must have been a young nobleman of Thessalonica, say twenty-five years old in the year of his death. I thought a nobleman and Thessalonian because this is how he was eventually described in the Byzantine hagiographies. [*insert here*] And youthful, because this is always how he is represented in his icons. He was martyred two hundred and fifty years after St Paul's foundation of a Christian church in Thessalonica, and so I believed my Demetrius was a Thessalonian born into the faith, of pious parents who made sure all their children, girls and boys, were instructed in the dogma and gestures of their faith. [*describe the church building, the liturgy etc of this period*]

The hagiographies all said he was arrested for preaching the faith, and so I began to imagine him on the last day of his life, that April day of the martyrs of 304 - going out to preach.

I imagined that Demetrius walked through a doorway and down the street from his house, his parents' house, which I think of as surrounded by cypresses and tall, ochre-coloured walls, toward the centre of the city, to the forum. But then I read that little is known of how houses related to the streets on which they stood at this period of the Late Roman Empire: *We do not know how many windows there were, what size they may have been, or where they were located; in most cases we do not even know how they were closed. Nor do we know how windows were used. Were they kept open or closed? Did people stand at the window or on a balcony?* [Thebert, p 331; see also "The Roman Home," p 315 in *History of Private Life*]

Even the ochre-coloured walls are wrong (perhaps these are Byzantine? or Turkish?) for it was by

Listening with the ear of the heart St Peter's Press

porticoes not doorways that people came and went between house and street.

Demetrius walked down a marble pavement, feet slapping it with thin leather sandals. This was still the age of the draped not sewn garment, white, embroidered folds of linen that swayed to the stride of his legs; there was a jewel clasp at his shoulder. It was a hot morning. Some dogs gave a perfunctory bark as he passed. There was no wind. I imagined the soft thud of oranges falling off trees in the gardens but perhaps April is too early for falling oranges. Down the slope to his left lay the sea lacquered by a silver sheen. To his right, up the slope, loomed the defensive walls patrolled by archers. He knew there were soldiers at the gates. But the troubles lay within the city, not without. Ahead of him rose the elegant columns white as chalk of the temple and the arcades of the forum. It was so hot and airless that sweat beaded then dribbled down the back of his neck, across his forehead, along his arms. He glistened, he shimmered. As he left the shadows of the houses on the marble pavements and crossed to the forum, he walked shimmering in the glare of the sun.

Demetrius is now sometimes afraid. His priest has already been dragged off to the prison cells. The homes of the deacons and subdeacons have been searched and scriptures seized. But Demetrius enters the Forum to preach, as usual. Heat, clattering noise, the stench of rotting food and animal blood and excrement, hawkers' shouts and lewdness. His listeners cannot save him - they don't even know how to pray! He teaches them what he has been taught but he himself is imperfect in his understanding. He knows he is not alone - the martyrs have preceded him - but what was it they knew that vouchsafed their joyful passage through death?

From a letter to a friend: *The priest here at the abbey to whom I take my questions and dilemmas as they arise is Fr Demetrius (!), raised a Ukrainian Catholic on a Saskatchewan farm. But we've "bonded" around our shared Patron, although I have the impression that Fr D doesn't really think too much about St D, just kind of takes him for granted. But we have talked quite a bit about the idea of "sacrifice" in the Scriptures, as I've been trying to understand from St Paul's letters to the young churches, what exactly lay at the heart of the Christians' refusal to make sacrifice to the Emperor. I have assumed that it had to do with the prohibited eating of a burnt offering (Pliny the Younger, for example, way back in the second century, was already complaining about the Christian boycott of meat markets in Bithynia) but I find St Paul completely confusing on the subject. As it happened (I'm no longer surprised by this kind of coincidence), 1Cor 10:23-33 was the text of the reading from the Epistles at last Sunday's service, all about to eat or not to eat "whatever is sold in the meat market." When I asked Fr Demetrius to explain to me why St Paul would say it is really not a matter for Christian conscience whether to eat meat "offered in sacrifice," Fr Demetrius explained that Paul was underlining the relative unimportance of what a Christian consumes, that "the real defilement lies not in the sacrificial meat but in the spirit of the individual." The point of the Christians' refusal to make the offerings to the Emperors was that, after the Resurrection of Christ, there are no more sacrifices; Jesus died once and for all, and so it was unthinkable that a Christian could participate in a (cyclical) pagan sacrifice.*

I joined the community here at Mass on Sunday - a shock after all these months of going to Ukrainian Orthodox church services: these are so stripped of visual and acoustic "glory" (except for the joyful peals of organ music by Brother Gerald) and so plain in their language. Fr Demetrius officiated, and gave a

Listening with the ear of the heart St Peter's Press

quite wonderful little homily on the text Matt 8:2-3, about how we, like Christ, can “choose” to pour out healing to the “lepers” of our own communities. This was fine, but as I listened to him I realized that I was identifying with the leper; I cornered him later, by the coffee pots near the kitchen, and asked him to say something about who we are as “lepers,” and he said, “We are asking to be healed - we are choosing to ask for healing.”

II.

There, under the brick arches of the market stalls, surrounded by his audience of townsfolk - the old woman with her fistfuls of mint to sell, her grandson the basket-weaver, the widow with her begging bowl, the blind poet with his, the sailor and fisherman and seamstress - he preaches what he himself has heard preached. He has a growing reputation as an inspired *rhetor*.

He is a virgin. His betrothed is his sister in Christ. Their flesh burns away in the Divine Service. Only their bodies remain, God’s handiwork and a temple for the Holy Spirit.

But today the crowd is smaller than usual and even most of these slip away as the soldiers of Caesar Galerius approach.

They came to arrest him. They knew him. He had already once, twice ignored the edicts to perform the ritual sacrifice to the Emperor. Others he knew had been brought before the authorities and questioned. It was just a question of time, but he was steadfast and would not sacrifice. It was unthinkable.

He was seized and dragged off, only a few of his followers brave enough to shout Help! in the forum as others slipped away into the shadows. Then these brave ones too fell silent.

He was thrown alone into a cell of the baths. From that moment until his death, Demetrius lived in total silence. Even the vermin made no noise. A little light seeped through chinks in the brick wall. Even his prayers were silent.

Outside, some friends stood sentinel in the shadows, anxiously waiting for a sign of his fate.

He was speared to death in the cell. He was one man against half a dozen soldiers. For all his prayerful meditation on the glory of the martyrs, his own life was still so fresh and muscular in him, leaping through his blood, that he cried out in disbelief. The soldiers of Galerius left him to bleed to death on the bare earth where his friends, creeping in from the night, made him a shallow grave, then slipped away, cupping bloodied soil in their hands as though they bore the Eucharistic wine and bread.

Eight years later Christianity became officially tolerated in the Roman Empire; within a generation it became the faith of the emperors. Demetrius’s story - if indeed there ever was a Demetrius who died in Thessalonika a martyr in 304 - was forgotten and his grave unknown.

