



## *PANNIKHIDA FOR DIMANA NICOL*

*The following sermon by His Grace, Bishop Auxentios of Photiki was delivered at the funerary dinner following a Pannikhida that he celebrated in Toronto, Ontario, for a pious Orthodox Woman beloved among our Canadian Faithful.*

Sunday afternoon, August 1, 2011 (Old Style)

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Philip Nicol, the husband of our spiritual sister, Dimana Nicol, has asked me to say a few words for the sake of those attending this memorial.

It is my great sorrow that I only met Dimana once. This was during my visit to Toronto last Spring, when Father Akakios, the Abbot of our Monastery, and I had come to celebrate the Divine Liturgy at the two parishes under our Synod's jurisdiction, the Serbian Church of the Holy Archangel Michael and the Greek Church of Sts. Nicholas, Raphael, and Irene.

It was not a terribly long meeting. Nevertheless, I quickly felt a special empathy for Dimana. This was facilitated by the fact that a decade ago, I had also struggled with cancer and, probably, by the fact that we were the same age. But there was more to the meeting that impressed me. This was her attention to the questions she and Philip put to Father Akakios and me.

These questions dealt with issues larger than Dimana's own spiraling health crisis. They concerned urgent matters pertinent to the entire Church, and especially the problem of extremism or, as the Apostle puts it, a "zeal of God, but not according to knowledge." This illness afflicts many Orthodox—even those who are genuinely sincere—who are alarmed by deviations in the Faith but who have not been properly formed and guided according to Patristic teaching. Thankfully, under the Apostolic care and direction of its President, Metropolitan Cyprian, our Synod in Resistance has steadfastly set its course by principles of truth formed in Christian love, that is, according to the "Royal Path."

While it was clear that Dimana knew the significance of her disease and that, in some two years, it had emotionally and psychologically drained her, she focused on our replies and, in my mind's eye, carefully weighed our words, turning her ear to focus and, with her limited strength, gently nodding her assent as we conversed. My impressions were later confirmed by Philip, who told us how after our meeting Dimana had helped him to process the exchange, highlighting and developing points in terms of the path that her family should follow, a path devoted to upholding our Christian Orthodox Faith in its fullness, but with compassion, not judgment for those who deviate therefrom. As I look back, I see now that Providence was nudging her on towards her martyric contest and that, with her ability to step away from her personal struggle and to consider the needs and future course of those around her, she was already showing the virtues that had made her worthy of her *podvig*.

The patient, grateful endurance of afflictions, even to the shedding of one's blood, and a resolute, self-denying concern for others have always been hallmarks of the heroes of our Faith. Dimana seized on these two things and held them fast to the end. For that alone, she deserves our everlasting admiration and gratitude, to say nothing of her many personal virtues that naturally evoke our love.

With the purified hindsight that God grants in the passage of time, those who knew and loved Dimana

can now better understand the significance of her struggle. The pain, sorrow, and sighing that were inherent in Dimana's disease, and that issued forth spontaneously in our mourning, fade away. In the great mystery that is the Lord's suffering, death, and Resurrection, we see that Dimana humbly offered her own life, laying before the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world her personal cares and wishes, seeking not her own will, but God's, according to the way "He had written," as she touchingly expressed it.

Dimana's suffering, a sacrifice offered with faith and hope, was unquestionably purified and united to the Lord's own suffering, "filling up" the afflictions of Christ, according to the Apostle's words, and manifesting a love that sought not its own, but rather that God's Will be done. So the Lord taught us to pray, and this is the martyr's witness that He left us with His own agony in the Garden of Gethsemane; this, too, was Dimana's ultimate resolve. Having partaken of His Cross and death, assuredly she is now glorified in His Resurrection and enjoying her reward with the righteous.

In His merciful wisdom, one of the many "goods" that God provides in the departure of those whom we love is the redirection of our focus and desires towards the next life. This begins with a simple yearning for reunion with those whom God has taken. But if it is to fulfill its appointed role, this pining must give birth to hope: our longing for those whom we have "lost" must mature into anticipation for the Kingdom of God. Our joyful memories of times past must mature into a vision of the "eighth day" without end, where the righteous shine like the sun. In a few words, we do not want the return of our beloved and departed brethren to this world of tribulation; instead, we seek a successful completion of our own course and union with the full company of the faithful in God's love. And, most important of all, we must seek this according to God's Will, not our own.

In our Scriptural texts, our Saints' writings, our creeds, and our hymnography, we confess that God wants all to be saved, that it is His good pleasure to give us the Kingdom, that He would gather us all together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. Let us follow Dimana's good example and trust God to fulfill His word in His own time, patiently bearing with our trials, sorrows, and afflictions. And as it behooves those who profess such faith, let us rightly profess our trust by offering God thanks in every circumstance. "Glory to God for all things," as the much wronged, slandered, and exiled Saint, John the "Golden-Mouth" (Chrysostomos), said in all his afflictions and on his death bed.

I can think of no better illustration of these points than the moving narrative from the life of the Holy Martyr Ouaros, concerning the righteous widow Cleopatra. The passage I will relate comes from our Archbishop Chrysostomos' translation of the great Christian classic, *The Evergetinos*, a four-volume compilation of apothegms, narratives, and instructions taken from the lives of the ascetic Saints of the first millennium of Christianity. His Eminence labored at this project for more than 20 years, and its publication is one of the great milestones in his life's work.

The narrative is a little long, but on hearing it I believe you will agree that it is not tiresome.

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1. In the age of the Holy Martyrs, there lived a rich woman by the name of Cleopatra. She greatly loved God, and among her other virtues was the love that she had for the Relics of the Holy Martyrs. Now, she was in Egypt, where the Martyr Ouaros was martyred for Christ. After frightful tortures, the Martyr reposed, being made worthy of a martyr's crown, and she took the body of the Martyr, transferring it to her own country, the Palestine. In the meantime, the persecutions against the Christians began to wane and, little by little, peace shone forth in the Church. So, in honor of the Martyr, the pious Cleopatra built a most beautiful Church.

2. This woman had as a sole pillar for her old age, and as her single hope in life, a son, for she had long been widowed. And so she nurtured the noblest hopes for her son. Thus, she sent ample money to the palace authorities, seeking thereby to qualify her son for an official rank in the court. Her request was immediately granted by an official royal decree, certifying that her son would be granted an officer's title and rank. But this pious woman postponed, for the moment, arrangements for bestowing this honor on her son, engaged, as she was, in completing the yet unfinished construction of the Martyr's Church.

3. Having completed the construction of the Church, she called together the Bishops and Presbyters of

the Eparchy, in order to perform the Consecration of the Church. As well, she invited to this sacred ceremony the most revered monks. During the performance of the Consecration, the precious Body of the Martyr was transferred to the Church and placed, with great splendor, on a fine bier. On top of the precious Relics of the Martyr—on the bier—there were placed the mantle and belt of a court officer, which had been bestowed on her son, so that they might be blessed by the clergy who were present. After this blessing, the pious mother helped her son to don the insignia of a court officer that had been sent by the king; that is, the mantle and the belt.

4. Subsequently, she attended, along with the crowd of people, a splendid and contrition-filled Vigil, glorifying God and the Martyr. At the end of the Vigil, the mother and her son went up first to the Holy Relics, kissed them with compunction, and, together lifting them up, transferred them to the Holy *Bema* of the Church, where, with proper piety, they were deposited. Cleopatra, who so loved Martyrs, knelt before the sacred Relics and, with fervent tears, beseeched with faith every good thing of the Lord for her son and herself.

5. In the meantime, the Divine Liturgy came to an end. Thereupon, Cleopatra offered to those present a rich and splendid meal. With her son, she put off eating and looked after the worshippers. The young son had been, indeed, commanded by his mother neither to eat nor drink anything until they were through looking after the worshippers.

6. Towards the afternoon, they finished looking after their guests. And the son, exhausted from work, took to his bed and was suddenly overtaken by a high fever. His mother, having eaten nothing, stayed with her sick son and, without sleeping, did whatever she could to cool down his temperature.

However, despite her efforts and her tragic agony, around midnight—oh, Thine inscrutable judgments, O God!—she saw her son completely exhausted by the illness and, in a few minutes, dead!

7. The moment that she determined that this tragic fact was true, the mother fainted and fell down, unable to utter a word. When, after a short time, she came to, she took her dead son on her shoulders and carried him to the Church that she had built in honor of the Martyr Ouaros. She placed his body in the Holy *Bema* and began to converse with the Holy Relics of the Martyr, as though the Martyr were alive and listening to her. Beside herself, she said to the Martyr with sobs and grief:

8. “Did we sin so much, Martyr of Christ, that we should fall to such a bitter calamity? Did I not, perhaps, abandon the remains of my husband in a foreign place, and did I not arrange with extraordinary care for the transfer of your Relics? Perhaps I did not build from the very foundations a Church in your honor? And if nothing else, did I not offer to you devotion from my soul and my ardent zeal?”

9. “And what did I want from all of this? What good did I hope for? What, except for the salvation of my son? And that he should, as I desired, remain close to his mother into old age. Alas, how my hopes have been dashed, how much to the opposite of what I anticipated do I see! O Martyr of Christ!

“So, I now ask from you, Martyr Ouaros, one final favor: either return my son to me alive, as did Elissaios the son of the Shunammite woman, or do not deny me a liberating death, so that I, a hapless mother, might depart this world now, along with my son.”

10. Weeping and mourning poignantly, Cleopatra slept a little and rested. During this short respite, her son appeared before her, together with the Holy Martyr Ouaros. The holy Athlete of Christ held to her son as though he were his own, and the two were wholly resplendent, dressed in a supernatural manner, two crowns of unfading and incredibly fragrant flowers, such as one would not find on earth, adorning their heads.

11. The Martyr Ouaros, with other-worldly sweetness, said to her: “Why do you not rejoice, but rather have upset your heart with fearful sadness? Indeed, would I be so ungrateful and so insensitive to all that you offered on my behalf? Are you of the opinion that I would not repay your sacrifices? Do you not see how much your son has been honored? The Grace that is reflected in his face? Why do you not, then, abandon your sorrow and be joyful? If you have any doubt, come near, that you might see even more clearly, with your own eyes, the radiance of your son.”

12. Thereupon, the Martyr addressed her son: “Go near to your mother, my child, and let her see how you are, that you might comfort her and stop her tears. Go to her.”

However, the young man moved closer to the Martyr and in no way wished to approach his mother, to

whom he said: “Mother of mine, go happily and dwell alone. From henceforth do not grieve at all, for I consider such to be the equal of a desire to exchange life for death, unending pleasure for fleeting sadness, and to prefer the ephemeral life over eternity.”

13. On hearing this from her son, the pious mother asked the Martyr, once more, to take her, too, along with her son, in order to enjoy the unearthly delight which she had seen.

“It is not yet time,” the Martyr told her. “Diligently pursue the path of salvation and you will come here as God wills.”

Finally, having blessed her with the peace of God, he departed with her son to the heavenly mansions.

14. The mother, awakening from this apocalyptic dream, warmly thanked God and the Martyr and spent another night in vigil, thanking God. And on the following evening, after the Divine Services, she set out a rich meal for those in attendance at the Vigil.

15. After that, she sold all that she had and distributed the proceeds among the poor. She set aside a paltry garment for herself and dedicated herself to the daily care of the tomb of the Martyr. And she spent her time in prayer and fasting.

So did she cleanse her inner man, that she was found worthy, every Sunday, to see her son and the Martyr in their usual splendor, hence taking a little comfort.

Thus living for seven years, she departed for eternal blessedness.

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So, let us be mindful, with Christian understanding, of the patient struggles and the radiant rewards of the Martyrs and righteous ones—including our beloved Dimana. As the righteous Cleopatra's son urged his mother, let us also “diligently pursue the path of salvation,” that we, too, might go there, as God surely wills.

*Vyechnaya Pamyat! Memory eternal!*