

14/03/2023

HOMILY By His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America At the Vespers of Contrition Saint Nicholas Shrine Greek Orthodox Church



Beloved brothers and sisters in the Lord,

We have arrived once again at the Vespers of Contrition, which prepares us to leave the relaxation of the weekend and re-engage the Lenten Fast with more fervor. The evening descends and we come to Monday, which is by right, the Second Day of the Week.

We gather in prayer and in supplication to God, that we might be guided aright in our disposition, our intentions, our will, and in all our ways. Each of us takes from this Vespers a different dispensation from God. For some of us, we are able to fast more diligently. For others, we are resolved to be more merciful to the poor and needy. And for some others, the doors of repentance open wider, and we find that we can forgive each other easier. In every case, though, God grants us these gifts according to our needs, whether we are aware of them, or not.

One of the many reasons that we observe the Lenten Season and Fast, is so we may take advantage of the benefits that a more intense spiritual practice affords.

However, not all of us can apply ourselves to the same extent, due to the many demands of this life. But for those of us who can come into the bosom of the Church and experience its uplifting spiritual services – like this Vespers of Contrition – there is a lasting benefit to our souls.

As you know, this vespers service is unique to the Sunday evenings of Lent. In Greek, contrition means κατάνυξις, which comes from the word, νύξις, meaning to stab or to cut. And in ancient Greek, this word also has the added sense of bewilderment, as if you are shocked by the wound.

This is the same Greek word, as a verb, used to describe the wound to our Lord on the Cross, after He had willed death to come:

εἰς τῶν στρατιωτῶν λόγχῃ αὐτοῦ τὴν πλευρὰν ἔνυξε, καὶ εὐθέως ἐξῆλθεν αἷμα καὶ ὕδωρ;

one of the soldiers pierced his side with a lance and, at once, there was an outpouring of blood and water.[*]

And these are the very words that our priests say during the Proskomide, when they pierce the Amnos with the λόγχῃ, the ceremonial lance. After the piercing, they pour wine and water in the chalice, which will, of course, be transformed into the Precious Blood of our Lord in the course of the Liturgy. I realize that most of you cannot witness this liturgical action, because it is accomplished in the Altar behind the Iconostasion. But it is potent and full of symbolism, and it speaks very much to the κατάνυξις we strive for in tonight's Vespers and in our lives.

For it is only when we have been pricked in our conscience – cut to the heart – that we feel genuine contrition and are truly ready for the outpouring of grace that is issued forth from the Holy Side of the Lord. Because those who are truly contrite in their hearts judge only themselves. They see only their own shortcomings, not those of others; as in the simple, yet profound, definition of a Saint: a person who only sees their own sins.

And this experience can be truly astonishing! Because we normally concentrate on the world around us, its problems and its problem-makers. We rarely look deep within our inner universe, and this is why contrition is so valuable. Κατάνυξις is the cut – the piercing – that opens us up to our most intimate and interior selves, so

that we can see ourselves as God sees us. And we can know His love and mercy for us with all our imperfections; so much so, that we are empowered to manifest that love and mercy for others.

Therefore, my beloved Christians,

Receive from this Vespers of Contrition all that you are able to bear. Let it be a doorway to self-knowledge, and a pathway to self-honesty. It will help you on your way to the Holy Resurrection of our Lord, where you will receive the blessing of eternal life with Him, Who is blessed and glorified with His Eternal Father, and the All-Holy, Good and Life-creating Spirit; now and ever, and unto the ages of ages.

Amen.

Photos: GOARCH/Dimitrios Panagos

[*] John 19:34.

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