

SUNDAY AFTER THEOPHANY, HIEROMARTYR PHILIP, METROPOLITAN OF MOSCOW

Matt. 4:12-17, January 9, 2022

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Today is the Sunday after the holy great feast of Theophany. Today we also remember the Holy Hieromartyr Philip, Metropolitan of Moscow, who was martyred in 1569 by order of Tsar Ivan IV.

St. Philip was baptized with the name Theodore and grew up in Moscow, being part of a boyar family. Both of his parents were very pious. His mother Barbara spent the last years of her life as a monastic, having taken the name Barsonophia. From childhood St. Philip was very pious and studious. He loved to read and study and to attend the church services. He was an excellent student. The young Theodore served the young prince Ivan Vasilievich (the future Tsar Ivan IV) in the palace until the age of thirty, when he was inspired to visit the church and heard the words of the Gospel “No one can serve two masters” (Matt. 6:24). He left the palace, and without telling his parents, he secretly entered the strict Solovetsky Monastery which is located in the Solovetsky Islands on the White Sea in northern Russia. The weather is very severe and very cold.¹ The novice Theodore excelled in the monastic life and his obediences consisted of various heavy physical labors, such as chopping wood, digging in the garden, carrying rocks and stones, and disposing of buckets of waste water. Many praised him, but others, out of jealousy, spread false slanders about him. He endured everything with silence and humility. He was tonsured with the name Philip. In order to escape the praise heaped upon him for his humility and piety, Philip spent time as a hermit in the forests of Solovetsky in prayer and fasting. The Igumen of the monastery, Aleksey, assigned Philip as the chief authority over the monastery novices, in which capacity he faithfully served for nine years. When it was time for a new Igumen to be appointed, the overwhelming majority of the brotherhood selected St. Philip. Again fleeing praise and earthly glory, he fled into the forest as a hermit. Aleksey returned as Igumen for one and a half years, after which he reposed, and Philip was again appointed as Igumen of the monastery, in which capacity he served for eighteen years. According to the hagiographer Makarios of Simonos Petra, under St. Philip’s spiritual authority “the Monastery became the ecclesiastical, economic and cultural center of the region.”² Among his accomplishments and improvements to the monastery, he built two stone churches, had church bells installed, built a three floor residence and hospital for the brotherhood, began the raising of cattle and sheep and dried up the swamps, connecting the canals of the river. The life of the saint emphasizes several times that at every step in St.

Philip's life he was always increasing his spiritual struggles (podvigs) and achieving greater and greater heights of perfection in the virtues.

In 1566 a vacancy occurred for the position of Metropolitan of Moscow, the most important position in the Russian Orthodox Church at that time. Tsar Ivan IV had been acquainted with St. Philip since childhood. Having heard of his sanctity and great accomplishments at Solovetsky Monastery, the Tsar had sent monetary aid and support for the monastery projects. The Tsar wanted Philip to be the new Metropolitan of Moscow and he summoned Philip to Moscow "for advice." At that time Tsar Ivan had created a secret police force called the "oprichniki."³ St. Philip tried to decline but was hard pressed by the Tsar to accept the position. Fr. Makarios writes in his life of the saint: "Fearing God alone, and motivated by an ardent love for the oppressed Christian people, {St. Philip} had no hesitation in condemning the cruelties perpetrated by the tsar and in demanding the dissolution of the oprichniki — at first in private", and later "in public from the the pulpit of the Cathedral of the Dormition. 'Sire,' he exclaimed, 'we are offering the unbloody Sacrifice here, while the blood of Christians is being shed outside this holy church.' The Tsar was furious and threatening him, ordered him to be silent. 'I cannot be,' he replied, 'I cannot obey your command rather than God's, I stand for what is true and right and shall continue to do so, even though I be deprived of my office and suffer the worst of torments; otherwise our faith would be vain, and vain too would be the apostolic office.'"⁴ The Tsar summoned a robber council with false witnesses, among them the Igumen and some unscrupulous monks from Solovetsky Monastery, who testified against the saint with slanderous lies. Even before the conclusion of the trial and after hearing all the false testimony, St. Philip removed his white klobuk and warned his accusers with the words of the apostle Paul that "you reap what you sow" (Galatians 6:7). Later, after suffering pangs of conscience, Tsar Ivan IV had these false accusers executed. St. Philip was seized while serving Divine Liturgy at the Dormition Cathedral, stripped of his vestments and ecclesiastical garments and dressed as a simple monk. Roughly abused, he was carted away into exile to the Monastery of Otrosh near Tver, where two days before Christmas in 1569 he was suffocated by Malyuta Skuratov, one of the most odious leaders of the Oprichnina.

In today's Gospel we read that when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee (Matt. 4:12). Our Savior is showing us by example that we should not go to meet temptations but that as Christians we should seek peace and try to avoid conflicts. That is why Jesus withdrew into Galilee among the Gentiles, where there were no Jews. This is exemplified in the life of St. Philip who tried to avoid becoming Igumen of the monastery, and later tried to avoid being appointed as Metropolitan of Moscow. There is a famous saying that monks should "flee women and bishops." Associating with women, for a monk, can lead to temptation or slanderous gossip and false accusations, and associating with bishops can lead to becoming ordained as a bishop or priest and, as a result, suffering from the burden of ecclesiastical office which is fraught with many temptations and conflicts which can disturb and threaten one's inner spiritual peace. However, when forced to face temptation, then the Christian must manfully and courageously face it. Again, we see this exemplified in St. Philip, who without fear or concern for his position or his very own life, out of pastoral obligation and concern, at first quietly tried to convince the Tsar to stop oppressing the people, and failing to convince the Tsar to disband the oprichniki, then resorted to publicly condemning the Tsar's oppression of the people.

May we also learn to follow the examples of our Savior and the Holy Hieromartyr St. Philip and seek to avoid conflict and temptations, seeking instead peace and harmony based on truth and righteousness. And if we are thrust into temptation, let us fearlessly "speak the truth in love," and always stand for what is true and right, regardless of the possible consequences. Remember, "no man can serve two masters," and "you reap what you sow." Holy Hieromartyr Philip pray unto God for us! Amen.

1. In 1921 Vladimir Lenin converted the monastery into a concentration camp where political prisoners were incarcerated and engaged in slave labor. Among its prisoners was the famous Holy Hieromartyr Hilarion (Troitsky), Archbishop of Vereya. When St. Hilarion arrived on Solovetsky, he was robust and healthy. After six years of harsh conditions and forced slave labor, he physically digressed into a mere shadow of his former self. He died in 1929 at the age of 44. Relics of St. Hilarion are sewn into the antimins of our parish. See his famous tract, "Christianity or the Church?", Holy Trinity Monastery, Jordanville, NY, 1997.
2. "The Synaxarion, the Lives of the Saints of the Orthodox Church," by Hieromonk Makarios of Simonos Petra, Holy Convent of the Annunciation of Our Lady, Ormylia (Chalkidike), 2001, page 99.
3. The first political police in the history of Russia (1565-1572). Presumably created to weed out anyone suspected of treason, the oprichniki in essence persecuted and suppressed the boyars and the elite class, seizing property and land and conducting public executions. Their goal was to subject all classes to the tsar's authority. They were notorious for their cruelty, torture, executions and suppression of innocent people and the common folk as well. They committed many atrocities among all the classes. One especially egregious act was their "massacre of Novgorod" when they raided the town and committed mass executions.
4. Synaxarion, page 99.

