

To Suffer for Doing Right

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On February 8 we celebrate the memory of the Greatmartyr Theodore Stratelates, whose title is often translated as "commander" or "general."

Theodore was one of those multi-gifted people who attract both admiration and jealousy. He was a brave soldier, and at the same time he was an articulate Christian who convinced many to join him in the faith. Several icons of Theodore depict an unusually handsome face with strong features.

The pagan emperor Licinius was well aware of his military commander's qualities, and those qualities worried him. He didn't want an enemy—Christianity—to have such a powerful advocate. So he called Theodore to the imperial court, and invited him to offer sacrifice to the pagan gods. Theodore came, and asked to take some of the pagan idols home, saying he would return with them the next day to offer sacrifice. What he actually did was to melt down the precious metal they were made of, and then distribute the valuable chunks to the poor.

Theodore would pay dearly for his dedication to Christ. He was tortured and crucified, and when those things miraculously failed to kill him, he was beheaded.

We remember Theodore as the patron saint of soldiers. But he also fulfilled a Biblical exhortation which we read on this day: "Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you" (I Peter 3: 15b). Theodore gave himself up to the emperor's men, and was heard to say, "Glory to God" as he died.

What does it mean in our lives, in our day, to "be prepared to make a defense" of our faith? For one thing, Christians should be ready to challenge public assertions that go against the words of Jesus Christ. One example is a recent book by Deepak Chopra, a well-known advocate of alternative medicine. In 2010 he produced a book called "Muhammad: A Story of the Last Prophet."

For Christians there is only one "last prophet" and that is John, the Baptist and Forerunner. Jesus says, "The law and the prophets were until John" (Matthew 11:13). These words tell us that the Old Testament law and prophecies have been fulfilled in Christ, to whom John was Forerunner. John's own words about Christ, found in John the Evangelist's writings (John 1:26-34), are also fulfilled. Christ has completed all the prophecies, and the time of prophets is done.

Troparion - Tone 4

Truly enlisted with the King of Heaven,
you became an outstanding general for Him, passion-bearer Theodore;
you armed yourself wisely with the weapons of faith
and conquered hordes of demons, revealing yourself as a victorious athlete.
Therefore, in faith we always call you blessed.

Some people say it's fine for everyone to believe as they wish; we can call John the last of the prophets and others can say the last is Muhammad. But calling Muhammad the last means that Islam's claims are true, and those of Christianity are false. This would be a denial of the One who ended all prophecy by fulfilling it, the One who, as Peter further writes, "has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers subject to Him" (I Peter 3: 22).