

Two Mothers with Different Hopes

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The Church remembers seven brothers, the Maccabees, and their mother Solomonias, or Salome. She had to witness the brutal deaths of all her beloved boys, but the way she did it is memorable.

Antiochus IV, who reigned from 175 to 164 B.C., was the Syrian king so full of pride that he took the title "Epiphanes" and felt entitled to demand that his whole kingdom follow one set of customs, those of the pagan Greek culture.

What this meant for the Jews living under his rule was that they were directed "to forbid burnt offerings and sacrifices and drink offerings in the sanctuary...to build altars and sacred precincts for idols, to sacrifice swine and unclean animals, and to leave their sons uncircumcised. They were to make themselves abominable by everything unclean and profane" (I Maccabees 1: 45-480).

While this was intolerable to many Jews, some accepted it so as to escape persecution and get along with the ruler. I Maccabees tells us: "All the Gentiles accepted the command of the king. Many even from Israel gladly adopted his religion; they sacrificed to idols and profaned the Sabbath" (1:41). Antiochus oversaw the desecration of the Temple itself. A faithful priest of the Temple who was in his nineties, Eleazar, was tortured and killed for his insistence on upholding the Old Testament Law.

The seven young martyrs were disciples of Eleazar. When the king brought them to trial, they openly declared their allegiance to him, and refused to break the Law of Moses by eating pork. The oldest brother, speaking for them all, challenged the king by asking, "What do you intend to ask and learn from us? For we are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our fathers" (II Maccabees 7: 2).

When only the youngest boy was left alive, Antiochus urged his mother Solomonias to persuade him to give in, so that she would at least have one son left. She pretended to do this, but actually whispered to him that he should show the same bravery his brothers had shown. She was sure they would all, by God's grace, be reunited. When her youngest defied the king and was killed, she said a prayer and died too.

Matthew 20: 21 gives us the account of the mother of the sons of Zebedee who comes to Jesus and asks Him to "command that these two sons of mine may sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom."

Jesus knows that it is really the two sons themselves who are asking this, and He turns His attention directly to them. He tells them that places at His right or left are the Father's, not His, to give.

So we have two mothers, both wanting things for their sons. One seeks honor; the other encourages martyrdom. Yet both women, different as they are, give sons to God for His service, and He accepts them all.

Troparion - Tone 7
Let us praise the seven Maccabees,
with their mother Salome and their teacher Eleazar;
they were splendid in lawful contest
as guardians of the teachings of the Law.
Now as Christ's holy martyrs they ceaselessly intercede for the world.
Kontakion - Tone 2
Seven pillars of the Wisdom of God
and seven lampstands of the divine Light,
all-wise Maccabees, greatest of the martyrs before the time of the martyrs,
with them ask the God of all to save those who honor you.