

The Holy New Hieromartyr Bessarion, Bishop of Smolyan^(*)



In the second half of the seventeenth century, during the reign of Mahmud IV, when the Ottoman Empire was cruelly oppressing all of those subjugated to it and was persecuting Orthodox Christians, the holy Bishop Bessarion of the small city of Smolyan, in the Rhodope Mountains in the southern part of modern day Bulgaria, was shining by the light of his sanctity.

The persecution of the Orthodox by the savage inhabitants had intensified in this region, and numerous slaughters and expulsions took place. In order to escape the wrath of the invaders, the pious Faithful took refuge in the forests and mountains, and found protection and comfort under the shelter of their affectionate spiritual Father, the holy Bishop Bessarion.

In 1669, the persecuted Christians of Smolyan and their Bishop crossed into the region of Raykovo, in the Rhodope Massif. On 29 July, 1670, while the Bishop, together with ten of his spiritual children, was making a round of visits to the Faithful in the region, he was taken captive by a band of fierce Ottomans after an unsuccessful attempt by his spiritual children to defend him in the clash that had broken out.

The martyric Bishop's calvary had begun...

The Ottoman leaders in Smolyan, where they took him, proposed to the Saint that he change Faiths and accept the Muslim religion in order to save his life. If they had succeeded in their attempt, the heroic resistance of his Flock, which was persecuted, but nonetheless steadfast in the Orthodox Faith, would have been broken as well.

The Saint boldly replied: *"A person who loves the Divine Truth is unmovable in his Faith. My death will make me immortal before God."*

The Turks then stripped him and began to pierce his body with specially pointed instruments and to rip out chunks of flesh. The Saint remained silent and in prayer, while his blood poured unceasingly from his holy body. After that, they beat him savagely with iron rods until he lost consciousness. They then began to hack him to pieces with knives, placed a flaming iron on his head, and ridiculed him in every way. Indeed, in order to degrade him, they carried him, naked and bloody, through the

streets of Smolyan. Then, one of the Turks from the fanatic mob thrust a sharp knife into the Martyr's chest, and the rest stoned him until they had completely mutilated him.

Thus, through this frightful martyrdom, did the Saint give up his soul to God.

The Turks ordered the Saint's followers to dig a grave in a garden near the Smolyan town square and to bury his holy relics there.

The veneration of the Saint

The holy Hieromartyr Bessarion, Bishop of Smolyan was immediately venerated by his Flock as a new Saint of our Faith. This veneration, however, did not extend outside of the local boundaries of the region of Rhodope, nor was he commemorated, at the very least, in the hagiology of the Bulgarian Church.



Bishop Parthenios of Levka included him in his work, *The Lives of Bulgarian Saints* in the middle of the twentieth century, publishing selections from the unique manuscript of his martyrdom, which bears the title "A Historic Record." A copy of the manuscript is preserved, today, at the Library of Philippopolis.

The Orthodox Eparchy of the Old Calendar Church of Bulgaria, under His Eminence, Bishop Photii of Triaditza, decided to fill this gap in the official veneration and commemoration of the Saint. Thus, Icons of him were painted, his Life was printed, and a service in his honor was written in Slavonic, which was also translated into English. In addition, this Bulgarian jurisdiction's calendar handbook for 1999 was dedicated to the Saint.



The first official Feast Day celebration of St. Bessarion was held at the recently-constructed Old Calendarist Cathedral of the Dormition of the *Theotokos* in Sofia on 28-29 July, 1999. The principal celebrant, His Eminence, Bishop Photii of Triaditza, was joined by many clergy and a large number of Faithful in an atmosphere of spiritual joy, exaltation, and compunction, to the glory of God.

May the intercessions of the holy Hieromartyr Bessarion of Smolyan strengthen us in our adherence to the Orthodox Faith and protect us!



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