

SERMON AT THE PATRIARCHAL DIVINE LITURGY – THE FEAST OF SAINT DEMETRIOS THE NEW OF BESSARABIA.

Monday, 27 October 2014

Your Beatitude Patriarch Daniel, beloved concelebrant in the Lord,

Your Eminences,

Your Graces,

Respected Members of the Government, Beloved Monastics,

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

We greet you today in this festive celebration, and we bring to you the grace of the Holy Tomb and the prayers of the Christian community of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem. It is our deep joy to be with you today and to celebrate this feast of Saint Demetrios the New Martyr.

Saint Demetrios the New Martyr reminds us of the meaning of martyrdom. There have been martyrs in every age, and every local Church venerates its own martyrs who have given their lives and united their blood with the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed we live even now in a new age of martyrs, as we witness the persecution of Christians in many parts of the world, especially in the Middle East, the cradle of Christianity.

To be a martyr is to be a witness. Martyrs are witnesses to us of the salvific truth of the Christian revelation. In their sacrifice we see the image of the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the prince of martyrs. The martyrs follow in the footsteps of their Lord, and they are an inspiration to us of constancy, perseverance, and faithfulness.

The martyrs are a witness to the selfless love of Christ. In their sacrifice, the martyrs show us what it means not simply to endure suffering and death, but to love as Christ loves even in the face of death. This tradition was established by Saint Stephen the Proto-martyr in the Acts of the Apostles, who, after the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, out of love forgave those who stoned him. Also, we remember Saint Thekla from Iconium, a disciple of Saint Paul, who became known as the first female martyr. In her life such was her love of Christ, and such was her complete devotion to him, that she is called "Equal-to-the-Apostles."

In these two persons we can see the true meaning of martyrdom. And this is precisely why, as Saint John Chrysostom has said, martyrdom is an encouragement to the faithful. For the martyrs teach us that we, too, are called to love others, even our enemies and persecutors, as Christ loves us, even in the face of persecution, suffering, and death. For the path of this love is the path of theosis, that is to say, of true union with God, and this is the ultimate vocation of every Christian.

We keep today the feast of Saint Demetrios the New Martyr of Bessarabia, a beloved saint and martyr of the Romanian people, and the patron saint of Bucharest. He is a further testimony of the enduring influence of martyrdom in the life of the Church. The Romanian people have had many martyrs throughout the decades of the persecution of the Church during the totalitarian regime of the 20th century. The sacred blood of these martyrs watered the seeds of the Church of Romania and

today the Church is harvesting the fruits of this martyrdom in the re-birth of faith in your country. We are witnesses of this new life, and witnesses of the assurance of our Lord in the Gospel of Saint Matthew that even the gates of Hades will not prevail against the Church (cf Mt. 16:18).

But the vocation of martyrdom is not limited to those who die a physical death for their faith in Christ. The fruit of martyrdom is our martyrdom in the world, which is expressed in various forms. For example, the Church also understands that both marriage and the monastic life in Christ are types of martyrdom. This is why in the Sacrament of Marriage the husband and wife are crowned – these are the crowns of martyrs whose witness to the love of our Lord Jesus Christ makes them put another's life before their own.

We are reminded of this in the Marriage Service,

Hear us, you martyred Saints, who fought the good fight, gaining crowns: entreat the Lord to shed His tender mercy on our souls

Equally men and women monastics, by choosing the angelic life, testify to martyrdom, for they bear a distinctive witness to the life of the Kingdom of God. They point us to the vision of the words from The Letter to the Hebrews, where we read of “the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven... and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect” (Heb. 12:23).

In this way, every Christian is called to follow in the footsteps of the martyrs, for every Christian is called to be a living witness. Whether enduring persecution, living in the married state, or committing oneself to the monastic life, the Christian is always a witness, always participating in martyrdom. We emphasize this, because our world is enduring terrible suffering and peoples everywhere are crushed by war, poverty, disease, degradation, famine, injustice, indignity,

and humiliation. There is everywhere a lack of respect for the human person as created in the image and likeness of God.

In our troubled world, it is the Incarnate Love of God and his resurrection that are our living beacon of hope. The Christian, as a member of the Body of Christ, that is the Church, must be a true witness to this love, and on this feast of Saint Demetrios, the patron saint of this historic city, we re-dedicate ourselves to this vocation, which is precisely articulated by the hymnographer of the Church, saying:

Your martyrs, O Lord, in their struggles received crowns of incorruptibility from you, our God; for with your strength, O Lord, they overcame tyrants, defeated demons, rendering them powerless. By their intercessions, O Christ our God, save our souls.

Saint Demetrios the New Martyr stands before us as an inspiration of strength and endurance in our modern world that suffers from confusion and loss of purpose. We say this, for the way to honour a martyr, indeed, is to imitate him, as Saint Basil says.

Let us then give praise to our Lord Jesus Christ for the great witness of the martyrs of His love. May Christ our God, through the intercessions of our Most Holy, Ever-Virgin Mary and Theotokos, and through the intercessions of Saint Demetrios the New Martyr, protect the faithful people of Romania and establish His peace in our world and in our hearts.

Amen.

His Beatitude

THEOPHILOS III

Patriarch of Jerusalem