

A.O.

A Word of Praise for St. Bessarion, Bishop of Smolyan

Thy heavens, O land of Bulgaria, are ablaze! Thy sapphire-clear, pure heavens burn with the wounds of the yoke! Blood drips from the heavens and the moan of slaves echoes from the Rhodope Mountains. Souls are heavy with despondency. Hearts are rent by fear and suffering. Like Jeremiah, we call out: "Remember, O Lord, what is come upon us; consider, and behold our reproach. Our inheritance is turned to strangers, our houses to aliens. We are orphans and fatherless, our mothers are as widows.... We have gotten our bread at the peril of our lives because of the sword of the Rhodopian wilderness. Our skin was black like an oven because of the terrible famine. They ravished our women in the holy places and the maids before the altars of God. Princes were hanged up by their hand; the persons of our elders were dishonoured... Wherefore dost thou forget us for ever, and forsake us so long time?" (Cf. *Lamentations*, Ch. 5.)

The Turks destroyed the churches. They turned the divine books into ashes. They plundered treasures and demolished the holy things. A black night lay over the Bulgarian land.

Yet, the voice of the birds was not utterly silenced. Like a nightingale in the twilight, like a heavenly bird amidst the wilds of the forests, from within the hearts of the rocks, Bishop Bessarion of Smolyan raised his sweet voice: the saintly nightingale, whose very name seemed to betoken his feat, since Bessarion means "of the forest".

Bessarion, the bird of the forest, soothing, by the words of its songs, the souls of the banished faithful lambs of Christ; Bessarion, the Rhodopian falcon undaunted by the unapproachable cliffs of the Rhodopes; Bessarion, the turtle-dove of the forest, which found a nest in the footstool of God's feet, in the divers caves and wilds of the Rhodopes, from whence prayers go up as pure incense towards the heavenly altars of the All-High God; Bessarion, the good shepherd, may he be glorified today by all the faithful!

But what hymns shall we offer, what candles shall we light before the face of our enlightened father, intercessor and guide towards the Light. Open your ears, ye Rhodopian rocks, and hear the song of the falcon of our land, the sylvan eagle, vigilant, even unto this day, over the indomitable fortress: the Orthodox Church, the holy spiritual mother of our people, the honour and glory of the Bulgarian land!

During the reign of Machmoud IV, in the month of July of the year of salvation 1669 A.D., the enslavers crawled over the Rhodope-mountain and did great mischief to the Christians there. They forcibly converted some of them to their impious faith, slaughtered others, and drove others away into the forests.

Among the fugitives was also the Bishop of Smolyan, the praiseworthy Bessarion, who, like an Angel and guardian of the sweetness of Eden, took refuge in the hamlet of Raikovo ("of Eden"), where with the fiery sword of his words he kept the filthy hands of the Agarians from the hearts of his faithful sheep. The shepherd of the people was always surrounded by many Bulgarians from the neighbouring villages. Sheltered under the wings of their guardian, they abode joyously in their holy Christian Faith.

And all around them, like rabid wolves, the Turks did all sorts of reprehensible acts that I cannot describe; my jaws are benumbed.

The lamp of the Rhodope Mountains remained for a year in Raikovo. However, the hater of light sought a way to extinguish this radiant flame, in order to bring to an end his baleful plans. For the hapless and overgrieved Bulgarians, Bessarion was an eagle's wing; and whilst he sojourned in their midst, their turbans and *yashmaks* wallowed contemptible in the sacks at the squares. This made the Agarian rancour ever more virulent.

At the first dawn of July 29, in the year 1670 A.D., the saintly Vladyka, together with some ten guardians, all on horses, took to the road towards Gorno Ezerovo. But suddenly, in a dale, some armed Ottomans ambushed them, and after a long and bloody fight, they captured the Bishop alive, along with his loyal guardians. God's finger was pointing towards Golgotha. The time had come for the faithful servant of Christ to be glorified. And instead of reaching Gorno Ezerovo ("the higher village of the lake"), the praiseworthy Bessarion was preparing to pass to the higher lakes of never-ceasing heavenly joy, where there is neither pain nor darkness, but Christ is all in all.

Having reached Smolyan, it was ordered by the local governors that Bessarion be offered the chance to accept Islam in a mild way, and thus keep his temporal life. The sly Agarians hoped, in this way, to wheedle the rest of the Bulgarians who remained faithful to Christ into the pernicious Mohammedan faith and thus to revenge their previous steadfastness.

But the holy hierarch answered gently: "A man who loves the Divine Truth is unfaltering in his faith. My death will make me immortal before God."

Then the Turks disrobed him and began pinching his flesh with some specially prepared pincers, tearing pieces of meat from his living body. The Bishop endured fearlessly these infernal pangs and did not beg for his life. The blood streamed out of the body of this genuine martyr. Afterwards, he was beaten in a most cruel way with iron sticks all over his body, until the holy hierarch lost consciousness. But the torturers brought him round and began stabbing him with knives, cutting pieces

from his body. Then they put a candescent tripod on his head, jeering at him in all fashions. Yet, this was not enough for them. They mortified him before all of the people, leading him around the town bare and naked for show. The Bishop swallowed this insult with humility. In the end, a frenzied Turk stepped out of the throng and thrust a sharp dagger in the breast of the sanctified martyr. The fanatical Turks threw themselves with a vengeance over the relics of Bessarion, assailing them with stones and disfiguring them, hacking them into a mangled mass.

Then they commanded his guardians to dig a grave in an orchard, near the village-green of Smolyan, where they buried his holy relics. Thus, on the July 29, 1670, Bishop Bessarion of Smolyan, the light of the Rhodopes was martyred in Smolyan. His memory today illumines all the land of Bulgaria. With songs and brilliant words, let us glorify this sylvan bird, the most wondrous Bessarion, praising jubilantly his valiant temper and his great staunchness in the Faith.

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Troparion of the hieromartyr, in Tone IV

Today we celebrate the memory of the luminary of our land and praise the wondrous passion-bearer, for he put the mindless Moslems to shame and established the faithful in piety. And, joining chorus now, we all cry out unto him: Rejoice, O Bessarion our father, who prayest for the Bulgarian people!

Kontakion, in Tone V

Thou didst not forsake thy little flock amid temptations, but wast a pillar of confirmation for the faithful amid evil circumstances; and, valiantly enduring the mockery and tortures of the tormentors, thou didst remain faithful to Christ God unto the end, and hast received a crown of glory in His heavenly kingdom, O Bessarion, our all-wondrous father.

Wherefore, unceasingly entreat Christ our God in behalf of all who honor thee with all their heart.

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Prayer to the Holy Hieromartyr Bessarion, Bishop of Smolyan

O all-wondrous and valiant hieromartyr of our race, new boast of the land of Bulgaria and adornment of the Orthodox Church, who didst shine forth in the days of our enslavement to the Moslems: Illumine us with rays of piety, and free us from the bonds of sin. O thou who ascended Mount Rhodope for the salvation of thy flock, lift up our hearts to the heights of Sion, the heights of divine knowledge and a right understanding. O thou who in caves hiddest thyself from the infidels, protect us from the most wicked enemy of the kingdom of Christ, who cometh to deceive, if possible,

even the elect. O good shepherd, tend thou thy nation, which is being led into the abyss by blind hirelings; and show now thy care for the humble sheep of Christ, who have been harried and scattered, as ones bereft of a shepherd. Hearken unto our groaning, attend unto our sighs, and behold our tears. And beseech our greatly merciful God, Who of old enlightened the Bulgarian people with the seven luminaries, that He light for us new lamps, that He suppress the darkness of ignorance, heresies and errors, and shine upon our much-suffering land the rich rays of righteousness and piety. Yea, O our right laudable and good father, we ardently beseech thee with tears, that the light of the knowledge of God, the right Faith, and piety may shine forth in our nation; that the rain of the lovingkindness of God may be poured forth on our land; that, rendered chaste by thine intercessions and those of all the new-martyrs of our people, we may be seen to burn up the thorns of sin and cultivate the roses of the virtues in the meadow of our homeland, that future generations, receiving the goodly inheritance of the Holy Faith from us, the unworthy, may also glorify our true King and Master, the Lord Jesus Christ, with His Father and all-holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Upwards Home

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