

On Fear and How to Overcome It (16.5.2021)

Today the Church commemorates, along with the Myrrhbearers, Joseph and Nicodemus, who took the body of Jesus off the cross and reverently buried it with all due honor.

Joseph was from Arimathea of Judea, and a member of the Jewish Council (Mark 15:43). Luke the Evangelist writes that he is a good and just man, and Matthew mentions his wealth, as well as revealing him to be a secret disciple of Jesus (Luke 23:50; Matthew 27:57). He hid his devotion to the Lord, for fear of the Jews (John 19:38). After the crucifixion, he dared to approach Pilate and with extraordinary courage, requested the body of Christ for burial (Mark 15:43). In this sacred task he was helped by Nicodemus, who was also a member of the Jewish Council and a Pharisee, as well as a leader and teacher of Israel with great influence (John 3:1,10 & 7:50). Nicodemus had earlier defended Christ before the Council which sought to condemn Him. John the Evangelist informs us that Nicodemus came to Jesus one night in secret, in order to meet with Him. It was there that the Lord taught him the necessity of spiritual rebirth through Holy Baptism. However, for the same reason as Joseph, Nicodemus kept his faith hidden. Only after the crucifixion did both men profess their faith openly, by hastening to prepare Jesus' dead body for burial with spices.

This fear of the Jewish authority dominated in the years the Lord spent among the people, as well as in the later time of the Apostles. Joseph and Nicodemus were not the only Jews of prominence who were secret disciples of Christ, as St. John writes: "*Among the chief rulers also many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue. For they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God*" (John 12:42-43). Many ordinary people also acted in this way, as "*no one spoke openly of Him for fear of the Jews.*" (John 7:13).

Even today, this kind of fear can be seen among Christians, particularly the youth. A Christian may find themselves in an environment where "progressive" ideas reign, contradicting the eternal truths of the Gospel. In order to avoid being judged as "backward" or labeled as a "religious fanatic," the temptation arises to remain silent and accept these ideas, even if only outwardly. They lack the courage to stand up for what they know is right, because of what others may think of them. They attempt to justify this failure with excuses about modern society and new ways of living, reasoning that "we cannot go back to the era of our grandmothers." With these arguments, they betray their Christian principles, with disastrous results.

The Apostle of the Nations, St. Paul tells us: *And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.* (Romans 12:2).

With the enlightenment that comes from God, we can help others understand that what they consider to be progress, modernization and innovation are not "new ways of life," but actually quite old. Being a slave to the passions is how people lived before Christ came to earth and brought truth, along with an authentic new way of life. This slavery also characterized the era of the Apostle Paul, and was condemned in his Letter to the Romans (Romans 1:21-32). What is arrogantly called "progressive" is in reality quite the opposite. As Orthodox Christians, let us reject this backward thinking, and refuse to believe the propaganda that would have us turn away from the Gospel, insidiously spread by well-known international centers of "information." Can we not see where all of this leads? Are we happy with the society we live in?

Instead of being afraid of social rejection on account of our Christian faith, one should strive to proclaim it with word and deed. People who have lost their way need the Light of Christ, as the moral decay of society calls for true Christians to be the “*salt of the earth*” (Matthew 5:13). If Christians “lose their flavor,” then they can do nothing against this corruption, which is constantly spreading.

Let the courageous voice of St. Paul the Apostle, who was the first one to preach the Gospel of Christ in Asia Minor and Europe, be heard in our souls: *For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.* (2 Timothy 1:7). And with the words of our Lord: *In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.*” (John 16:33).