

Greek Orthodox church celebrates a rare honor

St. Anna congregation blessed to receive a relic of Jesus' grandmother

By Kim Minugh -- Bee Staff Writer

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Like every other July 25, Anna Kimak spent Monday celebrating the feast day of her namesake, St. Anna.

But on this particular July 25, St. Anna joined the festivities.

Kimak attended a special Feast of St. Anna in Roseville inspired by a skull fragment of Jesus' grandmother. It is just the size of a guitar pick, but 200 faithful said that was enough to bathe them in the spirit of the venerated saint.

"This is the nicest day of my life," said Kimak, of Lincoln. "I've had 57 years of name days, but today is special. Now I like (my name) even more."

Greek Orthodox believers, Christians of many denominations and the just plain curious flocked to Roseville on Sunday and Monday to view a rare gift to the fledgling St. Anna Greek Orthodox Church - a bone fragment that traveled from a small monastery on Mount Athos in northern Greece.

The relic is the first of St. Anna's to reach American soil and will transform the church into a shrine to its patron saint.

Eventually, officials hope to house the relic in a grand new church complete with a gold dome, a vineyard and orchards, a marked contrast to its humble beginnings in a Roseville office complex.

There is no other Greek Orthodox church in the United States dedicated to Jesus' grandmother. Congregation members hope their church's new significance will make it a place of pilgrimage, a destination for Christians of all beliefs.



Anne Banks kisses a box holding a religious relic of St. Anna, Jesus' grandmother, at a feast at St. Anna Greek Orthodox Church in Roseville on Monday. At right is the Very Rev. Father Archimandrite Cheroubim Apostolou, who escorted the relic from Greece; at center is the Rev. Michael Stearns of Fort Worth, Texas.

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"(The relic is) ancient. It's authentic. It's wonder-working," said the church's director of religious education Margaret Mueller, referring to the bone's strong scent of myrrh, which is believed to be evidence of its holiness.

"For people who are faithful, this is a unique and unprecedented opportunity to come into direct contact with something so holy."

Believers and clerics came from all over Northern California, and as far away as Texas, to see the relic, which was encased in an ornate silver box.

On Monday, believers approached the box one by one, genuflecting, or crossing themselves, and kissing the glass cover. Some bowed or touched the ground. A few shed tears.

"The relic is of great significance. It's history," said 71-year-old Tina Karres of Folsom, who said she cried upon seeing the relic. "If you really believe, it makes your hair stick up. It gives you goosebumps."

Many described the experience as exciting, yet awe-inspiring and humbling. Others felt tongue-tied and mesmerized.

"It was just an incredible feeling - something it's hard to describe," said Dimitri Karnoookh, 44, of Rocklin. "It's something you really feel in your heart if you understand the meaning behind it."

No one expressed doubts of the relic's authenticity. They said the church's long history, and their faith, cemented their belief.

"You can feel the authenticity. You can feel the genuineness," said Timothy Mort of Cameron Park. "You can't imitate a relic."

The veneration of saints plays an important role in the Greek Orthodox faith. Believers honor them as examples of holiness and godliness, of the way lives are meant to be led.

Relics provide a connection to those saints, said the Very Rev. Father Archimandrite Cheroubim Apostolou, the Greek priest who escorted St. Anna's bone fragment to Roseville.

People are drawn to the fragment, he said, because it is seen as a bridge between what is called "the church triumphant" - the spiritual world in heaven - and "the church militant" - the human world on Earth.

"She's an intermediary for us," he said. "It's not just a bone, or a social event. People were crying. People were praying, seeking help ... (and) strength."

Apostolou said the relic originated in Jerusalem, but later traveled to Cypress and then to Mount Athos, where many relics are kept in monasteries. The majority of St. Anna's skull resides in a Roman Catholic church in Germany, he said.

The Rev. Chris Flesoras, the parish priest at St. Anna's Greek Orthodox Church, inquired about obtaining a relic for his church when he met Apostolou at a funeral. At first, his chances looked grim: Apostolou warned that getting religious authorities on Mount Athos to agree can be difficult.

But after a few weeks of e-mailing, Flesoras received the happy news that the monastic authorities had deemed his church a worthy recipient of St. Anna's bone.

"It was an exciting e-mail," Flesoras said.

Church authorities now are focusing on building a worthy home for St. Anna.

The church has grown to 175 families, and officials hope to break ground next year on 5 acres donated by developer Angelo Tsakopoulos at the corner of Stone Canyon Drive and East Roseville Parkway.

Plans include a 60-foot-diameter gold dome, a grape vineyard and an olive tree orchard.

The fruit will be used to make wine and olive oil for religious services.

Though fundraising will be the next significant hurdle for the church, congregation members are confident their dreams will be realized.

Already, they believe St. Anna's arrival is a good omen for her Roseville followers.

"To start with nothing and make it up to this point, with a relic," Karres said, "that's a miracle."

WHO IS ST. ANNA?

Anna is the traditional name of the mother of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Her feast is celebrated on July 25, which may be the day of the dedication of her first church at Constantinople or the anniversary of the arrival of her relics in Constantinople in 710 A.D.

Source: Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, Calendar of Saints

WHAT IS A RELIC?

The body or body part of a religious figure, or some object associated with him/her, kept and revered as a memorial in some churches.

TO VIEW THE RELIC

The relic will be available for viewing at 6:30 p.m. Wednesday at St. Anna Greek Orthodox Church, 114 N. Sunrise Ave., Suite A1, Roseville.

About the writer:

- The Bee's Kim Minugh can be reached at (916) 773-7359 or kminugh@sacbee.com.