

**ST. TIKHON, BISHOP OF VORONEZH, WONDER-WORKER OF ZADONSK
NEW HIEROMARTYR BENJAMIN, METROPOLITAN OF PETROGRAD
AND THOSE WITH HIM
Matthew 17:14-23**

**By Archpriest Peter Olsen
St. Basil's Russian Orthodox Church, Watervliet, NY, 12189, August 13, 2023**

Today we celebrate the memory of two great saints of the Russian Orthodox Church: St. Tikhon, Bishop of Voronezh and Wonder-Worker of Zadonsk, who reposed in 1783 at the age of fifty-nine, and the New Hieromartyr Benjamin, Metropolitan of Petrograd, who was murdered by the Bolsheviks on August 13 in 1922.

In reading the life of St. Tikhon, I was particularly impressed by his limitless gentleness and humility. Herein lies his extraordinary power as a pastor and shepherd of souls. While he tried to raise the moral and cultural level of his flock, if the saint believed that he had hurt any one's feelings, he immediately asked forgiveness and prostrated to the ground. Once, when he was invited to the home of a country squire, the saint was taken aside by a young admirer of Voltaire¹ who was boasting of his anti-Christian opinions. The gentleness and soundness of Tikhon's replies made the impudent young man lose all control and slap the Bishop's face. Falling on his knees before the offender, the saint asked forgiveness for having, by his words, put him in such a temper. This brought the young man to repentance, and he became a good Christian. You see, love and humility won over the soul of this young man. If St. Tikhon had reacted with anger or retribution, no matter how justified he was to do so, the young man never would have changed his ways and repented. St. Tikhon later retired to a monastery, having worn himself out without taking into account his physical strength. He was unappreciated by the monks of the monastery, and in particular by the abbot, who was a violent and haughty man who had been chosen from among the clergy that St. Tikhon had deposed. Tikhon reacted with sincere compassion for those who wronged or insulted him, considering that the devil alone was responsible for their attitude. He was always the first to ask forgiveness of anyone who had offended him, even a novice or a domestic servant, so that, from being an enemy, he would become his most fervent admirer. Many came to St. Tikhon for spiritual advice, and he always had a smile and a word of consolation or encouragement for all according to his need, and his hand was always outstretched to bless or give alms.

Concerning the New Hieromartyr Benjamin of Petrograd, I was struck by a powerful insight offered by Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev) of Budapest and Hungary in his sermon about the life and times of Metropolitan Benjamin. In the words of Vladika Hilarion, the Russian Revolution of 1917 was the result of an enormous spiritual crisis which affected every level of society. From the 19th to the beginning of the 20th century, the Orthodox faith was accepted by society as a kind of given, as something taken for granted. Many no longer valued the gift which was given to them in the Orthodox Church and the Orthodox faith. For many, Orthodox piety was reduced to merely keeping some external rules, rituals, and ceremonies. This is reminiscent of the attitude of the Pharisees in the time of Christ towards the Jewish law: they kept the external and forgot about the internal. This phariseism went unnoticed in Russia, grew little by little, and resulted in many people leaving the Church. Formerly people remained believers, but internally they lost their faith. On the eve of the Russian Revolution of 1917 the Church was in need of radical change, rebirth and transfiguration. Hieromartyr Benjamin, as well as many other New Martyrs of Russia, took part in an All-Russian Church Council which met in Moscow during the days when authority was being transferred into the hands of the Bolsheviks. For more than ten years the Russian Church was planning this council, during which it became necessary to take a look at key questions of church life. Its decisions were supposed to result in many changes in the Russian Church. However, it is unfortunate that the Church waited too long to hold this council, and when the Russian Church finally gathered and met, it was too late, and its decrees and decisions were never put into practice.

The lesson we should learn is that in the Orthodox Church and the Orthodox faith the Lord gives us a colossal and incomparable gift which we should value. We must understand that the Orthodox faith must be practiced and kept *internally*. Otherwise, if our faith is reduced to merely external rituals and ceremonies, our faith is without substance or life. What does it behoove us, therefore, to do internally? Internally we work on our hearts, we struggle internally to cleanse our hearts from sin, we struggle to transfigure ourselves internally according to the image of Christ. We are at a crossroads today in America, similarly to the predicament our Russian brethren found themselves in at the time of the revolution. We can become so absorbed with secular life and the many comforts, pleasures and distractions surrounding us, that we can easily be tempted to neglect our inner spiritual lives, and reduce how we practice Orthodoxy to some external rules, ceremonies, and rituals. This is a great lesson and warning to us, and God forbid that one day we should wake up and face the same catastrophe that Russia faced in 1917 — and then for us it will also be too late. God grant that we always value the great gift of Orthodoxy as did many of our brethren who preceded us, and for which many gave up their lives. Holy Hieromartyr Benjamin, Holy New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia, and Venerable Tikhon of Zadonsk, pray unto God for us! Amen!

1. Voltaire — François-Marie Arouet was a French Enlightenment writer, philosopher and historian. Among other things, he was known for his criticism of Christianity.



MUG SHOT OF METROPOLITAN BENJAMIN AFTER ARREST BY THE BOLSHEVIKS. During the night of 12–13 August 1922, after having been shaved and dressed in rags so that the firing squad would not know that they were shooting members of the clergy, Benjamin and those with him, Archimandrite Sergius, Yury Novitsky, and John Kovsharov, were executed in the eastern outskirts of Petrograd.