

St Assia

St Charbel's Church and Monastery, Punchbowl (20 January 2017) (with Special Guest Speaker, Father Maroun Bechara, Parish Priest, Toula)

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St Assia, who is the patron saint of Toula, lived until AD 377. This was in about the time of the Roman Emperor Theodosius II 'the Great', who reigned AD 379-395. Christianity, which had been persecuted by the Roman Empire during the first centuries after the birth of Christ, had only relatively recently become the official religion of the Roman Empire from the reign of Constantine the Great, who was Roman emperor from 312-337. He tolerated Christianity from 312, was the first emperor to convert to Christianity and he moved the capital of the empire in 330 to Constantinople, present day Istanbul in Turkey.

The historical and cultural context in which St Assia lived was the Greek speaking eastern Roman Empire, whose culture was mainly Greek, but influenced by several centuries of Roman rule, and also had the influence of many Near Eastern cultures, such as, in the region of Lebanon, Phoenician and Aramaic.

His father Famtiros was close to the Emperor Theodosius. Theodosius is famous for founding the Roman Empire as a Christian Catholic state, that is, he made Arianism and other Christian heresies illegal, outlawed paganism and ended sacrifice, and established

everywhere in the empire, which included Lebanon, the Christian religion in the form which has developed into the Roman Catholic Church.

St Maron, the founder of the Maronite Catholic Church, was a contemporary of St Assia and came from the same cultural context. Indeed, St Assia is said to have visited Constantinople to meet Theodosius.

We have an account of the life and works of St Assia. Soon after becoming a priest, he went to a monastery in Mt Sinai, a region which has been famous for centuries for its monasteries.

The story of his life has facts about his date, family and where he lived and worked, which may be accurate. The account of the miracles which he performed, living in a cave, praying and fasting, and trials by the enemies of the good is similar to the life of Jesus. They remind us of the temptation of Christ in the wilderness and the miracles which he performs are similar to those of Jesus.

He destroys a temple where animals are worshipped, which is parallel to the story of Jesus driving the money changers out of the Temple in Jerusalem. The ambassador of the Persian king brings him rich gifts, which is similar to Wise Men from the east in Bible.

Meeting students before his death and his final instructions to embrace the faith are like Jesus at the Last Supper.

You are all probably very familiar with the painting of him hangs above the altar in the church of St Assia in Toula. We are still researching the artistic style and date of this painting, but it could very well date from the 15th-18th century AD and may be of a style influenced by Italian art. We remember that the Venetians were influential in the Levant during the early part of this time and they thus brought Lebanon in contact with the important schools of Italian art of the Renaissance.

The church of St Assia in Toula is a beautiful stone building of Romanesque style, with Gothic features, which shows the probable influence of either Byzantine or western European architecture brought to the region by the Crusaders in the Mediaeval Period.

He has long been worshipped as a St Assia the Doctor for his curing of illnesses and disabilities. His name means 'doctor'. Christ similarly acted in this role.

The festival of St Assia is celebrated in Toula each year to mark the anniversary of his death in 377. On the last Sunday of September, the village holds an annual Summer Festival in his honour. At the festival, members of the village celebrate with an outdoor

party, where the traditional meat dish of the village, called *hrissi*, is cooked and eaten, *arak*, the drink made from grapes and flavoured with aniseed, is drunk, and there is dancing and ringing of the bells of the church of Saint Assia.

The slaughtering of the lambs for the *hrissi* is done in remembrance of and thanksgiving to God and Mar Assia (Saint Assia). Many of the villages in the Zgharta District, including the greater village of Zgharta, celebrate their patron saints in a similar manner through thanksgiving and the preparation of *hrissi*.

St Assia is a significant figure far beyond Toula. There is an Assyrian Catholic Cathedral of Mar Assia in Halab, which is the older name for Aleppo, in Syria. A picture of him is displayed in this cathedral.