

SERMON on the Holy New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia, January 26, 2020

Today we celebrate the memory of the Holy New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia. The New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia were Orthodox Faithful who suffered for Christ at the hands of the godless Soviets from 1917 to 1991. The number of the New martyrs of Russia is in the millions, which far exceeds that of all the martyrs who died for Christ during the first three centuries of Christianity. Among the countless Orthodox Russians who were murdered and tortured during the years of persecutions were laity, monks, priests, bishops whose only "crime" was their unshakeable faith in God. Among those who suffered for their faith were some who labored in America before the Russian Revolution: St. Tikhon, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia who founded St. Tikhon's Monastery; St. Alexander Hotovitzky, a zealous missionary priest who helped to organize many parishes, among them our own St. Basil's in Watervliet, and St. John Kochurov, who also played a role in the founding of St. Basil's before he, Patriarch Tikhon and St. Alexander Hotovitsky returned to Russia and suffered martyrdom.

Martyrdom is the same as Christianity. These two words have the same meaning. The way of following Christ is always the way of carrying one's cross. The road to Pascha always passes through Golgotha. Christ went along this road, the first Christians chose this road, and the saints followed after them, generation after generation. The Lord Himself showed us this way to salvation, and if there were some other way that leads to eternal life, then undoubtedly the Lord would have showed it to us. For the New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia, their cross was persecution unto giving up their earthly lives for Christ. Hatred against Christ and His followers should not surprise us. It was foretold by the Lord Himself who said, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you" (John 15:18).

In many cities and villages of Russia, many magnificent churches that were destroyed and desecrated by the Communists are being rebuilt. The red flag, the hammer and sickle, and the face of Lenin has greatly disappeared. What I mostly saw in Russia now is the Cross of Christ atop cupolas of magnificent cathedrals, the Russian tricolor flag and the Byzantine imperial double headed eagle. Places of execution of the New Martyrs are now places of pilgrimage and prayer. In Moscow I visited Butovo Field, where the NKVD shot tens of thousands of people from the 1930's to the 1950's. In the years 1937 and 1938 alone, in fifteen months 20,765 people were shot there. In Butovo Field there now stands a beautiful church dedicated to the memory of the Holy New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia. My former bishop and teacher, Metropolitan Laurus of blessed memory, helped to lay the foundation of this church and assisted in its consecration.

The next time it seems to us that the cross that we are given is greater than we can bear, when not only the attainment of Christian virtues, but even the usual attendance at services and following the Church-established fasts seems unbearable, let us turn with fervent prayer for help to the Lord and to the New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia, who did not give only a day or an hour, but their whole lives to Christ. The struggle of the New Martyrs is the common legacy of all Orthodox Christians, no matter if Russian, Greek, Serbian, American, Irish, Italian or whatever. The struggles of the New Martyrs are the lessons and guidance for our lives. Holy New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia, pray unto God for us! Amen.