

The Consecration of a Church *The Vesper Service and Reception of the Relics*

As we continue in this New Year, we look forward to the many blessings that our Heavenly Father provides us with. Among the most significant of those, for our community of the Assumption, will be the Holy Consecration Service, which will take place on the weekend of October 3-4 of this year.

For the coming months therefore, my focus in these articles will be in acquainting us with what the Sacred Services of the Consecration means for the life of our parish. Many have noticed the work that has already begun in preparation, and several have already begun volunteering and supporting financially the many arrangements that are already underway for the event.

The Consecration, which spans two days, will begin on the Evening of Saturday, October 3rd, with the Service of Great Vespers. While the Great Vespers Service is sung every Saturday night at our parish, this particular Vespers service will be even more spectacular. It will begin in a very unusual manner, with the presiding Hierarch (Bishop) bringing into the Church for the first time the relics, small pieces of bones, from a number of saints, usually martyrs. These same relics will be sealed into the Holy Altar table of our Church the following morning during the Consecration Service.

Upon bringing the relics into the Church, the Hierarch will recite a number of prayers, in preparation for the consecration, and special hymns to the martyrs will be recited.

*Blessed is the earth that drank your blood, O prizewinners of the Lord,
and holy are the tabernacles that received your spirits;
for in the stadium you triumphed over the enemy,
and you proclaimed Christ with boldness.
Beseech Him, we pray, since He is good, to save our souls.*

This hymn is just a selection of what will be sung that night, but it shows us the importance of the martyrs in our Church. In offering their lives for Christ, their bodies are sanctified – they themselves have become holy objects. The bodies of the martyrs are so holy, because of their sacrifice for Christ, as the hymn tells us, that even to the point that the ground that their blood spilled on has become holy.

It is with this high regard, that our Church will become the honored home of relics from the bodies of the martyrs. In fact, when we look back to the earliest practices of the Church, the tomb of the martyrs were places of pilgrimage for Christians. Eventually, as Christians would gather to pray at the graves of the martyrs, Churches would be built around them and the very tombstones of the martyrs themselves actually served as some of the earliest Altar Tables. The placing of the relics into the altar table is really an extension of this almost two thousand year old tradition.

The reception of these relics during the vespers service however, is more than just fulfilling of tradition, these saints will become protectors and intercessors to our community. With their prayers, and even simply by our proximity to their bodies, we will be blessed and sanctified.

However, as we all know, our community is already dedicated to the Mother of God, the Theotokos. While the Saints, of whose relics our Church will be received that evening, will become important members of our community, the Theotokos will always be our patron and protectress. Therefore, while a number of hymns will be dedicated to honoring the martyrs, many hymns will also be offered to the Theotokos as well. After all, it is only through her constant intercession that our community has so thrived to the point of being ready to have our beautiful sanctuary Consecrated. Moreover, it will only be through her continued intercession that we will continue to grow and prosper in our Orthodox faith.

While approximately half the service will be dedicated to honoring the martyrs whose relics we will be receiving and the Theotokos, our patron, the other half of the service will be hymns to prepare us for the Holy Consecration the following morning.

It is an ancient and excellent law to honor festivals of consecration, nay rather, to honor things

made new by festivals of consecration; for the islands are consecrated unto God, as Isaiah said. What is understood thereby is that the Churches from the nations, now inaugurated and established, have access to God. Wherefore, let us spiritually celebrate the present consecration.

As the hymn says, a consecrated Church is like an island in the sea that is the world. It is on this island that we the faithful will take shelter, and it is on this island that those seeking refuge from the world will find refuge in God. However, like an Island alone in the sea, we are responsible to not be worn away by the waves, and not succumb to the pressures of the world. One of the caveats of a fully consecrated church, which will be discussed in the next issue, is that it is never to be moved from its location. That means that whatever challenges arise in the future – it will be the responsibility of this community to meet them, and assure the future of the Assumption. The true beauty of this service however, is that it reminds us that we are not, have not, and will never be alone in meeting the challenge of the future of our Church. We have the martyrs who sanctify us and pray ceaselessly for us. Receiving their relics in this service is the ultimate preparation for the consecration. Just as importantly, we have the Theotokos as our constant protector and intercessor.

I hope to see you all at this service that will be performed only once in the life of our parish on the evening of October 3rd, and hope that you all join in the preparation for this event.

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