

Concerning the Different Ways that the Church is Persecuted
SUNDAY AFTER THE NATIVITY OF CHRIST
Matthew 2:13-23

By Archpriest Peter Olsen
St. Basil's Russian Orthodox Church, Watervliet, NY, 12189, December 31, 2023

In today's gospel, we heard about the events which took place shortly after our Lord and Savior was born in the world. King Herod, the ruler of Judea, having learned about the birth of the King of the Jews, felt threatened, and began to fear for his own rule as king. In order to prevent this newly born Child from growing up, Herod conceived a devious and evil plan. He ordered his soldiers to go throughout Bethlehem and its environs and to murder *all male children* who were two years old or younger (Matt. 2:16). This horrible plan was fulfilled. The murdered children became the first Christian martyrs, themselves being too young to be cognizant of this fact. The Mother of God, her husband, the righteous Joseph and his family, and the Divine Child fled to Egypt from the anger of Herod.

Our Lord Jesus Christ was still only a helpless Child when the jealousy and evil in this world sought His destruction. The King of the Jews, having been born, was forced to flee from the Kingdom of the Jews and to be concealed in Egypt, in order to wait out the anger of an earthly king.

Hasn't the same thing taken place throughout the history of mankind? Don't we all know that after the Church was founded by the Lord and His apostles, it suffered persecution for 300 years? During these horrible, yet simultaneously glorious times for the Church, the Church gave the world a tremendous amount of martyrs and confessors for Christ.

The persecution of the Church has continued in various intensities, and has occurred in various ways. We know that in the XX century the powers of evil and the powers of Hell attacked the Church of Christ. We know that in Russia many churches were desecrated and partially or completely destroyed. A tremendous amount of bishops, priests, deacons, monks and lay people were tortured and executed only because they believed in God and accepted our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior. Just like during the times of the first martyrs, just like during the first centuries of Christianity, so it was in the XX century there emerged from the Church a great cloud of new-martyrs and confessors. How many of you know that today more people are being persecuted and executed because of their faith in Christ than anyone else in the world who is being persecuted or killed because of their religious beliefs? Christianity is persecuted in various ways. Sometimes this persecution is not obvious, but has a hidden character. Sometimes the Church is oppressed under the pretext of freedom of conscience and freedom of religion. In contemporary Europe, which prides itself on its freedom and that they preserve human rights, Christianity is undergoing a gradual and sequential removal from all facets of social life. Crucifixes which for centuries hung in classrooms are now being removed — in order not to offend the feelings of non-Christian children, and teachers are punished if they speak with children about God. All this is taking place in the name of freedom of conscience and freedom of religion. We are told that this is being done in order not to force the Christian faith on children against their will. Let them grow up, and then they can make up their own minds and make their own choices.

In America we see the same thing happening. Today you're pressured to be afraid to say "Merry Christmas" to people with whom we come into contact during this holy season, whether it be shopkeepers, clerks in the post office, bus drivers, or whomever. Instead, we are now expected to say the new politically acceptable "Happy holidays." Schools no longer have Christmas shows and no longer sing the traditional Christmas songs. Now they have "holiday shows" or "winter shows" and they sing songs which are careful not to make any reference to Christmas. Nativity creches and Christmas trees have been removed from public display at many secular facilities. When I was a postmaster, I was ordered not to use any decorations in the post office which make reference to Christmas or Santa Claus. I was even forbidden to put

up our Christmas tree. We ignored the directive and put up our decades old decorations and Christmas tree anyway. Even in contemporary Russia where religion is no longer persecuted, under the pretext of separation of Church and State, it is forbidden to teach or speak about religion or God in secular schools. Just from an academic point of view such an attitude is senseless and without merit. Religion is part of human history and to deliberately exclude it from classroom discussion is to cut out a vital chunk of the history of mankind, leaving children with an incomplete education and understanding of the past, and even of humanity itself. I am not suggesting that Orthodox Christianity should be proselytized in public schools in Russia. I am, however, suggesting that it is ridiculous to completely cut out references to religion or God under the pretext of separation of Church and State.

Therefore, I cannot emphasize enough how important it is to teach and to raise our children in the true Christian faith. From the youngest age parents must speak to their children about God, about His love for mankind, and strive to secure a Christian education for their children in school. In Russia there are parochial Orthodox Christian schools, the same as there are parochial schools here in America. In our country many parents have opted to home school all or part of their children's education, because the alternative in many public and even many elite private schools is to spend a great deal of time indoctrinating our children with awful, immoral and spiritually harmful philosophies, instead of offering them a superb academic education, which is what their job is supposed to be. Do you think that parents want to spend \$60,000 or \$70,000 a year for this? This practice has extended to the university level as well, even among the Ivies, where the free expression of ideas and beliefs are no longer tolerated, *especially* the expression of traditional Christian moral and theological beliefs. Only the perverted false dichotomy of the modern secular age is permitted to be expressed on our contemporary American campuses. Only we can save our children from this evil nightmare from which the contemporary youth are perishing.

Let us not doubt that our faith is true and that our faith leads to salvation. Let us not listen to the deceivers and liars who say: "It doesn't make any difference what you believe, as long as you do good." Of course it is important to do good, but it makes a great deal of difference in what or in whose name deeds are done, and what we believe makes a great deal of difference. Since creation mankind has expressed the tendency to worship. The ancient rulers of Rome considered themselves to be gods, and they were worshipped by the citizens of the empire. In modern times cults have developed around certain rulers and dictators who ipso facto were worshipped like gods, among them Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler. Today Lenin's remains are still artificially preserved in a Communist shrine, and people can visit the effigy of this Soviet god. Modern man who says he does not worship God still worships something. One can worship an idea, a philosophy, science, carnal passions and pleasures, or even another person. People continue to idolize and worship, yet they claim to be neutral or atheists when it comes to belief and faith. The truth is that everyone puts their faith in something or someone, even if it is in yourself. No one is exempt from worshipping or idolizing some thing or some one.

It makes a huge difference when we sincerely believe in God to also live the life of the Christian, and not only to say we are a Christian, but to *be* a Christian in our way of life. When we behave in our own name and are left to our own devices, we are always in danger of egotism and self-glorification. When someone does not believe in God, perhaps today that person may do good deeds, but perhaps tomorrow that same person may easily do evil deeds instead. Self-interests and personal ambitions can easily captivate and drive us when we do not believe in God. It is good to have confidence and a healthy self-esteem. It is good to have goals and to try to better ourselves. It is not good to be proud, egotistical, and to believe in only yourself, and to allow no room in your heart for God. When we live in our own name and by our own self-interests, and our interests and ambitions are challenged, the danger is that it is possible to ignore the main rules and laws of morality, just like King Herod did. Amen.

Based on a sermon by Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev)