

Little Relic, Great Weight
Modesto native brings to north state
'a direct link to Christ'

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When Modesto native Christopher Flesoras returned from a trip to Greece earlier this year, he brought back a unique memento. Wrapped in cotton and placed in his pocket was a quarter-size piece of the skull of Jesus' grandmother, Anna.

The bone fragment is known as a holy relic, part of the remains of a saint or items that have come in contact with the sacred body of a saint.

Flesoras, a Greek Orthodox priest who leads St. Anna's Greek Orthodox Church in Roseville, was given the yellowish-brown piece of skull by the head of a monastery on Mount Athos in Greece.

"Carrying the relic back to America was overwhelming on many levels," said Flesoras, 33, who was born and raised in Modesto. (He attended Modesto's Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation and graduated from Davis High in 1989.)

"Spiritually, thinking we are carrying the grandmother of Christ is a bit overwhelming," he said. "Physically, where do you keep this on your person? It's not necessarily something you claim at customs. ... We were trying to be very respectful and thoughtful."

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

According to tradition, Anna and her husband, Joachim, were childless for 50 years but conceived by the grace of God at an advanced age. Anna bore a daughter, Mary, who, after Anna's death, gave birth to Jesus.

Holy relics of St. Anna were collected and venerated by early Christians. Her relics became the possession of the Church of Jerusalem and later were given to the Christian Patriarch of Antioch and the Holy Monastery of Kykkos on the island of Cyprus, an early Christian community.

Today, her relics are venerated in the Orthodox patriarchal centers of Jerusalem and Antioch, the Skete of St. Anna, a Catholic church in Germany, and now in Roseville.

The bone fragment at St. Anna's, encased in an ornate silver box, exudes the scent of myrrh and beads with myrrh-scented moisture, priests say.

"There is almost a scent of roses," said the Rev. Jon Magoulias, priest at Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation in Modesto. "This is not uncommon with relics. We think of death and we think of the stench of death, the corruption of the body. But for the saints and those sanctified by God, for the Christian believer, death is not the end. ... For many of these relics, there is a beautiful aroma that comes from them that reminds us of the beauty of the life beyond the grave."

Hundreds of faithful and curious gathered at the Roseville church late last month to attend services and view the relic. Believers and clerics came from all over Northern California, and as far away as Texas, to see the bone fragment.

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

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."

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.

Flesoras brought the relic to Modesto in March so it could be venerated during services at the Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation, where he was ordained a deacon in 1996, a year before he became a priest.

"To have (St. Anna's) relic here, the mother of the Virgin Mary, is unique," Magoulias said. "It reminds us that the Virgin Mary was a real person, that she gave herself to God and was obedient to his will and was the vessel by which Christ was born."

Having the relic in Modesto was a special experience for his parish, which is dedicated to the Virgin Mary, Magoulias said. Local parishioners were able to directly kiss and touch the relic.

"It reminds us of God's love and the continuation of his spirit working in people," said Magoulias, who attended recent St. Anna's feast day services in Roseville. The relic also visited parishes in Stockton, Sacramento and Castro Valley — and Holy Cross church in Belmont, where Flesoras was ordained a priest.

Now that the relic is back in Roseville, it is brought out for people to show their respect and offer prayers during services, though it remains in a box.

Flesoras has been deluged with phone calls and e-mails since he brought the relic to the United States. More than 500 people attended one recent service, and another attracted

more than 200 people, most of them Episcopalian and Catholic. His congregation has membership of 160 to 175 families.

"(The relic) is part of this whole plan of salvation that unfolded," Flesoras said. "You have a direct link to Christ, (his) maternal grandmother. Anyone that really pays homage to Jesus and has respect for his mother should have respect for his grandmother. ... It's a physical link to the person of Jesus."

An incredible journey

Though thousands of people from around the world visit the Mount Athos peninsula in Greece for spiritual edification, it is unusual to be given a holy relic as a gift, Flesoras said.

"It was just heaven-sent, the way it came about," Flesoras said. "There was a divine hand working in this somewhere."

Flesoras first inquired about obtaining a relic for his church in December, when he met the Very Rev. Father Archimandrite Cheroubim Apostolou, superintendent of the Skete of St. Anna of the Monastery of Great Lavra on Mount Athos, at a funeral in San Francisco.

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. There is no other Greek Orthodox church in the United States dedicated to Jesus' grandmother.

"It was an exciting e-mail," Flesoras said. Apostolou formally gifted it to St. Anna's during a service in Roseville on July 24.

Flesoras, his father, Modesto barber Dean Flesoras, and his father-in-law, Jim Kyriazis of Anaheim Hills, traveled to Greece to pick up the relic in February. They were dropped off by boat at the base of the Skete of St. Anna, the oldest and largest skete (a cloister or small settlement affiliated with a monastery) on Mount Athos. Mount Athos is home to more than 20 monasteries, mostly Greek Orthodox.

The skete is about 1,650 feet up, on the cliffs above the Aegean Sea. The men climbed 2,000 snow-dusted stairs to get to the skete's main courtyard. They stayed at the monastery six days.

"It was magnificent," Christopher Flesoras said. "The services were beautiful. The hospitality of the monks was very kind and genuine." The skete is home to more than 120

monks. Its library also houses about 100 manuscript Scriptures, holy relics of various saints, icons and liturgical items, as well as what is believed to be the left foot of St. Anna, the skete's matron.

"Venerating this artifact of the mother of Mary, who was the mother of Jesus, was spiritually, intellectually and emotionally overwhelming," Flesoras said.

Flesoras had been to the holy mountain once before. In 1995, he traveled to the site on a pilgrimage with seminary schoolmates.

Returning to the "civilization" of Athens — and home — was an adjustment, Flesoras said of the recent trip. "It was so incredibly peaceful and tranquil," he said. "It was a quiet we are not normally used to."

While on the trip, the three men also visited a monastery built on the place St. Paul preached to the Thessalonians, the Church of St. Demetrius, which contains the relics of St. Demetrius, the patron saint of Thessalonica, the cathedral in Athens and relatives.

Flesoras has a long family history tracing back to Greece. His mother was born on the island of Crete. His paternal great-grandfather was the first Greek Orthodox priest west of the Mississippi, serving at the cathedral in San Francisco. His maternal grandfather, the Very Rev. Emmanuel Papageorge, now 94, is pastor emeritus at Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation, where he served from 1948 to 1964.

Flesoras often returns to Modesto, where his parents, Dean and Angie, live.

He hopes having the relic of St. Anna at his Roseville church will make it a destination for faithful of all backgrounds. The trip to obtain the relic and having it here was a spiritual and moving experience for all three men, he said.

"Being entrusted with and gifted this relic was simply beyond belief," Flesoras said, "and most humbling."

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