

HOMILY ON THE APOSTOLIC READING FOR THE SUNDAY BEFORE THE ELEVATION
OF THE PRECIOUS CROSS 8/9/2019
(Galatians 6:11-18)

In today's reading, we hear the conclusion of St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians. In it, he summarizes everything that he had discussed at length previously, in order to protect the Christian community from those who were trying to distort the Gospel and sow dissension in the Church. He also highlights the blessings that Christ's sacrifice on the Cross has brought to our lives.

St. Paul tells Christians to not allow themselves to be separated from the community by fanatics, who pose as zealous Christians. They are not guided by the Holy Spirit, but rather their own selfish ideas of what is "correct." The Holy Apostle is quick to expose this hypocrisy and arrogance. For example, circumcision: What is the reason that these "zealots" demand circumcision? It is Jewish Law, but what does it have to do with the Gospel? It is not for God that they require this, but to satisfy their own self-righteousness. These fanatics wish to make others like them and gain followers, and to make an outward show to the Jews by maintaining formalities that are alien to the true spirit of the Gospel.

Sadly, we see the same thing today. There are many who are driven away from Christ by the self-righteous, who are deluded into thinking that they are the keepers of Holy Tradition and experts on the Holy Canons. They set themselves up as infallible guides who know what is right, and they want to impose their views on everyone else! They also do not hesitate to criticize Priests, Bishops, and Patriarchs, condemning them as heretics and schismatics! They encourage others to separate from their hierarchs, and enjoy having fanatical followers who think like them and engage in more of the same. These people who seek populist approval of their views are very dangerous to the peace and unity of the Church.

Let us not forget that in the Orthodox Church no one, no matter who they may be, has the right to impose their own personal interpretation of the Holy Scriptures and the Canons. When serious problems and issues come up in the life of the Church, be they matters of faith or ethics, the Church has from the time of the Holy Apostles definitively addressed these problems together, in a Synod. The first such gathering was in 48 AD, held in Jerusalem. It was here that with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Apostles discussed their issues and came to agreement on what to do about them. They then communicated their decisions to the Christian community (see Acts, chapter 15). This is the method that has remained in the Orthodox Church throughout time to solve any problem that might arise in the community. All Christians, no matter their position, are obligated to respect and follow the Synodical decisions of the Church. This is the safest way for us to live as Christians (This is a very deep subject that we have no time to analyze here in all of its aspects).

In what follows, St. Paul talks about the kind of boasting that the troublemakers are doing, and he answers them with his own boast: That is, that they can talk about making some of the people their followers, but "*as for me, I have no other reason to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (see verse 14). In a commentary on this verse, St. John Chrysostom says: "What is, then, that boasting in the cross? It is the fact that Christ took up the form of a servant for my own sake and He suffered that which He suffered for me the servant and his ungrateful enemy. However, He loved me so much that He delivered Himself to death for my own salvation." The Cross of Christ is the pride of every Christian as well, because it is on the Cross that our hopes and joy have their foundation. As we pray on Pascha, "*Behold, through the Cross came joy to all the world.*"

In St. Paul's focus on the Cross, he adds something even more powerful and meaningful, as the verse concludes: "*On this Cross the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world*" (verse 14). With the word "*world*", the Holy Apostle refers to the riches, power, glory and pleasures found outside, which people consider so important and wonderful. In short, St. Paul is saying that these things have no power over him, and he rejects them.

My dear brothers and sisters, the more we realize the truth that Christ died for us on the Cross, the stronger we will become in our struggle to free ourselves from the passions and sinful desires. This is how we will help strengthen the unity of the Church, and in so doing enjoy our Lord's peace, mercy and grace- All the things that St. Paul wishes for the Galatians at the very end of his Epistle (verse 18). Amen.