

## Saint Euphrasia, Patroness of St. Euphrasia CMC

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Euphrasia is the name of a flower in Greek like the English name Rose or Lilly. Names beginning with Eu- are common in Greek like Eudoxia and Eulogia for women and Eusebius, Eutichys and Eugenius for men. The prefix *eu-* means good or beautiful and corresponds to the Sanskrit *su-* in names like Sukumaran and Surendran. *Euphrasia* as a common noun means good cheer in Greek, and *euphrosune* means mirth, merriment, cheerfulness. Epictetus (mid 1<sup>st</sup> cent.- 2<sup>nd</sup> cent), the Stoic moral philosopher, speaks of *euphrasia* of the soul, the cheerful spirit. The Indian name Santhosh would seem to correspond to the Greek name Euphrasia.

St. Euphrasia, whose name was given to Rose Eluvathingal at her clothing in 1890 in the Congregation of Mother of Carmel, was born in Constantinople as the daughter of Antigonus, a senator and distant relative of Emperor Theodosius I (379-395). We do not know the precise year of her birth or death. Before she was one year old her father died. The emperor brought her and her mother to the imperial palace out of regard for his late relative Antigonus. Soon suitors appeared seeking the hand of the rich widow. When Euphrasia reached five years of age the emperor betrothed her to the son of a wealthy senator. However, her mother did not want to enter into a second marriage and left with her daughter for Egypt.

They found a place to live close to a convent of nuns in Egypt. They often visited the convent to pray and to have some company. When Euphrasia was seven years old she expressed her desire to join the convent. She was not dissuaded when told about the austerities of the convent life: fasts, sleeping on the ground, hard work, long prayers reciting the entire Psalter. Her mother yielded to the insistence of her daughter and let her have her way hoping that she would soon get tired of the austere monastic life and want to return home. But she disappointed her mother and did not want to leave the convent. Impressed by the piety and good character of Euphrasia, the abbess told her mother: "Leave her with us. The grace of God is working in her heart. Your piety and that of your husband Antigonus are bearing fruit in this manner." Euphrasia was then led by her mother before an icon of Jesus and offered to the Lord as his bride. A few days later she was admitted to the convent and given the monastic habit. Her mother asked her if she was happy and satisfied. "Oh, mother," cried the little novice. "Look at my bridal robe given me to do honour to Jesus my beloved." The mother left the convent and soon afterward left this world, too, to join her husband Antigonus.

At Constantinople, however, a different story was unfolding. The senator, to whose son Euphrasia had been betrothed, asked Emperor Arcadius (395-408), successor of Theodosius, to honour the imperial word and have the hand of Euphrasia for his son. She had reached the marriageable age of twelve. The emperor sent for her bidding her to come to Constantinople. But she wrote to him a letter telling him of her monastic profession and asking him to honour her vow. As regards the property of her father, to which she was heiress, she requested the emperor to distribute it to the poor. And the slaves of her family were to be set free. Out of regard for Antigonus the emperor abided by her request and honoured it as a testament.

Now followed a period of intense trial for Euphrasia. She was tempted by vain imaginations and the desire to know the world she had quit without knowing it. She was molested by the evil spirits in body and soul. The abbess, in whom she confided, tried to distract her attention away from herself by giving her hard work and humble tasks. Once she ordered Euphrasia to carry a pile of stones from one place to another and then back to the original place. This she had to repeat thirty times! It was blind obedience in ancient monastic style. Euphrasia obeyed promptly and cheerfully. She cleaned the cells of the elderly nuns, fetched water for the kitchen, chopped the firewood, and cooked the food for the community. She often fasted rigorously. Although the convent rule exempted the cook from attending the night office, Euphrasia never absented herself. She reached the age of twenty, and according to the historian she was more beautiful than the others, taller and better shaped.

But her humility was put to the proof by some of her companions and even by the kitchen maid. Euphrasia often went without eating for an entire week, as the abbess did at times. The kitchen maid once asked her why she was fasting like that. Euphrasia answered that she did so with the blessing of obedience. The maid called her a hypocrite. "You want to become the next abbess, don't you. You are playing tricks to draw attention to yourself with your queer penance." Euphrasia fell at the feet of the kitchen maid and asked her to pray for her. Such was her meekness and humility.

The extreme penance which Euphrasia practised was not uncommon in those days. Imitating her abbess she is said to have stood upright on the same spot for thirty days on end without eating or drinking till she lost consciousness and collapsed. This form of penance is known to be practised also in India by Hindu ascetics who even stand on one foot. It was carried to the extreme not far away in the outskirts of the city of Antioch in Syria by St. Simeon Stylites, who stood on the top of a pillar all his life. And he had several imitators, too! Long fasts were also not unusual. The famous pilgrim Etheria (ca 300) narrates about monks who were called *ebdomadarii* since they passed an entire *week* (*hebdomada* in Latin) without food from Sunday to Saturday evening. The great ascetic St. Melania the Younger was a contemporary of Euphrasia.

Euphrasia shared her cell with another nun, Julia, who loved her and was convinced of her holiness. As Euphrasia lay on her deathbed, her friend Julia asked her to obtain for her the grace to join her soon in heaven. Three days after the death of Euphrasia Julia also died. The abbess was struck sad at the loss of two of her dear ones in quick succession. She also prayed for the grace to join them in heaven. The following morning the nuns could not find her. They searched for her and went to look in her cell, where they found her lifeless body.

The exact year Euphrasia's death is not known. Probably it was 420. In the Byzantine liturgy the feast of St. Euphrasia, virgin, is celebrated on 13 March. In the Russian rite St. Euphrasia is named along with other saints during the preparation of the gifts before the Mass. Her life story was written not long after her death in Greek by an anonymous hagiographer. It was printed in a critical edition in the *Acta Sanctorum*, March, vol. 2 by the Bollandists, Jesuit scholars based in Brussels, who specialise in the critical study of the lives of saints or hagiography. A summary of the article on Euphrasia can be found in *Butler's Lives of the Saints* edited, revised and supplemented by Herbert Thurston, S.J. and Donald Attwater (Burns & Oates: London) 1956, vol 1, "March 13: St Euphrasia, or Eupraxia, Virgin (c. A.D. 420)," pp. 581-583. The more recent Italian encyclopedia on the saints called *Biblioteca Sanctorum* mentions five women saints called Euphrasia who lived in

the first millennium, and a sixth in the sixteenth century. Indeed, though rarely used in India, Euphrasia was once a rather popular name in the Greek Church.

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*Note.* The author was the Roman postulator of the cause of St. Euphrasia CMC after her beatification in 2006 till 2012 when he returned to India. In 2010 as postulator he directed the diocesan enquiry on the healing of Jewel Jenson's thyroglossal cyst obtained through her intercession in December 2006. This healing was approved as a miracle required for the canonization of St. Euphrasia, which took place in Rome on 23 November 2014.