

THE FEAST OF THE PATRONAGE OF THE MOST HOLY MOTHER OF GOD - "POKROVA"

Among the Marian feasts listed in our liturgical year, the Feast of the Patronage of the Most Holy Mother of God deserves special consideration. The devotion to the Mother of God as the protectress of the Ukrainian people is like a golden thread from the times of the Kyivan princes to the present day. The secret of honoring the Mother of God as a protectress lies, in the fact that we are dealing with heavenly and powerful intercession. Every person, family and nation would like to enjoy such protection. From the very beginning of our Ukrainian history, we have had great and powerful enemies, and it is a small wonder that our people cite the assistance and protection of the Most Holy Mother of God whose intercession is never wavering. For our people, the feast of the Patronage has always been, and still remains, a day of great manifestation of love and gratitude to Mary.

THE INSTITUTION OF THE FEAST

The event that led to the institution of this holy day was the vision granted to Saint Andrew, who is called the "fool for Christ," which happened when the Saracens besieged the city of Constantinople. The terror-stricken people sought refuge in the Church of the Mother of God in Blachernae, a suburb of Constantinople, where her mantle was preserved, and there they held a prayer vigil throughout the night. The church was filled to overflowing, and among those gathered were Saint Andrew and his disciple, Epifaniy, who were natives of the land of Ukraine-Rus'. After the service, Saint Andrew saw the Virgin Mary in radiant light as she was approaching the Royal Doors. In her company was Saint John the Baptist and Saint John the Apostle. Andrew heard a great choir of angels and saints singing, and observed the the Virgin Mother proceeding toward the altar, where she knelt down and prayed shedding tears. When she finished her prayers, she arose removed from her head a luminous veil from her head, and stretched it out wide over all the people in the church. Then she disappeared, and Andrew and his disciple understood the vision to be assurance of the Mother of God coming to rescue the city. News of the miracle spread far and wide like a flash of lightning; the enemy retreated and the city was saved.

In Ukrainian, the word "Pokrova" in Ukrainian refers to a covering, but it also means "to protect" as one is covered with protection. Accordingly, it refers to the protective veil of the Mother of God as well as her constant and never failing protection.

WHO WAS ANDREW THE FOOL?

Historians generally agree that Andrew was a Slav from the southern part of Ukraine-Rus'. Some say that he was brought to Constantinople with other slaves in the household of a wealthy lord. Meditating on the words of Saint Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians, "we are fools for Christ, but you are wise in Christ" (1 Corinthians 4:10), he began to behave eccentrically, and receiving the name "fool for Christ." When he

gained his freedom from his master, he spent much time in prayer and in the reading of Scripture.

The Feast of the Patronage was a local feast among the Greeks, which they ceased to celebrate after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Even though this holy day is not ranked as one of the 12 major holy days, it does enjoy much of the same honor.

POKROVA IN UKRAINE

In the services of our Church, three beautiful roles of the Mother of God are emphasized: her divine maternity, her perpetual virginity and her intercession for us before God. Above all, this last role won the hearts of our Ukrainian people; our princes, kings, armies, kozaks and hetmans gladly chose the Most Pure Mother of God as their protectress and guardian.

In the year 1036, Yaroslav the Wise, son of St. Volodymyr the Great, defeated the nomadic tribes of the Pechenegs. In gratitude he built the beautiful Cathedral of Saint Sophia in Kyiv, and in the following year, he placed the whole nation under the protection of the Mother of God, thus proclaiming her as the official patroness, defender and queen of the Ukrainian nation.

In hard times, our princes and their armies would hasten to her for assistance. The Grand Prince Mstyslav, who ruled in Tmutorokan, built a church in honor of the Virgin Mother in gratitude for his successful defeat the Cherkasses. The Grand Prince Volodymyr Monomakh stated in his memoirs that he owed his victory over the Polovtsians to the intercession of the Holy Mother. In the epic poem "Song of Ihor's Campaign," we find Prince Ihor Svyatoslavych paying homage to the miraculous icon of the Mother of God in Pyrohoscha for her assistance in his escape from enemy captivity. The great sovereign of Halychyna (Galicia) Danylo endowed this icon with special gifts after a successful campaign against Bohemia.

Some of our princes used icons of the Mother of God on their official seals. In recent times in Ukraine, very ancient gold, bronze and copper necklaces of icons we discovered bearing a representation of the Blessed Mother. One such necklace has the Greek inscription: "O Mother of God, be my protection and defense."

The Zaporozhian Kozaks built a church in honor of the Patronage of the Most Holy Mother of God with an icon representing her at the Sich, which was the center of their power. Above the icon were the words, "I shall deliver and protect my people," and at the bottom of the icon, the Zaporozhian Kozaks were represented holding a ribbon with the inscription "We implore you, cover us with your holy omophor, O Mother, and deliver us from all evil." Before beginning their campaigns, the Kozaks would always have a Moleben service to the Blessed Mother; their reliance on her intercession could also be found in the lyrics of the songs they sang as they went to battle.

Our Ukrainian people have always cultivated a sincere devotion to the Mother of God, turning to her with great confidence, and invoking her help, whether for personal or family troubles or in times of national crisis. The history of Ukraine has recorded many miracles attributable to the Virgin Mary, especially during times of enemy invasion; for example the miraculous protection of the Pochayiv Monastery during the Turkish siege of 1675. In response to the fervent prayers of the monks and the people, the Mother of God appeared over the monastery and opened her veil over it, thereby heralding her protection.

We must always remember to place our unreserved trust in Mary's powerful protection and immediate help, her role in our salvation and her great maternal mercy. She is a great intercessor for those in sorrow; she is swift help, salvation and strength for the world. Mary is a fount of mercy, divine wisdom and the protectress of the world. Our parish is indeed proud to be placed under her glorious patronage.