

Life of the Holy New Hieromartyr Nikephoros of Brest

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Nikephoros Parashes-Kantakouzenos (1540-1599)

EARLY LIFE

Nikephoros Parashes-Kantakouzenos was born in the 1540s in Constantinople to a wealthy family. The name of his parents is not known. What is known however is that he studied in Italy at the University of Padua like many of the Orthodox Greek intelligentsia. Unlike many of his fellow students who became apostates and active opponents of Orthodoxy, the young Nikephoros was not influenced by Western culture nor left the Church. He stayed in Padua for some time after his graduation, and taught Greek.

With an excellent knowledge of Latin and theology, Nikephoros expressed his loyalty to the Orthodox Church and was ordained a Deacon, where he served in the Orthodox Cathedral of St. Mark the Evangelist in Venice. He spent seven years preaching the Orthodox Faith in the city of Venice in Latin and Italian. During his time in Italy, he studied the heresies of Roman Catholicism and the corruption of Western culture, and became an apologist.

In the early 1580s, he returned to Constantinople after spending much time in Italy, and soon after was made an Archdeacon and served in the Phanar. Nowhere in the contemporary documents does it say whether Nikephoros was married or a monastic – however he was probably a monk or celibate. Shortly after his return to Constantinople, Nikephoros showed incredible zeal in defending the teachings and traditions of the Orthodox Church.

In 1583, he travelled to Moldova to the city of Iasi (Jassy) to raise funds for the patriarchal treasury. While there, he spoke against the heresies of the Papists and the Gregorian calendar that had been condemned at the Synod of Constantinople that same year, and was opposing the Uniates that were in Moldova.

While on his trip to Moldova, he had met the Orthodox Prince Konstanty Vasyl Ostrogsky and the Chancellor Yakov Zamoysky. Konstanty Ostrogsky invited Fr. Nikephoros to teach at the famous Ostrog Academy, which Fr. Nikephoros accepted. Yakov Zamoysky, a Papist, was upset that Fr. Nikephoros -- who was

well learned in Greek -- rejected his offer to teach at the Roman Catholic seminary which led to a lasting bitterness towards Fr. Nikephoros despite his attempts to maintain peaceful relations with the Polish chancellor.

When the Patriarch Jeremias II was imprisoned on the island of Rhodes, Fr. Nikephoros returned to Constantinople and used all of his ability to restore legitimate authority and order in the Church -- however the enemies of Orthodoxy fought him, and he was sent into exile on the island of Cyprus. The Turks also attempted to slander Fr. Nikephoros to the Russian ambassador, which was of no small importance, since the Russian influence on the affairs of the Patriarchate of Constantinople was very great at that time.

Fr. Nikephoros escaped from prison and once again joined the struggle to restore canonical order in the Church. During the absence of Patriarch Jeremias II, Fr. Nikephoros had to manage the frustrated affairs of the Patriarchate, which was a difficult task, since the Patriarchate had incurred great debts and had a stained reputation.

Fr. Nikephoros greatly respected Patriarch Jeremias II, whom he called a spiritual man. Due to the efforts of Fr. Nikephoros, Patriarch Jeremias II was restored to the Patriarchal throne in 1587. However this did not relieve Fr. Nikephoros of his duties, and the Patriarch decided to make Fr. Nikephoros an Exarch (a rare title for non-Bishops to hold) and when Patriarch Jeremias decided to personally go to Holy Rus' to ask for help in managing the throne -- not trusting his other Bishops -- Patriarch Jeremias had placed Fr. Nikephoros as the locum tenens of the Patriarchal throne -- perhaps a unique case in the history of the Orthodox Church. Fr. Nikephoros stayed as locum tenens for three years.

During this time, Fr. Nikephoros was given the nickname "the Wise", due to his talents and zeal for the Orthodox Faith. He had the full trust and love of Patriarch Jeremias II, and despite numerous attempts by envious and anti-Christian forces to slander or compromise Fr. Nikephoros' zeal, he remained faithful. The special rights that Fr. Nikephoros received as an Exarch were examined by multiple Canonists and proven to be within the canonical right of the Church, and the action of Patriarch Jeremias II was confirmed by a charter, signed also by Patriarch Meletius I of Alexandria.

RETURN TO MOLDOVA AND FIGHT AGAINST THE UNIATES

Exarch Nikephoros returned to Moldova in 1594, and began organizing the condemnation of the Uniates at the Council of Iasi in 1595, where the future Patriarch of Constantinople, Cyril Lukaris, and a young Fr. Petro Mohlya were present. At the Council of Iasi, a Confession of Faith was made against the heresies of Papism, and the apostate from Orthodoxy, George Grave was deposed. The Papists condemned the Council of Iasi, but the Orthodox population of Moldovia, Ukraine and Poland rejoiced.

During Fr. Nikephoros' stay in Moldova, there was a delicate situation. Condemnation of the union was voiced on August 17th, and in September a Polish military detachment under the command of Yakov Zamoysky -- who had been long familiar with Fr. Nikephoros -- approached Iasi in an attempt to arrest the Orthodox Bishops and clergy present. But in October, 42,000 troops of the Tatars and Turks came to Iasi, surrounding the Poles. There was another 40,000 strong Turkish army nearby. Fr. Nikephoros entered into negotiations with the Turks, and managed to achieve the retreat of the Turkish horde, which saved the Poles.

Thanks to Nikephoros, Jeremiah Grave (the brother of the deposed George Grave), was confirmed as a prince for Moldovia. The other candidates were a Turkish appointee, and a Polish appointee, who was supported by Yakov Zamoysky, but thanks to Fr. Nikephoros, the Orthodox Jeremiah was elected instead. Fr. Nikephoros planned on visiting Poland to speak against the upcoming union there, and while traveling there, Yakov Zamoysky implied Fr. Nikephoros meet him and be welcomed at the border town of Khotyn. This was, in fact, a trap, and Fr. Nikephoros, upon arriving in Khotyn, was arrested and accused of being a "Turkish spy".

Fr. Nikephoros spent six months in prison. Fearing the influence of Fr. Nikephoros on disrupting the plans of the Jesuits and Uniates, King Sigismund III Vasa personally ordered he not be released. However, Fr. Nikephoros escaped from prison once again, and rather than return to the safety of Constantinople, he continued to travel through Poland and arrived in Brest-Livotsk to disrupt the plans of the Papists.

With the protection and patronage of Prince Konstanty Ostrogsky, he preached against the Papists, organized the Orthodox people and held meetings for the Orthodox to protect and solidify their position, and condemned the Uniates. Reports were made to Rome, and the Papal nuncio assigned a Jesuit, Peter Arcudius, to monitor Fr. Nikephoros. Reports to Rome made by the Jesuits

indicate the confusion, anxiety and bitterness of the Papists, and stated that Fr. Nikephoros was "very dangerous" to their plans to enforce the Unia.

After the Union of Brest-Livotsk, Fr. Nikephoros continued to bravely and fearlessly condemn the Papists. Even when other Greeks were fleeing Poland, such as Cyril Lukaris, Fr. Nikephoros remained, and continued to organize resistance to the union, sending messages and preaching and confirming the Faith for the faint-hearted. He stayed in the lands of Prince Konstanty Ostrogsky, and taught at the Ostrog Academy.

MARTYRDOM

Soon after the events of the Union in 1596, Fr. Nikephoros was once again accused of being a Turkish spy, and an arrest warrant was placed by Yakov Zamoytsky. Fr. Nikephoros was arrested and brought to trial, but the prosecutors were unable to prove anything. Despite the lack of evidence, the Jesuits had brought false witness against him and accused him of other crimes including sorcery, murder, adultery, polygamy, and working against the state of the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth, attempting to get him the death penalty. Not only were these claims baseless and without evidence, but exposed the hatred of Fr. Nikephoros by the organizers of the Union and their hatred of Orthodoxy. The trial ended with Fr. Nikephoros being found innocent, however he was not released.

Without any sentence, Fr. Nikephoros was sent to Malbork Castle in 1597. Recognizing his innocence, even the Turkish Sultan was attempting to intercede for the Exarch. However King Sigismund III Vaza had assured the Sultan that Fr. Nikephoros was helping the Cossacks and was a spy from the Kingdom of Muscovy. The petitions of the Greek Hierarchs, particularly Patriarch Meletios I of Alexandria, were ignored by the Polish government. Prince Konstanty Ostrogsky's petitions were also ignored by the Commonwealth.

Two years after his acquittal by the trial, Fr. Nikephoros fell asleep in the Lord, after being murdered via starvation in prison in the year 1599. Fr. Nikephoros' repose was carefully concealed by the Poles, but nevertheless, several documents exist that testify the torture and Martyrdom of Fr. Nikephoros. The most important of them is the letter of the Uniate bishop Hypatius, discovered by the historian Platon N. Zhukovich (who was present at the 1917-1918 Moscow Synod and was murdered by the Bolsheviks in 1919) in 1891. In the letter, the heretic Hypatius

mentions "the traitor Nikephoros, who died in Malbork". In two other testimonies, he was mentioned as having reposed in the year 1599, and in another source, he is mentioned together with Stefan Zizaniy, who was an Orthodox layperson who also received a crown of Martyrdom.

LEGACY

The Hieromartyr Nikephoros, as a zealous defender of Orthodoxy and a Confessor against the Union, is well beloved by the Orthodox people of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Poland. His memory is especially strong in Belarus, where Malbork Castle is located. His memory is commemorated on October 6th. He is all commemorated during the celebration of All Saints of Belarus, celebrated on the Third week after Pentecost. The date of his Martyrdom is unknown, and where his relics are, is also unknown. Many icons exist of the Hieromartyr Nikephoros, with one popular style being of him trampling upon the Uniate bishops Cyril and Hypatius.

There also exist a Troparion and Kontakion to the Hieromartyr Nikephoros;

Troparion, Tone V:

O most glorious Greek branch, / O Holy Martyr Nikephoros, / accuser against the Latin wickedness, / confirmer of the Orthodox Faith, / having been slain for Christ, / we sing a wondrous hymn to Him in Heaven: // pray for us that our souls may be saved!

Kontakion, Tone III:

At the council of Brest, / O Nikephoros wise Exarch, / thou didst put to shame those who departed from the Orthodox Faith, / but now thou are with Christ the King in the Heavenly City, // with the angels we rejoice!