

All the nuns rushed to raise Pitirum and told him: 'Abbas, do not debase yourself for she is insane [σαλή ἔστι],'  
Pitirum answered: 'You are insane, and she is your amma and minc. [This is how spiritual mothers are called.] I pray to  
be worthy of her on the Judgment Day.'

Hearing this, the women threw themselves down at his feet and began confessing their sins. One said that she had slung mud at the σαλή, another that she had pummeled her, a third that she had smeared her nose with mustard. All told about their misdeeds. The righteous woman, meanwhile, had run away from the convent<sup>15</sup>.

Isidora is generally viewed as the first Orthodox fool for Christ's sake<sup>16</sup>. In my opinion, this is only partially true. Other characters in the story *think* that she is mad and call her σαλή, while she does not seek to create this impression, and the word σαλός at that time had not yet developed the meaning of holy folly, as a special type of sainthood. Isidora merely *allows* others to think badly about her; she does not pretend anything, but only shows humility. She is always silent; in the first variant of the legend she does not even have a name.

Secret virtue appears to be more significant in this story than aggression against the world, and therefore Isidora fails to meet the "classical" description of a holy fool. In other variants of this tale (which exist as separate vitae) the aggression gradually intensifies.

"Abbas Daniel's Tales" tell (*BHG*, 2101) about an old man and his disciple who came to a nunnery and asked to spend the night there. In the convent courtyard a nun was sleeping. Daniel was informed: "She is a drunk [μεθύστρια]. We do not know what to do with her: we are afraid to throw her out of the nunnery, and if we let her stay she will corrupt the other sisters"<sup>17</sup>.

Some water was splashed over the "drunk," but she barely opened her eyes. "She is always like this," the Mother Superior said angrily.

When night came and everyone in the nunnery was asleep, the elder and his disciple quietly got up and went out to take a look at the drunk. From their hiding place they saw her rise from the ground, raise her arms to the sky, and begin to pray fervently while shedding tears and bowing to the ground. When she heard one of the sisters come out to relieve herself, she immediately threw herself on to the ground and began to snore. Daniel took the Mother Superior to show her this, and she cried and said, "Oh, how we have wronged her!"

As soon as the "drunk" was exposed, she fled from the convent. She left a note saying:

'Pray for me and forgive me for sinning against you.' The nuns began to cry and wail, and the elder said: 'It was because of her that I came here. Such drunks are loved by God. [τοιοῦτως γὰρ μεθύστας ἀγαπᾷ ὁ Θεός].'  
The sisters, their eyes filled with tears, confessed to him the sins they had committed against her. In their cells they glorified the Lord who, alone, knew how many secret servants He had<sup>18</sup>.

Unlike the nun of Tabennisi, who stays in the kitchen where nobody can see her, the "drunk" appears in the courtyard of a convent. If she were mad but quiet, she might be ignored and not mocked. Yet, her conduct is provocative. The "drunk" would not go unnoticed; she challenges those around her to make a choice about what to do with her. Thus appear the first signs of the holy fool's aggression against the world.

The tale of the Tabennisi nun, originally written in either Syrian or Greek, was soon translated into Latin<sup>19</sup>. This translation is an accurate rendering of the Greek original except for one small difference: the holy fool has a name, Isidora, which she did not have in the Greek version.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>16</sup> W. Bousset, "Der verborgene Heilige," *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, (1922), vol. 21; Certcau M. de "Le silence de l'Absolu. Folles et fous de Dieu," *Recherches de science religieuse*, (1979), vol. 67; K. Vogt, "La moniale folle du monastère des Tabennisiotes," *Symbolae Osloenses*, (1987), vol. 62.

<sup>17</sup> Vie et récits de l'abbé Daniel, *Revue d'Orient chrétien*, (1905), vol. 5, p. 69.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>19</sup> Vita s. Isidorac, *Acta Sanctorum Maii* (Antwerp, 1680), vol. 1, pp. 49-50.