

Grandparents of Jesus

Once I heard in a sermon delivered by a Melkite* priest who said: “If you pray to our Lord and your prayer is not answered, you should pray to His Mother, and if you still don't get what you want, pray to St Anne because no one says ‘no’ to their grandmother.” He said it was an Arabic phrase, but no one else seems to know it, so you can credit me if you like it.

There is a certain spiritual logic that praying to saints increases our prayers. It is scripturally based on the cloud of witnesses that surround the Throne of God in heaven, whom we ask to join in our prayers. We know that saints do not grant the answers to prayers; all answers come from God. So, we may ask others to join us in our prayers.

It is not found in the Bible that Sts Joachim and Anne were the parents of Mary, but in the uncanonical *Protoevangelium of James* and the Gospel of James. Little details like these were not recorded because the Church in the first centuries was more concerned about preparing for the Second Coming of Christ. Therefore things about the of childhood were not as important as the teachings of Jesus. But the Conception of the Mother of God by St Anne thematically follows Jewish traditions or stories of legend. The Bible shares stories of Abraham and Sarah, and of Elkanah and Hannah, the parents of the prophet Samuel, which is found in the first chapter of First Kings. Similar events point to Jesus as the Christ. Older women who gave birth to their children were incredibly blessed by God.

Devotion to St Anne in the West started late in the 12th century. However, it was as early as the 6th century in the Eastern churches. Since she was ascribed the title of “Forbearer of God”, both the feast of the birth of Mary and the dedication of Mary in the Temple are celebrated as two of the twelve Great Feasts of the Church.

Our knowledge of Joachim comes from a sermon by St John of Damascus in which we learn he was married only once. The sister of St Anne was Sobe, who was the mother of St Elizabeth. This clarifies how Jesus is related to John the Baptist as commonly held within Catholicism and Orthodoxy.

The story of this couple is similar to, or influenced by, other stories of couples in Jewish scripture. They were a couple who found each other late in life, probably why St Anne is the one some people “pray to” when looking for a spouse. Some sources say they are from two different tribes of Israel, and others say they are both of the House of David.

They tried to have a child and failed. Joachim went to the temple to pray to have a child, and the priest there would not let him enter because it was a sign from God that he was not good. After all, he did not have a child. In other words, God did not favor him, so he

could not enter the temple. Distraught, Joachim went away because he was ashamed that his state prevented them from having a child. He went off to pray for a lengthy time, according to St Romanos the Melodist, remembering Abraham went into the wilderness to pray and so did he. An Archangel (Gabriel) appeared and told him to return, telling him his wife would conceive, and to name their daughter Mary and “she shall be devoted to the Lord from her infancy, and she shall be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from her mother’s womb suspect any evil concerning here.”

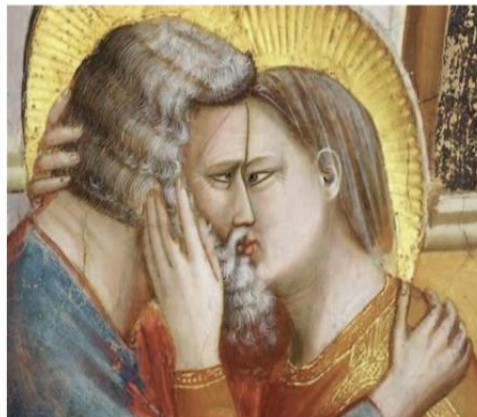
At the same time Gabriel appeared to Anne to tell her to welcome her husband home because they were to have a child. The couple coming together was painted, and the nontraditional icon called the Kiss at the Golden Gate. (To represent normal conception.) This gate was the entrance to the city of Jerusalem. The Feast of the Conception of St Anne is December 9 on our liturgical calendar traditionally,

St Anne is found in the icons of the Nativity of Mary, the Presentation of Mary, and the marriage of the Virgin. Finding themselves blessed by God, they produced a child, and she carried within her womb the highly-favored Mary. Some iconographers have given clues to what happens later in life, but these things are not recorded in scripture or tradition.

It has been assumed that since the grandparents of Jesus are not mentioned in the gospels, they probably died before Jesus began His preaching ministry. Accordingly, she was buried where they lived, according to the Jewish customs of the time and place. Some early Christians knew at least the place of burial of St Anne.

When Christians were banished from the Holy Land, some fled to other countries. Tradition has it that Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary fled to Gaul, now France. Tradition says that they brought with them the bones of St Anne for safekeeping in the city of Apta Julia. Because of the trials and tribulations of those states, they were buried for safekeeping in an underground church, as testified to by the first Bishop of Apta Julia, St Auspicius. He took further precautions to guard this holy treasure against desecration and had the body buried even deeper in a subterranean chapel, as Barbarians constantly ravaged France. The exact spot of the burial was lost, but was traditionally known to be the church underground.

After Charlemagne defeated the Saracens at the close of the 8th century, all discovered peace and tranquility. So, the priests and bishops began to look for the exact spot in the deep crypt for the remains; when Charlemagne himself visited Apta Julia, the cathedral was to be reconsecrated, which took place during Easter solemnities. Sadly, the bishops and priests could not find the remains of St Anne. They were later found miraculously, the





details of which are in a letter from Charlemagne to Pope Adrian I. When nobles arrived for the reconsecration, one of them, Baron Casanova, had a deaf, blind and mute son, John. During the service, this 14-year-old boy acted like emotions overcame him. He kept looking up and not at the surface as if someone above him were speaking to him. He went up to the high altar and made signs using his staff where they should dig. They found a door and stairs leading downward. John ran forward, and Charlemagne held the boy's hand and gave orders to keep back. John then struck the wall of the crypt. They found a long, narrow corridor when the wall was broken in. A bright light flashed on Charlemagne and his assistants. There was a recess in the wall that had been closed up, and on that wall was a lamp still giving forth light. As soon as Charlemagne and John reached the point the light went out. But at that moment, John could see, speak and hear, and said the body of St Anne, mother of the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, was in the recess. These were his first words, and Charlemagne and others emotionally gave words of praise and thanksgiving.

As the wall opened, a fragrance like that of an oriental balm filled the air, and a casket of Cypress wood was discovered containing the body of St Anne wrapped with precious cloth. On the casket was the inscription, "here lies the body of blessed Anne, mother of the Virgin Mary". Charlemagne and all those present venerated these sacred relics. Pope Adrian responded to



Charlemagne, saying, "We recommend that these holy relics be preserved with the veneration due to them and to you always to be filled with zeal, all to honor the divine majesty and improvement of your people."



Some of these relics were taken to St Anne DeBeaupre in Canada and distributed elsewhere.

The name Anna or Anne is the Greek translation of the Jewish name Hannah, which means "grace" or favored. St Anne and St Joachim are patron saints of infertility, childless couples, and those trying to conceive. They are also patron saints of grandparents. "Grandparents Day" is observed this year September 8th, the first Sunday of September after Labor Day.

There is an Akathist to Sts Joachim and Anne which concludes with this prayer, "Ancestors of God, Joachim, and Anna, your distress and reproach were overcome by the almighty God, and thereby the savior of the world came into the world through your holy daughter, Mary, your prayers were abundantly answered by our merciful God who rewards patience, humility and compunction we praise you for your faith and for your commitment to prayer Mary and we implore your compassion upon our lack of fruitfulness in the Christian virtues. Holy and righteous Joachim and Anna teach us to be living temples of the grace of God so that we may also devote ourselves to holiness and bring forth treasures which are pleasing to Him. Growing older with each passing day, we ask for your guidance so that we might reach a peaceful end on this earth and thereby be united with You forever in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Amen."

Fr Jonathan Morse

***Melkite:** A Greek-Byzantine Catholic Church with roots in the Antiochian Orthodox Church; joined Catholic communion in 1724. Parishes in Egypt, Palestine, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan, Syria, Turkey, Iraq, Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, France, Mexico, New Zealand, Sweden, United Kingdom, United States, and Venezuela; Liturgical language: Arabic, Greek, and also locally: French, English, Portuguese and Spanish; Patriarchal residence, Dormition Cathedral, Damascus. By Melkite tradition, founders: the Apostles Peter and Paul. [ed.]