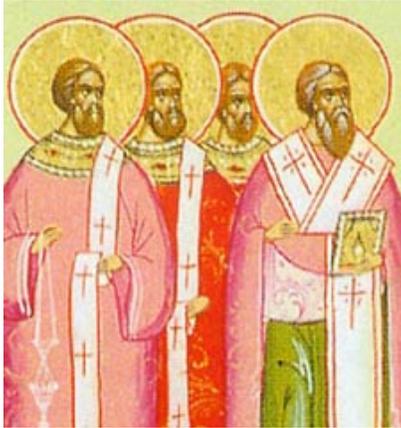


No Pity and No Fear

This weekly bulletin insert complements the curriculum published by the Department of Christian Education of the Orthodox Church in America. This and many other Christian Education resources are available at <http://dce.oca.org>.



The Hieromartyr Sixtus became Bishop of Rome at a time when having that position meant almost certain death.

Sixtus was born in Athens, and served the Church in Spain before settling in Rome. Competent and well-liked, he was an obvious choice to become Bishop of Rome.

But in the third century the Church had to contend with an emperor, Valerian, who hated Christianity and feared the growing influence and social position of its followers. So strong was Valerian's opposition to the faith that any Christian matron who would not worship the gods was, by his decree, to be banished. Any Christian member of the imperial household who would not renounce the faith was to be enslaved and put to menial work on the imperial estates.

The Bishop of Rome, as the most visible and influential Christian, was the special object of Valerian's hatred. Several men who preceded Sixtus in the position had been martyred, and that is why an appointment as Rome's bishop was seen as a death sentence.

People must have felt pity for Sixtus, who by obeying his calling in the Church was put in such a terrible position. They weren't surprised when the pattern continued and he was arrested and later martyred.

But what about Sixtus himself? If he felt fear, he overcame it and comforted those around him. He didn't feel deserving of pity, because he looked forward to his eternal life with God.

The Gospel of Matthew has something to say about both fear and pity. Matthew 14: 22-34 is the story of Jesus Christ walking on the water, and telling His disciples to "Take heart, it is I; have no fear." Then, because He wants to share everything with them, He gives Peter a chance to walk on water as well, and when Peter is too afraid asks him, "Why did you doubt?"

In Matthew 21: 18-22 the Lord withers a fig tree that isn't bearing fruit. When the disciples marvel at this, He tells them. "...if you have faith and never doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' it will be done." He wants them to cast away fear when they face the huge challenges that will come.

In I Corinthians 15: 12-19, Saint Paul tells us there is only one reason why we should ever be pitied: "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied."

Bishop Sixtus did not hope in Christ "for this life only." His hope was based on his confident anticipation of a life that would never end, and which no emperor could take away.

Nobody who shares his anticipation needs pity. Nobody who faces fearful things needs to be totally overcome by them. That's the message of Sixtus' life and of the words we read in these days.