10/03/2022

His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros Homily at the Pre-Sanctified Liturgy



Beloved Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In this first Pre-Sanctified of our Holy Fast, we embrace contrition and repentance for our lives, and indeed, for the life of our world. This is a deeply sad moment for our worldwide Church – a time when brother fights against brother and sister goes to war against sister. And all for the vanity and greed of a madman, who is unjustly and unfortunately glorified here and overseas by those ignorant of his true intentions.

Holy Rus' – sanctified by the Apostolic Preaching sent forth from Constantinople in the Days of Saint Photios the Great, is embattled and embroiled in a fratricidal war of aggression that cannot be justified by any amount of sophistry.

And here, on this hill of hope for our Church in America, where the generations of the clergy are spawned, what is our response? How can we aid our sisters and brothers in Ukraine who are at this moment fighting for their lives, their families, their democracy, and their freedom? What can we do? What must we do? [*]

The Season of the Fast is a time of intensified spiritual awareness, of the consciousness of God's presence in our lives and in our world. But it is not a time of spiritual self-centeredness. Our Liturgy is local, and at the same time universal, even cosmic in its dimensions. Every prayer that we utter with our lips, and within our hearts, has an impact on what is taking place around the world. Especially in the hearts and lives of the suffering Ukrainian people. We are not exempt from doing battle in their defense – taking up the spiritual battle on their behalf. As the Apostle says:

Ὅτι οὐκ ἔστιν ἡμῖν ἡ πάλη πρὸς αἷμα καὶ σάρκα, ἀλλὰ πρὸς τὰς ἀρχάς, πρὸς τὰς ἐξουσίας, πρὸς τοὺς κοσμοκράτορας τοῦ σκότους τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου, πρὸς τὰ πνευματικὰ τῆς πονηρίας ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις.

For our contest is not with flesh and blood, but with principalities, with forces, with the lords of the regions of darkness of this present age, with the spiritual powers of

evil in the celestial realms. [†]

Indeed, we are duty-bound to perceive beyond the secular and go to the spiritual heart of the matter, where we will see with clarity the struggle against evil. Where we will be able to set our intentions, and focus our prayers and supplications to the Lord, on behalf of those suffering. Where we will stand in solidarity at the cross of their suffering, engaging in the spiritual transformation that comes from love and compassion for others.

As His All Holiness wrote in his annual Catechetical Homily, opening this season of the Holy Fast:

Throughout these days, the pious people of Ukraine carry their own weighty Cross, as they suffer the unspeakable abuses of an unprovoked, irrational and hostile war, which propagates pain and death. Co-suffering with our tested brethren and children, we intensify our supplication to the Lord of mercy and God of peace, unto the immediate cessation of this conflict and the prevalence of justice and peace, which are a foretaste of the redeemed joy of the Kingdom of God. [‡]

Here, our worldwide Spiritual Father identifies what Lent is truly about, as it is revealed in the one of the first hymns we will hear in Holy and Great Week:

Δεῦτε οὖν καὶ ἡμεῖς, κεκαθαρμέναις διανοίαις, συμπορευθῶμεν αὐτῷ, καὶ συσταυρωθῶμεν, καὶ νεκρωθῶμεν δι’ αὐτόν, ταῖς τοῦ βίου ἡδοναῖς, ἵνα καὶ συζήσωμεν αὐτῷ….

Therefore, let us also, purified in mind, journey with Him, that we may be crucified with Him and for His sake die to the pleasures of this life, that we may also live with Him …. [§]

My beloved Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

It is in our co-suffering with our brothers and sisters, in our journey with the Lord to the Cross, that we fulfill the Fast of the Forty Days. It is not what we put into our mouths that can corrupt us, but what comes forth from our lips – because it is formed in our hearts and minds. For from the heart proceed all evil intentions, murders, and the rest. [**]

That is why we must change our hearts, transfigure them through love and forgiveness, if we are to overcome such evils. And that is why we fast, to remind ourselves that we must first deny ourselves, pick up our cross, and follow the Lord of Glory.[††]

In this, my beloved, we are all students, μαθηταί of the Lord, our whole life long! Graduation from this College and Theological School are not the end. They are only the beginning; hence we call it "commencement."

Again, as His All Holiness wrote in his Catechetical Λόγος:

Ascetic discipline is always a journey; it is fulfilled when it becomes part of the Church, when it leads us to communion of the Sacred Mysteries, which in turn incorporate us into the movement of the Church toward the Kingdom. [‡‡]

This journey never ends, for we can never cross from being created to being Uncreated. But the Uncreated Eternal Son of the Eternal Father has crossed over to creation, to bring us into our own perfection.

And by the Co-Eternal Spirit, He grants us the grace to participate in His Divine Nature, which infuses every aspect of the creation, if we are willing enough, and if we are loving enough, to behold it.

This is the "the movement of the Church toward the Kingdom," of which His All Holiness so eloquently speaks. But this movement is not without effort, without struggle, or without pain. For it is the Way of the Cross. As Saint Isaac the Syrian says in one of his encouraging letters to a monastic:

For His path – [the Lord's path] – has been trodden from the ages and from all generations by the cross and death. … The path of God is a daily cross. No one has ascended into Heaven by means of ease…."[§§]

And at this moment in history, our Ukrainian brothers and sisters are experiencing that daily cross, one upon which they might lose their lives at any moment. But as the Lord also said:

Μὴ φοβηθῆτε ἀπὸ τῶν ἀποκτεννόντων τὸ σῶμα, τὴν δὲ ψυχὴν μὴ δυναμένων ἀποκτεῖναι….

Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul….[***]

They are willing to give up their bodies, because they know their souls are in the

Hand of God. They know that this onslaught, even coming from fellow Orthodox Christians, will not prevail.

God will be the final arbiter of this wickedness. He is the sole Judge of the Universe. For God not only goes to the Cross, but He descends into the lowest depths of Hell in order to redeem us.

There will be redemption for Ukraine. For the Church of Ukraine. And, we pray, for the Church of Russia, which is now standing precariously close to those who cried out: We have no king but Caesar![†††]

So the question for us, my dear Christians, where do we stand? On what path do we journey?

This Lenten Season, in which our Church is being ripped apart by violence and hatred, is a time for us to intensify our spiritual life on behalf of the suffering. Do not be afraid to suffer with them.

If your knees are sore from your praying, dedicate whatever grace God grants you, to those shivering in the cold and mud of this harshest of Ukrainian winters, as they defend their land and their freedom.

If you are tired from the long services, dedicate your fatigue to those who have not slept for days, as they keep watch over the country, their families, their children. Be vigilant for them. Cling to sacred νήψις for their sake. Rouse yourself from your spiritual lethargy to be strong for them – out of compassion for their suffering, and out of love for all our Orthodox brothers and sisters: Ukrainian and Russian alike.

If your prayers feel hollow, then fill your soul with intentions for peace, for reason, for understanding. Pray for these virtues to be manifest.

We are here on the beautiful hill in Brookline, overlooking the safe harbor of Boston. But we can travel in the spirit to the front lines to give love and comfort, compassion and mercy, to all who are in need.

Remember – these are all human beings. With fears, with doubts, with sins and with faults. Remember:

Οὐκ ἔστιν ἅγιος, ὡς ὁ Θεὸς ἡμῶν, καὶ οὐκ ἔστι δίκαιος, πλήν σου Κύριε.

There is none holy, as our God, and there is none righteous except You, O Lord.[‡‡‡]

Only God redeems the evil of this world and only God is their judge. His

righteousness is the only standard that will not fail. Therefore, let us not judge our Russian brethren who have been deceived by an evil and corrupt government. Let us hold them in prayer even as we hold our Ukrainian brothers and sisters.

Thus, in this Lenten Season of Spring, we will journey with the Lord, purified in mind, … that we may be crucified with Him and for His sake die to the pleasures of this life, that we may also live with Him, through His glorious Resurrection at the Holy Pascha.

Καλή Σαρακοστή, και Καλό Πάσχα.

[*] Cf. Acts 2:37.

[†] Ephesians 6:12.

[‡] Catechetical Homily at the Opening of Holy and Great Lent, 2022.

[§] Στιχηρὰ Ἰδιόμελα of the Matins of Great and Holy Monday.

[**] Cf. Matthew 15:11-20.

[††] Cf. Matthew 16:24.

[‡‡] Catechetical Homily at the Opening of Holy and Great Lent, 2022.

[§§] Homily 59.

[***] Matthew 10:28a.

[†††] John 19:15.

[‡‡‡] Ἁγία καὶ Μεγάλη Τετάρτη: Κανών α’, Ὠδὴ γ’, Τριῳδίου, Καταβασία.

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