

A Modern Experience in the Tenth Century

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On April 19 we remember Saint Tryphon, Patriarch of Constantinople. He served during the tenth-century reign of Romanus, who ruled the Byzantine or Eastern Empire.

From his early years, Tryphon wanted only to be a simple monk. He chose to live without anything beyond his basic needs, and became known for his even-tempered approach to life. He didn't argue or debate with people, and his peaceful nature accepted the events of life as the will of God.

Tryphon is notable among the saints because, unlike many, his life did not end in torture and violence. What did happen to him is more like something that happens often in our own day. He was undermined by dishonest people who cleverly manipulated him, taking advantage of his trust and honesty and trustfulness for their own benefit.

Emperor Romanus had a son, Theophylact, and for some reason was determined to appoint him as Patriarch. But because the boy was so young, Romanus asked Tryphon, by that time a seasoned and respected monk, to serve until the boy was old enough to take the position. Tryphon accepted the appointment, perhaps not knowing the emperor's whole plan, and served as Patriarch for three years.

He became greatly loved by the people, who appreciated his modest way of speaking, his kindness and his simple manner of living.

When Theophylact turned twenty, the emperor was eager to have him become Patriarch, and asked Tryphon to step aside. But the monk could see that the young man wasn't ready, and that to appoint him would be harmful to the Church. So he refused to leave the Patriarchate.

Romanus tried to find a way of accusing Tryphon of some wrongdoing, so as to get rid of him, but there simply wasn't anything he could use. So he turned to a bishop who was willing to gain his favor by taking part in a deceitful plan.

This bishop pretended to be Tryphon's friend, and asked him to write his name and full title as Patriarch on a sheet of paper. The signature was necessary, the bishop told him, to disprove rumors that Tryphon was illiterate and unfit for his high position.

Suspecting nothing, Tryphon did as he was asked. The dishonest bishop took the paper to the emperor, who had him compose and write, above the signature, a statement of resignation. The document was used to depose Tryphon, despite objections from his many followers. He was sent back to the monastery where he had lived years earlier.

The members of the Church in Constantinople then lived through a difficult period of distrust toward the imperial government and their own leaders. Yet Saint Tryphon's humble acceptance of his unjust treatment was an example of Christlike endurance. The people who loved him learned from it, and those who deceived him were shamed by it. To this day in our churches, the humble monk is honored as no corrupt bishop or devious emperor can ever hope to be.