

THEOPHILOS WHO DENIED CHRIST IN WRITING

—from the book *The Salvation of Sinners*—

During the 636th year after the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, there lived in Sicily a pious and virtuous Church official named Theophilos, who was a steward of the Bishop of Adanon. Theophilos lived virtuously and governed the matters of the Church in a God-pleasing manner; thus everyone in his jurisdiction liked him and spoke well of him. When the local bishop passed away, as might be expected, the faithful went to the Archbishop, and requested that he consecrate Theophilos as the next bishop of their diocese. The Archbishop agreed to this; Theophilos, however, did not accept out of humility. When the Archbishop witnessed Theophilos' unwillingness to reconsider, he proceeded to consecrate another candidate, whom he advised to retain Theophilos as his assistant and to treat him with due respect. Indeed, Theophilos remained in this position for a considerable amount time. The enemy of truth, however, became envious of his humility, and planned a way to lead him to perdition.

Specifically, the devil craftily persuaded some immoral people to slander Theophilos to his bishop. The new bishop, in turn, believed them and gradually developed such dislike for Theophilos that he ultimately stripped him of his rank, expelled him from the Church, and appointed someone else in his place. Theophilos initially endured this injustice, and acted as though he was not upset. The demon of anger, however, relentlessly and methodically kept reminding him of his former position, and how he had been deprived of it by the ungrateful bishop. "It was because of you that this bishop was consecrated," the devil would tell him, "and now this bishop is disparaging you and mistreating you." The enemy planted these and many other similar thoughts into Theophilos' mind. Over time, these evil thoughts took root, and, having succumb to them, Theophilos decided to seek the help of a sorcerer in order to regain his former position.

In that region there lived a certain magician who would cast powerful spells. Theophilos went to him and asked if he could possibly help him. The sorcerer replied, "I can easily restore you to your former position, and give you even greater honor. All you have to do is worship my teacher, and follow his instructions. Just be careful not to make the sign of the cross—no matter what

you see. Otherwise, we will be unable to accomplish our goal." Overcome by anger and resentment, Theophilos agreed to the above. Thus, the wicked wizard led Theophilos to a deserted area, where he cried out to the demons with incantations. In a short while, an innumerable multitude of evil spirits gathered, with their chief arrogantly sitting in their midst. The magician then coaxed Theophilos: "Worship our master." After Theophilos prostrated himself before the devil, the magician appealed to the demon: "My Lord, this man was deposed by his bishop, and I brought him here to seek your help." The demon then responded, "If he wants me to bestow unto him more honor than he has ever had, and to grant him all the comforts of this world,—which, as you know, lies well within my power—let him deny Christ and enlist as my servant. All he has to do is draft a written statement in which he renounces the Son of Mary; this way he will not be able to betray me later."

Blinded by the vain glory of the world, or rather by its deceitful tyrant, Theophilos foolishly proceeded to compose a letter, in which he denied the Savior Christ and allied himself with the devil. He then sealed the letter and handed it over to the enemy. As soon as the demon took the letter in his hands, he gleefully embraced Theophilos and affectionately assured him: "Now you will witness my power." Subsequently, he along with all the other evil spirits disappeared, and Theophilos returned to the city.

The very next day, the bishop summoned Theophilos. He asked for forgiveness for having dishonored him and appointed him to the rank of chief administrator within the church. The bishop even prostrated himself to the ground before Theophilos, to the great amazement of everyone present. Thus, Theophilos was elevated to a higher position with greater glory. Unfortunately, he was no longer humble as before; rather, he was arrogant and domineering. Because of this, everyone feared him and spoke to him respectfully—especially the bishop.

The sorcerer would visit Theophilos from time to time, reminding him to keep his pledge to the one who had granted him such honor, and to never even think of acting ungratefully towards his benefactor. In the beginning, Theophilos would typically thank the magician; as time went by, however, he began to sense the destruction he had brought upon himself, and he no longer desired to meet with him. Thinking of the reality of death and eternal hell, he lamented: "Woe! Why was I such a fool? Why was I deluded? Why did I become enslaved to the

enemy for the sake of this temporary honor? If I could not endure losing my income, how will I, the thrice-wretched one, endure the loss of everlasting blessedness when the Heavenly King condemns me to the eternal fire? O, how mindless I was! Who will cry for an idiot like me?" Such thoughts tormented his conscience day and night; yet, he was reluctant to pray because he considered himself completely unworthy. He only wept bitterly, moaning to himself: "Woe to you, wretched Theophilos! How could you have been so stupid as to deny your Lord? Who can possibly snatch the written pledge from the hands of the demons? Woe to me, the wretch! It would have been better if the earth had opened up and swallowed me, or for fire to have fallen from heaven to reduce me to ashes, rather than for me to have denied my Creator and Savior!"

Having lamented in this manner at length, he felt a little respite and took courage. With renewed hope in God's infinite mercy, he decided to go to a chapel of the Most Holy Theotokos, where he fell to his knees before her holy icon and began to cry bitterly, sighing from the depths of his heart, and proclaiming his sin aloud. He further declared that he would not get up from the ground until the Mother of mercy showed compassion on him. He lamented in this manner for forty days, during which time the Most Holy Theotokos both strengthened him to endure without any food, and prevented the demons from tormenting him. After the fortieth day, as he was sleeping, the Queen of creation, (who is also referred to as the "fountain of mercy," and the "refuge of sinners") appeared to him and said: "You denied my Son! How can I now intercede on your behalf?" With tears, he replied: "My Lady and merciful Mother, you are the salvation of the world. I know that my crime is great, and I fell away from my Lord. But I am also aware of His infinite compassion and immeasurable love for mankind. He died for sinners; he saved thieves and tax-collectors. Even though my sin outweighs and is more abominable than all of theirs combined, I, nonetheless, appeal to your protection and goodness, and I cast my despairing soul into your All-Merciful Son's ocean of compassion, hoping to attain His mercy. My trivial repentance coupled with your tremendous power will attract the boundless mercy of my Creator and Savior. So, my Lady, the assurance of penitents, grant me a small amount of solace. Do not turn your face away from me, the impious sinner; and I promise you, my Lady, that with my genuine repentance I will embitter the demon whom I delighted with my foolish alliance. Just as I saddened the holy angels, I will now gladden them with the works of

my repentance. In the event that my works are not enough to compensate for my transgression, may the compassion of the All-Good Lord, who spilled His precious blood for sinners, make up for what they lack. Jesus Christ whom I foolishly denied, I now wholeheartedly confess, and I believe in Him as God and the Savior of the world. Furthermore, in order to confirm my confession with actions, I am ready to spill my blood for His love. I also spit on the enemy, I renounce him and deny him. Finally, I honor and venerate you as the most honored Queen of all creation, and I beg for your help."

After making this appeal, the Theotokos answered him: "Because you have again wholeheartedly confessed my Son as the true God, I will ask Him to accept your repentance." After she promised this, Theophilos awoke; and having received courage and hope of his salvation, he wept and wept. Three days later, he again beheld the Theotokos, who this time modestly smiled at him and said: "Rejoice, because my Son has accepted your repentance and has forgiven your sin. Henceforth, and for the remainder of your life, always remember the compassion God has shown you, and make sure you live with befitting repentance and conduct." Having thanked the Theotokos, Theophilos made a further request: "Since you put an end to my immeasurable misery, I beseech you, my All-Powerful Lady: command that I receive my written statement as confirmation of my forgiveness. Because whenever I bring to mind that the demons have it in their possession, I am overcome with sadness and distress." The Theotokos then responded: "Fear God, for He fulfills the will of them who fear Him."

Theophilos then arose with ineffable delight and continued to pray for another three days, as before, at which time the All-Hymned Virgin appeared to him again in a vision, and told him the following: "So that you may be fully convinced that the Lord accepted your repentance and has delivered you from the captivity of the devil, receive your letter." And with these words, he awoke to find the letter in his hand, just as he had sealed it! Who can adequately describe the feelings of joy that raced through his soul at that time? He began to glorify God, and thank the Ever Virgin Mary, proclaiming her infinite mercy and indomitable power.

When the bishop and the faithful of the city learned what had taken place, they too glorified the wonder-working God. Thereafter, Theophilos completely mortified himself to the world—he despised every secular desire and renounced

all vain and temporary glory. He decided to remain at that same chapel of the Most Holy Theotokos, where he served as the caretaker with great diligence and humility until the end of his life. On account of his profound repentance and virtuous conduct, after he passed away his relics became fragrant and even worked miracles to the glory of the All-Merciful God and His immaculate Mother.

This account was written by one of his disciples named Eutychianos, who witnessed everything, and recorded these events so that we sinners may realize how much the Mother of God, our protectress and advocate, is able to accomplish. Through her intercessions, may we be deemed worthy of the heavenly blessedness. Amen.