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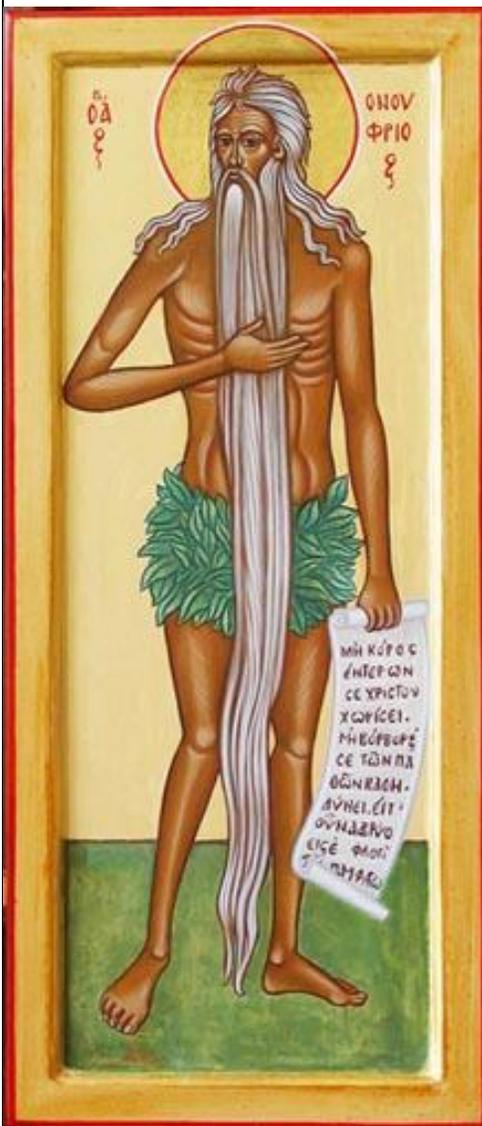
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Venerable Onuphrius the Great

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"I mostly feed and quench my thirst on the sweet words of God" (from the Vita of St. Onuphrius)



The vision of the Venerable Onuphrius, a tall slender man with a long white beard flowing to the ground before him, has been an inspiration for Eastern Christians for hundreds of years. On June 26, 1996, a Ukrainian Catholic Church was dedicated in an inter-Church ceremony (with clergy of the Ukrainian Catholic and Ukrainian Orthodox Churches of Canada participating) as an exhibit at the Museum of Civilization in Ottawa. It had been transported intact from the spot where it had been built by pioneers from Halychyna in the district of Smoky Lake, Alberta. It is the Church of St. Onuphrius. A statue of this Saint is found in a little shrine beneath the steps leading to the mighty St. George's Cathedral in Lviv. For several decades Orthodox seminarians in Poland have begun their spiritual training in the Monastery of St. Onuphrius in Jablechna. It is said that the Saint himself chose the place for the Monastery, appearing nearly four hundred years ago to fishermen and leaving them an Icon of himself on the banks of the river Bug.

The story of this remarkable Saint is shrouded in mystery for he was one of the Desert Fathers who made a great impression on Eastern spirituality in the third and fourth centuries, around the time that Christianity

was emerging as the dominant faith of the Roman Empire. At that time many folks joined the Church with little understanding - and still less intent to live according to the teachings of Our Lord Jesus as proclaimed in the Gospels and especially in the Beatitudes. At this time many Christians were inspired to go out into the desert and live in prayer under the providence of God alone in this harsh environment of extreme heat and cold, with practically nothing to eat and drink available to them, surrounded by all sorts of dangerous animals and desperadoes.

We know of the life of St. Onuphrius from the testimony of the monk Paphnutius. The saintly hermit had lived in the desert for sixty years when Fr. Paphnutius visited him. His hair and beard reached to the ground. This does not normally happen – the beard reaches a certain length and grows no further. His beard, related the Saint, grew to his feet in one day to cover his nakedness when the clothes with which he had come to the desert fell away. All the hairs on him were as white as snow and his entire appearance glowed, sublime and awesome.

As soon as he saw Paphnutius, Onuphrius called him by name and related to him his life in the wilderness. He said that it was his Guardian Angel who had brought him to this desolate place. For a long time he fed only on vegetables which could rarely be found in the wilderness and after that, when he had overcome, by patience and faith, violent attacks of temptations by demons, and when his heart was fortified and centred upon the love of God, an Angel of God brought him bread for nourishment. Besides that, by the good Providence of God, a palm tree grew next to his cell which brought forth dates in abundance and a spring of water began to flow there.

However, Onuphrius said, his face shining: "I mostly feed and quench my thirst on the sweet words of God." To Paphnutius' question: "How do you receive Communion?" the Hermit replied that an Angel of God brought him Holy Communion every Saturday. The next day, the Elder said to Paphnutius that this would be the day of his departure from this world. He knelt in prayer and quietly gave up his spirit to God. At that moment, Paphnutius saw a heavenly light as it illumined the body of the reposed Saint and heard the singing of Angelic Hosts.

Having buried the body of Onuphrius, Paphnutius returned to his Monastery and related to others the wondrous life of this man and the greatness of God's Providence which always nourishes and protects those who have completely given themselves over to the service of God. Onuphrius died in the year 400 A.D.

Perhaps it is the thought of God being able to keep a man alive for so many years in a situation where most could only live for a few days that has inspired Eastern Christians and led them to honour St. Onuphrius. Although it is not immediately obvious, we too live in deserts for even though comforts, food, clothing and shelter abound, their very abundance often leads to starvation of that which is most essential for a happy human life: the soul and the spirit. Without the nourishment of prayer and the sweet words of God these

atrophy and people are filled with anxiety and despair, which they seek in vain to dispel with more and more toys and pleasures. And so our lives flow by on the river of Time. Let us look to the strong figure of St. Onuphrius and recall where our true nourishment and health are to be found!