29/11/2021

His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America Homily at the Great Vespers of Consecration



Beloved brother and sisters in the Lord,

This evening, in this magnificent church dedicated to the Holy Great Martyr and Trophy-bearer George, we prepare for the Consecration of this place to our Holy Triune God and His divine worship.

Tonight, at our Great Vespers, which commences the sacred acts of Consecration, we bear with us the precious and holy relics of the Saints that will be interred tomorrow inside the Holy Altar.

Saint Panteleimon the Great Martyr and Healer, whom we celebrate on July 27.

Saint Haralambos the Hieromartyr and Wonderworker, whom we extol on February 10.

And Saint Barbara the Great Martyr, whom we will celebrate not many days hence, on December 4.

These are the Saints who will be sealed within the Holy Table, and they share a deep connection to your Patron Saint – they are all martyrs!

They were willing to give up their lives on this earth, out of love for their Savior, Lord and God, Who reigns forever in Heaven.

The tradition of sealing the relics of martyrs in the consecrated Holy Altar is very ancient, stretching back to the first centuries of the Church. In the days when the Divine Liturgy was still being celebrated in houses, it was also common for Christians to gather at the tombs of martyrs, and to celebrate the Eucharist atop their sacred bones. In the case of Saint Haralambos, his disciples actually celebrated the Liturgy on his newly-reposed body after his martyrdom!

This connection to the cemeteries – which literally means "the place of those who sleep" – is still understood by the Church. Your own community is one of the parishes of our Sacred Archdiocese that has its own: The Saint George Greek Orthodox Cemetery, which opened in 1957.

The association of these sacred and blessed grounds with the building of churches found its first fulfillment in what are called "Μαρτύρια" – the buildings raised up over the tombs of the Martyrs. The most famous in the world is, of course, the Ἀνάστασις in Jerusalem – usually called the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Today, it contains not only the Empty Tomb of our Lord, but the site of Golgotha as well, where He gave up His life for the life of the world.

And thus, my beloved Christians, we come to the understanding of why the precious relics of the martyrs are buried within the Holy Table. To quote the Second Century writer Tertullian:

"The blood of the Martyrs is the seed of the Church." [*]

Your Church, through the presence of these holy relics, realizes its potential as a living field of spiritual seeds. Every Sacrament, every Sunday School lesson, every community celebration, becomes an opportunity for growth and maturation.

Like the Precious Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ that we will receive tomorrow in the Divine Liturgy, the blood of these Holy Martyrs – Panteleimon, Haralambos and Barbara – will nourish your spiritual life through their bodily presence within the Altar.

Remember these martyred Saints, and their feastdays. For they join in the Chorus of Martyrs that is led by your Heavenly Patron, the Trophy-bearer George.

They will protect you and your families, as they are your intercessors before the Altar “Not-Made-With-Hands” that abides forever in Heaven.

Through their holy prayers, may you all enjoy the spiritual harvest that comes from the planting of this seed this weekend, as well as enjoy the fruits of faith, hope and love here in your beloved parish and throughout the Church.

Amen.

[*] Apologeticus, L.13.

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