



Holiness and Martyrdom in Our Times: An Interview with Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos

– Your Eminence, many people are unsure if saints exist today. What do you say?

– Of course there are saints. The purpose of the Church is to sanctify people, otherwise it should not exist. The Church, with the Mysteries and the ascetic life, aims to heal mankind from the passions and give them spiritual health, which is holiness. God says: “Be holy, for I am holy” (1 Pet. 1:16). And it is written in the Apocalypse: “Let the one who is holy continue to be holy” (Rev. 22:11).

Unfortunately, most Christians today perceive the Church as a religious, ethical or social organization with secular or worldly purposes. And they struggle together in the Church to produce social or ethical projects. Of course, the Church does such projects, but these are the result, a fruit of the union of a person with Christ.

Thus, there are saints also today who lived and live within the Church, such as Bishops, Priests, monks and laypeople of all categories. Yet, the biggest problem is that we don't have the Orthodox criteria to understand them, because they have an inner world that is hidden from the many, and many of us are not in the right condition to recognize them.

What is particularly important is not whether saints exist today, but how we can become saints. All sciences have a particular method, and for one to be a saint they must follow this specific method, which is the purification of the heart, the illumination of the nous and theosis, in conjunction with the Mysteries of the Church. We encounter this in the */Philokalia/* and in the teachings of the contemporary Fathers. Holiness is expressed through repentance, humility, and love for God and man.

This is the reason why people today read the lives and words of contemporary saints, in the hagiographic sense, where they are struggling for their salvation, such as that of Fr. Paisios, Fr. Porphyrios, Fr. Sophrony, Fr. Ephraim Katounakiotis, and many others who are known and unknown, who are now deceased. These are our guides and our models, without dismissing and undermining the institution of the Church.

– There are many people who are seeking an Elder with special gifts to guide them, which if nothing else, is hard to find nowadays.

– This naturally happens. Because people today, like people of every age, seek people who will show them the way and path of salvation, the method that leads to holiness and internal completeness. It is not a



method based on logic, technique and ethics, but it is a combination of the Mysteries and the ascetic life.

People seek “living organisms” and not simple teachers and academic theologians. Just as biological life is imparted from living organisms and not dead ones, because no dead organism can impart life, the same happens in the spiritual life. One who loves Christ with their entire existence, namely psychosomatically, can impart this love to others. Anyone who knows the path to a destination, they can also point the way to those who seek it.

I find the opportunity here to say that there are three pillars of the spiritual life, as interpreted by the sacred Nicholas Cabasilas. This appears at the consecration of a church, where the Sacred Altar is consecrated by the Bishop, who puts relics of Martyrs into it. So the axis of the spiritual life is threefold: the Bishop, the Altar and the Saints, and these three must operate properly for an ecclesiastical mindset to exist.

A Bishop who is not associated with the Divine Eucharist and does not recognize the Saints, or the Divine Eucharist without the Bishop and the Saints, or love for the Saints without participating in the Divine Eucharist and being in union with the Bishop, do not constitute an Orthodox ecclesiastical mindset.

The great Elders respected the Bishop and led those who wanted to unite with Christ to the Divine Eucharist and prepared them to commune of the Body and Blood of Christ. This is why people seek such blessed Elders and receive their words. In the /Gerontikon/ and in the ascetic texts it appears that whoever thirsts for God runs to the “living organisms” and asks the question: “Abba, give me a word that I may be saved?” This “word” of the Abba has power and energy, they are words of God and sayings of life that regenerate in Christ.

Unfortunately, as you say yourself, such Elders are scarce nowadays, which is a time of secularization and compromise in the faith and life, either because they are rare, or hidden, or because people cannot and do not want to follow them. Christ said this: “For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened” (Matt. 7:8). Many times there are blessed people next to us and we do not suspect it. And it is an awful thing to depart from this world, that is to die, without taking into account the friends of Christ who are near to us.

– In many parts of the world today we see that Orthodoxy is persecuted. Where do you think our enemies will reach?

– You are absolutely right. Wherever an Orthodox Church exists it accepts temptations and persecutions. It is an undeviating law. We see this wherever an Orthodox Church exists – North, South, East and West. The only thing different is the method of persecution in each country. Sometimes it is obvious and



aggressive and reminiscent of the ancient times of early Christianity, and sometimes it is insidious and more dangerous, such as secularization, that is, the intermingling with the world.

The Orthodox Church is the Body of Christ, it is the brilliant sun that causes and invites pain to those whose eyes are unhealthy and have vision problems. And where the sun is there is also a shadow, and in the shadow is darkness, where many bloodthirsty beasts circulate.

When people hate Christ, the Truth, the Orthodox Church, they have internal problems and can reach unfathomable places, to the point of madness. I saw on the internet a frightening scene of the beheading of a Christian by a fanatical Muslim and I was shocked. I thought how this was the way the Apostles and Martyrs were martyred, such as when the Synaxarion says “they were perfected by the sword”. And this is a test for us who love to have a good time, who compromise, who seek prosperity. Hence, persecutions show the internal illnesses of the persecutors, as well as the greatness of Christians. The measure of our love for Christ is very high. Holiness and faithfulness to the evangelical commandments are not given with the low criteria of ethical and social works, but they must have high standards.

Eventually, the Church today must prepare her children and those who love Christ and His salvation for martyrdom, to become martyrs for Christ. Theology, missions and social work outside of the feel and view of martyrdom has no particular value. The great Elders during the time of the Turkish occupation were “coaches” of the martyrs. This is what the great Elders are doing also today.

I was moved recently when I received a message from a Christian in Egypt that said: “Please pray to God to give us strength, peace and rest, so we can bear our cross with courage and firm faith, and be considered worthy to become saints and martyrs for the name of Christ.”

How can you not love such a disposition for martyrdom!

– In Syria the situation is unsettled. They threaten Christians there with massacres if they do not leave their homes. Where are we going with all this? Perhaps these war conflicts are generalized?*

– I follow with deep sorrow all that is taking place in Syria. I cannot say that I am on a particular side, because then I would be participating in the killing, and this is susceptible to divine justice. However, I deeply sorrow for this crazy river of blood, for the loss of human beings. We must create an army to pray that this crazy bloodbath will end and that peace will come to the region.

I sorrow for a particular reason, because I know these parts, since I repeatedly visited throughout the three-year period of 1988-1991, as well as many times after. In 1988, at the suggestion of Archbishop Seraphim of Athens and All Greece and the decision of the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece, I went to Lebanon to teach at the Balamand Theological School “Saint John of Damascus”. I had an official passport from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to have greater security. Because the airport in Beirut was not in operation, due to the civil war, I would go to Damascus in Syria and from there the Patriarchate of Antioch led me to Lebanon.

So for many days I would stay in Damascus, where I spoke with Orthodox young people, scientists and students who had a great thirst for God. I visited many of them and liturgized and spoke with the people, such as in Homs, Aleppo, Lattakia, etc. In Syria I came to know ardent Orthodox Christians, good monks



and exceptional Clergy. There I gained dear friends and I grieve that I see daily the unrest in the region. I know Bishops and Professors who were students of mine at the Theological School in Lebanon, and I pray for them to God. Of course, I know Patriarch Ignatios of Antioch, with whom I spoke many times. He has excellent skills and is trying to preserve and protect the Church, but temptation is great.

However, we live in an era in which we should not only look after ourselves and our homes, but we should be concerned with the problems of our other brethren and Orthodox Christians, and we must pray for them.

Of course, God directs history, and we are under His Providence, and He intervenes in the proper time, but our prayers are needed. Hence, every Divine Liturgy is a prayer for the peace of the world, the stability of the Churches of God, the cessation of wars.

Let us make this a request for prayer. Let our hearts hurt, because unfortunately the world's problems are geopolitical, since all people are considered small pawns in the international chessboard, instituted by some "global players", without pity and pain. Let God be propitious to us all.

– In all of this, many say the Holy Mountain is a spiritual oasis that gives rest to the thousands that visit it lately.

– The Holy Mountain is indeed a blessed place, a spiritual oasis, which has sanctified people who know how to love, how to assist people, how to hurt, how to sacrifice for others, and how to give rest to the weary.

Do not let it be paradoxical if I say that the Holy Mountain is a place of war, a place of conflicting wars. I mean of course spiritual warfare against evil spirits. The Apostle Paul writes: "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spirits of evil in the heavens" (Eph. 6:12).

The Fathers of the Holy Mountain gain experience of this war, which is why they can teach about the methods of this spiritual warfare to those who desire to learn it. When someone fights against the devil, sin and death they can experience the fruits of the divine Economy, the Incarnation of Christ, and acquire spiritual freedom and inner fullness.

Since my student years I often visited Mount Athos, I came to know venerable monks, I tasted their blessed bread, I heard their sanctified words, I felt the love and their hidden life, I came to know who the natural man in Christ is, vigils in the monasteries, sketes and hermitages, I walked the wondrous trails, I rejoiced in its virginal purity of nature, and I generally lived in a world of love, purity, tenderness and nobility.

At the Holy Mountain I came to know the truth that authentic monks are imbued with the prophetic, apostolic and martyric life, they "live the Gospel", they are contemporary Prophets, Apostles and Martyrs of the Church. Many times I invoke their intercessions and prayers.

Mount Athos, despite some mistakes made by certain individual monks, is a place of mystery, inflamed by prayer, it is a spiritual womb that is pregnant and giving birth to children of God, heavenly citizens. This is why we must have deep respect for it.



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“Ἁγιότητα καί τό μαρτύριο στήν εποχή μας”, July 2012.

Translated by John Sanidopoulos.