

In the name of the Father and of the Son of the Holy Spirit. Christ is in our midst. He is and always shall be.

In this morning's Gospel our Lord tells us:

"The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is evil, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

This means, if you fill your mind with worries over money, you have extinguished the lamp and darken your soul. Suggested the eye that is "sound" sound or "healthy" brings light to the body, in the eye that is "evil" or "diseased" brings darkness so also does the state of the mind affect the soul. If the mind is blinded by these worries, it is cast into darkness; and the soul becomes dark, how much more so the body as well?

"Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink; nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not the soul more than food, and the body more than clothing?"

Jesus does not forbid us to work, but rather he forbids us to give ourselves over entirely to our cares and to neglect God. We all have cares that try to take us away from God. We must be careful not to them succeed.

In another place He also teaches:

"Do not be afraid of those who [can] kill the body but are not able to kill the soul. Rather, fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in Gehenna."

Today we commemorate St. Joseph of Damascus who was martyred on July 10, 1860.

During the little entrance the troparion was sung for St. Joseph of Damascus. The words are:

Let us honor the martyr of Christ, a priest of the Church of Antioch; who by the word of the Word, and by his blood and the blood of his companions, baptized the land of Syria, its Church and its people. Being immersed in the light of the Gospel from his youth, he worked and taught and defended the Church of Christ and her flock. O Father Joseph of Damascus, be for us an example, defending us and interceding for us fervently before the Savior.

St. Joseph was born in May 1793, to a poor but pious family. At an early age he obtained some education and became acquainted with Arabic, and Greek. Unable to afford tuition, his father decided to halt his education in favor of putting him to work in the silk industry. His desire for knowledge, however, was not quenched by poverty and destitution, so he decided to find a solution. He started working all day long and teaching himself at night. At the age of 14 he studied under a Damascene Muslim elder, Mouhamad Al-Attar, who was one of the greatest scholars of his age. He learned from him Arabic, logic, the art of debate and right reasoning. He discontinued his studies, however, because tuition and the cost of books overburdened his father. Joseph dedicated his evenings wholeheartedly to study the Torah, the Psalms and the New Testament,

comparing the Greek text of the Septuagint with the Arabic translation, until he gained mastery in translating to and from Greek. His knowledge was not limited to the Greek language, but he was able to memorize a greater portion of the Bible. He persisted in seizing every opportunity to gain more education with great yearning. Joseph also studied theology and history. He then started teaching from his home, where he learned Hebrew under one of his Jewish students.

Joseph was married to a Damascene young woman whose name was Mariam Al-Kourshi, while he was still nineteen years of age (1812). Marriage, however, did not turn him away from his pursuit of knowledge

He was ordained to the priesthood at the age of 24 in 1817. He was assigned to be the Great Economos of the Patriarchal Cathedral of the Dormition of the Most Holy Theotokos in the heart of the Old City of Damascus. He developed into a great preacher. Some people regarded him as the successor of Chrysostom

Along with his sermons, he was diligent in comforting the heartbroken, in consoling the grief stricken, in helping the destitute and in strengthening the feeble. In 1848, when the yellow fever spread in Damascus, Fr. Joseph manifested a great fervor in ministering to the sick, and in burying the dead, without being troubled by the possibility of catching this infectious fever, because he had a profound faith in God. Although he lost one of his children by this contagious disease, he was tireless in doing his pastoral duty. His fervor, his steadfastness and his compassion increased. He was highly respected by the Damascene people; they saw in him the image of Saint Paul who said: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus Christ, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies" (2 Cor. 4:8-10).

Today, we often hear and read of the killings of Christians by the Moslems throughout the Islamic world. In the middle of the 19th century in Syria there was also a great massacre Christians. In Lebanon, the Druze were the Overlords of the land. The Ottomans ruled the Middle East in those days. They had put the Druze to rule over the land of Lebanon and gave them the ability to tax as they desired. The Druze was a religion which had evolved from Islam. Most Moslems do not consider the Druze as Moslems. They had one thing in common, their hatred of Christians.

The Christians labored for them. The Christians complained of being heavily taxed by the Druze. It reached a point that in 1840 the Christians in Lebanon rebelled against their Overlords. The Civil War lasted until the 1860s. It had begun to overflow into Syria. Usually the Moslems sided with the Druze in fighting the Christians. When the fighting spread to Damascus it changed from being a Civil War to being a religious war. The Muslims decided to take the side of the Druze and sought to destroy all Christians living in Damascus.

On Monday, July 9th, 1860 the brutal massacre of Christians, which began in the mountains of Lebanon, spread to Damascus. Many of the Christians had fled Lebanon to Damascus seeking refuge. The officials of the Ottoman Empire promised to protect the Christians, if they would turn in their weapons. They told them to seek sanctuary in the Cathedral of the Dormition where Fr. Joseph had been assigned. Once the Christians had gathered into a central location the Ottomans

closed their eyes to the attacks of the Druze and the Moslems. Some Damascenes (including Michael Hawaweeny and his young wife Mariam who was bearing in her womb a son who would be the future St. Raphael of Brooklyn) fled Damascus for the port city of Beirut. The majority, however, took refuge in the Cathedral of the Dormition. Many had previously fled to Damascus from their mountain villages, while others came to the Cathedral of the Dormition from the Christian Quarter of Damascus and the villages that surrounded the city.

Fr. Joseph, seeing that the Christians were going to be massacred, took up his communion kit containing the Reserved Sacrament, left his home and began to make his way to the Cathedral by jumping from rooftop to rooftop across the narrow streets of the Old City. As he went, he stopped to confess and commune the aged and infirm who could not flee their homes, encouraging them with stories from the Lives of the Great Martyrs. On Tuesday morning July 10th, the Cathedral was surrounded, pillaged and burned by a fanatical crowd. Those inside the holy temple perished in the flames; of those who escaped and fled into the streets, most were shot or caught and forced back into the burning building, while only a few, including Fr. Joseph, survived.

As he roamed the narrow streets searching for survivors who needed to have their confession heard and receive Holy Communion, Fr. Joseph was surrounded by the enemies of Christ. Seeing that his end was near, Fr. Joseph took out his communion kit and consumed what remained of the Body and Blood of Christ. Recognizing him as the "leader of the Christians," the persecutors savagely attacked him with axes. Then, binding his legs with ropes, they dragged his mutilated body through the streets to be mocked and spat upon by jeering onlookers. Fr. Joseph's sacred relics were then unceremoniously pitched into the city dump along with those of the other New Martyrs (numbering two thousand five hundred men plus women and children).

St. Joseph and his Companions were glorified by the Holy Synod of the Patriarchate of Antioch in the year 1993.

Through the prayers of the hieromartyr Joseph the Damascene and his companions Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on us. Amen.