

Body and Soul

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On April 13 the Church honors the martyr Crescens. He was the son of a nobleman, and came from Myra in Lycia, a familiar name because it's also the home town of the great Saint Nicholas.

Crescens was respected because he was a member of an eminent family. He was also well-known as a Christian who was not afraid to talk about his faith. So it isn't surprising that one day, seeing a group of pagans on their way to the temple to honor the gods, he started a conversation with them. He asked them why they bothered to offer worship to idols made of stone that couldn't even hear them, let alone respond to them somehow. He told them about the life that Jesus Christ lived among us, and urged them to follow His way.

There is no record of any conversions taking place that day, but someone disapproved of Crescens' action enough to report him to the local prefect, a pagan, who took it very seriously. Crescens was arrested.

However, as the son of a prominent citizen, Crescens could not be treated like some common criminal. In addition to that, the prefect knew his father and was aware that the father was a good, decent man. He tried hard to get Crescens to worship the idols, but when that failed he decided to give the young man a suggestion that would save both of them a lot of trouble, rather than keeping him under arrest.

The prefect said, "If you insist that your soul must cling to this God of yours, so be it. But then just bow to the gods with your body—the outward show of respect will be enough."

But Crescens couldn't possibly have been convinced to do such a thing. He answered, "The body can never do something independently of the soul. It is the soul that gives guidance to the body." He was martyred for his refusal.

The Lenten services of the Orthodox Church reflect this direction of the body by the soul. As we go through Great Lent we use our bodies to bow before God, making our physical movements consistent with the prayers we offer and the repentance we feel in our souls. Crescens' answer to the prefect puts this into words.

Of course it's possible to offer outward signs of love for God that are not really directed by the soul. Some of those who greeted Jesus Christ with shouts of "Hosanna" as He entered Jerusalem, remembered on this Palm Sunday, were ready to demand His crucifixion not much later.

Also on this day we read about the man most notorious for saying with seeming sincerity what he didn't inwardly believe. John 2: 4-6 records Judas' pretended concern for the poor and then bluntly tells us that he didn't care for the poor at all, but was a thief.

As the Feast of the Resurrection approaches, we can look to the martyr Crescens as an example of how body and soul can work together to glorify God.