

Saint Pulcheria

Virgin, Empress of the Eastern Roman Empire

In 399 AD, in the city of Constantinople, Aelia Pulcheria was born to the Eastern Roman Emperor Flavius Arcadius, and his wife Aelia Eudoxia. Arcadius was a weak and easily controlled emperor, reigning during a time when the empire was being invaded by various Gothic armies comprised primarily of Arian-Christians who believed Jesus Christ, the Son, was a creation of the Father, rather than of one substance with the Father. Pulcheria had an older sister who had passed away young. In 400 AD, her sister Arcadia would be born, followed by Theodosius II and Mariana in 401 AD. In 402 AD, Arcadius went on to declare his one year old son Theodosius II to be his co-Emperor.

Despite the fact that Pulcheria's family were Nicene-Christians and accepted the reality of the Trinity, her mother Eudoxia was in constant conflict with the Patriarch of Constantinople, Saint John Chrysostom. John had refused to host lavish parties, which endeared him to the commoners, but left the wealthy, including Eudoxia feeling alienated. Eudoxia was not fond of John's reforms, attempting to have him banished. When a silver statue of Eudoxia was built near the Cathedral, John denounced the dedication, comparing Eudoxia to Herodias, who had conspired to have John the Baptist beheaded. Eudoxia managed to have John exiled in 404 AD, but soon after she suffered complications from another pregnancy and died during childbirth. John would die in 407 AD, a year before Arcadius in 408.

With both parents dead, Theodosius II was named sole emperor at the age of 7 under the guardianship of Praetorian prefects Anthemius and Antiochus. In 414 AD, when Pulcheria turned 15, she declared her family no longer in need of Antiochus and dismissed him from office, becoming her brothers guardian.

At this time Pulcheria made a vow of virginity followed soon after by her sisters Arcadia and Mariana. She then transformed the imperial palace which came to resemble a monastery as opposed to the extravagance of her mother and father. Chanting and reading of sacred scripture became the norm, and they took on the practice of fasting twice a week.

Although Theodosius II was emperor, Pulcheria would have a profound influence on him his entire life. She taught him both how he should carry himself as emperor, and how to be a pious Christian leader. While he maintained a pleasant and trusting demeanor, he was careless, easily manipulated, and neglected his duties as emperor. As a result, Pulcheria's own influence continued to grow, and she was often treated as equal to men at court. She went on to erect many churches and buildings for the poor in and around Constantinople, and

to have bishops reinstated who had been unjustly dismissed.

In 421 AD, when Bishop Atticus reported the persecution of Christians by the Sasanian King Bahram V after the destruction of a Zoroastrian temple, Pulcheria influenced her brother to send troops to defend the Christians in the Sassanid Empire. After a successful campaign which Theodosius attributed to his sisters piety and virginity, Christians were allowed to return to Sassanid. During this time, Theodosius married a pagan who took the name Aelia Eudocia, and converted to Christianity.

In 431 AD, the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus was called to address an issue with the Nestorius of Constantinople, who denied Mary as the Theotokos, the "God-bearer." Pulcheria supported Cyril of Alexandria, who in turn supported Mary as the Theotokos. To discredit Pulcheria, Nestorius accused her of having sexual relations with numerous individuals. Due in part to Pulcheria's efforts Nestorius was deposed, and after Cyril condemned him and the Council upheld Mary as the Theotokos, Theodosius II had Nestorius banished to a monastery in Antioch.

Eudocia envied and sought Pulcheria's power and influence at court. In a bid to oppose Pulcheria, she embraced Nestorianism in defiance of the ruling of Ephesus, and denied Mary as the Theotokos. She then went on a pilgrimage in 438 AD to the Holy Land where she supported Miaphysitism, which had used ambiguous language regarding the Council of Ephesus, becoming a major controversy for those who supported the council. As a result, Pulcheria left court to reside in Bebdemon, a seaport seven miles from Constantinople.

In 430 AD, Theodosius was thrown from a horse in a hunting accident and died. Pulcheria returned to Constantinople to arrange his funeral. Theodosius had no male children, and thus no avenue to maintain dynastic legitimacy. To preserve legitimacy, Pulcheria would have to marry. General Aspar suggested his tribune Marcian, and on the condition that he respect her vow of virginity, she agreed. They carried out the rite in a way that honored both her vow, and fulfilled the requirements for a legitimate marriage.

In 452 AD, Pulcheria and Marcian summoned the Ecumenical council of Chalcedon which upheld Mary as Theotokos, and condemn Nestorius and his compatriot Eutyches. The following year, Pulcheria died. Her death sent shockwaves through Constantinople, and her relationship with the people was affirmed. In her will she instructed her remaining wealth to be distributed among the poor. Her feast day is September 10th.