

## Saint Sophia and Her Daughters

September 17, 2017

The gospel holds many stories that surprise no one. At the Last Supper the disciples all vow their loyalty to the Lord. Peter professes his willingness to die rather than deny Him. We know the rest. Most of the disciples abandon Jesus when He is arrested; Peter denies Him not once, but three times. Not one placed himself in harm's way for Him. But eight weeks later they were boldly preaching His resurrection and all of them, excepting Judas Iscariot and perhaps John, died martyr's deaths for His sake. Why?

St. Paul was known in his early life as Saul, and he was a formidable enemy of Christianity. He assisted in the execution of St. Stephen, and later he made it his business to secure the arrest and punishment of any involved in this breakaway sect of Judaism. How then, did he change his mind? How was he transformed from a persecutor into the foremost advocate of Christianity in his day?

In the story of the 40 Martyrs of Sevasteia, a troop of Christian soldiers, the martyrs were being put to a slow death. One of the forty soldiers gave up and denied Christ. One of the executioners was so moved by the example of the now 39 soldiers willing to die for Christ that he willingly put down his armor and took the place of apostate, the denier of Christ, and he chose to die with the others. Why would an executioner freely take the place of the convicted?

The stories of the eight female martyrs we see near the ceiling of our church and of St. Paraskevi (in the stained glass window) are different in many ways and yet alike in some. One common element is that all (except perhaps St. Markella) were from upper class or middle class families. These girls, and by today's standards they were "girls" when they died, lived very comfortable lives and had everything they needed or wanted in life. What possessed them to give up everything for the sake of a name?

Today we honor a mother and her three daughters- Saint Sophia and her children Faith, Hope and Love. "These Saints were from Italy and contested for the Faith about the year 126, during the reign of the Emperor Hadrian. Faith was twelve years old, Hope, ten, and Love, nine; each was tormented and then beheaded, from the eldest to the youngest.. (<https://www.goarch.org/chapel/saints?contentid=208>).

"Summoning each of the sisters in turn, Hadrian urged them to offer sacrifice to the goddess Artemis. The young girls remained unyielding. Then the emperor ordered them to be tortured. ... They subjected Saint Sophia to another grievous torture: the mother was forced to watch the suffering of her daughters. ... Saint Sophia sat there by the graves of her daughters for three days, and finally she gave up her soul to the Lord. Even though she did not suffer for Christ in the flesh, she was not deprived of a martyr's crown. Instead, she suffered in her heart. Believers buried her body there beside her daughters"

<https://oca.org/saints/lives/1999/09/17/102638-martyr-sophia-and-her-three-daughters-at-rome>)

Let us return to the story of the Lord's disciples. Why would these cowardly men who ran from the Lord's arrest or denied Him repeatedly later choose to preach His resurrection and to die for Him? The only answer that I can come up with is that they saw something so marvelous that they could not deny it. They saw the risen Lord. St. Paul, the persecutor of Christians, saw the risen Lord. All the martyrs had experiences of God so compelling that they could not ignore them. What is noteworthy is that they were ordinary people doing extraordinary feats, by the grace of God.

The Lord said: "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it." One of the most powerful human instincts is that of self-preservation. It can make a person do almost anything. How then, do the Christian martyrs overcome it? We believe that it is the experience of God, of His suffering and of His resurrection.

God in His wisdom has not left us a physical proof of the resurrection. The only proof that exists is what lies in the hearts of believers. The saints and especially the martyrs serve as reminders of His grandeur and as teachers that holiness is not an abstract concept but a living reality.

Most of us are not called to martyrdom. There are and have been martyrs in the 20th and 21st centuries, but most of us will not be among them. But they remind us that we could do more than we are doing now. They are the pacesetters of the church. We do well to study their lives and emulate their examples. By the prayers of Saints Sophia, Faith, Hope and Love and by their examples may we learn true holiness! Amen.

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Text: Mark 8:34-38; 9:1

The Lord said: "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? For what can a man give in return for his life? For whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." And he said to them, "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power."