

## The Story of Kutija and St Theodore the Recruit

Excerpted from *The Zacchaeus Tree*, by Lynne Wardach

At the Pre-Sanctified Liturgy on the first Friday of the Great Fast, you will hear the name of Saint Theodore the Recruit. He was a soldier during the persecution of the Christians in the early fourth century who had fearlessly given his life for his belief in Christ. About fifty years later, the Christians were still being persecuted in Constantinople by the Emperor Julian the Apostate. He knew that the Christians would be observing the Great Fast, and that they would be hungry after the first full week, so he ordered his soldiers to consecrate all of the food that was offered in the marketplace on that first weekend of the Fast to idols. This would be an especially cruel thing for him to do to the Christians. However, because God knew of the wicked emperor's plans, He provided for His people! On the first Friday night of the Fast, He sent the soul of His servant St. Theodore the Recruit to visit the Archbishop, Eudoxius, in a dream. He told him to tell the faithful not to buy or consume any of the offerings at the marketplace that weekend, but instead, they should eat wheat that they would cook and mix with honey. In this way, they would avoid the Emperor's trick. About 20 years after that event, the Patriarch Nectarius of Constantinople decided to set aside every first Saturday of the Great Fast as a commemoration of this miracle. Every first Friday evening a Canon, or prayer, composed by St. John of Damascus, to the Great Martyr Theodore is sung. The faithful may bring their decorated dish of boiled wheat and honey, known as Kutija or Kolyva, to be blessed at this service, and then take it home to be enjoyed.

*Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. —John 12:24*

Bearing this scripture passage in mind, this dish has also become associated with memorial services. It is prepared, usually without the honey, to commemorate the day of a funeral of a loved one by his family. At subsequent memorial Liturgies, as time begins to heal the sadness, the honey is gradually added back to the recipe. It is also served as part of the traditional Slavic or Greek Holy Supper on Christmas Eve to commemorate not only our own ancestors, but those of Christ as well.

Here is a recipe for Kutija that you can make with your family! You can even bring it with you to the Presanctified Liturgy tonight for Father to bless, and you may eat it tomorrow on the Feast of St. Theodore the Recruit and remember how God used this holy saint to save His people in their time of distress.

#### Kutija

*from the Kitchen of Carrie Chuff*

1 cup dried wheat berries [I prefer soft white]

2-4 Tbsp poppy seeds (depending on your taste)

1/4 cup walnuts, ground

1/4 cup raisins

2-4 Tbsp honey (to taste)

[2-4 Tbsp powdered sugar—this isn't traditional necessarily, but I saw some other recipes used powdered sugar and I found it helped, so I added it. But you can leave it off]

Cinnamon, if desired

Place wheat berries in a pot and cover til there's about 2 inches of water over the berries, and season with salt. Bring to a boil, and then simmer for about an hour. Using a fine mesh strainer, strain under cold water, and then place over a bowl for gravity to strain a bit more for about 15 minutes.

Meanwhile, place poppy seeds in a grinder and grind until chopped up, but not to the point of making a paste.

After berries are adequately strained, add them to a bowl and then add the honey, ground up poppy seeds, walnuts, raisins, [powdered sugar] and mix well. Add cinnamon on top, to taste.

Keeps well in the refrigerator for about a week.

It is interesting to note that the different Eastern Churches each produce a variation on the recipe which speaks to their national and culinary heritage. For example, while the dish mentioned above is typically Ukrainian, the Ruthenians commonly make kutija with rice, since wheat was once scarce for them and a suitable replacement was used which then became the custom. Melkites commonly make one using chopped parsley and pomegranate seeds which are commonly used ingredients in the Middle East. It seems that as long as the grain and honey are used, the additional ingredients are completely variable and I've even heard it said by a monk of the Romanian Church that he uses gummy bears and chocolate chips in his!!







