

# St. George Newsletter

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## **The new martyrs and confessors of Russia**

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“And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth? And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled.” (Rev. 6:9-11)

Friends, today is the celebration of the prayerful memory of the saints whose holiday was established when they, these people, were still alive and still stood on the threshold of the labor that stood before them. And they themselves, not knowing this about themselves, but prophetically foreseeing the future of Russia, at the all-Russian Council of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1917-1918 proclaimed “To establish throughout all Russia the annual commemoration on January 25 or the Sunday closest after it (...) of all those confessors and martyrs who perish in this current cruel persecution.”

They did not know this about themselves, but the Holy Spirit that rests in and guides the Church spoke through their lips clearly about the future of God’s people in Russia for a long period in its history, and called this “a cruel time”.

And at this all-Russian Council, which restored the God-given Patriarchate to Russia, the ancient glory of the Russian Church was also seen. But at the council, this glory was contrasted with the coming future: an unappeasable evil force, hating Christianity and the Cross, and promising the Russian Church the fate of martyrdom and confession, rarely seen in her before this time.

The endless persecution, in which the Universal Church was born, it seems, had passed over Russia. Russia had received Christianity already formed through the sufferings of others from the hands of its leader -- the great equal-to-the-apostles prince Vladimir -- and grew in Russia through extremely small sacrifices. But could the Russian Church avoid the common path of all Christianity, of which Christ spoke? “They shall lay hands on you and persecute you, giving you up ... to prison, and leading you before ... the leaders for My name’s sake” (Lk. 21:12). This fate of the Church was already revealed in full in the apostolic times. And for Russia, the hour of testing of her faith, the hour of sacrifice for Christ came in the 20th century, for without Russia, the Universal Church would not reach its fullness of spiritual measure and perfection. After almost a thousand years of Christianity, a persecution of heretofore unseen power was released on the Russian Orthodox Church, driven by active theomachy, the goal of which was to wipe the Church from the face of the earth, and erase the very memory of God from the heart of Russians. And the end justified the means. In a relatively short period -- in seventy years -- the earthy Russian Church filled up the Heavenly Fatherland with many holy Russian martyrs and confessors.

Today, for the second year, we glorify those who bore this trial of faith through to confession and martyrdom in this new period of history for Russian and its holy Church.

Only seventy years later the proclamation of the 1917 Council came to life and became active. And on this day we prayerfully commemorate those who suffered for faith and justice: they were shot, tortured, murdered; they died from sickness and cold in camps; they received a martyric end for faith in Christ. Today we read only eight names -- the names of the first eight martyrs canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church in 1992 [the glorification of far many Russian new martyrs had already been performed in 1981 by ROCOR, -ed.]: Vladimir of Kiev and Galitsa, Benjamin of St. Petersburg and Gdov, archimandrite Sergius, the martyrs Yuri and

John, the venerable martyr and great princess Elizabeth and the venerable nun Barbara. Only Patriarch Tikhon was glorified earlier, in 1989.

But behind these already named stands a countless multitude of clerics and laity, whose names are known only to God, and who became intercessors and representatives before the throne of God for us and the Russian land by their witness to their faith in Christ.

The first period of massive bloody persecutions against Christ's Church began after the decree of the collection of Church valuables and after the publication of a list of "enemies of the people", the first of whom was Patriarch Tikhon, and after him the other bishops and priests -- all the best part of the Russian clergy. By the end of 1922, 2691 of the white clergy, 1962 monks, and 1447 nuns and novices had been shot. This counts only those for whom "court" reports exist. Many more unknowns were murdered without trials, and also stand before God in the robes of victory whitened through suffering.

The first, who stands at the head of the new-martyrs of Russia, is the Patriarch and father -- St. Tikhon. He, by his patriarchal blessing, showed the children of the Russian Church the only right way to go in this "new" life: "If it will be necessary to suffer for Christ, we call you to this suffering together with ourselves...If a redemptive sacrifice is needed, if the death of innocent lambs of the flock of Christ is needed, I bless all faith servants of our Lord Jesus Christ unto torment and death for His sake," calls out the voice of our father. This is the way of Christ; this is the way of His Holy Church. This is the path of everyone who has become a Christian. Both the Church of God and the laborer for Christ go willingly to the Cross and ascend upon it. In this willingness is the power of the deed, and its value.

Receiving the patriarchal staff in 1918, metropolitan Tikhon knew what lay before him, and did not shy away from the way of the Cross. "Your news that I have been chosen as Patriarch is for me that scroll, on which is written 'lamentations, mourning, and woe'. Henceforth care for all of the churches of Russia is laid on me, and it lies before me to die for them every day," said Vladyka Tikhon on the day of his election. And his dying began from the first days.

Against a Christianity armed only with the Cross and with prayer, the civil powers rose up with mindless

evil to destroy and trample on Christ. And Russia, with its patriarch at the head ascended its Golgotha.

Patriarch Tikhon, it seems, among the new martyrs was deprived of the joy of a martyr's crown, but by the greatness of his suffering, he became first. His bloodless martyrdom was constant in the course of seven long years. Every day, every hour, until the very hour of his death. He undertook a less visible, more everyday path for the good of the Church, which seemed outwardly not to be a hard path. He fought with the enemy, with his violence, with his mockery for the freedom of the Church. And the Church, guarded by his effort, calls out today: "Holy Hierarch Tikhon, pray to God for us."

From the all-Russian Council, before it even ended, having only received Patriarch Tikhon's blessing, metropolitan Vladimir of Kiev and Galitsa went to suffering and death. For sixty years, the hieromartyr metropolitan Vladimir had lived his life in God. His life was full of labor and suffering. By them, he learned to fulfill the will of God in all things. In the Church he passed through obedience from seminarian to metropolitan. In the tragic death of his wife and only son, being then only a young priest, he saw the providence of God.

The way of monasticism was his only way after that, until the end of his life. Vladyka was always with God's people as a true shepherd in all of its sufferings. This was particularly noticeable in the time of the cholera epidemic and famine in the Samara district. With the Cross and prayer he showed up in cholera wards and prayed on the streets -- a fearless warrior of Christ and a good shepherd. He taught, enlightened, healed, fed, warmed. And the love of the people was his reward. St. Vladimir took true humility to a degree that was only possible for a hierarch. He spoke meekly and with surprise about himself, that he had become a sort of all-Russian metropolitan, occupying all the major sees of Russia -- Moscow, Petersburg, and Kiev.

We must not pass over one extremely important detail: In 1915, Vladyka was transferred to Kiev, and he, foreseeing what lay before him, was depressed. But when a friend asked, "Is it not better to retire?" metropolitan Vladimir answered quietly, "Yes, by human standards I agree with you. But by God's standards? Is it right to test and try to foreknow the will of God?" This is the common feature of the lives of holy people: "By God's standards?"

By God's standards, metropolitan Vladimir, metropolitan Benjamin, archimandrite Sergius, the laymen Yuri and John, the great princess Elizabeth and the nun Barbara had to deny themselves, deny that which is of men and take up that which is of God -- their cross -- and follow after Christ. And they, motivated by the spirit of love for Christ, took this path. They felt the presence of the Holy Spirit, and their joy became eternal.

Standing up for the unity of the Ukrainian Church with the all-Russian Orthodox Church, Vladyka Vladimir said not long before his death, "I fear nothing and no one. I am ready at any time to give up my life for the Church of Christ, for the Orthodox faith, so as not to give her enemies reason to mock her. I will suffer until the end so that Orthodoxy remains in Russia where it began [in Kiev]." These words are in complete accord with those of Patriarch Tikhon: "Let my name perish from history, if only there would be good for the Church."

And there, where Russia was baptized into Christ, where the sign of victory -- the Cross of Christ -- was raised by the hands of the first-called apostle Andrew, in Kiev on the Dnieper, the successor of the apostles Vladimir was hung on a cross, and from the same place, the baptism of Russia by fire and blood began.

Without due process, without statement of guilt, the unknown representatives of the new power came after the metropolitan with bayonets and torches. Mocking him, they led him to the gates of the Kiev Caves Lavra. And he, raising his hands to heaven, prayed. Then, blessing his murderers with both hands with the cross, he said, "May the Lord bless and forgive you." The martyr blessed his own death and prayed for the forgiveness of his murderers. "May the Lord forgive you." But the evil, unable to bear this righteousness and light, accomplished its judgment over righteousness with bullets and bayonet wounds.

This was the first bloody crime, and "judging by human standards, this death seems horrible, but nothing is in vain in the providence of God, and we deeply believe...that this martyric death of Vladyka Vladimir served not only for the forgiveness of his voluntary and involuntary sins, which are unavoidable for everyone who bears flesh, but as a fragrant sacrifice for the cleansing of the sins of our great mother Russia," said the holy patriarch Tikhon about the martyrdom of metropolitan Vladimir and about all the future hieromartyrs and martyrs of the

Russian land, who would follow after this first sacrifice.

Four years later, after metropolitan Vladimir, the hierarch of the Petersburg diocese, metropolitan Benjamin (Kazansky) completed his earthly path by martyrdom. He had thought about martyrdom already as a child. And this was so deep and heartfelt, that the Lord fulfilled the desire of him who had loved Him and gave his heart to Him by his whole life. "In my youth and childhood I read the lives of the saints," wrote Vladyka Benjamin of himself, "I was uplifted by their heroism...I was sad that it was no longer the time to endure what they had endured."

A heretofore unknown drought and famine overtook the country in 1921. With them began persecution against the Church, which appeared at first as the desire to take church valuables. Vladyka Benjamin, showing an example of heightened Christian love, blessed the giving away of the valuables that were not for church service use for the needs of the poor. "We will give them away ourselves," he said. But the civil powers did not have as their main goal the collection of these goods. They needed to begin a visible judicial process against the clergy, implicating them in a plot.

Imprisoned for this fabricated plot, the metropolitan especially suffered for those who were imprisoned with him. He suffered the accusations of lawless judges and from the evil of his false brothers -- the newly-appeared Judases -- the Renovationists who betrayed the true Church.

Vladyka's loving flock vainly interceded for him. Also in vain were the spiritual wisdom and reason that upbraided all of the accusations. The sentence, "He is worthy of death" could not be overturned. And waiting for the fulfillment of his fate, metropolitan Benjamin left his disciples and co-pastors a testament -- immortal words of great power: "It is difficult to suffer, but according to the measure of our sufferings, the comfort of God also abounds. It is difficult to cross this Rubicon, this frontier, to give up completely to the will of God. When this is done, a man receives full comfort, and does not feel the greatest sufferings." "The suffering reached its apogee, but the comfort has also increased," he wrote, "I am peaceful and glad... Christ is our life, light, and rest. With Him everything is good, everywhere and all the time. I do not fear for the fate of the Church of God. We need greater faith, and we pastors need even more. We need to forget our self-

hope, our intelligence, our education, and give room for God's grace to work."

In his last words in court, Vladyka Benjamin said, "I do not know what you will give me in my sentence -- life or death -- but whatever you pronounce, I will with equal reverence lift up my eyes, cross myself, and say 'Glory to Thee, O Lord God, for all things'."

Not long after the application of the sentence, Vladyka Benjamin's friends received his klobuk, and on the inside edge was written, "I return my white klobuk without stain." Trustworthy witnesses testify that the metropolitan went to his death peacefully, quietly whispering prayers and crossing himself.

Laymen, active workers in church life, also shared the fate of the bishop: the martyrs Yuri and John, and also the hieromartyr archimandrite Sergius. Archimandrite Sergius, addressing the court in his last words said, that a monk is tied to life by a slim thread. His place is the meditation on God and prayer, and the severing of this thread is not fearful to a monk. "Do your work. I pity you and pray for you..." His last words before death were a prayer, "Forgive them, O God, for they know not what they do."

"Lord forgive them. They don't know what they're doing." -- these were also the last prayer of the great princess Elizabeth before the dark depths of the mineshaft swallowed her up.

She went conscious into this yawning pit, categorically refusing to leave Russia when this evil began. She followed after Christ, and the light of the Resurrection shone on her spiritual eyes from the depth of this pit. What led her, a foreign aristocrat, to the far Ural city of Alapevsk, which became her Golgotha? What gave her over into the hands of unknown demon-possessed men? They could not have known her earlier in life. She met them only so they could pronounce sentence upon her in some unknown court. But this is by human standards. How by God's? By God's standards this judgement was "for God" or "against God".

And the great princess Elizabeth, the former protestant who had converted to Orthodoxy in her new motherland, in Russia, and who loved the Orthodox Church of Russia "even to death" answered this evil. Whatever sentence this mindless evil would pass on her, she took as a sentence from on high, and an opportunity sent down upon her to confirm by action the sense and content of her life.

Love for God and love for neighbor were the true sense of her life, and this love brought the great princess to the cross. And her cross grew and touched the Cross of Christ, and became her refreshment.

The great princess had lost her husband, who died at the hands of a terrorist. She gathered what was left of him [he was killed by a bomb. -ed.] with her own hands and carrying in her heart the pain of her terrible loss, she goes to the prison to the criminal with the Gospel to forgive him and lead him to Christ with repentance. All of the rest of her life became a work of mercy in service to God and neighbor. The great princess gathered together a sisterhood, having built the Martha and Mary convent, and served all the poor and suffering according to the example of the two sisters of the Gospel. She put all of her means into this work, gave away everything, leaving nothing, and gave up herself to the end. Her love for people returned to her in their love for her.

The nun Barbara, who was with the great princess throughout all her labors, did not want to abandon her in her last great labor -- death. And she took up the martyric crown by her self-denial and giving of herself.

In the stormy, difficult days of 1917, when the ways of old Russia were destroyed, when the enemies were preparing to destroy Russian government in the person of the sovereign, when everything holy was given up to mockery, when the holy things in the Kremlin were shot up, the great princess Elizabeth wrote that precisely in this moment, to a great degree, "The Orthodox Church is appearing as the true Church of the Lord. I have experienced such great pain for Russian and her children," she writes, "who in this time do not know what they are doing. Is this not a sick child? ... One would like to carry its suffering, to teach it patience, to help it... Holy Russia cannot die. But Great Russia, alas, is no more." "Great Russia, fearless and irreproachable is totally destroyed."

From the ruins and dust of Russia, from the pain of a whole nation, from innumerable deaths sounds the voice of a holy sacrifice, confirming life: "Holy Russia and the Orthodox Church, which 'the gates of hell shall not overcome' exist and will exist longer than anything else." These words were written by her at the gates of her tomb.

"I...am sure," continues the great princess, "that the Lord that punishes, is the same Lord that loves." This is the measure of her spiritual growth and the measure of her self-emptying. She has already become a sacrifice herself, and the Lord accepts her sacrifice for Russia, which she loved so much. And those guards who took her life out of nowhere would have had no power over her, had it not been given from on high. They threw everyone who was with the great Princess Elizabeth into a mineshaft alive, except for one who fought back. They did not die right away. For a long time the nearby residents heard the cherubic hymn sung from underground. And the great princess, even there in the common grave, continued to do God's work -- the head of one there with her was bandaged with her nun's habit.

When, three months after the death of the martyrs, the place of their rest was found, they found the great princess lying on a side protrusion 15 meters deep with the icon of the Savior that she received on the day of her conversion to Orthodoxy on her chest. The righteous live forever.

The Russian new martyrs are the sacrifices expected of the universal Church to fill up the number of those murdered for the word of God. And who knows how long this short apocalyptic time will pass until the earthly Church matures to the judgment of God, Who will revenge the blood of the righteous?

"New passion-bearers of Russia, who have passed through the course of confession and sufferings, taking up boldness, pray to Christ who strengthened you, that we also, when the hour of trial comes upon us, may also courageously take up the gift of God. For ye are an example to those who honor your labors, that neither tribulation, distress, or death can separate us from the love of Christ."

And we, looking on the glory of these Russian martyrs with hope for the rebirth of our Church, our motherland, the greatly-suffering Russia, call out from the depths of our believing hearts: "Holy new martyrs and confessors of Russia, pray to God for us!" Amen.

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