

# “Saint Sophia” or “Saint Myrtidiotissa”?

## HISTORICAL TRUTH AS A PRECONDITION FOR THE GRACE-FILLED PRESENCE OF A PROTOTYPE IN ITS ICON

### The Grave Responsibility of the Iconographer



At the link <http://hsir.org/p/2u> there is a posting by His Grace, Bishop Klemes of Gardikion, in which he presents some important testimony regarding a very serious ecclesiastical issue which has arisen. This issue inevitably has implications for iconology, since Orthodox iconography is at the service of the Church, which is the “pillar and ground of the truth,” according the Holy Apostle Paul (1 St. Timothy 3:15).

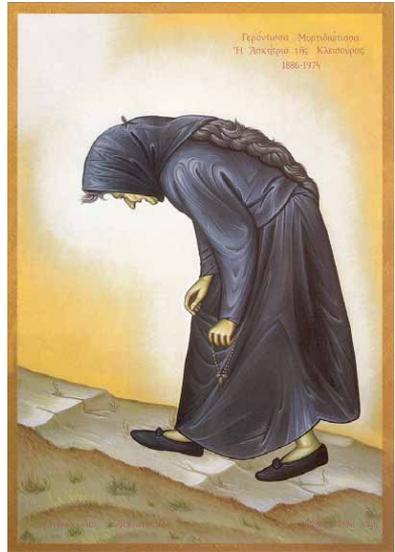
Thus, we read the following comments in this justified—as we believe—and necessary testimony, which puts matters on the correct footing:

In the relevant materials that are being circulated (articles, Icons, etc.), the Saint is constantly presented as a simple lay woman, Sophia, without acknowledging the monastic vocation of the holy ascetic Eldress, and with absolutely not a single reference to her monastic name, *viz.*,

Myrtdiotissa. ...[T]he holy Eldress was so fully conscious of and responsive to her monastic vocation and her monastic name, that she appointed that it be given to a child who was born after her departure to the Lord.

\*\*\*

Since this matter has, in its iconological aspect, preoccupied us for some years now (from the time when we first saw a depiction of “St. Sophia” at an exhibition of Icons, which came—we must admit—as an unpleasant surprise), permit us to present, for the first time, a sign of the holy Eldress’ good pleasure at the holy Icon of her as “St. Myrtdiotissa”—not, of course, on account of its technical mastery, but because it portrays her in monastic garb and with her monastic name.



Following an obedience that we received from our spiritual Father, His Eminence, Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Phyle, we were vouchsafed, in 2001, to paint an Icon of the holy Ascetic.

We were intensely concerned about the problem of how she should be depicted in her Icon, since it is well known from her Life that she did not wear her monastic apparel, preferring to continue, even after her tonsure, the struggle of blessed foolishness for Christ’s sake.

What prevailed, however, was that Saints should not be portrayed in their holy Icons as they were (as in a photograph), something which does happen and is certainly not reprehensible in religious painting, but as they will be (in eternity), clearly expressing in this way the eschatological nature of Orthodox iconography.

For this reason, St. Myrtdiotissa was arrayed in especially deco-

rous monastic attire, thereby enjoying in her Icon that of which she voluntarily deprived herself in her earthly life “in a fully conscious and responsive manner,” for love of Christ.



\* \* \*

The Icon was painted at a *Metochion* (dependency) of our Monastery, and when, by the Grace of God, the painting was finished, it was conveyed to the Monastery and presented to His Eminence. We noticed a certain hesitancy in his expression when he first set eyes on the Icon and venerated it.

Having himself been in close contact with the Saint during his lifetime, he preserved in his memory her ascetic and unkempt appearance. The Icon disclosed something “else,” something unwonted.

Kindly and discrete, as always, His Eminence was in no hurry to speak, offer observations, or reprove. He simply let his bemusement show somewhat and ordered that the Icon be placed on the Holy Table in the *Katholikon* (main Church) of the Monastery for forty days, in keeping with the existing pious tradition.

The next day, after the Divine Liturgy, the bell was rung. At a special assembly of the Brotherhood, His Eminence, wearing an expression of manifest enthusiasm and emotion, made known what had happened to him that morning.

When he entered the Altar and venerated the Holy Table, he prayerfully took the Icon of the Saint in his hands in order to kiss it. The same sense of doubt induced hesitation and perplexity in his mind, as he told us, and led him to pray at greater length on this subject.

A miraculous heavenly fragrance then emanated from the Icon and enveloped him. His Eminence, attentive and humble, as usual,

neither accepted nor rejected the sign, but merely puzzled over what had happened.

He attended the Divine Liturgy in a prayerful spirit, communed of the Immaculate Mysteries, and, as he was leaving the Altar, went to venerate the Icon of the Holy Eldress once again.

The same fragrance, more intense this time, wrought in him the “good transformation” and informed him, as he told us, of the good pleasure of the Holy Eldress regarding her Icon, dispelling all thoughts of doubt that he had and granting him a sense of the Saint’s presence and protection.



**I**n his detailed study of iconology, “The Grace-Filled Presence of a Prototype in Its Icon, According to the Iconology of the Church,” Professor Demetrios Tselengides makes the following important points, among others:

Orthodox Iconography, in accord with the theology of the Church, endeavors, through its technique, to render perceptible the presence of uncreated Divine Grace and Energy in the Icons of its deified members. In this way, the Orthodox Icon corresponds to the truth of the persons of the ‘new Creation’ that it portrays, since it strives both to affirm the historicity of the persons depicted and to express the Divine Grace that is inseparably united with them.... Through the iconographic representation of the Saints, the Church underscores for its faithful the personal identity of its glorified members.



**I**t became evident from the foregoing that it was necessary to write this article for the purpose of averting the confusion that prevails on this particular issue by reason of certain misunderstandings about iconography.

We chose the subtitle, “The Grave Responsibility of the Iconographer,” in order to communicate the extent to which an iconographer ought to weigh his every choice, since, according to the wise

Solomon, “A passionate man acts inconsiderately, but a sensible man bears up under many things” (Proverbs 14:17).

We consciously phrased the title in the form of a question, “‘Saint Sophia’ or ‘Saint Myrtdiotissa?’” in order to make it clear that the foregoing commentary was written, not in a spirit of reproof, but in a collegial spirit. It is addressed with love to our fellow iconographers, in conformity with the Scripture: “Give an opportunity to a wise man, and he will be wiser: instruct a just man, and he will receive more instruction” (Proverbs 9:9).

Monk Gabriel  
Director of the Icon Studio  
of the Holy Monastery of Sts. Cyprian and Justina,  
Phyle, Attica



The Chapel dedicated to St. Myrtdiotissa the Ascetic  
at our Monastery, constructed in 2001.