

OCTOBER 29: MARYAM OF QIDUN, *Monastic*, 4th century

Maryam of Qidun is one of the most popular Syriac Christian saints. The drama of her life story easily lends itself to fictionalized interpretations, and multiple accounts of her life exist were produced. There nevertheless seems to be a historical person in the background of all of these accounts, who became the inspiration for all of these stories.

Maryam grew up in a Christian family and was orphaned at the age of 7. Her only living relative was an uncle named Abraham who lived as a hermit in the desert near Qidun, a village outside of Edessa. Despite the seeming oddity of an anchorite being the guardian of a young girl, therefore, she was given to him to raise. For twenty years, she lived the ascetic life in her own room in his dwelling, growing deeply in holiness and prayer, teaching those who came to seek her wisdom through a window, and being praised and admired by all who met her.

However, there was a monk who desired her, and who used to come to the hermitage every day on the pretext of speaking with Abraham in order to see her. One day when her uncle was out, the monk seduced her. Afterwards, she fell into despair about the possibility of her salvation, for she had always been admired for her purity and holiness, and had felt secure in those things. Deeply shaken, she thought: "How can I ever again raise my eyes up to heaven when I cannot even bring myself to look at my uncle?" Rather than face him and confess her sin to him, she ran away to the city and began to work as a prostitute in a tavern.

After two years of frantic searching, her uncle discovered where she was living, and he borrowed a soldier's uniform and a horse. He covered his face with the helm, and set off for the tavern. When he saw her dressed as a prostitute and flirting with the customers he wanted to weep, but he concealed his emotions lest she recognize him and run away. Although he had not touched wine or cooked food in nearly fifty years, he feasted and drank and joked as though he were truly a soldier. But when the girl led him back to her

bedroom he took off his hermit and said, "My daughter Maryam, don't you know me? Whatever has happened to you? Why did you not just tell me when you had sinned? I would not have been angry with you, for who is without sin, except for God alone? I would have done penance for you myself, yet instead you have left me all alone in unspeakable sadness and grief."

As he spoke these words, she was like a motionless stone in his hands, too ashamed and afraid even to speak or to raise her eyes to his. But he spoke words of comfort and compassion to her all night, and in the morning she allowed him to lead her home, where she pleased God more by her sincere repentance than she ever had by her virginity, and where she was able to direct others more wisely because she was able to identify with sinners in their weakness rather than looking down on them from a place of purity.

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I O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and restore them again like thy servant Maryam of Qidun with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of thy Word, Jesus Christ; who with thee and the Holy Ghost liveth and reigneth, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

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Lessons and Psalm

Hosea 2:14–23

Psalm 130

Luke 15:11–24

Preface of Lent (1)