



“For the Edification of the Church”

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■ Words of Exhortation in Times of Affliction

Fear Not!

“For a sheep that is sealed [by the Good Shepherd] is not easily ensnared”

Patronal Feast of the Convent of St. Paraskeve,
Acharnai, Athens



On Sunday, July 26, 2021 (Old Style), the historic Convent of the Holy Virgin Martyr Paraskeve (near Athens, Greece), under the direction of the Reverend Mother Justina, celebrated its Patronal Feast Day.

The wildfire that had been burning since Friday evening on the neighboring Parnitha mountain range did not daunt the faithful present at the All-Night Vigil, but rather induced them to more fervent prayer.

His Grace, Bishop Ambrose of Methone presided at Great Vespers, assisted by the Reverend Abbot of the Monastery of Sts. Cyprian and Justina, Archimandrite Father Theodosios, clergy belonging to our Metropolis, and Father Jeremias Cvak from the Czech Republic.

Also participating were nuns from other convents in our Metropolis, including the Reverend Mother Taxiarchia (from the Convent of the Holy Angels) with many members of her Sisterhood, who were lovingly given shelter those very days at the



Convent of St. Paraskeve owing to the wildfires in the area of their own convent.



At the end of Vespers, Bishop Ambrose gave a brief festal sermon, during which he invoked the intercessions of St. Paraskeve for the cessation of the wildfires and deliverance from the *present afflictions*.

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After a short break—during which the faithful venerated the Icon of St. Paraskeve and portions of the Relics of the Holy Virgin Martyr Paraskeve and of the saintly founder of the convent, the Athonite Elder Hieronymos—the All-Night Vigil continued with Orthros and the Divine Liturgy, at which His Eminence, Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Phyle presided.

Before the communion of the faithful, Metropolitan Cyprian expressed the wish to offer to the faithful some words of edification and consolation, but also of doxology and thanksgiving for the gift of the compunction-evoking *Agrypnia*, since the threat of the nearby fire had passed during the course of the night.

In his sermon, he emphasized that a conscientious Christian comprehends that the succession of tribulations afflicting Greece and all of mankind is due to our own sins. When we remove God from our lives on a personal and social level, a void is created that the devil hastens to fill, so as to destroy man and his environment: “He was a murderer from the beginning” (St. John 8:44). Our Lord in His love for mankind, however, restrains the intensity of the destructive assaults of the enemy.

We all share a portion of the responsibility for the sins of the world. If we were true Christians, we would act as spiritual “lightning arresters,” counteracting the assaults of the evil one.

Let us not lay the blame on others for the tribulations afflicting us. Rather, let temptations serve as an opportunity for self-reproach, repentance, and return to the Will of God. Let us extinguish the threat of fire with our tears of repentance.

Our great sin is that we are not holy; we do not conscientiously





tiously struggle to live up to the calling of our Lord: “Be ye holy; for I am holy” (Leviticus 20:7 and I St. Peter 1:16).

As the great ascetic Hadji-Georgis the Athonite has handed down to us, the evil spirits have confessed what are the three spiritual weapons they fear:

***Baptism, the Precious Cross, and Holy Communion**, all of which drive out the unclean spirits and unite us with the All-Holy Trinity.*

In times of affliction, let us ask ourselves:

- *to what extent are we careful to preserve the “seal of the Holy Spirit” that we received at **Holy Baptism** and strive to become receptive to the gifts thereof?*

- *to what extent do we avail ourselves of the weapon of the **Precious Cross**, leading a crucified life with spiritual awareness and repentance, and calling to mind everything that Christ suffered for our sakes?*

- *to what extent do we approach the Immaculate Mysteries with proper preparation and self-reproach?*

The unclean spirits have confessed: they are thankful to those Christians who, through their negligence and careless way of life, dispel the power of these Mysteries and lose the charism of repentance.

If we struggle to live in Christ, regardless of our weaknesses and falls, we have nothing to fear. Why should we worry about things over which we have no control? Let us take care to preserve the Seal of the Lamb, and this will be for us a safeguard and a guide: “For a sheep that is sealed is not easily ensnared, whereas one which is unmarked is easy prey for thieves.” (St. Gregory the Theologian).

Such was the spiritual struggle led by St. Paraskeve: even before her martyrdom, she shed the mystical blood of her heart, the blood of the martyric ethos of repentance; whereupon the Grace of God overshadowed her and wondrously strengthened her to complete the path of martyrdom.

Finally, in the midst of so many tribulations and innumerable, ever-increasing snares of the enemy, let us take note of the revelation—not merely an instruction—handed down to us by St. Anthony the Great:





“I saw all the snares of the Devil spread out over all the earth, and I groaned and said: ‘What is it that bypasses these, without being trapped?’ And I heard a voice saying to me: ‘**Humility.**’”

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Following the All-Night Vigil, the Sisterhood served the traditional *agape* meal, during which Metropolitan Cyprian re-emphasized certain parts of his sermon and thanked the Reverend Mother Justina and her Sisterhood for their spiritual and material hospitality.

All those participating in this *Agrypnia* concurred that it was permeated with an unprecedented special Grace and Divine blessing.

