

Hungarian Saints

Saint Irene of Hungary (born Piroska) (1088 – 1134)



She was born in Esztergom in 1088, daughter of King St. László. She lost her mother when she was two years old, and her father five years later. King Kálmán, apparently the guardian of orphaned Piroska, gave her in marriage to the Byzantine emperor Ioannes Komnenos II. She converted to the Eastern Orthodox Church and took the Greek name Irene, which means “peace”. Joannes Komnenos and his Hungarian bride were crowned in 1118. It is thought that the mosaic depiction of the emperor and empress in the Hagia Sophia Church was created at this time. She is shown with thick, red tresses, in the only likeness we have of Piroska-Irene.

Irene did not become involved in her husband’s political affairs, but devoted herself to raising her eight children, four boys and four girls. Her generosity to, and protection of the poor influenced not only her immediate family, but all of Byzantium. She built hospitals as well as homes for the aged and the mentally ill. But perhaps her most lasting accomplishment was the construction of the Pantocrator-Meter Eleusa-St. Michael triple church complex with its monastery. It was a magnificent center of worship and contemplation, with emphasis on Christ as the Ruler of the World, and fostering devotion to Mary. Although only ruins remain of the church complex, they still provide a strong indication of the splendor they must have had when Irene built it.

After the death of her husband, Irene entered a convent. On her deathbed, she took the name “Xené”, which means foreigner. It would seem she never felt at home in the strange Greek environment, and perhaps was even homesick for her native Hungary. She died in 1134, and was buried in Constantinople.

She is honored as a saint by the Orthodox, Byzantine and Roman Catholic Church, with her feast observed on August 13th.