

In the days of Great Prince Ivan III Vasilievich of Moscow,³ the Orthodox Christians subject to the Germans had two churches in the Russian quarter of the city of Yuriev—one dedicated to St. Nicholas the Wonderworker, and other to the Great Martyr Saint George. Two priests served in these churches—one by the name of Ivan, surnamed Shestnik (i.e. stranger), was from Muscovy; the other was called Isidore. When the Germans—at first with promises, later with threats—began to lure the Orthodox inhabitants of the city into Latinism, the priest Ivan, who had dwelt in Yuriev all of two and a half years, left for Pskov. Soon thereafter he received the monastic tonsure with the name Jonah and founded the Pskov-Caves Monastery on the border of Pskov and Livonia. Having dwelt there in a holy manner, he was accounted worthy of a blessed repose in the Lord. (Commemorated March 29) But Isidore remained in the city of Yuriev and had great disputes with the Germans on the Orthodox faith. Not infrequently he reproached the heterodox, exhorting them to abandon the Latin faith (Roman Catholicism) and embrace Holy Orthodoxy.

In 1472, the Latins took up arms against the divinely-protected city of Pskov and the Orthodox populace subject to it, in order to plant in its midst the Latin faith confirmed principally by the canons of the pseudo-Council of Florence (1438-1439; which was never accepted by any of the Orthodox Churches) at which the Latins had decided to reinstate so-called Christian unity by force. Meanwhile, the priest Isidore served blamelessly at the Church of Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker as a star shining forth amongst the Christians of his flock. And it came to pass that the elder of the city of Yuriev, a German by the name of Yuri Tryasigolov, rose up against Isidore and against the Orthodox Christians and complained about them before the Latin bishop Andrew and the city rulers, who were also of the Latin persuasion, and the merchants of the Livonian land, saying that he had heard from this Russian and his whole flock blasphemy against the Latin faith and the use of unleavened bread, and praise for the Greek faith alone. Thus did he stir up wrath amongst the bishop and the nobles; thenceforth the Latins sought to torment the Orthodox Christians of the city of Yuriev.

The holy Feast of the Theophany of our Lord fell on January 6, 1472. The priest Isidore with all the Orthodox duly went forth to the river Omovzha with the precious cross to sanctify the water. There on the waters of the Holy Theophany Germans who had been sent by their bishop Andrew and the above mentioned Elder laid hold of Isidore the Christian teacher and those men and women and, like fierce wolves, dragged them before their bishop and the civil judges. Great was the torment the mighty warriors of Christ endured in the judgment hall for their faith, which the Germans sought to force them to renounce. Saint Isidore, however, and all the

³ Reigned 1462-1505.

Orthodox confessors with him, as it were with one mouth, replied turning first to the bishop, then to all their judges: "God forbid, O ye enemies of the Truth, that we Orthodox renounce the True Christ and the Orthodox faith! We will not spare our bodies for Christ God, however much you torment us. We beseech you, wretched ones: Spare your own souls for the Lord's sake, for ye are God's creation."

Then with great boldness did Saint Isidore unmask the false wisdom of the Latins and their apostasy from true Christianity. The enraged Latin bishop ordered the Orthodox cast into prison and summoned all the local rulers from the surrounding castles, as though to put the Orthodox on trial. As soon as the Orthodox Christians had come together, Saint Isidore instructed his flock in prison:

"Brethren and children," he said, "the Lord has assembled us together for this spiritual feat, desiring to crown you by His own almighty hand with unfading crowns. Do ye, brethren, suffer well at the hands of the iniquitous, harboring no doubt or uncertainty? Fear ye not these bitter torments, neither weaken, for your adversary, the devil, stalks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour (1 Pet. 5:8), that is, whom he may lure away from the Orthodox faith. Let us stand in it immovably, like good warriors, against his wiles, for the Lord Himself has said: 'If they have persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept My saying, they will keep yours also. But all these things will they do unto you for My name's sake, because they know not him that sent Me. But when the Comforter is come, Whom I will send unto you from the Father, He will testify of Me; and ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with Me from the beginning' (John 15:20-21, 26-27). Thus, brethren, spake Christ unto His disciples, and thus doth He say even unto us, if anyone suffereth for His name's sake unto the shedding of his blood, which is unto death. And you, my beloved brethren, forsake me not, but suffer together with me, and do not be deceived by the desires of this world, but be great martyrs of Christ in this generation."

Afterwards the holy Isidore with his companions stood in the prison facing east and began to sing and to pray with tears and heartfelt sighs. He partook of the reserved Gifts of the Holy and Life-creating Mysteries and communed all the men, women and children who were with him. All were filled with spiritual joy, and the devout priest instructed them again concerning the reward of eternal blessings for good deeds and of eternal torments for deeds of darkness.

"Let not one of us," he said to his companions, "from the least to the greatest, fear either the threats or the tortures themselves. For if we suffer well for the Son of God, Our Lord Jesus Christ, we will receive the reward of our suffering on the day of judgment."

And with one spirit, with a loud voice, they chanted a hymn in honor of the martyrs" "O holy Martyrs, who have endured suffering and have been crowned, beseech ye the Lord, that He will have mercy on our souls."

Messengers from the Latin bishop and civil judges arrived at the prison and, leading the Orthodox Christians forth, delivered them to the place of judgment at the town hall for a short trial before the bishop and all the Latins that had assembled for the spectacle. As the sun amongst the stars, so stood the confessor Saint Isidore with his companions before them. At first the bishop strove with unctuous words to incline the confessors of Orthodoxy toward his own faith. Turning to Saint Isidore, as the leader and guide of the flock, but afterwards to all those under his care, the bishop said: "You need but to obey me and the governors of this city in the presence of these many Germans who have come together from the surrounding castles of my realm. Accept our precious faith (which is truly one with yours) and the use of unleavened bread, and do not destroy yourselves. Be true brethren unto us and partakers of our riches. If you so desire, hold to your own faith again; only confess your guilt now before me and the judges and Germans."

But the confessors replied to the bishop: "Why do you try to persuade us with false and lying words? You cannot dissuade us from the true Christian faith. Do with us as you wish, for behold, we stand before thee and repeat to thee that which we have said previously."

Then, like serpents, consumed with rage against the Orthodox, the stern bishop and the other judges ordered all of them driven into the river Omovzha in whatever clothing they had on. Saint Isidore, still vested as a priest, was cast into the very hole in the ice through which, through Orthodox prayers, the water had been sanctified earlier on the Feast of Theophany. Thus did they deal with them as with criminals, executing them in a cruel manner for their Orthodox faith in Christ. Seventy three suffered who considered Saint Isidore their instructor. They surrendered their pure souls into the hands of the living God and were crowned with crowns that fade not away.

There was at the time of their martyrdom a most wondrous sight. Among the Orthodox was to be seen a young mother who had in her arms a three year-old child, most beautiful and comely of countenance. The wicked Germans wrested the infant from his mother's arms and cast her into the river. Beholding his mother drowned with the blessed martyrs, the child began to weep in the arms of the tormentors, and however much they tried to calm him, he struggled all the more, scratching their faces. Then the cruel tormentors cast him down beside the hole in the ice. The lad, creeping up to the hole itself, crossed himself thrice, and facing the people, exclaimed: "I also am a Christian. I believe in the Lord and wish to die, as did our teacher Isidore and my mother." And thus saying, he cast himself beneath the ice. Thus did a child suffer for the truth, as of old the infant-martyr Cyricus, who confessed the Lord on the knees of

the tormentor as he beheld the suffering of his mother Julitta, and received a martyr's crown with her (commemorated July 15).

Spring arrived and the river Omovzha overflowed its banks. Then did the relics of all the confessors of Christ appear almost three miles upstream from the city of Yuriev, under a tree near a mountain. They were all incorrupt and lay facing the east, as though arranged by human hands. The priest Saint Isidore lay in their midst in all his priestly raiment. Thus did the Lord glorify His holy saints. Then the Orthodox merchants of the city of Yuriev took up the relics of those who had suffered and buried them in the city around the Church of Saint Nicholas the wonderworker where they shall rest until the Second Coming of Christ.

The Orthodox Christians began to venerate the memory of the Hieromartyr Isidore and his 72 fellow martyrs not long afterwards, no later than the mid-1500's. The Church, however, did not rank them among the saints until 1897. Then, with the blessing of the holy Synod, it was decreed that their memory be celebrated; the first such feast of the holy Martyrs was solemnly observed on January 8, 1898.

The first account of Saint Isidore and his fellow martyrs was written down by Hieromonk Varlaam of Krypetsky Monastery about the year 1560 with the blessing of Makary, Metropolitan of Moscow. The present translation was taken from the *Lives of the Saints*, second volume of the appendix to Saint Dimitry of Rostov's compilation, Moscow, pp. 19-24.

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