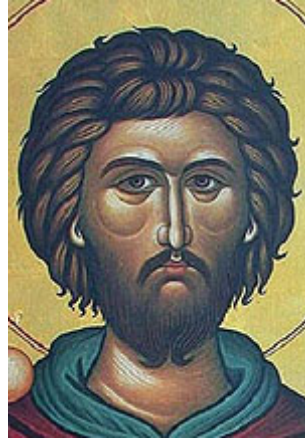
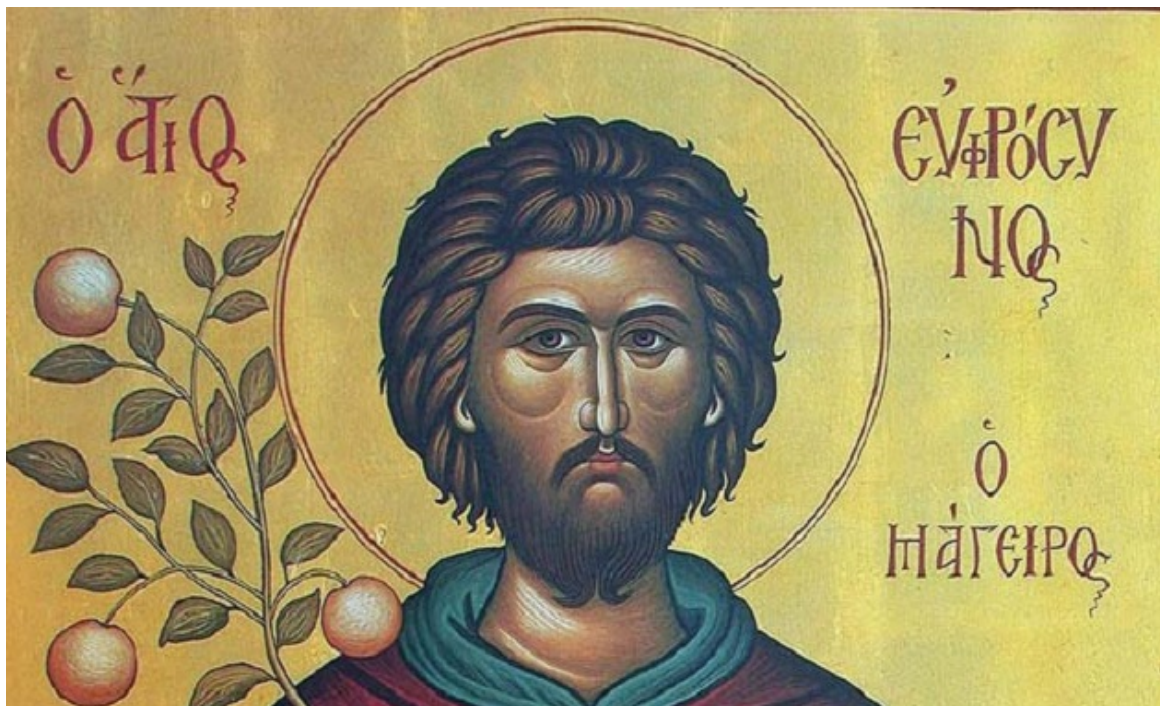


Saint Euphrosynus the Cook and the apples from heaven (Eva Topping)

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Obscurity surrounds the birth of St. Euphrosynos the Cook. No one knows when or where he lived. The names of his country and parents are unknown. The end of his life is also obscure. No one knows when or where Euphrosynos died. Fortunately, the time and place do not matter much, because we know the story of his goodness and humility.



Euphrosynos was the son of country folk, so poor and obscure as to be nameless. His family was poorer than the mice that lived in the empty little chapels in the

countryside. The parents could scarcely feed, clothe and house their children. Euphrosynos never went to school. He never learned to read or write. To the end of his life he remained an unlettered man, a simple soul.

While Euphrosynos was still a lad, poverty drove him away from his native village and his parents' roof. Cold, friendless and hungry, the poor boy drifted from place to place. From village to village, Euphrosynos wandered about, begging for a piece of bread to keep himself alive. His family never saw him again.

One afternoon, as Euphrosynos wondered whether he would find supper and shelter for the coming night, he caught sight of a monastery. The little monastery lay at some distance from the road, nestled in the curve of a hillside. Hidden by a clump of tall, dark green cypress trees, the monastery was barely visible in the late afternoon shadows. In his wanderings Euphrosynos had often stopped at monasteries. None had ever refused him food and bed. Now the weary lad quickened his steps in the direction of the little whitewashed monastery.

As he hurried, he glanced towards the West, where a fiery sun was fast disappearing behind the mountains. Euphrosynos was afraid that he might not reach the monastery in time. For he knew that when the last ray of the setting sun had vanished, the monastery gate would be shut and barred tightly for the night. Then, no matter who knocked, the gate would not be opened. Any unlucky traveler who arrived after sunset would have to wait outside the monastery walls all night. Not until the first rays of the morning sun had appeared would the gate be opened again.

Euphrosynos began to run, racing with the sun. He left the road, crossing fields and jumping over stone walls to reach the hill on which the monastery was built. Soon he found a narrow, winding path leading to the monastery gate. Breathlessly he scrambled up the narrow path, looking anxiously over his shoulder at the setting sun. He reached the gate just in time. The old monk who guarded the gate had already begun to close the great wooden door for the night. He led the breathless boy in and secured the door with two iron bolts. Then the old monk led Euphrosynos to the kitchen.

"You are lucky, my boy," he said. "Some saint was watching over you. Another second and the gate would have been locked. Follow me and we'll find you some supper and then a bed for the night." The monk in charge of the kitchen gave the young wanderer some warm soup and bread to eat. While Euphrosynos ate, he warmed himself in front of the fire burning in the hearth.

Revived by his supper and heartened by the monks' kindness, Euphrosynos then went to the monastery church where the monks had gathered to sing the evening services. This day thus ended happily for the wandering boy. Early the next morning the boy was taken to the abbot of the monastery. Euphrosynos knelt in front of the old man and reverently kissed his hand. Afraid to speak, Euphrosynos bent his head and fixed his eyes on the wooden floor.

The old abbot spoke kindly to the silent boy, encouraging him to speak. The abbot soon learned his story. There was not much to tell. Euphrosynos had left home because his poor parents could not any longer take care of him. "And so, Your Grace, I took to the road. I depend on God's will for everything. Now I beg for your mercy." Euphrosynos spoke haltingly, slowly. His voice was so low that the old abbot strained to hear his words.

The abbot felt pity for the ragged boy who had sought refuge the night before at the monastery. He had seen at once that Euphrosynos needed a home and protection. He decided that the homeless boy should remain at the monastery. "My son, stay with us. You can live here as long as you like, " he told the boy who was still on his knees before him.

Euphrosynos was grateful to the kind old abbot. He was happy to stay at the little monastery. His days of lonely wandering had ended. Euphrosynos found a new home in the peaceful monastery among the dark cypresses on the hillside. Since Euphrosynos was unlettered and unskilled, he was assigned to work in the monastery kitchen. The monks considered kitchen work the meanest of all tasks. Therefore, no monk wanted to be the cook, burdened with the dull routine of preparing food, washing pots and pans, day in and day out. Having no talents or learning, Euphrosynos was perfect for the monastery kitchen.

So that same day he was sent into the kitchen to learn his new tasks. Then he became the monastery cook. All the monks smiled and thanked Providence for sending Euphrosynos to their monastery. "What a blessing has befallen us," they said, each monk relieved that he had escaped kitchen duty. Without complaint the new cook assumed his duties. Although Euphrosynos was slow, he was patient and cheerful. He could manage the simple meals that made up the monastic diet.

In the years that followed, Euphrosynos spent most of his time in the monastery kitchen. The kitchen was a small room adjoining the refectory where the monks ate the simple meals prepared by Euphrosynos. It had a hard earthen floor. The walls and the ceiling were black, stained by the smoke from the open hearth. Food was

cooked in pots suspended from a great iron hook over the fire in the hearth.

Against one sooty wall stood an old wooden table. Shining copper pots and pans hung from pegs driven into the smoke-stained walls. On wooden shelves were stacked the plates, bowls and mugs made of red clay. Next to the kitchen door stood tall earthen jars containing water drawn from the deep well outside in the courtyard. Strings of dried vegetables and aromatic herbs hung from the smoky ceiling.

Cooking every day for the monks, Euphrosynos labored long and patiently in his dark kitchen, illuminated only by the fire in the hearth. By the end of the day, Euphrosynos' face was sometimes as sooty as the walls of his kitchen. When he was tired, he sat down to rest on a three-legged stool in a corner. Three years after his arrival in the monastery, Euphrosynos became a monk. His life, however, did not change in any way. He was still the monastery cook. No one else wanted the job. Clad now in a monk's black robes, Euphrosynos continued to labor among the copper pots and pans in the kitchen. Euphrosynos was content with his lot. He did not mind the endless drudgery of his work, or the ridicule it brought him.

The other monks always made fun of the cook, mocking his awkward ways and slow speech. But Euphrosynos accepted their ridicule humbly and patiently. He felt no ill will against them. Serene and unruffled, the monastery cook was worthy of his name, Euphrosynos, "he of the cheerful soul". Because he was the monastery cook, Euphrosynos was always the last monk to sit down at the long table in the refectory. After all the food had been served, he took his place at the farthest end of the table.

When the meal was over, the cook was also the first monk to rise and leave the table. In keeping with an old monastic tradition, Euphrosynos went to the refectory door and fell on his knees at the end of each meal. Then the abbot rose and led the monks from the refectory. As each monk passed by, the kneeling cook begged forgiveness for his bad cooking. The cook's example, it was hoped, would inspire the monks to greater humility. "Please pardon the wretched meal that your most unworthy cook prepared. Forgive me, I beg you."

Euphrosynos repeated this over and over until the last monk had left the refectory. Most of the monks ignored him. Some smiled in condescension at the kneeling cook. Often when Euphrosynos had finished his work in the kitchen he would slip away to the church, which was across the courtyard. Church and kitchen occupied most of Euphrosynos' simple life.

During the many long services celebrated by the monks, the lowly cook always stood inconspicuously in a shadowy corner of the church. From his corner Euphrosynos listened to the prayers and songs. He followed them with deep reverence and love, even though, he did not understand the words of the ancient hymns and prayers. Nevertheless he sensed their beauty and meaning. Over the years the illiterate cook learned them all by heart.

At other times the cook went to the church when he knew it was empty. There, alone in the church, Euphrosynos enjoyed peace and happiness. It was like heaven.

The simple cook gazed with wonder at the wall-paintings of saints and prophets, eternally alive and shining in the candlelight. This was a radiant, mysterious world, different from the smoke-stained kitchen where he spent many hours each day. Yet both belonged to Euphrosynos.

In time these sacred figures painted in ikons and frescoes became as familiar to Euphrosynos' as his brother monks. Unlike the mocking monks, the saints were his friends. They were kind to the slow, plodding cook. Whenever Euphrosynos looked into their eyes, the saints returned his gaze with friendship and love. The despised monastery cook spent many happy hours in their company.

Meanwhile, the other monks in the monastery knew nothing about Euphrosynos' secret spiritual life. At the sight of the cook, they never failed to laugh and scoff at his bumbling ways. He was a dullard, they thought, fit only to be their cook, nothing more. One day a miracle opened their eyes. Their lowly cook, Euphrosynos, was a saint.

Among the monks at the monastery was an old priest. For many years he had served the nearby villagers as their priest. But now he had retired and come to the monastery to devote his last days to prayers. The pious old man had had one wish for a long time. He longed for a vision of heaven. Day and night he prayed that God would let him have a glimpse of paradise. The old priest was impatient. Why could he not see heaven now? Must he wait until after death? Had he not faithfully served God? He thought that he deserved to have his prayers answered.

One evening, alone in his cell, the old priest knelt before an ikon, praying with all his soul that God would grant his wish.

"Lord, grant your servant just one look at heaven before he dies," he repeated again and again.

Finally, exhausted by his prayers, he fell asleep on the thin straw pallet spread on the floor of his cell.

Suddenly the old priest found himself far from the little monastery on the hillside. Angels from heaven had carried him to a beautiful garden. Over his head the sun shone in a spring blue sky. Soft green grass covered the earth, watered by four streams, rippling and sparkling in the bright light. Fragrant flowers, colored like the rainbow, grew everywhere. Clusters of grapes bent vines close to the earth. Trees of all kinds were heavy laden with fruit.

“Where am I?” the old priest asked himself, amazed at the beauty all around him.

“This must be paradise, Eden,” he whispered. He did not dare speak loudly for fear that at the sound of his voice this beautiful garden might vanish.

“This is what it was like in the beginning when God created the world and everything was new,” he thought.

“It was a garden like this that God planted for Adam and Eve.”

Lost in thought and wonder, the old priest stood a long time, looking about him. Then, all at once, the old priest saw that he was not alone. A black-robed figure was standing in the middle of the beautiful garden.

“Who can it be?” In his surprise the old monk spoke loudly. “A monk? This is no place for monks. Only angels live in paradise.”

The old priest forgot that he was himself a monk in black robes. With slow steps he began to walk toward the black robed figure in the middle of the garden. He drew closer. Indeed, it was a monk. Moreover, the monk looked familiar. In another moment the old priest’s feeble eyes had recognized Euphrosynos. It was the despised cook from his own monastery. The old priest was astonished at the sight of Euphrosynos in his tattered black robes.

“What was that dullard cook doing in this Eden?”

He remembered Euphrosynos, a slave in the smoky kitchen, and kneeling like a beggar at the refectory door to ask forgiveness for his bad cooking. Yet here he was in this paradise. The old man stared at the cook. No, he had not made a mistake. It was Euphrosynos. Something, however, was different. This was not exactly the same Euphrosynos he knew back at the little monastery. The cook was standing straight. His face shone with happiness. Euphrosynos appeared to be

completely at home in this paradise.

At first the old priest was speechless. When he recovered from his surprise, he addressed the cook, who seemed oblivious to his presence. Without greeting Euphrosynos or calling his name, the old priest abruptly said, "What place is this? Whose garden is it? Tell me, if you know."

Even as he asked these questions he did not expect the slow-witted cook to know the answers. But there was no one else he could ask. Only he and Euphrosynos were in the beautiful garden. The old priest was surprised when the cook answered him immediately.

"This garden belongs to God's friends. He promised it to them long ago."

The monastery cook spoke with such assurance and authority that the old priest, despite himself, believed him. God had at last answered his prayers. This was paradise. Yet he was not happy. Euphrosynos' presence had spoiled his happiness. The old priest did not wish to share Eden with the monastery cook.

"And you," he demanded rudely of Euphrosynos, "what are you doing here?"

Euphrosynos ignored his rudeness and answered the old priest quietly. "Through God's goodness I am here in this beautiful garden." As he spoke, the cook looked serenely into the old priest's eyes. The old priest heard Euphrosynos' words. But he could not believe that God's friends also included a kitchen drudge at whom everybody laughed. He, a priest, deserved to be numbered among God's friends. But slow-witted Euphrosynos? The old priest could not hide his resentment against Euphrosynos.

"Tell me, what is your business here?"

Again Euphrosynos replied quietly, with assurance and authority.

"I am lord of this paradise," he said, "lord over everything you see here."

The old priest stared at Euphrosynos with unbelieving eyes. Then he touched his ears under his tall black stovepipe hat. Had he heard correctly? Euphrosynos, the meek, unlettered kitchen slave at the monastery? He was lord of this Eden, this paradise? The old man looked again at Euphrosynos. He was certainly the monastery cook from the smoky kitchen. And just as certainly he was a friend of God. Otherwise he would not be in paradise. When the old priest next spoke to Euphrosynos, his manner changed.

"Can you," he asked politely and hesitantly, "can you give me something from this garden?"

"Yes, I can," Euphrosynos replied promptly. "By God's grace I can give you whatever you like. You have only to choose and tell me what you want."

The old priest slowly looked around him. What should he choose from among the marvels of paradise? A golden yellow flower or a cluster of purple grapes? Then he saw some shining red apples that grew on the tallest tree in the garden.

"May I have some of those apples?" he asked, pointing to the tall apple tree.

Euphrosynos went to the tree, picked some red apples and handed them to the old priest. The old man took them and put them in a big pocket of his black robes. As he was putting the red apples into his pocket, the old priest heard Euphrosynos saying, "May you enjoy these apples, Reverend Father."

At that moment the old priest was suddenly awakened by the wooden gong in the monastery courtyard. A monk was rousing the monastery by striking his wooden mallet against the wooden gong.

"Whack, whack, whack," the low sounds echoed in the dark stillness. 'Whack, whack, whack.' The silence of deep night was broken as monks awoke to start a new day.

The old priest sat up on his thin, straw pallet on the floor of his cell. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he looked around him. The beautiful garden had disappeared. A bright sun no longer shone in a spring blue sky. Euphrosynos was nowhere to be seen. Nor the tall apple tree. Instead, he was alone in his little monastery cell. The cell was dark, except for the feeble, unsteady light of a dying candle which burned in front of an ikon in the corner.

"I have been dreaming," he muttered sadly. He was very disappointed.

God had not granted him a vision of heaven after all. Satan had sent an idle dream to deceive him. Alarmed at this thought, the old priest quickly crossed himself three times to protect himself against the evil spirit. "Even those beautiful red apples were a part of the deception," he concluded, half weeping in fear.

At the thought of the apples, the old man thrust his right hand into the pocket of his black robes. His trembling fingers soon touched something round and firm. Carefully he removed his hand from his big pocket. And there in the palm of his

right hand lay the shining red apples that Euphrosynos had given him from the tallest tree in paradise.

In the sputtering light of his single candle the old man examined the apples. They glowed mysteriously, streaking the darkness of his cell with new light. The red apples filled the little cell with a fragrance sweeter than the most costly incense. The apples were real. They proved that he had been in paradise. God had answered his prayers.

"It is a miracle," the old man cried, tears of joy running down his raisin-wrinkled cheeks. "It is true. I have seen heaven. God be praised for his goodness to me."

The old priest remained motionless for a long time. Holding the bright red apples in his hands, he sat on the straw pallet spread on the cell floor. The again doubts dispelled his joy. Satan was a clever deceiver. Had he not tempted Adam and Eve with an apple? In terror the old priest looked at the red apples shining in his hands. Afraid now to hold them, he laid the apples on the little shelf under the ikon.

Had the apples come from heaven? Or was it another trick of Satan's? He must find Euphrosynos at once. Euphrosynos had given him the apples. Only the monastery cook could tell him the truth. The old man left his cell, stumbling, he stepped into the darkness of the hour just before dawn. The first faint light had not yet appeared in the East. The courtyard was deserted, since all the monks had already gathered in the church to greet the new day with psalms. The muted sounds of chanting guided the old man's steps towards the church.

With shaking hands he managed to open the heavy doors. Inside the church the monks were singing. The old priest quickly found Euphrosynos. He stood in his usual place, a black-robed, meek figure, hidden in a shadowy corner of the church. The old man beckoned the cook to follow him.

Euphrosynos obeyed and the two monks went out into the dark courtyard. No word was spoken. The old priest and Euphrosynos stopped by the marble fountain in front of the church. The cook waited respectfully for the old priest to speak first. But the old man said nothing. He did not know how to begin.

While they waited in silence, the first grey fingers of morning light appeared in the East. Soon the old priest could see Euphrosynos' face in the grey light. The old man began to speak. He asked Euphrosynos to swear an oath that he would answer truthfully a question he wanted to ask him. This strange request did not trouble the cook. He had never in his life told an untruth. He did not hesitate to swear the oath.

"My son," the old priest began, "tell me, where were you tonight?"

"I was here in the monastery, Reverend Father,"

Euphrosynos replied, "I was in my cell and then in the church where you found me."

The old priest looked at the cook. He waited a minute before continuing.

"Tonight God performed a miracle. You know about it, but for some reason you are unwilling to reveal it. My son, I beg you, tell me the truth."

Euphrosynos smiled and his face reflected the light of heaven. His shining eyes looked at the old priest who waited in agony to hear his answer.

"Yes, Reverend Father, God performed a miracle tonight, This night I was in paradise, the place prepared by God for his friends. You saw me there. For you were in paradise too."

Euphrosynos' words reassured the old priest. But he needed one more proof of the truth of the miracle. The old man spoke slowly. The echo of each word vanished into the morning quiet before the next word was spoken. In the silence the old man could hear his heart beat, It sounded as loudly as the whack of the wooden gong that had awakened him.

"Father Euphrosynos, what did you give me tonight from that beautiful garden?"

This was the first time that anybody had addressed the lowly monastery cook as "Father Euphrosynos."

But Euphrosynos noticed the respectful address no more than he had the ridicule of his brother monks.

"Reverend Father," the cook said simply, "I gave you those beautiful red apples that you have in your cell."

The old priest fell on his knees and gave thanks to God. His prayers had been answered. It was true. God had performed a miracle and granted him a vision of paradise.

As soon as the morning service was over, the old priest hurried to tell the miracle to the abbot. In the presence of all the monks the old priest told the story of his vision and the miracle. He showed them the beautiful red apples from heaven that Euphrosynos the cook had given him.

Everyone turned to look at Euphrosynos. He was standing meekly in the back of the room, his hands folded in front of him, his eyes looking down at the wooden floor. It was the same room in which long ago the kindly abbot had invited the homeless boy to stay at the monastery.

Euphrosynos, the scorned, unlettered cook, was revealed to be God's friend and lord of paradise. And they, his brother monks, had laughed at him for years and never known him. Pride had blinded their hearts and they had failed to recognize the saint who toiled in the smoky kitchen. Now a miracle had brought to light Euphrosynos' holiness, the purity of his spirit.

The story of the miracle and the divine apples spread rapidly throughout the countryside. Throngs of pilgrims came to the little white-washed monastery to see Euphrosynos and the beautiful apples from heaven. Soon it was discovered that the apples had miraculous powers of healing. From far and near the sick came to be cured. When they touched the beautiful red apples they were cured at once. Euphrosynos, the saintly cook, and the apples from heaven brought the little monastery fame and riches. But Euphrosynos remained humble, serenely content in service to others. His peace and solitude, however, had gone. The pilgrims who came to the monastery would not leave unless they first saw Euphrosynos. They crowded into the dark, smoky kitchen to ask his blessing. When his simple life of cooking and worship was no longer possible, Euphrosynos left the little monastery. He left one day and was never seen again. To the world Euphrosynos the Cook gave the unfading radiance of his goodness and humility, and the miraculous apples, his gift of love. Ikons of St. Euphrosynos the Cook show a saint holding a branch of shining red apples.

The eleventh day of September is sacred to his memory.

Source: *Sacred stories from Byzantium* by Eva C. Topping
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