07/02/2022

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



My Beloved Community of Hellenic College and Holy Cross,

Tonight, we gather at this Service of Great Vespers in order to implore God's blessing upon the Spring Term of classes here at our Institution of Higher Learning and Preparation for the Holy Priesthood.

In an alternate Apolytikion of Saint Photios, the great Patriarch of Constantinople, we hear the following:

Ἑώας τὸ θεῖον σέλας, τῆς Ἐκκλησίας λαμπρότης, ἣν διατήρει Πάτερ ἄσειστον.

Divine flame of the East, Splendor of the Church – O Father, preserve the Church unshaken…[*]

Therefore, at this gathering of joy and spiritual celebration, it seems to me that a consideration of the person, character and brilliance of this "Divine Flame of the East" should constitute both our personal and collective meditation and reflection.

As all of you know, the Great Photios was, until his election as Ecumenical Patriarch, a layman – and perhaps the most erudite layman of his era. He was

schooled in all manners of learning – both secular and ecclesiastical – just as you are here at this institution.

His mind and heart were on fire with the love of God, and he fueled that fire with the wealth of worldly and otherworldly knowledge. And this is an example for every student and, indeed, for every teacher here. Be like the flame that burned in Saint Photios; for as the Scripture says, “our God is a consuming fire.” [†]

And just as God is known as a living flame of love,[‡] the Spirit ignites that flame to purify us and make us capable of reflecting the Divine Radiance that blinds the proud and gives light to the humble.

Thus, the Holy Photios is called the “Splendor of the Church” for his defense against the teachings and leadership that were contradictory to the Church. He stood for the full expression of the Person of the Holy Trinity. And his work entitled, Concerning the Mystagogy of the Holy Spirit, is a classic that everyone who considers themselves learned in Orthodox Theology should read.

Of course, the Great Photios stood up for the prerogatives of the Ecumenical Throne and the entirety of the Eastern Church administratively, too – even risking schism with Elder Rome in order to defend the good order of the Church. His righteous stand, however, was judged wrongly for many centuries by those who spoke of a so-called “Photian Schism.”

Nevertheless, today, thanks to honest scholarship in the West, even his detractors have been turned to the truth of his righteous and saintly stand. Thus, the Great Photios continues to shine as the “Splendor of the Church” he defended so admirably.

In our own days, when we see our Mother Church attacked, we appeal to the Great Saint to “preserve the Church unshaken.” We need his intercessions, for he knew so well what it was to be wrongly attacked.

Even so, despite the outrages against his high office as Ecumenical Patriarch, his apostolic spirit never faltered. He sent forth missionaries to the Slavic Lands – lands that today suffer from politicization and interference from secular forces; lands that our Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has brought healing to, despite those who hold the love of power, over the power of love.

Saint Photios is more than an inspiration for us Hierarchs and Clergy. Do not forget that he began his life without the intention of being ordained. Yet, in just three days, he advanced through the ranks of the Priesthood, so that he could ascend the

Patriarchal Throne. But before his priesthood, he was always a disciple and a learner – just like all of you here today.

Therefore, on this feast, I exhort all of you to become like him. Use your knowledge and learning in service to Christ. Study with diligence and dedication. And above all, practice love in all that you do. This way, you will answer the call that the Great Photios did:

“Preserve the Church unshaken!” Τὴν Ἐκκλησίαν διατήρει ἄσειστον!

Amen!

[*] Alternate Apolytikion of Saint Photios – Τῆς σοφίας ἐκφάντωρ λαμπρὸς γενόμενος, Ὀρθοδοξίας ἐδείχθης θεοπαγὴς προμαχών, τῶν Πατέρων καλλονὴ Φώτιε μέγιστε· σὺ γὰρ αἱρέσεων δεινῶν, στηλιτεύεις τὴν ὀφρύν, Ἑώας τὸ θεῖον σέλας, τῆς Ἐκκλησίας λαμπρότης, ἣν διατήρει Πάτερ ἄσειστον.

[†] Hebrews 12:29.

[‡] See the parable of the Lazaros and the Rich Man (Luke 16:19-31).

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