

Week Five:

Sts. Vasilissa & Anastasia of Rome

These two Roman women were converted to Christianity by Saint Peter and Saint Paul, and went on to be students of those two apostles. Their faith was strong, because it was based on the solid truth preached by the earliest followers of Jesus Christ.

That solid faith was needed, because under the rule of the emperor Nero, from the years 54 to 68, it was a hard time to be a Christian. Nero had a deep and abiding hatred of Christians, and took delight in devising cruel tortures for them. Saints Vasilissa and Anastasia were aware that the bodies of executed believers were often treated as trash, simply tossed aside in piles of garbage by the side of a road.

The two women decided to take on a compassionate but very risky ministry. They secretly collected the bodies of Christians who had been killed, and buried them decently.

Perhaps if they had lived in some remote part of the Roman Empire, their work would have gone unnoticed by the emperor. But they were in Rome, and Nero had his spies and informants. He found out what they were doing, and had them arrested and imprisoned.

Like many others, they were tortured and terribly ill-treated. It's possible they had opportunities to renounce the faith, but if so they resolutely refused to do so. Finally, around the year 68, they were put to death by order of the emperor himself.

Some might say that the emperor Nero was the "winner" of this contest with two Christian women. But the words of the Troparion with which the Church celebrates them (as well as many other saints) tell us something different. The words are these: *"Having Your strength, they laid low their adversaries/and shattered the powerless boldness of demons."*



Church tradition tells us that Nero's own daughter, Domnina, was converted to Christianity. The ruler who so hated Christianity "lost" his own daughter to the faith he despised. But for Saint Vasilissa and Saint Anastasia it was a triumph, a "laying low" of the enemies of the faith.

We cannot know Nero's eternal destiny, but the two women who defied him, Saint Vasilissa and Saint Anastasia, must certainly rejoice in the Kingdom with others who also loved the faith more than their own safety or comfort.

Read Matthew 27: 57-60. How does this passage relate to Saints Vasilissa and Anastasia? *(Like these two saints, Saint Joseph of Arimathea was determined to give a decent burial to someone—in Joseph's case, to Our Lord Jesus Christ. Because Jesus had been executed as a criminal, He would not have received burial according to Roman law.)*

In the encyclical released at the end of 2020 by the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America, entitled *We Rejoice Even in Tribulation: An Encyclical of Hope*, we read that the "drastic steps of temporarily suspending or curtailing liturgical services were taken out of love, not fear: love for those in particular peril from the virus, love for healthcare workers overwhelmed with patients, love for those outside the Church for whom our cooperation was and is a witness of Christian charity."

The encyclical goes on to say that these steps have required us all in the Church to make great sacrifices. "Yet we know that Christ, our Creator and Almighty Lord, is our rock amid this storm (Lk. 6:48), and because our rock is unshakable, we have been willing to lay down our normal life out of love..."

The encyclical is addressing the crisis of the Covid 19 pandemic. How do the words "lay down our normal life out of love" also apply to Saints Vasilissa and Anastasia? *(These two saints faced the crisis of the emperor's hatred and violent persecution of Christians. They laid down their normal life through love for fellow Christians by deliberately doing something that would invite the anger and punishment of the ruler: burying the bodies of believers he disdained and had killed.)*

Read I Corinthians 6: 19 and 15: 51-55. How do these verses help us understand why the Church respects the body as an integral part of our personal resurrection? *(Paul calls the body the "temple of the Holy Spirit" and says that we "have it from God." He calls on us to "glorify God in your body." In the later verses we read that it is our physical body that will be changed when we are raised at the Lord's coming again. What is perishable and mortal will become imperishable and immortal. Clearly, the body is not a kind of "shell" that we will someday cast off. Rather it is an essential element of our salvation.)*