

Panagia Kathariotissa in Ithaca (8 September)



Five hundred and fifty-six meters above the Gulf of Morou, on the southeastern peak of Mount Nirito, the highest spot of Ithaca, is the Monastery of Katharon (or Kathara). It was built in 1696. The katholikon of the monastery, dated about 100 years earlier, is called Panagia Kathariotissa after the miraculous icon found there, and to her, the patron and protectress of the island, the locals run with faith seeking her help and blessing.

According to tradition, certain shepherds from Epirus in Ioannina, persecuted by Turkish-Albanians, arrived on the island of Ithaca with few possessions. They set up their huts at the foot of Mount Nirito, on the south side, in Mazos, four hundred meters from where the monastery is today. Great was their sadness however when they noticed that of their few possessions the miraculous icon of the Panagia was missing, which they had in their home and brought from Epirus.

Their grief did not last long. One night on their opposite side they saw a bright light. They realized that something was happening there. The next day, despite a thorough investigation at that spot, they found nothing. Yet for many nights after this the light continued to appear. They thought about cutting the trees, bushes and twigs in that area to better investigate.

Gathering a heap of bushes, they set it on fire. Amazed, they saw in the midst of the fire an even brighter light than the flames. When the fire extinguished, they were overjoyed to see among the ashes a blackened icon from the flames, but it was not burned! They wiped away the soot, and everyone recognized the icon of the Nativity of the Theotokos they had brought with them from Epirus. With tears in their eyes they kissed the icon and brought it back to their huts.



The next day they noticed that paradoxically the icon was missing again. After searching, they found the icon once again in the ashes. Bringing it back home, the same thing took place over the course of three days. Understanding the will of the Panagia, they decided to build a church on that spot to house the miraculous icon. They also decided to name the icon "Panagia Kathariotissa", because they found it in the "kathara", which is what you call the ashes from burnt twigs and shrubs in order to clean out an area.

Twice in the past, particularly after the earthquake of 1928 and in March 1954 after the devastating earthquake of 1953, the miraculous icon of Panagia Kathariotissa

was transferred from the monastery to Vathy, the island's capital. The procession was followed by everyone on foot, demonstrating that the people of Ithaca put their trust in the Panagia and derive strength and hope from her in difficult moments. Furthermore, innumerable are her miracles, as told today by the islanders.

The locals believe that the icon of Virgin Mary in this monastery has been painted by Saint Luke and that it is miraculous. Often the people call upon the help of the Kathariotissa, and seek her intercessions in all matters of life. Even when a couple is newly married, the following quatrain is sung in a slow tempo at the marriage table:

O Panagia from Kathara,
with your Only-begotten Son,
to the couple being made,
give your blessing.

Apolytikion in the First Tone

Venerating your august icon, we receive strength in soul and body, all-hymned Lady, august Kathariotissa; wherefore we run to you in haste, and we also earnestly sing hymns to your Son, magnifying with longing: Glory to your magnificence Pure One, Glory to your divine protection, Glory to you who have showed yourself in being a savior to us in danger.

Megalynarion

Come let us praise O faithful, the divine icon and the holy one of Katharon, who is

our glory, our great boast, and the protectress of Ithacicians.



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