

Homily-Reflection for the Feasts of the Protection of the Most Holy Theotokos & St. Gregory the Illuminator

In the Name of the All Holy Trinity: + Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.
Dear Brothers and Sisters: Glory to Jesus Christ!

A. The Protection of the Mother of God

The feast of the Protection of the Mother of God is one of the most beloved feast days among the Slavic peoples. In the year 860, a terrifying fleet of Russians (who were not yet Christian) with over 200 ships, led by Prince Askold, were raiding ports in the Black Sea. On June 18th, they entered the Bosphorus and harbor of Constantinople and began mobilizing to invade the Christian Imperial City. The Emperor Michael III left another military campaign to rally the Roman forces to withstand and repel the imminent invasion. He spent much of the evening prostrated in prayer in the [Blachernae] Palace Church near the city gates.



St. Photius the Patriarch called upon his flock to join the Emperor, expressing tears of repentance for their sins and to call upon the Most Holy Theotokos for protection. St. Andrew of Constantinople, the Fool for Christ, gathered with many for an All-Night Vigil. In this Palace Church were kept several relics of the Mother of God [brought there from Palestine back in the fifth century], including her robe, her veil, and a part of her belt.

As the threat grew, the Patriarch Photius and Emperor Michael ceremoniously removed the holy relics to take to a safer location. As they passed by the waters on their way, St. Photius stopped and dipped the robe of the Theotokos into the waters to beseech her intercession.

Meanwhile, during the All-Night Service, with the chapel filled with those in fervent prayer, St. Andrew lifted up his eyes and saw our Most Holy Lady coming, surrounded with heavenly light and accompanied by an assembly of the Saints. She came to the center of the church, knelt down and remained there in prayer for a long time, with tears. After completing her prayer she took off her veil and spread it over all the people there as a sign of protection.

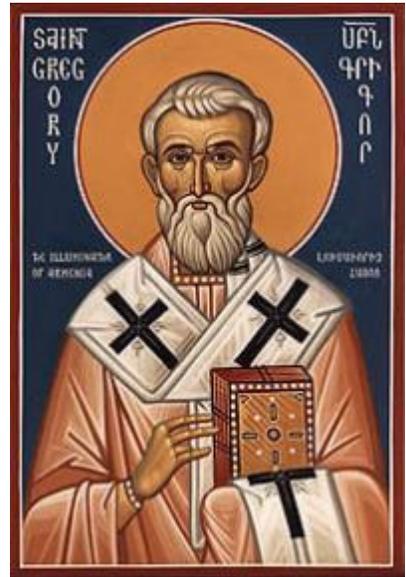
After the Mother of God's appearance, the invasion was miraculously repelled and the city was saved from destruction and bloodshed. Not only this, but the Russian Prince underwent a miraculous conversion. He soon contacted the Patriarch Photius with a request for Baptism and was christened with the name "Nicholas." After this, the evangelization of Russia & many Slavic countries took place! As a result this feast is celebrated much more by the Slavic Churches than the Greeks!

B. St. Gregory the Illuminator

This Saturday on our Byzantine Calendar was the feast of St. Gregory the Illuminator whose icon is also before us [on the tetrapod with the Icon of the Protection].

When Gregory was a young boy his father assassinated the King of Armenia -because of a dynastic struggle. It wasn't long before Gregory's father was killed in retaliation. So the young boy Gregory was exiled to Cappadocia to save his life. There, in this great Christian center of learning, which produced saints like Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian and Gregory of Nyssa, the boy Gregory was taught the depths the Christian faith.

Once his Christian formation was completed, as a young man he desired to bring the truth of Christ to his people, so he set out to Armenia. The king at this time was Tiridates III, the son of the king who had been assassinated by Gregory's father. Gregory was quickly arrested for evangelizing, and it was soon made known to the king, that Gregory was the son of of his father's assassin. After enduring unspeakable tortures, Gregory was cast into a deep, dark pit where he would remain for 13 years -kept alive by the king's house-servant ---who was secretly a Christian.



The king then set out to annihilate all Christians from his realm [in imitation of his friend the infamous Roman Emperor Diocletian]. But eventually his evil affected him and the king lost his mind. The king's sister [Khosrovitoukht] then had a dream that only Gregory could heal her brother. So she finally convinced the king to free Gregory -whom he thought was long dead. When Gregory emerged from the pit, he prayed over the king, and the king was immediately healed.

The king then put his faith in Christ and received Holy Baptism. He then joined Gregory in the work of evangelizing all of Armenia. Because of the great work of St. Gregory and King Tiridates [or Drtad in Armenian] whose also a canonized saint, in A.D. 301 Armenia became the First Christian Nation," 12 years before St. Constantine's Edict of Milan legalized Christianity in the Roman Empire.

C. Application

What do these two feasts have in common and what lessons do they have for us?

While Armenians eventually formed a separate, national Church, many lived within the Byzantine Empire and fully assimilated into Byzantine society, culture and Church. There was a dynasty of Byzantine Armenian emperors. The second dome that sits atop Hagia Sophia (the Great Church) --for over a thousand years now in Constantinople--- was designed by an Armenian architect [Drtad]. There were even Patriarchs of Constantinople, most notably for our feast today, St. Photius the Great who dipped the robe of the Theotokos into the waters to save Constantinople. Photius even traced his family line back to St. Gregory the Illuminator!

Not only this, but St. Photius was the very one who sent out Sts. Cyril & Methodius, the Apostles of the Slavs, to evangelize the Slavic peoples! So there's a direct connection between Gregory the Illuminator, the Byzantine Church of Constantinople, Photius the Great, the conversion of the Slavs and our own Byzantine Church in America which descends from a Slavic Church!

The story of St. Gregory holds a lesson for all of us. St. Gregory left his comfort and safety b/c he cared for his fellow countrymen who were in the utter darkness of pagan ignorance and disbelief. This why he's known as: "The Illuminator." He brought them the Light of Christ!

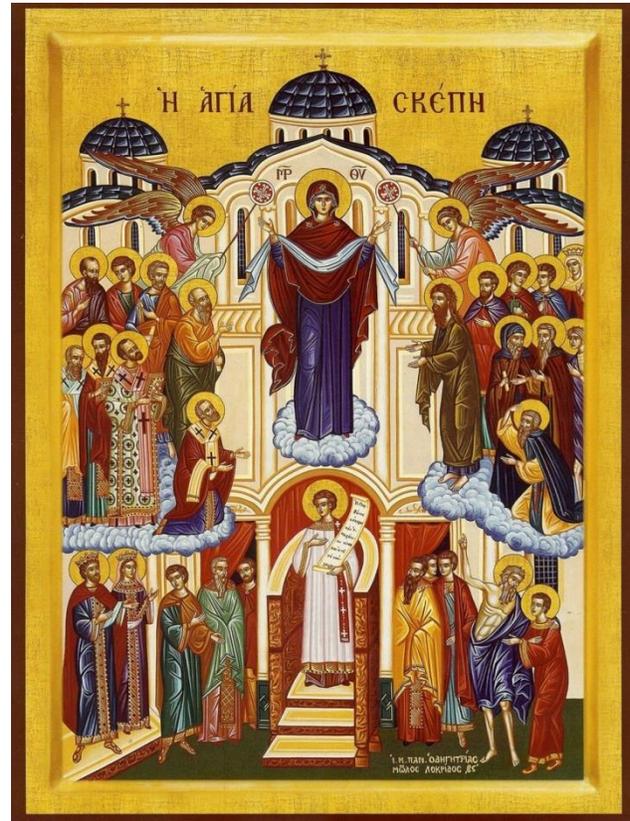
These two feasts share a common theme of "Conversion of Whole Peoples to God" by the profound faithfulness of ordinary individuals. So this brings a question for all of us as American Byzantine Christians:

Do we love our people, fellow Americans, enough, like St. Gregory, to do whatever it takes to bring them the Light of Christ? Or, are we so focused on our ethnicities, we allow this to be a way to insulate us from allowing others to join our Church?

We should have a zeal, even an urgency, to share the Good News of Christ with others.

We can't be indifferent about the evil and godlessness all around us. Things like abortion, euthanasia, Gay marriage, sex outside of marriage, filthy films, lewd subject-matter in the media ---you name it. Sin is spiritual toxic waste. You can try to ignore it, but pretty soon it's going to affect us b/c sin affects all of mankind. Make no mistake; we can't escape the effects of living in a country that rejects God. So we better get busy living and sharing His truth.

We have the truth. Not only do we have the truth, we have one of the most beautiful, most ancient and most authentic expressions of Christianity. And we even have this available in English! Do we love our fellow Americans enough to want to reach out and share this with them? As it says in today's Gospel, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." If we were lost we would want someone to share the truth with us! And remember, it was a city filled with Christians unified in prayer to Christ and the Theotokos which brought about the salvation of the city. If we want our country to be saved from enemies, physical and spiritual, we must do the same. Glory to Jesus Christ!



http://www.byzcath.org/forums/ubbthreads.php/topics/42049/Re_Feast_of_St_Photios_the_Gre