

Mary the Egyptian (d. 522) nun

On the sixth day of the month of Barmudah, the Coptic church commemorates Mary the Egyptian, a penitent in the Palestinian desert.

Historical facts about this ascetic of Egyptian origin are limited to the existence of the tomb of a female solitary in Palestine. The legendary Lives written about her, however, left an indelible mark on both the Eastern and Western churches.

The earliest and most famous Life, translated into all of the languages spoken in the early Christian world, is attributed to Sofronius of Jerusalem. He writes that Zosimas, hieromonk of a lavra near the Jordan River, went to spend Lent in the desert and met a sunburnt woman wrapped in nothing but her long hair. After receiving a cloak from Zosimas, Mary told him her story. A native of Egypt, she had run away from home and gone to live a dissolute life in Alexandria. In search of new adventures, she had then joined a group of pilgrims headed for Jerusalem. When they arrived in the Holy City, Sofronius continues, a mysterious force prevented Mary from entering the Holy Sepulcher. As she stood in front of an icon of the Virgin, it was revealed to her that she was to undertake a penitential journey. Taking three loaves of bread, Mary headed into the desert, where she lived for forty-seven years.

Zosimas was the only human being Mary met in the desert. When he returned to bring her the Eucharist on Holy Thursday of the following year, he found her dead, and buried her with the help of a lion.

In the Byzantine churches, Mary the Egyptian is the model of a penitent, the image of the penthos that should accompany every believer's conversion. She is solemnly commemorated on the fifth Sunday of Lent, and her name appears at the end of each of the Odes of the Great Canon sung in the Lenten liturgy.

A READING

As soon as it was light, I crossed the Jordan and asked the Holy Virgin to lead me where she wished. I then came to this desert, and from that day on I have remained in solitude waiting for my God, who saves all who turn to him, great and small.

Pseudo-Sophronius of Jerusalem, *Life of St. Mary of Egypt*, 18

BIBLICAL READINGS

Gal 3:23-4:5; Lk 7:36-50

THE CHURCHES REMEMBER...

COPTS AND ETHIOPIANS (6 barmudah/miyazya):

Mary the Egyptian (Coptic Church)

Adam and Eva (Ethiopian Church)

LUTHERANS:

Simon Dach (d. 1659), poet in Eastern Prussia

MARONITES:

Aristarchus (1st cent.), apostle

Hermenegild (d. 585), king and martyr

ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS AND GREEK CATHOLICS:

Aristarchus, Pudens and Trophimus, apostles

Pachomius of Gledin (d. 1724), bishop (Romanian Church)

John Sciavteli (12th-13th cent.)

Euloge Salos (13th cent.), monk (Georgian Church)

WEST SYRIAN ORTHODOX:

Baselios mar Yaldho (d. 1685), catholicos (Malankara Church)

EAST SYRIAN ORTHODOX:

Justine (d. ca. 165), martyr (Malabar Church)