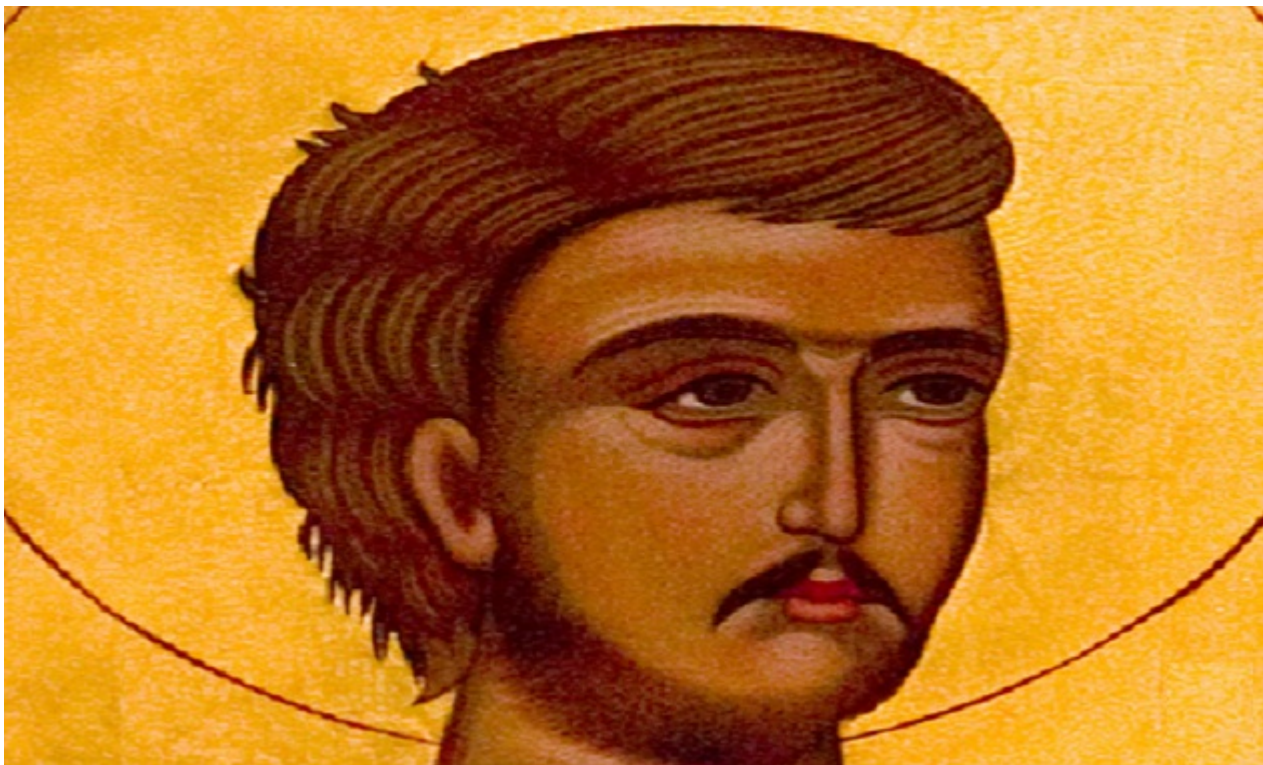


Saint Porphyrios the Mimic (George Poulos)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)

Christianity is the world's greatest source of joy, but it is no laughing matter. No one would think a clown could make his way to Heaven by playing a joke on the Lord, but the Lord has the last laugh as well as the greatest mercy. A bum-bling comic found the immortality of sainthood in an incident which displays with a sample of the divine brand of humor that the pearly gates are accessible even to a buffoon.



This saint has come down to us as Porphyrios the Mimic, a jester in the court of the Emperor Julian the Apostate (360--363) who performed for a monarch who was born a Christian but disavowed Christ in one of history's grimmest chapters. A pagan himself, Porphyrios clowned his way into royal favor-itism unaware that within him was a latent force which was to link him with the divine and bring into the company of saints the least likely candidate in the entire empire, short of the perfidious emperor himself. He paid scant attention to the genocide which was being masterminded by a defector whose bloodletting of innocent Christians has marked him for all time as the arch-villain of history.

On the occasion of the vile emperor's birthday, Porphyrios was asked to give a performance, with the suggestion that the theme of his act be based on a mockery

of the Christian Faith, a lampoon which japing Julian would doubtless find hilarious and for which the jester and his group would receive the royal plaudits. Knowing nothing about Christianity or its true beauty, the jester inquired about the celebrations of Christians and selected from their sacred rites the sacrament of Baptism, which he considered alien enough to paganism to be made considerable sport of and which would provide the material most suited to his sarcasm.

When the well-rehearsed troupe was led before the emperor by Porphyrios to perform the mock ceremony, they were greeted with gales of laughter and the pagans chortled in anticipation of a good time at the expense of the ridiculed Christians. The professional cast of buffoons was made to look quite authentic, with one leering character attired in a bishop's full ceremonial dress, others assisting in the garb of Christian priests, and Porphyrios being held in reserve as the convert to be baptized. The obscenity was carried out to the fullest detail, with every participant trying to outdo the others in derisive posturing, ridiculing gestures and foul-mouthed pronouncements, to be climaxed by the symbolic white garment of salvation being placed upon Porphyrios, at which time the chief clown would make a supposedly uproarious shambles of the final act.

Porphyrios was quite prepared to interject his own version of what he had been told should include the words «in the name of the Father,» and as he was turning these words over in his mind he donned the white garment of Christianity and suddenly felt himself transfixed. A complete serenity engulfed him, and out of a bright light that only he could see before him came a voice which said he was truly being baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. By the will of God he was transformed from a clown of the king to a servant of the Lord.

Falling to his knees, Porphyrios thanked God for his deliverance and then rose and addressed himself to the king, joyfully exclaiming that he had found the truth of Jesus Christ and that he would thenceforth serve him in contrition and gratitude. The monarch, not grasping the reality of this transformation, failed to be amused and the clowns, knowing that this was not in the script, urged Porphyrios to continue with the farce. When they beheld the benign look on his face as he repeated his conversion announcement, they left the scene in confusion, only too anxious to disassociate themselves from a man who would now suffer for having transposed a mockery of Christianity into a withering denunciation of paganism.

The incredulous Julian demanded a full explanation, and when Porphyrios came back with even more exultant praises of the Lord the infuriated king, tormented by the man who only moments before he had found amusing, ordered that Porphyrios be led away and beheaded. The entertainer who had found a moment of glory died

for Christ on 4 November 361.

Source: George Poulos, *Orthodox saints*, vol. 2, Brookline 1978, pp. 173-174.