

A CLOUD OF WITNESSES OF CHRIST
Synaxis of the Holy New-Martyrs and Confessors of Russia
By Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev)
February 10, 2013
Moscow, Cathedral of the Icon of the Mother of God “Joy of All Who Sorrow”
on Bolshaya Ordynka

Today we celebrate the synaxis of the Holy New-Martyrs and Confessors of the Russian Church ~ all those who suffered during the years of the cruel persecution of faith and the Church of Christ. This is a feast of the entire Church. It is connected with the memory of sad and tragic events, but at the same time, it is a great church celebration, for the epoch of the persecution of the Church, which lasted in our country** for 70 years during the 20th century, revealed to the world a great cloud of confessors and new-martyrs. They chose death rather than to deny Christ, and today in the triumphant Heavenly Church they pray for us and for our Fatherland.

The persecution began right after the October Revolution when the Bolsheviks came to power. The persecution of believers was single-minded and continuous and in its cruelty surpassed all previous persecutions, including the persecution of the Church by the Roman emperors of the first, second and third centuries. Never in the history of mankind has there ever been such a massive extermination of people as occurred in the last century. The God-fighting (theomachist) regime which came to power in 1917 did everything that it could to annihilate religion, the Church and its representatives who bore the grace-filled spirit of Christ, which for centuries thrived and spiritually nourished our Fatherland.

The repression of believers was cruel and bloody because the authorities relied on the complete destruction and annihilation of the Church. They proceeded from a completely fanatical and anti-human idea that religion is a relic of the past that must die out by itself, and if it doesn't die out by itself, then this must be helped and made to happen, so as to destroy it as soon as possible.

An anti-human criminal ideology was formed, by which the authorities governed our country for the duration of several decades. This ideology resulted in many millions of victims, and its victims were people of the most divergent beliefs, of various classes and of divergent social status. They began with the fight against the nobility and the merchants and then they began to “dispossess the kulaks” (wealthy peasants). Next began the re-settlement and extermination of entire nationalities, one extermination campaign was followed by another. These criminal activities lasted for the duration of several decades. The Russian Orthodox Church was just one of the objects of the suicide campaign that the authorities waged against their own people, but it was the Church that showed the world great courage and spiritual heroism, which was etched in the memory of people and the Church glorifies today with the canonization of the Holy New-Martyrs and Confessors of Russia. The persecution machine ate not only innocent people, but also the ones who were themselves guilty of these crimes, persecutors became the persecuted and those who received sentences fell under the same verdicts. We don't see any heroism amongst these people and we understand that they became victims of the world which they themselves had created. The ones who we glorify were not guilty of anything except that they believed in Christ, served the Church, loved God and led the people of God to salvation. Not all those who suffered during these terrible years, but those who remained faithful to the Lord to the end, who were not broken by the repressive machine, who did not renounce Christ even under torture and imprisonment, who did not betray their neighbors — these are the ones who we glorify as the New-Martyrs and Confessors of the Church of Russia.

We don't know how many of them there were: tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands or millions, because the full truth of those years has never been revealed. All of the archives are not opened and revealed so that it would be possible that by means of the archives we would be able to find out who was faithful until the end and who apostasized. Furthermore, using the

archival files themselves and the interrogation protocols by which we often try to recreate the history of this or that new-martyr is not a small undertaking. Sometimes people did not apostasize, but it is recorded in the protocols that they apostasized. They never actually signed anything but all the same their so-called “signature” was placed on the documents for them. The history in its entirety of the struggles (podvigs) of these saints is known only unto God. The Church, however, glorifies all of the New-Martyrs and Confessors — those whose struggles (podvigs) are known to us and are documented, as well as those of whom only God knows. Among them were luminaries — confessors of the Church of Christ, simple priests, as well as monastics, monks and nuns and a great cloud of laity who were called to the struggle of martyrdom, who under terrible tortures and excruciating torments did not turn away from Christ. Glorified by the Church are those whose names we know as well as those whose names we don’t know and are known only unto God. These people, who walked in the steps of Christ, imitated Him in their lives, and just like Christ Himself, they were not afraid to ascend the cross, to suffer and to die by means of horrible torments. Now they are our protectors and they intercede for us before the throne of God.

The struggles and lives of the Holy New-Martyrs and Confessors of Russia is a spiritual treasure that our Church should keep with care and in a sacred manner. We don’t know what kinds of times await us in the future. One should not think that the church will now and forever enjoy prosperity, peace, and a relationship of good will from the point of view of the civil authorities, because times can change. In history it has always been this way. Our Orthodox Church has lived through various and diverse circumstances, wherein there have always been people who were prepared to traverse, with Christ, the path to Golgotha, to the end. Today we glorify them and pray to them, that the Lord would protect our Church and our Fatherland, that the Lord would keep and protect us, our families and our neighbors, that the grace of God would never withdraw from our people, as it occurred, when a great many of our people renounced faith, God, Christ and the Church. We pray that this apostasy will never again happen in our history, that our people would follow Christ the same way that our pious ancestors followed Him. We pray that the Orthodox faith, which we have inherited at such a high price, would be able to be passed down by us to our descendants [and to future generations].

**Whenever Vladika Hilarion refers to “our country” or “our Fatherland” he is obviously referring to Russia, being a Russian bishop and giving this sermon in Russia. The meaning extends to every country and everyplace in the world where God is worshipped “in spirit and in truth”. The Holy New-Martyrs of Russia intercede before the footstool of the Lord not only for Russia but for all of us as well, for every pious Orthodox Christian who honors and prays to them.

See *The New Martyrs of Russia* by Archpriest Michael Polsky, Jordanville, NY, 2000.