

**HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH**  
**SUNDAY, APRIL 2, 2023**

**HEBREWS 9: 11-14**

**“A PRIEST WHO OFFERS UP HIMSELF”**

St. Martin was a great and holy monk in what is now southern France around 400 A.D. One day he was walking down a road (most likely praying as that is what he was pretty much always doing) when a man approached him. A man shining with light---it appeared to be Jesus Christ Himself! And the man said to Martin---“I am your Lord Jesus Christ! Bow down and worship Me!” Martin thought for a moment and then he said, “Please show me your hands.” And the person did that. Martin replied, “You cannot be the Lord----there are no nail scars in your hands!” And the person vanished from sight. (Persecution in the Early Church, Herbert Workman, Abingdon Press, p. 12)

What a special Lord and Savior we have! Yes, He is divine. He is powerful and majestic. But He has scars in His hands, from the nails that held Him to the cross. He loved us enough to be crucified for us!

In our assigned epistle lesson for today, from Hebrews 9, we hear about Jesus our great high priest----who has nail scars in His hands. The scars show us that He is a high priest who offered *Himself* for His people. In verse 12 of chapter 9, the Holy Apostle Paul says that it is not a matter of the blood of goats and cows like in the Old Testament sacrifices----our high priest, Jesus of Nazareth, offered up His *own* blood for us.

The Old Testament sacrifices were not voluntary. The cows didn't volunteer to be killed....they didn't push forward to be first in line to die! Those were forced sacrifices. Imagine the chaos and the noise of what went on. Imagine what it must have been like if a cow got loose and ran through the temple! Very much not a voluntary thing!

Our Lord Jesus Christ was different----He *voluntarily* sacrificed Himself to bring us forgiveness and salvation. As we read in the word of the St. John Chrysostom liturgy which we pray most Sundays of the year---“on the night in which He was given up---*or rather gave Himself up* for the life of the world”. Christ didn't offer up a goat or cow for us---He offered up Himself for you. That's how much He loves you!

And He is still offering Himself up for you----at every liturgy. In the

liturgy, we offer up our bread and wine to the Father. As that is done, God changes that bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. As we are offering our bread and wine to the Father, Christ is offering Himself up for us.

This sacrifice of Himself by Jesus Christ is far greater than those Old Testament sacrifices. In the Old Testament, man offered animals to God. In the Holy Eucharist in the liturgy, the Son of God offers Himself up for us to give us forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life.

It is the most amazing thing there is! And so there should be nothing more important in our lives than that little (physically little!) meal we receive in the liturgy---the very Body and Blood of the Lord in a miracle. Through that meal, we come into God's presence. And God comes to us.

And so each week---we should remember that we received Holy Communion the Sunday before. And we should give thanks for that all week. And live all week in thankful obedience to God. And at the same time---we should all week look forward to receiving that meal again the next Sunday. And seriously prepare ourselves to do so. Receiving Christ's Body and Blood should be the central and most important thing in our lives!

Six years ago I asked you to remember the name of a small city in what is now Algeria----Abilinitina. I see some of you do remember! Good memories! I want to tell you about Abilinitina again and again urge you to always remember that town---in particular, the Christian people of that town long ago. It was about 300 A.D. and there was a particularly severe wave of Roman pagan persecution of our Church going on in North Africa. In Abilinitina there was a total ban on Christians gathering together for worship--the penalty for breaking that ban was death. And so the local Christians decided to "lay low" for a while----to avoid each other, to certainly not gather together for liturgy. They hoped things would calm down soon. But they didn't calm down. And so for weeks and weeks----no liturgies, no Holy Eucharist.

Eventually, this got to be too much. The believers could not stand living without worship and without Holy Communion. So they quietly communicated with each other to see who was willing to take a very big risk--to have a liturgy at someone's house. If caught, it would mean death! But they decided it would be worth death to receive again Christ's Body and Blood.

And so they secretly gathered at one of their homes for the liturgy. But somehow word got out to the mayor. And just as the liturgy was ending, just after they had joyfully received the Eucharist---the Roman soldiers came

pouring into the house. All of them were arrested and all of them died by the sword that day. They died happily for the Lord whose Body and Blood they had just taken. (The Shape of the Liturgy, Gregory Dix, Continuum, 2005, p. 152)

Never forget Abilinitina and our brothers and sisters there 1700 years ago! How important the Holy Eucharist was to them! Is it that important to us? I hope so! In just a few minutes after this sermon, your great high priest Jesus Christ will come to you in that little spoonful of a meal. In that spoonful, you will see God, you will touch God, you will taste God.

Make that meal the number one priority in your life. Be here for it every week. Seriously prepare every week to receive it with great joy. And then go on to show your thanks to God by living for Him all week.

Taste and see that the Lord is good!