



Roughly about fourteen years after our Lord's death and Resurrection, the Jews of Jerusalem began to persecute the first Jewish Christians. An ancient and uninterrupted tradition holds that after the martyrdom of Saint James¹ in Jerusalem, our Lord's dear friends from Bethany- Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary Magdalene² - were imprisoned. Fearing the crowds if a public execution were to take place, they were placed onboard a boat without sails, oars, helm, or provisions. With them were Mary, the wife of Cleopas³ and mother of James the Less and Jude Thaddeus, herself considered to be cousin to the Virgin Mary; also Mary Salome, mother of James and John, Bartimaeus,⁴ Maximin, one of the seventy-two disciples of Jesus, and a few other Christians. They were towed out into the open Mediterranean Sea and there left to perish a slow death. Before leaving, they managed to secure and carry with them the tenderly loved body of Saint Anne, the mother of Mary, for they feared it would be profaned by

their persecutors, or in the destruction to follow which Jesus had prophesied concerning the holy city Jerusalem.

After escaping death from a violent storm at sea, they all miraculously drifted off to the southern Mediterranean coast of France and came ashore near the seaside village known today as *Sts. Maries de la Mer*, and near a place called *Apta Julia*, or simply "Apt" as it is known today. There they reverently buried the body of Saint Anne, securely hiding it in a cave with a small shrine to mark the location. Three of the group - Lazarus, Magdalene, and Martha - then set off, together with the others in their company, to evangelize the pagan peoples of Provence. Saint Lazarus eventually became the first bishop to the Christian converts at Marseilles and there was martyred by beheading during the bloody persecution of Domitian toward the end of the First Century. In Tarascon, not far from Avignon, the collegiate Church named after Saint Martha and built over her home has been the site of pilgrimage to the relics of the saint. Saint Mary Magdalene lived for thirty years as a penitential hermit in the mountains of Provence, and her relics can be found in the mountain cave-shrine at La Sainte-Baume; her skull is reverently preserved in the nearby Basilica that bears her name in Saint Maximin-La Sainte-Baume. Later on, in the beginning of the Second Century, Saint Auspicius, the first bishop of Apt, took further precautions to protect the body of Saint Anne from profanation by burying it still deeper in a subterranean chapel with all access to it carefully concealed until a more favorable time. Over the years of warfare and barbarian invasions the exact spot became lost in obscurity. Then in the Eighth Century after the Emperor Charlemagne had decisively defeated the Saracens, the holy shrines and tombs of the saints and martyrs were gradually restored by Charlemagne and the date of re-consecration was set. On Easter Sunday 792 AD the Emperor Charlemagne traveled all the way from his palace in Aachen to Apt for the occasion.

At the most solemn moment of the ceremony, a boy of fourteen, blind, deaf, and mute from birth - and usually very quiet and passive - to the amazement of those who knew him became visibly agitated. Without warning he leapt from his seat and walked down the main aisle to the altar steps and began banging on the stone with his stick again and again. His family, now embarrassed, tried to lead him outside, but he would not

budge and continued :frantically to pound on the steps amid loud groans, for he was mute and unable to speak. The Emperor Charlemagne suspected something. He approached the boy and called for workmen to remove one of the steps leading to the high altar. Suddenly a subte1Tanean passageway was revealed beneath the steps and the disabled boy went in, followed by the Emperor, who held the boy's hand, then the pliests and the workmen. They made their way through the dim candlelight until they came upon a wall which blocked further advance. The boy banged on the wall with his stick and the Emperor ordered the workmen to remove the wall. They all walked down another long darkened co1Tidor until it led to a clypt, where miraculously a vigil lamp was still burning and filled the room with an unearthly light which then extinguished as they entered, while a sweet fragrant scent hung in the air. Suddenly the deaf, mute, and blind boy began to see and to speak for the :first time. The :first words he c1ied out, "*It is she! It is she!*" No one knew what he meant, until the single sarcophagus in the crypt was opened and there in a winding sheet were relics with the inscription, "Here lies the body of Blessed Anne, mother of the glorious Virgin Mary." Examination of the winding sheet showed it to be of ancient Eastern Design and texture.

Needless to say, the Emperor and all the people were overwhelmed and fell to their knees with profound gratitude that here was :finally found the relics of the Mother of Heaven's Queen. And all by a boy blind, deaf, and mute. "And a child shall lead them" (Is. 11 :6). "Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger" (Ps. 8:2). An exact description of what happened was written, signed, and sealed by the Emperor and sent to Pope Adrien I. These documents together with the Pope's reply are preserved to this day. Over the centuries, countless cures and conversions have taken place in the shrine of Saint Anne at Apt. The account of the re-finding of the relics of Saint Anne serves to underscore an even greater truth - the mystery of the Incarnation, that Jesus the Eternal Son of God made flesh is not simply an ideal, some interior religious longing, or, as modernists prefer, an event - "the Christ Event" - He is a real flesh and blood Person with a beating heart, conceived and born of a Mother, and also having grandparents. Imagine: *God had a grandmother!*

He is a person - a divine person - of flesh and blood. "In the fullness of time God sent his Son, born of a woman ... " (Gal. 4:4). As a result, Jesus took all His physical resemblance, all of His DNA, from His Mother - a fact beautifully depicted in some of the great masterpieces of the Madonna and child. And as Mary took her resemblance from her parents, Joachim and Anne, Jesus would have looked remarkably not only like His Mother but also like His grandparents. The bodily relics of Saint Anne are the closest earthly link we have to Jesus and Mary. Saint Teresa of Avila knew firsthand the power of Saint Anne's intercession. In founding the monasteries of the Carmelite Reform she often put them under the protection of Saint Joseph and Saint Anne, reminding her nuns, "The mercy of God is so great He will never fail to favor the homes of his glorious grandmother."

Notes

1. James the Greater, Son of Zebedee and Mary Solome
2. This tradition identifies Mary of Magdala with Mary of Bethany.
3. Known to the French of Provence as "Ste. Marie de Jacobe." Cleopas is believed to have been the brother of Saint Joseph, which would make his sons cousins to Jesus.
4. Cured by Jesus of his blindness



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