

**DEFENDER OF THE ORTHODOX FAITH**  
**Day of remembrance of the luminary**  
**Basil the Great, Archbishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia**  
**By Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev)**  
**January 14, 2006**

The luminary Basil the Great is glorified by the Church because he guarded the truth of the Church and did not give in to the trends of the times, as many of his brother archbishops did, and because he did not submit to the prevailing mindset of the fourth century which was formed by the Arian heresy.

Not everyone knows what the Arian heresy is and why it is dangerous. The Arians denied the Divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ, maintaining that there is only one God — God the Father, and that Jesus Christ is part of God's creation, that God the Father created Him according to His will. He was created, of course, before the creation of the visible world, the angels and mankind, but all the same, He was created by God. The Arians in the times of St. Basil the Great said that they "know God the same as God knows Himself." In other words, that there is nothing in God that is mysterious or hidden, superior to the human mind or beyond our ability to understand. This heresy, which contradicted the very foundation of Christianity, seized the minds of very many people in the fourth century. In the same way, a significant number of bishops and priests also submitted to this teaching and began to preach and to defend it.

At that time, St. Basil the Great was the bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia, which was an enormous metropolia. Fifty bishops were subordinate to him and almost all of them were Arians who denied the Divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Divinity of the Holy Spirit, thereby denying the Holy Trinity as well. One can only imagine what kind of spiritual wisdom was needed in those difficult times, when the saint's co-workers became heretics, in order for him to not only keep the true faith but to proclaim it to the people.

Without wavering, St. Basil the Great defended the truth in speech and in writing. His works have come down to us and show us the great spiritual depth of this man. Having come down to us as well is the "Oration of Praise", which was written in his memory by his closest friend, St. Gregory the Theologian. He was a comrade-in-arms and helper to St. Basil who, together also with St. Gregory of Nyssa, defended the teaching of the Church against the Arian heresy. In the "Oration of Praise," Gregory the Theologian creates an image of Basil the Great as a man of the Church who had no fear of anyone or anything. Once he was summoned to appear before the prefect of the city of Caesarea who, like the emperor and the majority of the civil authorities at that time, was inclined towards the Arian heresy. The prefect asked Basil, "Why don't you follow the majority?" Basil answered, "I follow Christ, I follow the Truth." The prefect asked, "Aren't you afraid that you will be punished because of your stubbornness?" Basil answered, "What do I have to fear? If you want to take my property from me, I don't have any, only a few books. If you want to take my clothes, all I have are the rags that you see me wearing before you. If you want to hand me over to beatings, you will only be able to order the first blow, because my body is so weak that I will immediately give up the spirit. And I am not afraid of death, for it will unite me with Christ." The prefect said, "Until now, no one has ever spoken to me in this way", to which Basil answered, "Maybe you never met an archbishop before."

Such was this luminary, who the Church has glorified for already more than fifteen centuries. He was one of those who have bequeathed to us the Orthodox faith, who in the difficult years of the coming into being of Orthodoxy when decisive dogmatic formulas of the Church did not yet exist, with his theological wisdom, helped to find their formulations, which have remained with us for the ages. These formulations were necessary in order to defend the true faith against the encroachment of the heretics.

You see, if Christ is not God, then why do we say "the Church of Christ", then by what means are we saved, why do we go to church and why do we pray and receive Holy Communion? If Christ is not God, then what is the point and essence of Christianity? How,

then, does Christianity differ from other religions, from Tolstoyism, from any other moral or philosophical teachings? If Christ is not God, then how does the Gospel differ from the Koran, the Bhagavad Gita, or from other religious books? You see, there were many such books before and after Christ. However, the essence of Christianity, her saving power consists of the fact that Christ was God incarnate. In His Divinity He is equal to the Father and in His humanity He is one of us, He is part of the human race. This, namely, is the source of our salvation which has been given to us by Christ. Those who deny this salvation and the Divinity of Christ also deny the essence of Christianity. This is why it was so important to stand up against the Arian heresy and to keep the true faith.

This is why, today as well, regardless of all the tendencies of our times, regardless of all the contemporary philosophies and ideas which are fashionable in our times, we must firmly keep the Orthodox faith, remembering that many surrendered their lives for this faith.

Exhausted by this struggle, St. Basil the Great died at the age of 49. Every day this struggle shortened his life by ten days, and every year of confrontation and opposition shortened his life by ten years. Many were the luminaries, confessors, venerable ones and martyrs who gave up their lives for this saving Christian Orthodox faith, which we have received as an inheritance. Let us keep this faith, and let us thank God that He has granted it to us. Let us ask of Him that the grace of God will never become scarce in the Church, that we would always find ourselves to be defenders of the faith, that we would be numbered among the luminaries, venerable ones and confessors, that we would fear nothing and that we would preach the Gospel of Christ, God incarnate, God who became Man for our salvation.

***Translated from the Russian by Archpriest Peter Olsen***

#### Translator's notes

1. St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory the Theologian became close friends when they were students together in Caesarea.
2. St. Gregory of Nyssa was St. Basil's brother. Five of St. Basil's siblings, as well as his mother and grandmother are numbered among the saints.
3. Tolstoyism is based on the social, philosophical and religious views of the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910). Tolstoy was excommunicated by the Russian Orthodox Church.
4. The Bhagavad Gita is a sacred book of the Hindu religion.