


The Bishop's

by Barbara Davies

Bouquet



the Waters', recalling Christ's baptism by John in the River Jordan, his official revelation of divinity, reprised every 6th of January with Epiphany celebrations, called «Theophaneia» (God revealing himself), at seaside Cypriot towns. It is the blessing ceremony that transforms any water into holy water. Each aspect of this blessing ceremony is symbolic and many elements are much more ancient than Christianity itself, tied to the natural world as much as to the spiritual.

The blessing ceremony, like the Bible, begins with the common olive tree (*Olea europea*). The olive tree is the first Biblical botanical reference, calling the olive leaf a healing agent and the plant «the king of trees». Genesis 8: 11 introduces us: «And the Dove came to him in the evening, and lo, in her mouth was an olive leaf plucked off. So, Noah knew that the waters were abated from off the earth». Here, the olive is God's sign of peace, cleansing and new beginnings.

To begin the blessing, the Bishop or priest chants while censuring the area with the smoke of burning olive leaves. That smoke is the legacy of the 60,000 year old fossilized remains of olive trees found in the volcanic rocks of Santorini; and carries the mythic memory of Athena planting the first olive tree on the Acropolis, and claiming the city-state of Athens as her own, thereafter wearing a wreath of olive on her war helmet.

The olive tree, which Sophocles (Greek dramatist, 496-406 B.C.) called «the tree that feeds the children», and whose oil Homer referred to as «liquid gold», has been in systematic culture since the Stone Age, first in Palestine, Phoenicia (modern Syria and Lebanon) and Greece and then throughout the Mediterranean and beyond. The first wild olives were stunted and thorny, with fruit giving little flesh around large stones, but selection and breeding resulted in more useful plants. In ancient times, the fortunes of many cultures depended upon the olive. Destruction of olive trees was punishable by death or exile, while fleets of ships were designed solely to transport the oil to market.

Olive tree at the Temple of Apollo Hylates

A few fine trails of smoke float through the air, filling the space with a faint pungency. The bishop intones his familiar chant, the 'Ayiasmos', the blessing "Great art thou, O Lord, and marvelous are Thy works, and speech sufficeth not to sing the praises of Thy wonders». The chant is familiar because it is entwined with all Cypriot Greek Orthodox blessing ceremonies, whether they are for the Epiphany of Christ, a wedding ceremony, the baptism of a child, the fertility of an agricultural field, the safety of a new car, or the ribbon-cutting of a computer shop grand opening. Faith runs deep in Cyprus.

This one prayer is the root of all blessing ceremonies because it is the priest's prayer for the 'Blessing of

All parts of the plant are used. The leaves are burned as purifying incense and brewed as healing tea, being antiviral, antimicrobial and antiseptic, boosting the immune system through the bitter phytochemical, oleuropein. The wood was used to build shelter, or burned as fuel for cooking food, and it was hard enough to serve as handles for tools as well as framework for musical instruments. To some, the tree is a regenerative miracle: even when burned, old trees are capable of re-sprouting, and they can be transplanted at advanced age with relatively small root balls.

The olive's fruit is inedible fresh, but when processed with salt, brine, vinegar or lemon, it can be stored for long periods, and is a staple in the Mediterranean diet. When pressed, the fruit yields relatively large quantities of oil for culinary and medicinal uses. There are well over 200 different grades and flavours of extra virgin, virgin and other olive oils sold world-wide, inspiring gastronomic connoisseurs. The oil boasts some of the highest levels of brain-boosting and cholesterol-lowering Omega-3 essential fatty acids. For massage, the oil may be steeped with flowers or grasses for medicinal or relaxation purposes. The original Olympic athletes were rubbed with an infusion of olive oil to make them suppler. An ancient list excavated in Mycenae, in northeastern Peloponnesus, enumerates preferred aromatic additives: fennel, sesame, celery, watercress, mint, sage, rose and juniper, among others.

Lower grade olive oil is used in lamps. In more remote village churches and roadside shrines, small cups of olive oil are still floated with upturned borage flowers (*Borago officinalis*) as wicks in order to illuminate altar icons. But the very finest grades of oil are reserved for the consecrated Chrism, a mixture of oil and balsam (a recipe of myrrh and frankincense described by John the Baptist) used in sacramental anointments, like baptism and confirmation. The olive is known as «the holy tree of Cyprus». These legends, talismans and customs come to life with a visit to «Oleastro, the living museum and workplace dedicated to the olive, in Anogyra village.

In the «Blessing of the Waters» ceremony, a silver bowl, previously dipped into the holy water of the River Jordan at the place of Jesus' baptism, is filled with water, and the recitation

of the prayer continues; «O King who lovest mankind, come down now also through the descent of Thy Holy Spirit, and sanctify this water». As the blessed cross of wood and silver is dipped into the living water, the transformation is effected, and the holy water carries the energy of the blessing to all uses, even being drunk, sometimes mixed with Chrism, in small quantities for healing.

Continuing the blessing ceremony, the Bishop takes up his bundle of herbs selected for their sacred significance, and dips them into the water, a source of fertility and life. By scattering the water from the leaves of the herb bundle, his sacred bouquet, the priest enfolds his suppliants in the plants' dewy aura. In addition to olive, the most important inclusion is holy basil, vasilizia or «Vasilikos» (imperial), then rosemary or myrtle.

Basil (*Ocimum tenuiflorum*, *syn. O. sanctum*) is the high holy herb in Greek Orthodox Christian tradition, filled with divine essence. It was said to be found growing around Christ's tomb after the Resurrection. Its sweet, clean scent drew St. Helen, mother of Constantine the Great (280-337 A.D.), to the spot in the Golgotha where she is believed to have rediscovered the true cross of the crucifixion during her pilgrimage there at 80 years of age. While returning with the cross, she reportedly saw a light on a high hill, as she stopped in Cyprus. Following the light, she came to the site of Stavrovouni (Mountain of the Cross) Monastery, where she left a fragment of the true Cross, still protected in a reliquary to this day.

Basil is found growing in small pots on or near many church altars and, also, around most Cypriot homes either in pots or planted directly in the garden soil. Its scent is multipurpose; it prepares the mind for enlightenment,

combats insomnia and dispels melancholy, and the volatile essential oils also repel flies and mosquitoes. A sharp basil tea is anti-inflammatory and antispasmodic, containing the active chemicals caryophyllene, ursolic, oleanolic and rosmarinic acids and eugenol, supporting normal cortisol, blood sugar and insulin metabolism.

Legend tells that the rosemary bush (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) sheltered the Virgin Mary in her flight into Egypt, and so it is one of her symbols, being considered a safeguard from evil. Rosemary, said to improve memory, is also associated with lasting friendship and the marriage ceremony, being entwined into wedding chaplets and bouquets. Rosemary tea is a nerve relaxant and digestive aid, as well as a healing and strengthening hair tonic.

Greek myrtle (*Myrtus communis*) is the sacred plant of Cyprus' Aphrodite, goddess of love and beauty, who sheltered behind it when she emerged naked from the sea at Petra Tou Romiou, near Kouklia. The myrtle nymphs were prophetesses who taught the god Aristaeus, son of Apollo, to make cheese, to tend beehives and to cultivate olives. After paganism gave way to Christianity, myrtle was given over as a plant sacred to the Virgin Mary, to symbolize purity and fertility.

Myrtle's leaves, fruits and flowers are used in cooking and its essential oil contains myrtol, used in toothpastes and for many skin and respiratory disorders, as well as in perfumery. Basil, rosemary and myrtle all are being clinically evaluated for a roll in future cancer treatment.

Thus, in the Bishop's hand, the small bunch of herbs scatters droplets of holy water to bless a human moment, and the living water carries the spirit of those plants to us, linking our lives to the spiritual reveries of the Ancients.

