06/12/2021

His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America – Homily at the Vespers of the Feast of Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker



Beloved Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Tonight, we come together as the People of God, to celebrate the Victory of the People: Nicholas! Whom we praise as:

Ἱεραρχῶν τὴν καλλονήν, καὶ τῶν Πατέρων κλέος, τὴν βρύσιν τῶν θαυμάτων, καὶ τῶν πιστῶν ἀντιλήπτορα μέγιστον….

The adornment of hierarchs, the glory of the Fathers, the well-spring of miracles and great defender of the faithful….[*]

I am so very pleased to have returned just yesterday from the embrace of the Mother Church of Constantinople – the Church that Saint Nicholas himself belonged to as the Archbishop of Myra in Lycia.

Celebrating this Great Vespers with you – the faithful of the largest parish in the Sacred Archdiocese of America, and indeed, the largest single Orthodox Christian parish in the United States – is a cause for deep and profound spiritual joy.

We are so blessed in the Archdiocesan District to have the physical presence of Saint Nicholas, in addition to his spiritual presence through grace.

In all of his holy icons and divine services that invoke his name, as well as in the prayers we offer in our churches, it is by grace – the Divine Energy of God – that we enjoy the presence of the Holy Wonderworker.

But here in this very Church of Saint Nicholas, we have his precious and sacred relic as well. And not only here! Just this morning, I celebrated with the faithful Christians in West Babylon, where the Saint's relics are also enshrined. And we are blessed to have them in the Archdiocesan Cathedral of the Holy Trinity as well.

And now, thanks to the beneficence and generosity of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, as well as the Monks of Mount Athos, our new Saint Nicholas National Shrine at the rebuilt World Trade Center will have the precious relic of the Saint's hand, too.

This superabundance of blessings of the precious relics of the Saint holds an important message for our communities and society as a whole.

The victory of the people – whether it is one human being or every human being – is not found in conquering others. It is found in conquering oneself.

We call Saint Nicholas an "adornment" of Hierarchs. Why? Because his archpastoral ministry in Myra imitated the Great Shepherd of the Sheep, our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Saint Nicholas cared for every member of his flock and saved them from dangers both near and far.

We also name the Holy Nicholas the "glory" of the Fathers. Why?

Because, as I am sure you all know, he struggled mightily against heresy at the First Ecumenical Council and championed the Orthodox Dogma of the Holy Trinity – even at great personal cost, when he was arrested and imprisoned for challenging the arch-heretic Arius.

But God miraculously intervened, and thus showed the beginning of Saint Nicholas' ministry as a "well-spring of miracles," as his Doxastikon states.

And because of this miraculous ministry, he is the "great defender of the faithful."

Allow me to share with you a true story that manifests this reality, which as shared with me by someone who heard it in person.

There was an elderly Greek man – from Chios – who was in his last days in a hospital. Everyone called him "Captain," because he had spent his life sailing the seas. As a young man during World War Two, his ship – not a warship, but a Greek merchant vessel – was torpedoed by a German submarine. The crew escaped to a lifeboat, but floated for weeks without rescue.

Finally, under the hot sun, when their food was long gone and the fresh water had run out, one of the sailors stood up, shook his fist at Heaven, and began cursing God. In his desperation, he had lost all hope.

Among the dozen or so men in the lifeboat, one old man had said nothing since the attack. But he stood up at that moment and rebuked the blasphemy.

He said: "Hold your tongue and blaspheme no more. Tomorrow, we shall be rescued."

Most of the sailors laughed at him. They had been floating for two weeks without a sign of any ship. The angry, hurt fellow asked him: "How do you know this?"

The old man replied: "Last night, Saint Nicholas came to me, walking over the sea, and he told me."

And there was even more laughter and more scorn. But as the Captain concluded the tale – on his deathbed and with tears in his eyes – he said: "The next morning at dawn, a ship appeared on the horizon and we were saved." He said no more after this, for he was filled to brim with emotion and gratitude to the Saint, and to ,God Who is glorified in such Saints!

My beloved Christians,

Your Heavenly Patron is a powerful intercessor before God. Let us understand that God still works miracles in His Holy Ones, and particularly through the Holy Hierarch and Wonderworker Nicholas.

May we always have his prayers as we struggle to be victors through Christ in our lives on earth. And may we have his intercessions when we stand before the dread Judgment Seat of Christ, so that we night be welcomed into the mansions of eternity to live in the Kingdom of God. Amen.

[*] Doxastikon of the Kekragarion of the Great Vespers of Saint Nicholas.

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