

14 Σεπτεμβρίου 2013

HOMILY By His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew At the Conclusion of the Divine Liturgy Church of the Dormition, Helsinki (September 12, 2013)

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Most Reverend Archbishop Leo of Karelia and All Finland, dearly beloved brother and concelebrant,

Most Reverend and Right Reverend brothers and concelebrants,

Beloved children in the Lord,

“God spoke to Moses face to face, as one would speak to one’s own friend.” (Ex. 33.11)

Today, we too find ourselves addressing one another face to face – the Holy and

Great Church of Christ in Constantinople, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and its garden olive in Finland, the local Autonomous Orthodox Church. And we speak to one another as friends, relatives and brothers, in similar manner as the almighty Lord conversed with the visionary Moses.

We are familiar with the Lord's words to His disciples: "I have called you my friends, inasmuch as all that has been given to me by my Father, I have made known to you." (John 15.15) So, too, at this moment, is the Ecumenical Patriarchate addressing the beloved Orthodox Church of Finland, ninety years after granting it the status of autonomy, as friend to friend, flesh from its flesh and bone from its bone, bestowing and sharing all that it possessed and preserves as the apple of its eye – namely, the Orthodox faith and witness, the tradition in its entirety, the Orthodox ethos and custom, self-administration and autonomy. That is to say, all of the spiritual values because your Church and people "have found favor before" (cf. Ex. 33.17) the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Indeed, it has not only granted you this in order that you might preserve these values; but it has, throughout this period of almost one century, "never ceased to care" for you as Orthodox Fins, through prayer and intense supplication, as well as through the exercise of canonical and ecclesiastical supervision, through support of your hierarchs, through prudent and experienced responses to the requests of the Church of Finland, which look to unity, spiritual progress, prosperity and growth. For our aim is that the Orthodox Fins may always stand on the firm rock, namely Christ, so that neither wind nor storm, neither flood nor any earthly or heavenly adversity, whether visible or invisible, may affect you, because you are grounded on the sure foundation of the Orthodox Faith and of the Holy and Great Church of Constantinople.

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

Just as the sacred visionary Moses raised the snake in the desert so that the old Israel may behold it and not deviate from its faith in God, so too was the Son of Man, our Lord, raised on the Cross, so that we as faithful – who move as human beings in a world of matter and superstition where passion reigns instead of dispassion, hatred instead of love, and human injustice instead of God's righteousness, to the oppression always of the vulnerable – may see the sign of the Cross uplifted, and be assured that the Cross is divine power, wisdom, all that is not flesh, a suffering God, and the way to Resurrection.

In today's epistle reading to the Ephesians, St. Paul invites all faithful and their Churches to "attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of

God, to maturity, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine.” (Eph. 4.12-13)

We are able to ascertain in these words of St. Paul the largely cruciform journey of the Orthodox Autonomous Church of Finland, which has already attained to maturity to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ over the past ninety years, because it has gone through many well-known trials and circumstances.

We especially rejoice today because the younger generation, the “children” of today’s reading, are praying with us here. They are the ones whom our age is endeavoring to toss to and fro with every doctrinal wind and human game.

Beloved young men and women,

Many of you will be called to assume responsible positions within the society of this European nation of Finland and in the broader world. Others will be called to serve your Church as clergy or as students of our Theological School in Joensuu. Therefore, it is crucial that you care for your spiritual formation, just as your Church and Most Reverend Archbishop also care for this. You must live in accordance with this great calling, conscious of the mission that our Lord has prepared for you. However, this mission, and every mission, includes the cross and martyrdom, as we observe in the Church’s journey through the ages, in the lives of the Apostles, Saints, and Martyrs of Christ.

Indeed, ever since our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ was put to shame and hung on the wood of disgrace, Church and Cross comprise an indivisible unity; ever since that time, these two mysteries go hand-in-hand. For us Christians, the Cross of Christ is the wood of life, whereby death – as the pre-eternal enemy of humankind and the result of the disobedience of the first-created – was abolished. Death was conquered only through Christ and His Church, against which the gates of hell do not prevail.

In a couple of days, at the venerable Center of Orthodoxy as in all of our Churches throughout the world, we shall celebrate the elevation of the sign of the most precious Cross. Thus, just as our Lord was elevated on the wood of the cross, we too are called to behold and experience the sign of the Cross, and constantly be elevated upward, toward grace and blessing. Woe to us if we are not constantly elevated. For, then, there would be no meaning in the Cross, the Church and life itself. Our passing through this life would be foolishness. Our earthly life begins in

our mother's womb, when we are conceived and grow as embryos. However, it is foolishness for us to grow as human beings in wickedness, evil, temptation, sin, and darkness, after being born from our mother's womb. On the contrary, it is wisdom and power when our life increases like Christ's human life through love and sacrifice, through tolerance of others and patience in righteousness, which we are called, by the Lord, to learn. (cf. Is. 26) Moreover, righteousness signifies the Cross, on which Christ died, in order to be our "ransom" for the injustice of this world, so that we may learn to crucify our "ego" and passions.

Brother hierarchs and Fathers, blessed Orthodox Fins of all ages, but especially our beloved young people as the future,

St. Paul says: "The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God." (1 Cor. 1.18) And elsewhere he adds: "But far be it from me to glory, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." (Gal. 6.14)

Destruction, salvation and glorification (or pride), are three experiences that we would like to highlight today in addressing you, just as St. Paul does, in the epistle reading. All three experiences are features of the Cross and not of worldly authority.

Destruction comes when we deny our Lord on the Cross, just as the ungrateful thief, even at the last moment before his death, particularly since he witnessed the extraordinary events, as the curtain of the temple was torn, the dead arose, and the darkness covered the earth. Is it not the same that occurs with many people around us, who are motivated by passion and unable to confess their "deceit", even as they are dying, preferring to express "curses" and "wrongs" against those that disagree with their opinions, treating them like "children tossed to and fro" by the "signs of the times"?

Salvation, the opposite of destruction, is the awareness of the fleeting nature of every worldly authority or skill, and the assumption of the Lord's Cross, in order to follow and journey with Him. This is what the grateful thief did on the cross, when with his last breath he confessed that "truly this man did nothing wrong", and gained his salvation simply by expressing the words "Remember me, lord" in his heart.

Finally, glorification or pride. Because we truly have nothing that belongs to us, for which we human beings can boast. We must never forget that we are "earth and ashes," temporary and ephemeral. Nevertheless, our glory and pride lie in the

immortality of our soul. Glory and pride are, when we can say with St. Paul that “we have run the good race and preserved the faith,” we have done good and shared love with our suffering neighbor, we have accomplished “righteous deeds”, and been crucified with Christ, in serving His “image” and creation.

Brothers and fathers, beloved children,

For two thousand years, all the faithful followers of the Lord – Apostles, Martyrs, Hierarchs, Ascetics, Neomartyrs and plain Christians – honor and venerate the Cross as our pride and symbol of glory; not as some magical “defense”, but as revealing the redemptive and life-giving sacrifice of the crucified Christ, who taught us in practice the true meaning of authority and power: namely, humility and sacrifice, which lead to the King of Glory.

Here in the northern region of Finland, the sign of the cross is always raised on the domes of Orthodox and non-Orthodox Churches, on the walls of church buildings, on doors and windows of homes, on vestments and vessels in church, around the necks of clergy and laity, at every Orthodox act of sanctification and gathering of worship, which are sealed by the sign of the most precious Cross.

The holy and Great Mother Church of Christ in Constantinople has absolutely and eternally harmonized itself in its historical journey to this day with the exhortation of its Lord and Master, who said: “Whoever wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and lift up his cross and follow me.” (Matt. 16.24) Thus, it lifts its cross patiently, seeing it elevated every day in its humble home at the Phanar, far from every worldly authority, modestly and invisibly “breaking the Bread,” always believing that Golgotha is ultimately followed by Resurrection, now and in the age to come.

This joint experience of cross and resurrection is what the Mother Church always offers to everyone, and in every direction, in word and in deed, but particularly through its silent example, because victory belongs to the slain Lamb (Rev. 5.6), as we learn each day from the experience of the ages.

It is this same experience of life and witness – and not any experience of authority – that the Ecumenical Patriarchate also gave ninety years ago to the Orthodox Church and Orthodox people of Finland. It is an experience of salvation and glorification, not of destruction. Dear brothers, you received this “price” and

increased, sanctified and refined it, bearing witness to the Cross of Jesus Christ, constantly elevating it from the unstable and ephemeral to the stable and permanent level, just as the Church of Constantinople has done, still does, and will continue to do until the end of the ages.

Beloved brothers and blessed children of the Finnish Orthodox Church,

Very often, during the journey of our earthly life, each of us is tested to see whether he or she follows the example of our crucified Lord, out of conviction, rather, than out of vainglory, superficially responding to our vocation. In any case, "Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that we should follow in His steps." (1 Peter 2.21)

Of course, human weakness, combined with the passion of the tempter, sometimes shatters our faith and freezes our love and hope toward the Lord. This is why, the constant elevation of the Cross before us, is critical, in order that we might constantly be elevated "until we attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; so that, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth, and edifies itself in love." (Eph. 4.13-16)

As imitators of the Lord and of all the Saints, who patiently lifted the cross, falling and rising each day, we continue our journey, each of us lifting his or her personal cross of passion and of the "passions" of others. For, this cross finally leads to the delight of the glorious Resurrection, in the conviction that "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." (Rom. 8.18)

Expressing our joy in the Lord as well as the pride of the Mother Church and ourselves for the progress to this day, with the grace of God, of this small in numbers but great Church in faith, under the prudent and sacred guidance of Your beloved Eminence, brother Archbishop Leo of Karelia and All Finland, we congratulate you on the one hand for the completion of ninety years of autonomous church life, witness and journey, despite many known trials and great difficulties; on the other hand we gratefully remember the late Patriarch Meletios IV (Metaxakis) of Constantinople and the distinguished hierarchs of blessed memory

who served here – Herman, Pavel and John. In conclusion, we pray that both, the present and future generations will remain to the end children of light and day, living in a way that is faithful to the Gospel, and in accord with the Orthodox tradition and life, so that you may always be worthy of salvation and glorification, through the intercessions of all the Finnish saints, “unashamed of Christ’s Cross. Indeed, even if others conceal it, you should have it sealed on your forehead, making the sign of the Cross when you eat and drink, sit and sleep, rise and walk and speak, but generally in all that you do.” (Cf. Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechesis IV).

Amen.

Text No. 4