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His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America Sunday after the Exaltation of the Holy Cross



September 20, 2020

Saint George Greek Orthodox Church

New Britain, Connecticut

My Beloved Christians of this beautiful Saint George Parish,

I am truly delighted to be with you today, at this wonderful parish in New Britain, dedicated to the Τροπαιοφόρος and Great-Martyr George. On this Sunday after the Universal Exaltation of the Cross, when we continue to celebrate the “ὄπλον εἰρήνης ἀήττητον τρόπαιον,” “the weapon of peace, the invincible trophy,” the example of Saint George is especially meaningful.

We call him “Τροπαιοφόρος,” because he did not hesitate to take up that Trophy, which is the Precious and Life-giving Cross of our Savior Christ. He is a living illustration to the Church for all time of the words we read in the Gospel this day:

“If you want to follow Me, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Me.[*]

As you all know, Saint George was a great military commander of the Roman Empire, in the days leading up to the conversion of Saint Constantine. But those same days knew some of the worst persecutions, as the Empire was roiled with struggles for earthly power.

Even though he was a soldier of an earthly king, George knew that he was much more than that. He was the servant of a heavenly king. As a soldier, he knew well the meaning of our Lord’s words that we heard today:

“For if your only desire is to save your life, you will lose it, but if you lose your life for My sake and the sake of the Gospel, you will save it.” [†]

No soldier worthy of his station enters combat with the exclusive notion to survive the battle. He risks his life for the cause! And the cause for Saint George throughout his life was nothing else but our Lord Jesus Christ and His Holy Gospel. He looked beyond the battlefields of this world to the eternal realms of glory. The τρόπαιον, the trophy in his heart, was the Cross of Christ.

You see, my beloved Christians, in the ancient world, a trophy was much more than what we might think of today. It was a weapon of the vanquished enemy that was seized and set up for display, to celebrate and mark the victory. For Christians, there is only one such weapon – the Cross.

For the Cross, a hated instrument of torture and death, was used by throughout the ancient world – and especially by the Romans – to instill fear and dread in the hearts of the common people.

But for us, for Christians, this vicious weapon of pain, and suffering, and death has been used by God Himself to transform pain, and suffering, and death! How? Through love, through perfect, unselfish, compassionate, forgiving love. Our Lord willingly ascended the Cross because of His infinite love for His creation. He was willing not only to die, but to take the reason for death – which is sin – and abolish forever its hold over us. As Saint Paul says:

“The death He died, He died for sin, once and for all.” [‡]

Indeed, my beloved Christians, He died for sin, but not His own; rather, it was ours. And because He was completely sinless, and death held no sway over Him, through His death he paved the way to the Resurrection for us all.

This is how the Cross of Christ becomes “τό ἀήττητον τρόπαιον,” “the invincible trophy,” that everyone of us, by the grace and love of God, can claim as our own. This was the trophy that the Τροπαιοφόρος and Great-Martyr George held aloft in his heart. More than any battle wreaths of conquest, more than any commendation from warfare. This was the only trophy that held ultimate meaning for Saint George, and this is what made him able to face the horrible death inflicted upon him through the excruciating torments that he endured.

His example of bearing the Cross of Christ is a challenge and a call to each and everyone of us, especially in this period when we exalt the Cross of the Lord.

How do we lift up the Cross of love, compassion, and forgiveness every day in our own lives?

How do we exalt, within our minds and hearts, sacrifice for the sake of others, when this goes against a self-centered, self-focused, and selfish lifestyle, even to extent of giving up the breath of life itself?

Picking up our cross, carrying our cross, and following the Lord, is not about suffering in silence, and playing the martyr against our will.

Taking up the Cross is lifting up all those around us with our love and forgiveness, the very crossbeams upon which the Lord of Glory was raised.

My beloved friends, we may not all be great saints like your heavenly patron, Saint George, but we can all be soldiers in the host of the Lord of hosts, and servants of the Heavenly King, for Whom George gave up his life.

Let us pray that, through the prayers of the Holy Great-Martyr and Trophy-Bearer George, we may daily find the courage to take up this Cross and lift it on high, as our invincible trophy of love over hate, and life over death.

Amen.

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