

HOMILY ON THE FEAST OF THE HOLY HIERARCH SERAPHIM, ARCHBISHOP OF BOGUCHAR, THE WONDERWORKER OF SOFIA

In the carefully collected notes on St. Seraphim's spiritual guidance compiled by the late nun Seraphima (Yastrebova), dearest brethren, we can read:

“In 1936, the Athonite schema-hiermonk Cassian visited Bulgaria. Vladika (i.e. St. Seraphim) made his confession to him. When Fr. Casian left, Vladika told his disciple, “Do you know, he has wondrous, kind eyes”. Vladika always talked about him as about a truly righteous man – wise, sound and holy.

During a conversation with Fr. Cassian, the disciple asked him, “How do you feel about our Vladika?” The elder replied, “What can I say about your Vladika; his life is holy. He himself is all love. I have never seen such hierarchs.”

Holiness is glory of the Church, comfort, joy and support for Her faithful children. However, holiness is also a stumbling stone for many, the reason to reveal the innermost thoughts in many hearts. In this respect as well, St. Seraphim is no exception.

Listening to or reading accounts of St. Seraphim by his most faithful spiritual children, immersing oneself in his sermons, in his truthful instructions is a real spiritual pleasure and sweetness – so heart-warming and soul-comforting – and, for what feels like a split second, you can catch a glimpse of a different world, of the world of a man whose entire being pulsates with life in the God-Man Christ. And God glorified His servant, whose life was to glorify Him.

However, in our sinful world, Christ's witnesses, Christ's companions, the saints, have been much maligned, and denounced, and adjusted to match the values underpinning some opinions or others, and used for some purposes or others.

The year is 403 after the Birth of Christ. In the immediate vicinity of the ancient city of Halkidon was convened a council which was “canonical” from a technical point of view and during which St. John Chrysostom was condemned. The deeds of this council can be read even today. The indictment comprises 29 points. Among them are: the third accusation - the sale of a large amount of church property; the fifteenth accusation – [Archbishop John] receives women and stays in their company alone while sending the other people away [from

his place]; the twenty-fifth accusation – he has lunch on his own and during this solitary meal behaves like a Cyclops, shamefully and sensuously; the twenty-ninth accusation – he used money to bribe bishops ordained by him so as to oppress the clergy through them. And so on, and so forth. An authentic document, some might say. But God and the church people, together with Christ’s faithful hierarchs, priests and deacons pronounced their authentic judgement and no later than immediately after his departure, the Archbishop of Constantinople, who was disgraced at more than one council, remained St. John Chrysostom forever.

No wonder that sixteen centuries later the slandered Holy Hierarch Seraphim shares the destiny of one of the greatest hierarchs of Christ’s Church.

The reverential attitude, the genuine deference towards the saints are incompatible with using their authority for ecclesiastical and political purposes; the former are irreconcilable with the attempt to subject the personality, theological work and spirituality of a saint to views and actions that are utterly incongruous. It is sorrowful, it is painful that the recent canonization of St. Seraphim in Moscow was connected exactly with such attitude towards the personality of the Wonderworker of Sofia. Thus, for example, Hilarion, the Metropolitan of Volokolamsk and chairman of the commission of the “official” canonization of the Saint, claims, “While he critically assessed the position of the hierarchy of the Orthodox Church of Russia in the USSR, at the same time he acknowledged the election of Metropolitan Sergii (of Stragorod) as Patriarch.” Yet, the diary of St. Seraphim for 1943 reads:

“1st Oct[ober] I was deeply upset by [the news about] Fr. A[ndrey]: the Bul[garian] Synod acknowledged Patr[iarch] Sergii yesterday.

“2nd Oct[ober] Yesterday, this issue caused me heartache. On Wednesday, during the all-night vigil in the altar, Fr. A[ndrey (Liven)] said that the Bul[garian] Synod recognised Patr[iarch] Sergii.”

Here is another statement made by Metropolitan Hilarion in a report delivered before the Hierarchical Council of the Patriarchate of Moscow, “While renouncing the possibility of the

existence of entirety of truth in the creed of the other religions and confessions, Vladika Seraphim never condemned the social contacts and theological dialogue with those from different denominations.” This attempt to associate the ecclesiastical views of St. Seraphim with the ecumenical policy of the Patriarchate smashes to pieces when compared against the very words of the Holy Hierarch in his report *Should the Russian Orthodox Church Participate in the Ecumenical Movement*, “We cannot help noticing the circumstance about the extent of the negative influence of Orthodox representatives attending ecumenical conferences, either. The very fact of their presence there reinforces the idea in the mind of Christians of different creeds that it is as if all Christian confessions belonged to the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church... The presence of Orthodox representatives at ecumenical conferences only implies that Orthodox Christians have started to depart from their Orthodoxy. It is hard to say in which respect the retreat of the Orthodox ecumenists from the Orthodox Church occurs on a larger scale – whether this is through their writing or through their attending ecumenical conferences. In its essence, such presence represents a betrayal of our dogmatic Orthodox teaching about the Church, as stated by the ninth Article of the Creed.” There is no need to give more examples to illustrate the deceitful endeavour to embed the Saint’s personality and the facts of his life in a scheme designed to serve the fundamentally non-ecclesiastical policy of the Patriarchate of Moscow.

But aren’t we accused of using the saint’s name for self-seeking motives? Yes, we are. And if we do not strive to keep and follow the spiritual legacy of Saint Seraphim in the way his faithful children and our spiritual fathers and mothers taught us, if we dare turn his holy personality into a tool for highlighting our own rightness and our own false superiority over others, then we are going to create occasions for such accusations and we are going to be a temptation for the others. As our ever-memorable mother Abbess Seraphima used to say, we are holding the Truth in our unclean hands. And, naturally, people will first of all notice our unclean hands, and this filth unwashed with repentance will repel them from the Truth, and will alienate us from it also. The supercilious sense of our, exactly our own ideological superiority over others, the silly ostentation, exaggeratedly identified as fervour for the purity of Orthodoxy, can deform the human soul to a no lesser extent than the liberal disintegration of the Orthodox consciousness can. Let us learn, similarly to the Chananian woman, to humbly feed on the crumbs left from the spiritual meal of our fathers and mothers, and to learn to keep and follow their legacy with spirit and truth, humbly and reverentially, as they

kept, followed and passed on in our, alas, really unclean hands, the legacy of their Abba, who shone with holiness on our native land.

Holy Father Seraphim, do accept our feeble glorification and ask our Lord to confer a spirit of genuine and unreserved repentance upon us!

Amen!

Bishop Photiy of Triaditza