



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Bishop Youssef

*"We call martyrdom perfection, not because the man comes to the end of his life as others, but because he has exhibited the perfect work of love."
Clement of Alexandria (c. 195)*

My Beloved Youth,

May the Eternal Peace of the Lord Jesus Christ and all those who suffered and died for His Name Sake be with you all.

It is during this time of each year that the Mighty Arrows pays tribute to the holy martyrs, the breath of Heavenly inspiration for hope eternal, steadfast love, enduring patience and the life sacrificing protectors of our faith.

Seeking hope eternal was not one of vainness but in total submission to God the Father. Without doubt, our love for the Lord must go beyond simple words. It must be the way we live our lives and the way we die. It must be the totality of our lives in complete submission to the Will of God. This was the spiritual path in which the martyrs trod.

St Paul the Apostle told the Philippians that he fervently desired deliverance but not just for his human body. "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain... I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you." (Philippians 1:21) St Paul was executed in Rome under the Emperor Nero, about AD 67.

The martyrs love for the Lord Jesus Christ made them endure excruciating sufferings. They honorably gave their lives as willing sacrifices. St Ignatius is often quoted and timelessly remembered for his exhortations to the Lord, "Allow me to become food for the wild beasts, through whose instrumentality it will be granted me to attain to God. I am the wheat of God: so let me be ground by the teeth of the wild beasts—so that I may be found to be the pure bread of Christ." Ignatius (c. 150) St Ignatius, second bishop of Antioch following St Peter, was devoured by wild beasts except for a few large bones collected by those Christians who witnessed his death.

Early Christian writers often wrote about the direct relationship between love and Eternity among the martyrs, "All the martyrdoms were blessed and noble, and they took place according to the Will of God... The martyrs despised all the torments of this world, redeeming themselves from eternal punishment by the suffering of a single hour." Martyrdom of Polycarp (c.135). St Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, was tried by fire and died by the executioner's dagger.

Patience was also a virtue exhibited by the holy martyrs. In the Second Epistle of St Paul to the Thessalonians the Apostle says, "We ourselves boast of you among the Churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure, which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the Kingdom of God, for which you also suffer." (1 Thessalonians 1:4, 5)

St John Chrysostom commented on this very passage "If the fear of an earthly king withdraws us from so many evils, how much more the fear of the King Eternal!" St John Chrysostom believed that how one tolerated unjust persecution then was manifest evidence of how one would stand up at the Final Judgment.

Sirach 2: 1-5 tells us, "My son, if you aspire to be a servant of the Lord, prepare yourself for testing. See a straight course, be resolute, and do not lose your head in time of disaster. Hold fast to Him, never desert Him, if you would end your days in prosperity. Bear every hardship that is sent you, be patient under humiliation, whatever the cost. For gold is assayed by fire, and the Lord proves men in the furnace of humiliation."

As a protector of the Faith, St Timothy said, "I am already being poured out as a drink offering and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the Faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the Crown of Righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge will give to me on that Day." (1 Timothy 4:6-8)

St Timothy would come to be slain with stones and clubs by the heathen.

The prophets prophesied in days of old, "...all those on whom the Spirit of God should rest and who would obey the Word of the Father and serve Him according to their ability would suffer persecution and be stoned and slain." Irenaeus (c.180)

As we contemplate upon the lives led by the holy martyrs may we today in this earthly world strive also to be good stewards of the faith with their examples ever before us,

God bless you,

His Grace Bishop Youssef
Bishop, Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States