

Christian Treasures Organization

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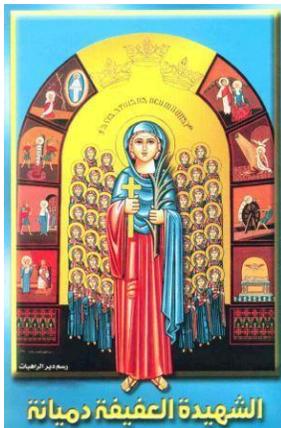
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Life Story of the Chaste Saint Demiana and the 40 Virgins



Coptic orthodox icon of Saint Demiana and her 40 virgin nuns. Icon painted by nuns of St. Demiana's Monastery, 1996.

Birth and Childhood of St. Demiana:

Near the end of the third century, there lived a Christian man named Mark. He was the governor of El-Borollos and El-Zaafaran districts in the Northern delta of the Nile River in Egypt. Mark had an only child named Demiana; her beauty and virtuous character were legendary, and her father loved her dearly. Demiana's mother reposed in the Lord when she was a young child, and her father did his utmost to raise her virtuously in Christ. St. Demiana loved to pray and read the holy books in the seclusion of her room.²

Fleeing from the World:

When Saint Demiana turned 15, her father wanted her to marry one of his noble friends, however, she refused to do so. She said she had devoted herself as a bride to Christ and intended to live in celibacy for the rest of her life to serve her lord, Jesus Christ. St. Demiana requested her father to build her an isolated house on the outskirts of the city where she could live with her virgin friends, fleeing from the world and its temptations.¹

Monastic Life:

Knowing her deep desire for the virtuous life, her father granted her wish and built her a large palace in the wilderness. St. Demiana changed the palace into the beginning of a Coptic orthodox coenobitic monastery for nuns by living the monastic, ascetic life with her forty virgin friends; the Lord's hand was upon them, giving them strength and comfort. St. Demiana was their abbess; they spent their time fasting, doing handiwork, reading the holy books and praying fervently to God. Often, St. Demiana spent time in the seclusion of her room, praying and crying, as she felt the love of Jesus filling her heart.²

Persecution by the Pagan Emperor Diocletian:

At that time, Diocletian, the pagan emperor, began to torture and kill Christians who refused to worship his idols, Apollo and Artemis. When Mark was ordered to kneel before the idols and offer incense, he refused initially; however, after some persuasion, he consented to worshipping the idols, forsaking the Creator of the universe.¹

Confrontation between St. Demiana and her Father Mark:

When news came to St. Demiana that her father had denied Christ and had kneeled and offered incense before the idols, she quickly left her palace and went immediately to see her father.¹ Upon meeting him, she said: "What have I heard about you? I wish I had heard the news of your death rather than knowing that you have forsaken God, who created you, and worshipped what is made by hands. How could you deny your Savior who shed His blood to save you and kneel down to stone idols inhabited by Satan? What you did, my father, is cowardly and shameful. If you insist on what you have done and do not relent by denouncing the idols, then you are not my father and I am not your daughter. It is better for you, O my father, that you die as a martyr and live with Christ in heaven forever than to live as a pagan here and die with the devil in hell forever."¹ She then departed.¹

Mark Repented:

Her father was moved by her words and wept bitterly.¹ He repented and said, "I am a sinner. Hastily I depended on these stone idols, and bowed to the dwelling of the devil. Blessed is the hour in which I realized, O blessed Son, to be delivered from the deep pit; and in this hour I am on the wings of the wind. I am ready for death in the name of the Savior, Jesus Christ, my God. I believe, and in His name do I rely, will die, be with Him, and live forever."²

Mark's Faith Restored:

Mark traveled immediately to Antioch to see Emperor Diocletian.² Mark said to Emperor Diocletian: "How could you have left the worship of the God of heaven and earth and worship idols made by rocks and wood, who are deaf and mute, and embedded by Satan? The name of Jesus is good, blessed be the name of Jesus, the living name of Jesus."² Mark then crossed his face with the sign of the cross in front of the emperor, soldiers, princes and all people, then shouted, I believe in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, One God, amen.²

Diocletian was furious and said, "I have tried to keep our friendship but your insult against me in front of all the people has made you my enemy. Now they may all act the same as you."² He ordered Mark to quickly reconsider and bow down to the idols.² Mark refused and said, "There is no God in heaven or on earth except Jesus Christ. I will die in His name."²

Mark's Martyrdom:

The emperor ordered Mark to be beheaded by the sword there in Antioch, and he earned the crown of martyrdom in the early 4th century. The feast day of his martyrdom is commemorated on July 12, Abee 5 (Coptic calendar).²

Emperor Diocletian Persecutes St. Demiana:

When Emperor Diocletian learned that it was Mark's daughter, St. Demiana, who had persuaded her father to deny his idols and return to worshipping Jesus Christ, he ordered one of his commanders, who was a prince, to attack her palace with one hundred soldiers.² Diocletian ordered him: "First, try to convince her to worship our idols by offering her riches and glory, but if she refuses then threaten her, torture her, and even behead her and her virgins to make her an example for the other Christians."²

When St. Demiana saw the soldiers approaching her palace, she prayed to God to strengthen their faith unto death. She told her 40 virgin friends: "If you are willing to die for Jesus' sake

then you may stay, but if you cannot withstand the torments of the soldiers then hurry and escape now.”² The forty virgins cried and replied, “You are the cause that we left the world and came to the monastery, thus we will not leave, we will die with you.”²

The prince relayed Diocletian's message to St. Demiana by saying: "I am an envoy sent by Emperor Diocletian. I command you by his orders to worship his gods so that he may grant you whatsoever you wish."²

St. Demiana shouted: "Cursed be to the messenger and him who sent him. Are you not ashamed to call stones and wood, gods? They are dwelling places of devils. There is no other God in heaven or on earth besides the one and only true God--the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit--the Creator, who has no beginning and no end; the omnipresent and omniscient God who will throw you in hell for eternal condemnation. As for me, I worship my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and His Good Father and the Holy Spirit--the Holy Trinity--I profess Him, depend on Him, and in His name I will die and by Him I will live forever.”¹

Her Torments:

The prince was enraged with St. Demiana and ordered his soldiers to torture her in many vicious and cruel ways. Only five of her torments were recorded in manuscripts:

- 1. Body Press (Hinbazeen)**—St. Demiana was tied onto the outer surface of a large stationary wheel (like a watermill) by four robust soldiers who turned her on the wheel, pressing her against metal spikes which raked off her flesh.²

St. Demiana lifted her eyes to heaven and cried: “O the one and only begotten of the Father, the eternal Son, Jesus Christ, who was raised on the holy cross by the Jews, crucified between two thieves by Your own will, raise my mind, O my God, above worldly cares which scatter the mind from the remembrance of Your heavenly providence and accept my little toil for Your name’s sake, for Yours is the glory and great reverence, now and forever and ever, amen.”² St. Demiana’s flesh and bones became like dough as her blood poured upon the ground like water. All those present were amazed. The soldiers were exhausted from torturing her.²

The virgins wept while observing the torture.² St. Demiana said to them, “Weep not my sisters because Jesus Christ, to Him be glory, endured suffering for our salvation and died in flesh although He sinned not, yet died in flesh on behalf of Adam and his descendants to save them from hell. If God Almighty accepted crucifixion and death on His own will, having not committed any sin, how much more must I, His servant, obey Him. I accept death as sweetness, as said by the apostle Paul, Romans 8:18 *“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.”*²

Afterwards, they threw her torn-up body in prison. St. Demiana suffered immense pain which is the cost of martyrs and saints, yet the heavenly joy and reward are indescribably much greater. The virgins wept, then slept as St. Demiana endured her great pain. Suddenly, Archangel Michael appeared, illuminated the prison, greeted her and touched her with his celestial wings and healed her completely, endowing peace upon her, before he ascended to heaven in great glory.²

The next morning, the prince ordered St. Demiana to be brought to the Governing Council. When he saw that St. Demiana had been healed without a single wound or scratch on her body, he said, “O truly Demiana, your magic supersedes Ozark.”² The crowd screamed, saying, “O unjust prince, may you and your infidel emperor be burnt. We declare we are all Christians and

we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ--the God of this chaste saint, St. Demiana. We will die the same death as this saint--the virgin bride of Christ.”² The prince ordered them all to be beheaded by the sword. No one dared to take their bodies, which were next to St. Demiana’s palace. They earned the crowns of martyrdom and became intercessors for people. May their blessings be upon us all forever, amen.²

2. Iron combs—The soldiers slashed St. Demiana's body with sharp iron combs, tearing off her flesh, then rubbed her open wounds with a boiling mixture of aged vinegar, lime and swine hair, causing excruciatingly severe, burning pain.²

Afterwards, they threw her into a dark prison with the rest of her virgins who were weeping in great sadness.² Amidst St. Demiana’s intense pain and suffering, she prayed fervently with her virgins, saying: “O my Lord and God, the Creator of heaven and earth and all therein; who is merciful and compassionate; who in His mercy listens to the poor who calls upon You from a pure heart; who provides their needs for their salvation; now, O Master, I, Your weak and poor servant, strengthen me to bear the pain and give me power to win over the enemies of God who obey the devil; deliver me by Your name and allow me to be in company with Your saints--those before me--because You are the good God, lover of mankind; to Thee is due glory and honor forever and ever, amen.”²

After her prayers, Archangel Michael appeared to her, spread his celestial wings above her and illuminated the prison. When the virgins saw the light, they were astonished. Archangel Michael said to her, “The peace of the Lord Jesus Christ and His Good Father and the Holy Spirit be unto you, O young chaste virgin, perfect Demiana.”² He touched her with his celestial wings and healed her of all her wounds and pain, then ascended to heaven.²

St. Demiana said to her virgins: “Awake my sisters, for the Lord has sent His angel to heal me, I, the weak servant. I thank Him because He has revealed His power in me as said by Paul the apostle, [^{NKJ} 2 Corinthians 12:9] “*My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.*” The weakness of God is stronger than the mighty power of the strong. May all thanks, glory and honor be unto God for ages of ages, and forever, amen.”²

The prince said to his soldiers: “Go see if she is still alive in prison. If yes then throw her to the wild dogs. Report quickly back to me if she is dead, hence we will return without delay to our emperor, to rest from all this burden, struggle and toil. We have stayed a long time here from Antioch and rumors of our absence will reach the emperor.”²

In prison, they found St. Demiana sitting, her face glowing with splendor like the sun. They brought her to the prince at the Governing Council, whereby she said to him, "You have the god of stone with you and I have my God Jesus Christ with me. O enemies of God; worshipers of idols doomed to failure, you are slaves of statues. There is no God in heaven or on earth except the God of the Christians--Jesus Christ, God and Creator for all mankind who healed me from the torments, O you faithless ones. O all you present, you all saw me yesterday when I was in immense pain and suffering, now I am well, my Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ healed me.”²

The crowd shouted, “There is no other God on earth and in heaven except the God of St. Demiana, the God of the Christians. Now we believe in the chaste and Holy God of Saint Demiana.”² The people were from neighboring villages. When the prince heard this, he beheaded them all with the sword, and they received the crown of martyrdom. No one was able to take their bodies; their bodies were left with the rest of the bodies martyred before them beside

the palace. They became intercessors for sinners in paradise. May their blessings be upon us all, amen.²

The prince said to St. Demiana, "Enough - you have caused the bloodshed of all these people, you headstrong and determined lady Demiana. Rise and obey me, and bow before Apollo the great god."² She replied, "True is what David the prophet said, [^{NKJ} Psalm 115:4-8] *Their idols are silver and gold, The work of men's hands.* ⁵ *They have mouths, but they do not speak; Eyes they have, but they do not see;* ⁶ *They have ears, but they do not hear; Noses they have, but they do not smell;* ⁷ *They have hands, but they do not handle; Feet they have, but they do not walk; Nor do they mutter through their throat.* ⁸ *Those who make them are like them; So is everyone who trusts in them.*"² The prince's face turned color and he sighed deeply, saying, "O this steadfast lady has defeated me; I have never seen anyone like her, not even the bravest heroes."² Hence he intensified her torments.²

3. Hammering her body--They hammered St. Demiana from head to toe with an enormous iron, then placed her in a burning cauldron containing a boiling mixture of swine lard, oil, gum and tar. The fire of the cauldron reached many meters in height.

Throughout all this, St. Demiana did not die because God saved her. The more her flesh and bones burned, the more she praised God. The cost of suffering endured by saints is great, yet the joy and glory of the kingdom of heaven are indescribable. Archangel Michael appeared the third time to her and placed his wings on the cauldron, extinguishing the fire and taking her out of the cauldron. She stood healthily without any smell of smoke or burning. Archangel Michael then ascended to heaven in great glory.²

St. Demiana went to the prince and shouted: "My Master Jesus Christ and I come to you and your stone gods which cannot hear."² The prince was astonished to see her. He said to the people: "Who is this young lady? We have seen many people and no one is like this lady in her forbearance of severe torments; my mind is confounded by her."² Many people present cried out: "We declare we are Christians, and we believe in the God of St. Demiana."² The prince beheaded them all and threw their bodies with the rest of those martyred beside the palace.²

The prince said to St. Demiana: "What is the benefit gained from all this? O you, the obstinate and mighty. You will be accountable for the death of all these people."² St. Demiana replied, "If you want to enter your kingdom, you first need to offer a present in order to be granted permission to enter. I offer the souls of these people as a gift, a sacrifice of praise to the Lord; they will ascend to heaven and now they are in front of the throne of Christ, the Creator and God, waiting for me to meet up with them in goodness and grace. I ask my God, the Living and Holy, the Almighty, the Victorious, to complete His will in me so that I may be with them in heaven."² The prince marveled at the wisdom and grace of St. Demiana's eloquent speech. He ordered St. Demiana to be imprisoned until he could think of what to do with her.²

Two days later, the prince said to St. Demiana, "Greetings, chaste Demiana, you who are from an honorable lineage, whose virtues the people speak well of, will you not worship the statues and end all this suffering?"² She replied, "Those who are wise will not accept praise and empty words. My Master Jesus Christ, to Him be glory, has said in the holy books, [^{NKJ} Luke 6:26] *Woe to you when all men speak well of you, For so did their fathers to the false prophets.*" Their reward will be on earth. I will not obey you because the result will lead to death. Sins which are appealing and desirous lead to hell; I ask my God to save me from love of these sins. Is it not enough for you after seeing all these powerful miracles? Where is the power of your

god? It cannot even move from its place. How can it help you? You must be embarrassed, you ignorant one. My God rules the world, raises heaven without any pillar to support it, and is unlimited in wisdom, to Him be glory forever, amen.”² The prince was greatly worried and sighed deeply in his heart.²

4. Carving a hole on her head and gouging out her eyes—The prince ordered his soldiers to carve a hole into St. Demiana's head, gouge out her eyes, uproot her skin from her head to shoulders, then pour a boiling mixture of oil, lead, gum and tar over her head and wounds.²

St. Demiana screamed during the excruciating pain: “Jesus is God; Jesus is my hope; Jesus is my strength and salvation; Jesus is my King. O full of grace and glory, O mother of the Light, my God, Saint Mary, intercede for all your people.”² Her spirit left her body. All those present watched as a white dove appeared and flapped its wings upon her head and eyes healing her completely. She rose from death and stood up--her body all healed--her eyes and brain were intact, no sign of wound or pain present. The dove then flew up into the sky and disappeared.²

All the people shouted: “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill toward men. The eternal God, performer of miracles with His saints has saved St. Demiana from death and suffering.”² The people cried to St. Demiana: “Ask the Lord God Jesus Christ to strengthen us to gain the crown of martyrdom in His holy name.”² St. Demiana said to them, “I ask the Divine to grant all of you the strength to be delivered from the tortures, and may we meet in heaven.”² The people kissed her hands and feet, and went to tell the prince: “Burn, you infidel, and your deceiving emperor and idols that have no power to defend themselves; we profess our belief in our Master Jesus Christ.”² The prince beheaded them all by the sword. They were many who received the crown of martyrdom, entering paradise, where they celebrated with Christ. They became intercessors for us sinners on January 9, Tooba 1 (Coptic calendar). May their prayers be with us forever, amen.²

The prince ordered his soldiers to seize St. Demiana, who had ruined the belief of the surrounding regions by drawing men, women and prominent citizens to believe in the Crucified and guiding them to martyrdom. They imprisoned St. Demiana with her virgins in darkness without food and water.² He said to her virgins: “Tell your friend, lady Demiana, to obey me in order to not have to endure the most painful punishment and suffering.”² In the dark prison, St. Demiana and her virgins all prayed. As they prayed, the prison lit up brightly like the sun.²

Ten days later, the prince ordered St. Demiana to be brought to him. He said that perhaps she had now changed her mind and would worship his idols, which would be a comfort to him, her and everyone else. When the soldiers opened the prison door, they saw brilliant intense light.² Immediately they bowed down to St. Demiana and said: “O our lady, the prince wants you.”² She rose and went with them saying, [^{NKJ} Psalm 129:1-8] A Song of Ascents. “*Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth, Let Israel now say --* ² *“Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth; Yet they have not prevailed against me. ³ The plowers plowed on my back; They made their furrows long.” ⁴ The LORD is righteous; He has cut in pieces the cords of the wicked. ⁵ Let all those who hate Zion Be put to shame and turned back. ⁶ Let them be as the grass on the housetops, Which withers before it grows up, ⁷ With which the reaper does not fill his hand, Nor he who binds sheaves, his arms. ⁸ Neither let those who pass by them say, “The blessing of the LORD be upon you; We bless you in the name of the LORD!”*²

When they reached the prince, he said to her, “O chaste lady Demiana, obey me now and worship the emperor’s idols and I’ll give you much honor.”² St. Demiana replied, “My mind is

dumbfounded by your ignorance; one word is enough for the wise, yet many words have I spoken to you for a long time to stop worshiping your evil gods after you have tormented me severely and my God has healed me; may you and your bad faithless emperor perish."²

5. Her body hacked into pieces and thrown to beasts— the prince ordered her four limbs to be stretched, tied to four stakes, and her body to be hacked into pieces then fed to beasts.²

When St. Demiana heard the prince's orders, she faced the East (this clearly confirms that praying while facing the East was the custom of Christians in the past) and prayed with her virgins, saying: "O God of lords, Christ our God, strengthen me O my Master to bear this torture in Your holy name because You are the God of truth, the blessed God, and to You are due glory and honor, now and always, and forever, amen."² When she finished the prayer, she said to her virgins: "Remember me, my sisters, in your prayers so that Christ, my God, may strengthen me to bear this torment."²

She went to the soldiers and said, "Why are you all standing idly? Do the injustice which your master, the prince, has ordered you to do."² The soldiers pulled her four limbs, tying them with chains to four stakes, then they hacked her body into pieces like a fish; subsequently, she lifted up her spirit. The prince ordered her dismembered body to be thrown to the wild beasts for a day and a night. The beasts and birds surrounded her as though they were bewailing in deep sorrow, mourning for their beloved, and did not approach her. The virgins were watching at a distance with the crowd; they all wept.²

Appearance of Jesus, Virgin Mary and Archangels:

There was thunder and an earthquake. All those present were terrified and fell to the ground. The Lord of glory descended from heaven upon His cherubim with Virgin Mary sitting to His right and archangels singing ineffable praises.² The Lord shouted, "I say to you, O blessed daughter Demiana, rise without decay."² St. Demiana leapt as she rose like one awakening from sleep and worshipped the Savior.²

The Savior said to her, "Be strengthened, my chosen Demiana, for I have prepared for you three crowns for your joyful wedding in heaven. You have one more torment to endure by shedding your blood by the sword before you receive your crown of joy. Your name and biography will be remembered and proclaimed by all people forever, as it will be the cause of many miracles. In this place a great church will be built to honor your blessed name. Many people will come from all places seeking forgiveness of sins in My name and My mother's name, the Virgin Mary, and in your name. This place will be renowned until the end of time, and blessed by Myself and My mother, Virgin Mary, forever."² The Savior strengthened her, endowed her with peace, and ascended to heaven in great glory. St. Demiana bowed down to the ground before the Savior, worshiping Him.²

St. Demiana awakened her 40 virgins and the people present, and they went to meet the prince of the Governing Council. People from the surrounding villages were also present.² St. Demiana shouted loudly before everyone, [^{NKJ} Luke 2:14] "*Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!* Shame on you, O prince! My Master and Savior Jesus Christ truly raised me after you dismembered me like a fish and hammered my bones with great axes. Behold, I now stand before you in healthy mind, body intact and completely well!"² All those present upon seeing St. Demiana healed and well, believed and shouted, "O prince, you are a hypocrite. We are Christians and believe in the God of this virgin, Saint Demiana."²

St. Demiana and the 40 Virgins' Martyrdom:

The counselor of the prince said to him, "O prince, we have been torturing this young lady for a long time, yet cannot change her mind, nor will she obey us, nor are we able to kill her, and we have not rested for an hour since we came. We keep torturing her yet she is very determined. I know that Christians are very strong in bearing torments and now I will tell you something to console you: listen to me, behead her and let us return quickly to our emperor before he affronts you for being unable to execute his order."² The prince was fond of the idea and realized his efforts were of no avail before the steadfastness of this pure virgin; hence he wrote a decree to behead St. Demiana and her 40 virgins along with all believers present. They beheaded them all with the sword on the same day at her palace in the early 4th century.² Their martyrdom is commemorated on January 21, Tooba 13 (Coptic calendar).¹

The total number of people who were martyred as a result of St. Demiana was estimated to be 400. St. Demiana received 3 heavenly crowns: for her virginity, her endurance of torture and her martyrdom. The prince and his soldiers returned the same day to Antioch. People of surrounding villages who heard of her martyrdom came and gathered all the bodies of the martyrs and placed them in rows like honeycombs, one on top of the other, and kept them until the end of persecution.²

St. Demiana and the 40 Virgins' Tomb:



Restored tomb of Saint Demiana and the 40 Virgins in the Tomb Church of her monastery, 2011.

A few years later, the Christ-loving Emperor Constantine the Great, the first Christian emperor, reigned. He sent his soldiers and mother, Queen Helena to St. Demiana's monastery palace. Queen Helena found the bodies unharmed; she kissed St. Demiana's body and wrapped her body along with her 40 virgins in expensive shrouds. She built an underground cellar tomb-bed of ivory and placed St. Demiana in the middle, covered with a precious silk linen bedspread and her 40 virgins around her. On top of their tomb, she built an altar table and dome, thus turning it into a church. This tomb church was consecrated by H.H. Pope Alexandros (Pope of Alexandria and 19th Coptic Orthodox Patriarch of the See of St. Mark), on May 20, Bashans 12 (Coptic calendar).¹ St. Demiana's Tomb

Church is still present and has been restored; it is located exactly where her palace or monastery was originally.

Restoration of St. Demiana's Monastery:



Saint Demiana's Monastery for Nuns, Barrary-Belqas, Egypt, 2011.

Situated in Barrary-Belqas, Egypt, at the same place where St. Demiana's original monastery palace and Tomb Church were, is a coenobitic Coptic orthodox monastery for nuns bearing her name--St. Demiana's Monastery. It is the first time after her martyrdom in the early 4th century that her monastery has been officially consecrated as a coenobitic Coptic Orthodox Monastery for Nuns on September 24, 1978, by His Holiness Pope Shenouda III

(Pope of Alexandria and 117th Coptic Orthodox Patriarch of the See of St. Mark).

Presently at her monastery property, 4 of the 9 churches bear her name: Saint Demiana's Big Church, Saint Demiana's Tomb Church, Saint Demiana's Ancient Church and Saint Demiana's Church for Nuns. Many churches of the Coptic Orthodox Church also bear her name.

St. Demiana, the Founder of Monasticism for Coptic Orthodox Nuns:

St. Demiana is the founder of monasticism for Coptic orthodox nuns and the princess (highest ranking) of female martyrs of the Coptic Orthodox Church. St. Demiana and her 40 virgin nuns are depicted in Coptic icons as not wearing the black monastic habit as we see Coptic orthodox nuns wear nowadays because at her time, the black monastic habit had not yet taken form.

Feasts of St. Demiana and the 40 Virgins:

The Coptic Orthodox Church commemorates the feasts of St. Demiana and the 40 virgins' martyrdom on January 21, Tooba 13 (Coptic calendar), and the consecration of Saint Demiana's Big Church at her monastery on May 20, Bashans 12 (Coptic calendar).

May the prayers and blessings of these great martyr saints, Saint Demiana and her 40 virgins, be with us all, amen.

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