

Feast of Saint Helena

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by

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Today the Church Universal commemorates Saint Helena. As a patroness of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre, we honor her this day with elation, joy, and greater solemnity.

Saint Helena was born in Illyricum, a province of the Roman Empire in modern day Albania, in the middle of the third century. She was married to Constantius, a prominent member of the Roman military. Saint Helena traveled with her husband during his military career. When Constantius became the Caesar of Britain, Gaul, and the surrounding area, he dismissed his wife and their son Constantine. Later, Constantine assisted his father during military campaigns. Upon his father's death, the military appointed him General. Shortly after, an adversary, Maxentius, was proclaimed Emperor in Rome. In battle against Maxentius, Constantine was victorious. He did not attribute his victory to military strategy or strength. Instead, he attributed it to a vision he had many years earlier, in which he saw an elevated cross in the sky with the words, "By this sign you will conquer." Now, as emperor, he appointed Saint Helena as Mother Empress of the Roman Empire.

Saint Helena, now late in life, embraced Christianity. She was experienced in traveling the empire from accompanying her husband from one military campaign to another. Accustomed to traveling great distances coupled with her newfound faith in Christ, Saint Helena embarked on many pilgrimages to sites holy to Christians. At the age of 80 years, she made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Inspired by her son's vision, she desired to find the cross on which Jesus died. What she found was a Temple of Venus built by Hadrian at the top of Calvary. She ordered it to be destroyed. As the debris was removed, she found three crosses, many nails, and a public bill with the inscription, "INRI."

Saint Helena presented these items to Macarius the First, Bishop of Jerusalem. To discern the legitimacy of these discoveries, he took a portion of each of the three crosses to a woman afflicted with an incurable disease. He gently laid these fragments, one by one, upon her. When the second was removed and replaced by the third, the woman was made whole again instantly. For Bishop Macarius, Saint Helena, and her attendants, this divinely confirmed that relics of Our Lord's Passion had been found. When Constantine learned of the miraculous discovery, he wrote to Bishop Macarius and the rest of the Bishops of Palestine with orders to erect a church on the site where the Holy Relics were found.

Helena is a saint, not because she discovered True Cross or for her part in building the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. On their own, these are insufficient. Helena was a faithful Christian upon whom God bestowed the necessary graces to do God's Will. Even this does not

ensure sainthood. God daily imparts His many graces freely and generously to every human life. Cooperating with those graces, indeed to cooperate with God's Will, is rarely easy. Simple desire and mere intent to cooperate with God's Will is inadequate. Desire must lead to effort. Intent must manifest in action.

Saint Helena is part of the Communion of Saints because she made the effort and took the action necessary to fulfill God's Will. Her sanctity arose from her faith in Jesus Christ and in His passion, death, and resurrection which made possible our salvation. It is Saint Helena's holiness which we acknowledge and venerate today.

Saint Helena could not have known that her years of traveling the empire with the military would provide the confidence she needed to make pilgrimages, far from home, and advanced in age. We, too, have unique gifts and different experiences. We are given opportunities every day to employ these in service to God and His Will.

Saint Helena could have used her position, wealth, and influence to fulfill her desires and wants. Instead, she considered them to be mere tools to be used in service to God. Tangible wealth, specialized talents, positions of influence, or, in fact, anything we have, was given to us by God to be used for His glory. Expending ourselves in this life stores up for ourselves treasure in Heaven.

Not altogether unlike Saint Helena, our divine commands require us to make equally heroic efforts. She lived many years in and among the military of the Roman Empire. She knew acting heroically meant taking a risk. Heroic risks are most clearly seen in theatres of war. We are at war. Battles rage on every side. Conscripted or voluntarily, we are soldiers in the spiritual battle. It is made manifest in different ways and to varying degrees. Training requires setting aside earthly pleasures, esteem, and honors.

Take Constantine's vision as your own. Exemplify Saint Helena's faith, virtue, and perseverance. Fix your eyes on the Cross. Press forward. Your eternal life depends on it. When you see doubt on your brother's face, fatigue in your sister's eyes, and doubt in your own heart, point once again to the Cross and shout out the battle cry, "By this sign, you will conquer!"