

A HOMILY FOR THE FEAST OF THE HOLY  
GREAT MARTYR DEMETRIUS  
(Oct. 26/Nov. 8)

An Account of the Passion of the Holy Great Martyr,  
and About Our Sacred Duty of Obeying the  
Civil Authorities

Brothers and sisters!

Last Sunday, we commemorated one of the greatest saints of modern times, the holy, righteous archpriest of Kronstadt John, and today we celebrate the memory of one of the greatest saints of antiquity, the holy, glorious great martyr Demetrius of Thessalonica. Saint Demetrius was governor-general of Thessalonica, a position that gave him authority not only over the city, but over all of Macedonia, as well as other parts of Greece and some areas of modern Bulgaria. The emperors at that time were the brutal Diocletian and Maximian, who presided over the most ferocious persecution of the Church in history, except for the one perpetuated by the Bolsheviks in Russia during the twentieth century.

As military governor, Demetrius was responsible for apprehending and executing the Christians of the region, but the young general was himself a secret Christian and instead used his lofty position to further the faith of Christ, becoming a new Saint Paul to the Thessalonians. Word of this of course reached Emperor Maximian, who at that time had just concluded a campaign in the northern Balkans. Learning that Maximian was on his way to deal with him, Demetrius freed all his slaves and gave his possessions to the poor. Then he prepared himself with intense prayer and fasting for the coming ordeal.

Maximian imprisoned Demetrius in the lower rooms of a public bath, which have survived to this day as the crypt of the great church of the saint in Thessalonica. Meanwhile, the Emperor sought to win the people's favour by holding violent games of the sort to which the Romans were so addicted. Among these were wrestling matches featuring Maximian's Vandal lover Lyaeus, a huge German. A

platform was set up, surrounded by spears pointing upwards, and the barbarian would hurl his opponents onto the spears. Many Christians were among the unfortunates forced to wrestle with Lyaeus. The tyrant and most of the soldiers were delighted when the brute skewered his victims, but the Thessalonians were horrified, for the better part of them had been converted to Christ by Saint Demetrius.

One of the soldiers who had been under Demetrius' command, a teenager called Nestor, visited the saint and asked his permission to take on Lyaeus. Although it seemed a hopeless mismatch, Demetrius blessed him to do this. Nestor miraculously prevailed over the barbarian and threw him to his death on the spears, for which Maximian had the youth beheaded. Then, having learned that Demetrius had blessed Nestor to contend with his favourite, the Emperor sent soldiers to the bath, and they ran through Saint Demetrius with their spears.

During those days, brothers and sisters, things could hardly have looked darker for the Christians, but only God, not man, can know the future. Soon the Lord raised up a ruler very different from Diocletian and Maximian. This was the renowned Emperor Constantine, and he put an end to the Great Persecution and legalised Christianity. A chapel was built over Saint Demetrius' grave, and many miracles were worked there. Later, a grand church dedicated to Saint Demetrius would cover the area, a building which exists to this day and is visited by every devout pilgrim to Thessalonica. For centuries, vast quantities of healing myrrh poured out of the great martyr's relics. The ducts that carried it to the basin from which pilgrims drew it still survive. So copious was the flow that the Thessalonians were known to baptise babies in it!

Alas, because of our sins the city, for centuries kept inviolate by Saint Demetrius, eventually proved unworthy of his constant protection, and experienced a series of terrible sackings. Yet despite these calamities, even now the pious citizens of Thessalonica remain devoted to Saint Demetrius, and every day come to his basilica to pray, or simply to be in his presence. Anyone who has visited the church senses that the Thessalonians continue to love this saint above all others, and still trust and put their hope in him.

Brothers and sisters, Roman history is filled with the reigns of persecutors and deranged tyrants, men like Diocletian and Maximian, Caligula and Nero. By comparison, most of our contemporary American politicians would seem to be paragons of uprightness. Yet, Saint Demetrius and the other early Christians submitted to the authority of such rulers and obeyed it, except when these men were specifically commanding something that indubitably contravened incontrovertible principles of faith. This is difficult to comprehend for many modern-day Christians, whose inclinations tend more to suspicious and insubordinate, not to say fantastical political theories than to the devout spirit of subordination, cooperation, respect, and obedience. Yet the early Christians were acting precisely in accordance with the teaching of the Scriptures here, the Scriptures of both the Old and the New Testaments.

In a brief sermon, I cannot quote you every relevant scriptural passage, but let us review at least portions of some of the more important:

From Exodus: *Thou shalt not speak ill of the ruler of thy people.*<sup>1</sup>

From Ezra: *Whosoever will not do the law of thy God, and the law of the King, let judgment be executed speedily upon him, whether it be unto death, or to chastisement, or for a fine of his property, or casting into prison.*<sup>2</sup>

To these lines from a letter of the Persian King Artaxerxes, the holy Ezra adds this comment: *Blessed be the Lord God of our fathers, who hath put it thus into the heart of the King.*<sup>3</sup>

From Ecclesiastes: *Observe the commandment of the King, and that because of the word of the oath of God.*<sup>4</sup>

Also, from the same book: *Even in thy conscience, curse not the King.*<sup>5</sup>

From Romans: *Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power, but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.*<sup>6</sup>

From Titus: *Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready to every good work, to*

*Speak evil of no man, to be no brawlers, but gentle, shewing all meekness unto all men.*<sup>7</sup>

And from First Peter: *Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the King, as supreme; or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men.*<sup>8</sup>

It is noteworthy that both authors of the New Testament texts adduced, Saint Peter and Saint Paul, were put to death namely by a Roman emperor, the depraved Nero, who reportedly used Christians as torches to illumine his banquets. Perhaps when they wrote, the saints did not know every crime Nero would commit, but the All-Holy Spirit, Who inspired their epistles, most certainly knew! Nevertheless, their epistles command obedience to the civil authorities - pagan, even anti-Christian civil authorities - in the strongest terms.

Why so, dear Christians? Saint Paul, the mouth of Christ, explains: *Rulers, he writes, are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wherefore, ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake.*<sup>9</sup> In other words, even pagan governments are frequently motivated by an interest in furthering the public good. Besides this, we must obey government *for conscience sake*; that is, we must have a spirit not of indiscriminate complaining, criticism, and disobedience, but of pure-hearted subordination and obedience to government, in order to have a pure conscience before God - the prerequisite to pleasing Him. Since we Christians are forbidden to judge with undue harshness private individuals (our equals) in respect to private matters, much more are we obliged to extend to the civil authorities (our superiors) all possible benefit of the doubt with regard to their basic good intent in the exercise of their governance.

Of course, all governments do act at times in an unwise, unjust, or ill-intentioned manner, and certain governments act in extremely evil ways, with varying degrees of consistency. But this does not void the scriptural principle of Christian subjection *for conscience sake*. Rather, in the specific situations in which the civil authorities

attempt to compel disobedience to the higher law of God or create a profoundly impossible moral dilemma, the Christian is relieved of the general obligation to submit and obey, but for that instance only. We see this in the life of Saint Demetrius, when the Emperor expected him to massacre the faithful, but instead he spread the faith among the people. In modern times we have seen it in Russia, when the Catacomb Church refused to collaborate with the murderous anti-religious campaign of the Bolsheviks.

These exceptions notwithstanding, it is abundantly clear from the language of the scriptural texts cited that God has delivered to us a command, not an option, to obey the civil authorities. After all, Saint Paul states plainly that those who resist the power of the government, ordained of God, *shall receive to themselves damnation*.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, a heavy burden of proof rests, not on the civil authorities, but on those who frivolously impute evil motives to them or foster a spirit of inward or outward rebelliousness against them. We must never fall back on the exceptions to the rule lightly, for they are indeed a “court of final appeal.”

Also, it is important to remember that God works His purposes through the secular powers as through all creation, and that our ultimate citizenship is not earthly, but heavenly. This means that things not to our liking -- including onerous or even cruel actions of the government -- may nevertheless be to our benefit. In difficulties and hardships, Christ calls us to maintain the spiritual perspective and to endure gladly for His sake, because, as He says, *In your patience possess ye your souls*.<sup>11</sup>

Obedience is not so much doing what we want to do, as doing what we would rather not. Except in the most exceptional of circumstances, it is not submission and obedience to the secular powers that is reprehensible, but the spirit of insubordination and disobedience. Sacred Scripture shouts this aloud. Unless we are being forced to sacrifice to idols or perform some other heinous deed, insubordination and disobedience to the civil authorities are not signs of an Orthodox mindset or conscience, but of ignorance, or sin, or misbelief, or unbelief.

It is no accident that heretical and unbelieving commentators and historians routinely pillory the Orthodox Church for subservience to the civil authorities, whether under ancient Rome, Byzantium, the Ottomans, or Tsarist Russia. The Orthodox Church, precisely because it is the Church of Christ, the Church of the apostles and martyrs, teaches submission and obedience to the government and cooperation with it, except when this would be the clearest, most blatant, most unquestionable betrayal of Christ and His truth.

Here there can be no question of personal, much less political prejudices entering in. All such opinions lie outside the realm of the Church's teachings. All of them are fallible. None of them are dogmas of the Church. Even bishops must obey the government, except when the government attempts to compel obedience in a matter that flagrantly and indubitably contravenes the law of God or interferes with the Church's purely internal affairs. The apostles do not except bishops from their command that Christians obey the civil authorities. If this be so, then what of us ordinary Christians?

Besides this, we must be especially careful to avoid bringing in theories connecting current political situations and events to the reign of Antichrist. The Holy Chief Apostle Peter says plainly: *No prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation.*<sup>12</sup> Many people over the centuries - occasionally even holy people - have forgotten this warning, with the inevitable result that, having misled others, they were always proved wrong in the end. If this were not enough, we have Christ Who, although omniscient as the Son of God, as the Son of Man tells us: *Of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father.*<sup>13</sup> After this, who would presume to speculate on the subject!

Unfortunately, in our time the Internet and social media have made possible the unprecedented proliferation of misinformation and ill-reasoned, ill-supported, yet *cunningly devised*<sup>14</sup> theories regarding all sorts of topics. Worse, some of this is being propagated by persons in clerical rank. No sooner does a new event occur or a new trend emerge, than the self-anointed pundits rush to provide

their glib explanations, the ingenuity of which is often bounded only by the limits of the inventors' imaginations. Intellectual circumspection and integrity demand that we view their explanations in every case with considerable skepticism, but the more so when accepting them might well incite our base passions and put us at variance with the clear, age-old teaching and ethos of the Church of Christ.

This is why, dear Christians, we must be especially wary when demagogues attack the basic good intent of the secular authorities. Such unsparing criticism has become the norm, not the exception in our society, and modern technology is likely to make this pernicious trend ever more prevalent for the foreseeable future. But in many, if not most cases, these assaults do not meet strict standards of proof, or even plausibility. In any case, if the authorities have in fact acted with poor judgment or bad faith in one instance, this is no wise necessarily establishes that they have done so in another. For this reason the overstretched theories in question, with their saltations in evidence and logic, and but rarely stand up to serious scrutiny.

It will be readily understood that the complexities of administering public health care in the era of the novel Coronavirus provide a field day for these attacks of demagogues and conspiracy theorists.

Again, to accuse falsely *the powers that be* - which, according to the Apostle, *are ordained of God*<sup>15</sup> - is intrinsically a graver sin than to accuse falsely a private individual - itself a serious transgression. Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk, in his wonderful book, *On True Christianity*, expresses this clearly. "Although it is a sin to condemn anyone," he writes, "and a grievous sin at that, speaking evil of the authorities is a far greater sin."<sup>16</sup> So, let us tread with extreme caution and not rush to judge those set over us with civil authority, but offer them the willing obedience that is their due, in all except the most extreme circumstances. So doing, we shall prove ourselves followers of the blessed ancient Christians such as Saint Demetrius the Myrrh-gusher, of the inspired authors of the divine Scriptures, and of our Saviour Himself.

We shall prove that we have the mindset, not of the world, but of the Holy Church of Christ, which teaches us to judge our own faults,

and *not to judge them that are without*.<sup>17</sup> We have courts to judge governmental and medical malfeasance. And where these have not established criminal wrongdoing, we have, in this country, the ballot box and the free market system to express our sympathies and preferences.

If we humble ourselves and put away political and secular prejudices, discerning spiritual things spiritually,<sup>18</sup> and maintaining proper balance and moderation, as the people of God should, we are certain to choose the right approach here. This means always remaining intensely focused on our own personal spiritual life, which is vastly more important than our political notions.

May God help us to maintain true inner peace and thereby to assist others in maintaining theirs, by the prayers of the Holy Great Martyr Demetrius and all the saints. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Ex. 22:28; Acts 23:5

<sup>2</sup> Ezr. 7:26

<sup>3</sup> Ezr. 7:27

<sup>4</sup> Eccl. 8:2

<sup>5</sup> Eccl. 10:20

<sup>6</sup> Rom. 13:1-2

<sup>7</sup> Tit. 3:1-2

<sup>8</sup> I Pet. 2:13-15

<sup>9</sup> Rom. 13:3,5

<sup>10</sup> Rom. 13:2

<sup>11</sup> Luke 21:1

<sup>12</sup> II Pet. 1:20

<sup>13</sup> Mark 13:32

<sup>14</sup> II Pet. 1:16

<sup>15</sup> Rom. 13:11

<sup>16</sup> *On True Christianity*, Vol. 4, Article 4, Ch. 4:11

<sup>17</sup> I Cor. 5:12

<sup>18</sup> Cf. I Cor. 2:14