

СВЯТЫЙ СЛУЖЕБНИК

Speech at the Centenary Observance
of the Martyrdom
of the Holy Royal Martyr
the Grand Duchess Elizabeth Feodorovna
at the Russian Church of Saint Mary Magdalene
Gethsemane

His Beatitude Theophilos III
Patriarch of Jerusalem

17 July 2018

Your Eminences,
Your Graces,
Dear Abbess Elizabeth,
Dear Archimandrite Roman,
Reverend Fathers,
Beloved Monastics of this community,
Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Today we greet you on the centenary of the martyrdom of the Holy Royal Martyr the Grand Duchess Elizabeth Feodorovna and her companion Barbara, whose relics are venerated here in this great church on the Mount of Olives, and we sing the moving words of her feast:

In the midst of worldliness,
your mournful heart dwelt in heaven;
in barbaric godlessness,
your valiant soul was not troubled;
you longed to meet your Bridegroom as a confessor,
and he found you worthy of your martyric purpose.
O Elizabeth, with Barbara, your brave companion,
pray to your Bridegroom for us.

(Kontakion for the Feast)

The Grand Duchess Elizabeth Feodorovna lived her life at a time of terrible turmoil and disruption. She was born in the Grand Duchy of Hesse into one of the noblest families in Germany. The granddaughter of Queen Victoria, she was also the older sister of Alexandra, who would come to marry Nicholas, the last Russian Tsar.

In 1884 Elizabeth married the Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich, whereupon she moved with him first to Saint Petersburg, and then to Moscow. She embraced Orthodoxy upon her marriage, and was quickly beloved of her new family and her new people of Russia.

In 1905, during the wave of political unrest that spread throughout the Russian Empire, the Grand Duke was assassinated. The Grand Duchess bore this terrible act with deep Christian charity and faith, even forgiving her husband's assassin in person and asking that his death sentence be commuted.

Afterwards, the Grand Duchess embraced poverty, selling her jewels and other luxuries, including her wedding ring, and with the proceeds founded the Martha and Mary Convent in Moscow and became its first abbess. In the spirit of these two saints, the convent was dedicated to the double obediences of prayer and service to the poor, and the Abbess Elizabeth became known for her singular piety and her great devotion to the many poor whom the convent served.

The convent carried out its work for almost a decade under her wise leadership until her arrest in 1918. Sent to internal exile, first to Perm and then to Ekaterinberg, there she was joined by other members of the Imperial Household and others, including Sister Barbara, who had been one of her nuns in the convent. They were all then transported to Alapayevsk, where on 18 July 1917 one hundred years ago, they were brutally murdered.

Three months later the White Army found the remains of the Abbess and her companions, and her relics, along with those of her companion Barbara, were sent first to China, before they were finally brought to this holy place on the Mount of Olives. In 1981 the Grand Duchess and Sister Barbara were canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church outside Russia, and in 1992 by the Moscow Patriarchate, and a statue of her was set up above the Great West Door of Westminster Abbey in London in 1998.

Just last month, His Royal Highness the Duke of Cambridge came on pilgrimage here to venerate the tombs of his noble ancestors, The Holy Royal Martyr Elizabeth and the Princess Alice of Battenberg.

As we keep this centenary, we remember with deep gratitude to Almighty God the ever-memorable witness and deep devotion of this servant of God, who gave selflessly for the well-being of others, and who, at a time when the world was turned upside down, remain steadfast in her faith and purpose. The Church of Jerusalem, the Mother of all the Churches, rejoices to be the home of her relics, where thousands of pilgrims come from all over the world to venerate and to be renewed by the deep wells of spiritual refreshment.

And we pray that God will continue to bless you, dear Abbess Elizabeth, and your community here, as you seek to live faithfully this great heritage of prayer and service.

May the Holy Royal Martyr the Grand Duchess Elizabeth and her companion Barbara pray for us, that in our own day, in which we too experience turbulent times, our souls may not be troubled, but may always be focussed on the Bridegroom, for he is good, and he loves mankind.

Thank you.