

04/12/2020

His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America: Homily at the Vespers of the Feast of Saint Barbara the Great Martyr



December 3, 2020

Saint Barbara Greek Orthodox Church

Orange, Connecticut

Beloved Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Tonight, we continue our journey to the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ through three very special days in the life of the Church, which begin with your Heavenly Patroness, Saint Barbara the Great Martyr. It is Barbara whom we honor with hymns and praises this evening, and who leads off these three days - December 4th, 5th, and 6th, that are a profound image of the life and experience of the Church.

We commence this evening - with a woman and a martyr. We often do not think of the leadership of women in the Church because of the all-male liturgical priesthood, but in fact, women were the first witnesses of the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and they announced it to the Disciples. Indeed, it was these same

women, Disciples of the Lord, who had remained by the Cross of the Lord, and led in the burial customs after His saving death. In the Epistle of Saint Paul, we read of many women leaders and deaconesses, including Phoebe, Chloe, Junia and Priscilla.

But it is in the ranks of the Martyrs that women often surpass men in their devotion and faith unto death. And here we know that in the earliest days of the Church, Saint Barbara bore witness unto the shedding of her own blood, and received the crown of martyrdom.

For the blood of the martyrs watered the seed of Faith that was sown throughout the Roman Empire, and from which the harvest of the Church was achieved. Without the astounding and indeed miraculous testimony of the martyrs, the message of God's love might not have been as believable for a doubting and indifferent world. That is why Saint Barbara and parishes such as this that carry her holy name are so important to the memory of not only the origins of the Church, but her future as well.

There have been martyrs in every era of the Church, but where there has been little persecution, it is the Saints represented by December Fifth's feast - that of Saint Savvas the Sanctified - who continue this witness to the truth. For that is what the monastic life is called to be, a witness to the radical love of God for every human being. In a monastery, you do not choose any one of your monastic family. They are simply there, like your family of blood relations. But unlike that personal family, you have no experience of the monastic family because you did not grow up with them. And yet, the monastic vocation is to love the brotherhood or sisterhood in Christ with the same sacrificial love of God that was witnessed upon Golgotha. This is a very real martyrdom of the ego and the self-centered existence that dominates so much of our world today.

You see how Barbara's sacrificial testimony in her own blood, becomes transformed into Savvas' testimony in his deeds. But there is one motivation behind them both, and that motivation is love. Barbara loves God so much that she gives up her life for Him. And Savvas loves God so much that he gives up his ego for Him. And they both lead to the next day, December 6th, when we celebrate the Wonderworker of Myra, Saint Nicholas.

As a Hierarch of the Church, I have a special love and appreciation for Saint Nicholas. For in his ministry, we see the arc of love - exemplified in martyrdom by Barbara, and in monasticism by Savvas - we see it come full circle. Saint Nicholas' ministry was directed toward others and their needs - material, physical, spiritual. The love of God welled up in the Bishop of Myra's heart and it overflowed in his

diakonia to his people, who were and still are the children of God.

Thus, my beloved Christians, the blood that flowed in martyrdom from your Celestial Guardian, Saint Barbara, was transmuted into the interior martyrdom of Saint Savvas. And in Saint Nicholas, this same sacrificial love becomes the “precious myrrh” and “dew of Hermon” that nourishes the Church through the hierarchical ministry.

Therefore, let us honor and praise the Holy Barbara, whose martyric love launches these days of holiness that ultimately lead to Incarnate Love Himself, born in a Cave and laid in a Manger for our salvation. Amen.

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