

Prince of Vladimir, Vsevolod III, known as “the Great-Nest”, but who also was baptized with the name of Demetrius, built a beautiful church of the holy martyr Dēmétrios, and adorned it wondrously with icons and frescoes.

The memory of Saint Dēmétrios of Thessaloniki is historically associated in Ukraine-Rus’ with the military, patriotism and the defense of the country. This is apparent by the saint’s depiction on icons as a soldier in plumed armor, with a spear and sword in hand. There is a scroll on which is written the prayer of Saint Dēmétrios for the salvation of the people of Thessaloniki, “Lord, do not permit the city or the people to perish. If You save the city and the people, I shall be saved with them. If they perish, I will perish with them.”

St. Demetrius’ feast day is on the 26th of October, the 8th of November on the Julian calendar. It is considered to be a minor holy day in the Ukrainian Church.



SAINT OF THE WEEK

The Holy Great-Martyr Demetrius the Myrrh-Gusher of Thessaloniki

The Great Martyr Dēmétrios the Myrrh-gusher of Thessaloniki was the son of a Roman proconsul in Thessaloniki. Three centuries had elapsed and Roman paganism, spiritually shattered and defeated by the multitude of martyrs and confessors of the Savior, intensified its persecutions. The parents of Saint Dēmétrios were secret Christians, and he was baptized and raised in the Christian Faith in a secret church in his father’s home.

By the time Dēmétrios had reached maturity and his father had died, Emperor Galerius Maximian had ascended the throne (305). Maximian, confident in Dēmétrios's education as well as his administrative and military abilities, appointed him to his father's position as proconsul of the Thessaloniki district. The young commander's principal duties were to defend the city from barbarians and to eradicate Christianity. The Emperor's policy regarding Christians was expressed simply: "Put to death anyone who calls on the name of Christ." The Emperor did not suspect that by appointing Dēmétrios he had provided him with the opportunity to bring many people to Christ.

Accepting the appointment, Dēmétrios returned to Thessaloniki and confessed and glorified our Lord Jesus Christ. Instead of persecuting and executing Christians, he began to teach the Christian Faith openly to the inhabitants of the city and to overthrow pagan customs and the worship of idols. The compiler of his Life, Saint Simeon Metaphrastes (November 9), says that because of his teaching zeal he became "a second Apostle Paul" for Thessaloniki, particularly since "the Apostle to the Gentiles" founded the first community of believers in the city (1 Thess. and 2 Thess.).

The Lord also destined Saint Dēmétrios to follow Saint Paul on the path to martyrdom. When Maximian learned that the newly-appointed proconsul was a Christian, and that he had converted many Roman subjects to Christianity, the Emperor's rage knew no bounds. Returning from a campaign in the area of the Black Sea, the Emperor decided to lead his army through Thessaloniki, determined to massacre the Christians. Learning of this, Saint Dēmétrios ordered his faithful servant Lupus to give his wealth to the poor saying, "Distribute my earthly riches among them, for we shall seek heavenly riches for ourselves." He began to pray and fast, preparing himself for martyrdom. When the Emperor came into the city, he summoned Dēmétrios, who boldly confessed himself a Christian and denounced the falsehood and futility of Roman polytheism. Maximian ordered Dēmétrios to be thrown into prison. An Angel appeared to him, comforting and encouraging him.

Meanwhile the Emperor amused himself by staging games in the circus. His champion was a German by the name of Lyaeos. He challenged Christians to wrestle with him on a platform built over the upturned spears of the victorious soldiers. A brave Christian named Nestor went to the prison to Saint Dēmétrios, his instructor in the Faith, asking for his blessing to fight the barbarian. With the blessing and prayers of Saint Dēmétrios, Nestor defeated the fierce German and hurled him from the platform onto the spears of the soldiers, just as the murderous pagan would have done with the Christian. The enraged commander ordered the execution of the holy

Martyr Nestor (October 27) and sent a guard to the prison to kill Saint Dēmétrios. At dawn on October 26, 306 soldiers appeared in the Saint's underground prison and ran him through with lances. His faithful servant, Saint Lupus, gathered up the blood-soaked garment of Saint Dēmétrios he took the imperial ring from his finger, a symbol of his high status, and dipped it in the blood. With the ring and other holy things sanctified the blood of Saint Dēmétrios, Saint Lupus began to heal the infirm. The Emperor ordered his soldiers to arrest and kill him. The body of the holy Great Martyr Dēmétrios was cast out for wild animals to devour, but the Christians took it and secretly buried it in the earth.

During the reign of Saint Constantine (306-337), a church was built over the grave of Saint Dēmétrios. A hundred years later, during the construction of a majestic new church on the old spot, the incorrupt relics of the holy martyr were uncovered. Since the seventh century a miraculous flow of fragrant myrrh has been found beneath the crypt of the Great Martyr Dēmétrios, so he is called "the Myrrh-gusher." Several times, those venerating the holy wonderworker tried to bring his holy relics, or a part of them, to Constantinople. Invariably, Saint Dēmétrios made it clear that he would not permit anyone to remove even a portion of his relics.

It is interesting that among the barbarians threatening the Romans, Slavs occupied an important place, in particular those settling upon the Thessalonian peninsula. Some even believe that the parents of Saint Dēmétrios were of Slavic descent. While advancing towards the city, pagan Slavs were repeatedly turned away by the apparition of a threatening radiant youth, going around on the walls and inspiring terror in the enemy soldiers. Perhaps this is why the name of Saint Dēmétrios was particularly venerated among the Slavic nations after they were enlightened by the Gospel. On the other hand, Greeks dismiss the idea that Saint Dēmétrios was a Slavic saint.

The very first pages of the Primary Chronicle, the first written record of our Ukrainian history, as foreordained by God, is bound up with the name of the holy Great Martyr Dēmétrios of Thessaloniki. The Chronicle relates that when the Great Prince of Kyiv Oleh threatened the Greeks at Constantinople (907), the Greeks became terrified and said, "This is not Oleh, but rather Saint Dēmétrios sent upon us from God." Thus this image entered the soul of the Ukrainian nation.

Church veneration of the holy Great Martyr Dēmétrios in Ukraine began shortly after the Baptism of Ukraine-Rus. Toward the beginning of the 1070s the monastery of St. Demetrius at Kyiv, known afterwards as the Mikhailivsky-Zlatoverkho monastery, was founded. The monastery was built by the son of Yaroslav the Wise, the Great Prince Izyaslav, whose baptismal name was Demetrius. In the years 1194-1197 the Great