

Sermon for the Three Hierarchs

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Today, we celebrate the Feast of the Great Patrons of all Seminarians throughout the world: St. Basil the Great, St. John Chrysostom, and St. Gregory the Theologian. These three Saints not only had a profound knowledge of the deep mysteries of God but also were granted tremendous ability to elucidate these mysteries to us with utmost clarity, teaching us by their words and their deeds. All three of these Saints had an amazing grasp of the things of heaven and also of the created world, using philosophy, science and other fields of secular learning to build up the Church and eloquently convey the Truth, thereby showing us that a balanced well-rounded education is not to be disdained but rather is to be used for the glorification of God, the spreading of the Gospel, and is to be sanctified by Christ through prayer, asceticism, humility and submission to the Church and to God-ordained authority.

“By keeping the feast of the Three Hierarchs at the end of January, the month in which we keep the memory of so many glorious Bishops, confessors and ascetics,” the Synaxarion explains to us that “the Church thereby recapitulates the memory of all the Saints who have witnessed to the Orthodox faith by their writings and their lives. This feast sets the seal to the month of January in which each of the three Hierarchs have already had a separate commemoration. In this present feast, we honor the whole ministry of teaching in the Holy Church, namely, the illumination of the hearts and minds of the faithful through the word of truth.” So the feast of the three Hierarchs is in fact, as the Synaxarion tells us, “the commemoration of all the Fathers of the Church, those models of evangelic perfection which the Holy Spirit has raised up from age to age and from place to place to be new Prophets and new Apostles, guides of souls heavenward, comforters of the people and fiery pillars of prayers, supporting the Church and confirming her in the Truth¹.”

The great Hierarchs offer us many gifts today on their feast, among which is their immense corpus of theological writings. St. Gregory's Orations, St. John Chrysostom's Commentaries on the Scriptures and St. Basil's Letters and Treatises are indeed enough to occupy any one person for an entire lifetime, for each word of these fiery pillars contain a treasury of the Spirit. Their proclamation has gone out into all the earth and their words to the end of the universe, enlightening every generation, shining like a great city on a hill whose light cannot be hid but rather pours forth illumining all. It is because of their work that Orthodoxy triumphed in the 4th century when Arianism, exile, and confusion were rampant in the Church.

These Saints also offer us today the great gift of humility. By seeing their lives and the mercy that they were granted by God, we can begin to fathom the unthinkably great height they ascended and luminous Glory that God gives to His chosen ones. Reaching a profound state of holiness by participating in the life of God Himself, these luminaries were not simply “good people” but rather they were Angels in the flesh, heavenly men who through Christ transcended the laws of nature, sin, and death. St. John Maximovitch tells us the holiness that these great Saints possessed “is not simply righteousness, for which the righteous are accounted worthy to enjoy blessedness in the Kingdom of God, but is rather such a height of righteousness that the Saints are SO filled with the grace of God that it flows from them and out upon those who are in fellowship with them. Great is their blessedness, (he says) *which proceeds from the vision of the Glory of God*. Filled to

¹ Synaxarion, January 30th.

overflowing also with a love for men which proceeds from love for God, they are responsive to the needs of men and to their supplications, and become mediators and intercessors for them before God.²

These giants of the spiritual life entered into the innermost Holy of Holies in the Heavenly Tabernacle even while they were yet in the body and now they abide there forever, in the closest proximity possible to the Throne of the Triune God, interceding for us. We see this truth illustrated in the iconographic scheme here in the Church, which is an image or reflection of the Heavenly Church. We can see that not all of the Saints are in the Altar, some are in the Narthex and some in the Nave. And yet, the ones who always stand closest to the Throne (in the Altar), with the exception of the Mother of God and St. John the Baptist, are the Three Great Hierarchs, whose icons can be seen when the curtain is opened.

These saints, and indeed all the Saints, grant us the gift of blessed humility because when we see their lives, we can begin to realize our own poverty and how far away we really are from the goal that God has for all of us, soberly reminding us that anyone could fall away from God at any time. And yet, it is this very humility alone of which we speak which actually attracts God's protecting grace, preserving us from future deadly falls and which grants us salvation. Abba Dorotheos tells us that "even if we cannot endure much labor [like the great Saints] because we are weak, [we must]...be set on humbling ourselves. I firmly believe [he says] that, in the mercy of God, the little things done with humility will enable us to be found there, in the same place as the Saints who have labored much and been true servants of God."³

The lives of the Saints should therefore inspire us, and never cause us to despair. It is a healthy, humble spiritual insight when we realize that we might not reach the spiritual stature of the Three Great and Holy Hierarch's. St. John Climacus reminds us that "*it is impossible for all to become dispassionate, but it is not impossible for all to be saved and reconciled to God.*" (Step 26:82.) Therefore it is imperative that we should always strive to imitate their lives to the best of our ability, according to the strength which God has granted us.

"The Three Hierarchs, an earthly Trinity, have taught us in their writings and through their lives to worship and glorify the only True God: the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. These three luminaries of the Church have shed the light of the true Faith all over the world and have left us their descendants a sacred inheritance by which we too can attain to utmost blessedness and everlasting life in the presence of God and of all the Saints."⁴ The hymnography from the services therefore exhorts us to glorify our benefactors: "the three heralds of the great Trinity, the instruments of grace, the harps of the Spirit, the bulwarks of piety, the three apostles added to the twelve, the rivers pouring forth living water from Eden, which flood the face of the earth with life-bearing and divine streams, for it is they who have formed the Faith as the elements form creation"⁵. By their prayers and those of all the Saints may God grant us to strive with all our might, to fight the good fight, and to humbly and faithfully finish the course well as they did so that we might find eternal rest with them in the Kingdom of God. Amen.

² Lantern of Grace, pg. 70.

³ Abba Dorotheus, pg. 95.

⁴ Paraphrase of Synaxarion.

⁵ Vespers Lord I Call.