

Infertility and the Intercessions of Sts. Joachim & Anna

by Rev. Dr. Christopher Flesoras

On the Feast of the Dormition of St. Anna in 2005, our parish, dedicated to and seeking the intercessions of St. Anna, the maternal grandmother of Christ, received a Holy Relic from the *dikaio*s (superintendent) of the Skete of Saint Anna on Mount Athos, Archimandrite Cherubim Apostolou. Then on the Feast day of Joachim and Anna in 2007, the parish was further blessed to receive additional holy relics of Joachim and Anna from the Theophileon Brotherhood of the Skete.

The initial gifting was met with a media storm; the latter gifting was celebrated with over 2,000 Christians venerating their Holy Relics at both the Roman Catholic Cathedral and our parish. These saints, spiritually and now physically present with us, remain intercessors who soften hearts, gladden souls, and hear the prayers of all those who desire a sincere relationship with Christ.

In 2007, as the Metropolis of San Francisco founded the Family Wellness Center, Metropolitan Gerasimos dedicated the parish as a Metropolis shrine, with this prayer:

“Most merciful Master, Lord Jesus Christ our God...You also came to Cana-in-Galilee and blessed the marriage there, to show that lawful marriage and the bearing of children is Your will. Being mindful of the need to preserve the sanctity of the home, made firm through the prayers of grandparents, parents, brothers, sisters, and kin, we beseech You to hear our prayer.

“Cast aside every trial, the temptation, and the tribulation that besets the members of our Christian family—young and old alike, those who persevere in virginity, those who are married, those who are widowed, and those who are divorced.

“Strengthen, preserve, and sanctify us in Your peace, the estate of marriage, and the nurturing of children through the dedication of this Shrine, which shall seek the intercessions of Saints Joachim and Anna, spiritually and physically ever present in her midst.”

Family



Connections

This distinction as a Shrine dedicated to the sanctity of marriage and family through their prayers is unique. Through the Grace of God, the Shrine is addressing real needs as numerous individuals continue to seek the intercessions of the Saints through prayer requests and parish visitations.

The most common petition is for those couples who struggle with infertility.

Although there are other saints who are petitioned for childlessness, Joachim and Anna retain a special standing because their story is so familiar. Joachim and Anna did everything right.

They were faithful to God and the Temple; they prayed, fasted, gave alms in excess of what was expected, studied the Law, and labored in virtue, yet they remained childless.

Like other couples in such a circumstance, they were troubled and perplexed by their inability to conceive. Weeping over his infertility, Joachim went to a shepherd's field and prayed.

With inconsolable tears, Anna lamented her childlessness. Only after recounting God's blessings upon Sarah and Hannah, Anna lifted her tear-filled eyes to heaven and prayed.

After nearly 50 years of marriage and unwavering faith, Joachim and Anna were granted a daughter, Mary, the ever-Virgin mother of our Lord.

Having a special affinity for the plight of Joachim and Anna, and recognizing not only their faithfulness but also the powerful manner by which the Lord responded to their prayers, Christians in like circumstances have sought their intercessions for nearly two millennia.

Since the time the Skete of St. Anna was entrusted with a relic of their matron, couples everywhere began writing, asking for her intercession.

To this day, it is not uncommon for husbands to travel and climb the 5,000 steps to the church to venerate her relic and pray before her icon.

The Skete has therefore included a unique petition in their services to formally petition Saint Anna on behalf of infertile couples: “Again we pray for health, salvation, and fertility for the servants of God (names) and for their deliverance from sterility or barrenness.”

It must however be noted that the gift of children is but one of the many blessings we seek from God when He “makes the two one”; the bearing of children is neither automatic nor guaranteed.

Though the gift of procreation can

never be trivialized within Christian marriage, in like manner neither should childbearing be considered the sole function or focus of marriage.

The inability to have a child in no way undermines the presence of God's grace and blessing. After all, there are countless wonderful married couples who offer many prayers, read the Scriptures, attend services, keep the fasts, give alms, frequently receive the sacraments, venerate relics, and follow prescribed disciplines of a monastery or parish, who nevertheless remain unable to have their own child. This couple is as loved by God, His Church, and His people as anyone else.

Involuntary childlessness should never be equated with a curse, sin, shame, or faithlessness.

The Church as an instrument of God's Grace does everything she can to assist these couples, but at the same time she prays that should a couple exhaust all efforts and realize that such a gift is not a part of God's plan for them, that they welcome other ways to exhibit and share the love generated by their marriage.

Hence while praying for these couples, the Church also encourages couples to discover the gift of adoption and thereby embrace the blessed example of St. Joseph the Betrothed, the adoptive father of Jesus.

It is also hoped that couples discover the great privilege and profound responsibility of spiritual adoption by serving as godparents through Baptism

or Chrismation; a relationship that according to canonical tradition is equal to blood relatives.

In any instance, it's with great devotion to the saints as well as a true sense of awe and humble obligation that our community, the only parish of our Archdiocese of America formally commemorating St. Anna and possessing holy relics of both ancestors of Christ, now also offers special prayers for those couples who struggle with infertility (names of couples are also forwarded to the Theophileon Brotherhood at the Skete for inclusion in their devotionals).

Whether it be the veneration of their Relics, the devotion to items blessed over their relics, the anointing with oil from the vigil light, fervent prayers, commemoration in services, or the prayers of the faithful and the brotherhood, by God's Grace and with the intercessions of Sts. Joachim and Anna, many couples who once struggled with infertility have since been blessed with children.

May these ancestors of Christ ever intercede on our behalf!

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A Prayer of Supplication

To Christ's ancestors let us cry out most piously,
All we who keep sacred feast,
Asking for their intercessions;
For they have received
at God's throne
Boldness and true grace divine
To have mercy upon us;
For they gave birth wondrously
To the pure Ever-virgin;
Therefore, deliver our souls
from every grief,
Blessed Joachim and wise Anna,
true Saints of God.



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