

Your Highness, we've been defeated: Basil the Great (Stylianos G. Papadopoulos)

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Until then, Orthodoxy in Cappadocia seemed very much like an islet in the East. Valens let loose the evils of heresy everywhere. The combination of his brutality and cunning brought shocking results. He swept through Orthodoxy and then dug his claws into Caesarea. It's true to say that the Cappadocians hadn't really experienced Valens' savage cruelty yet. When they heard what had happened elsewhere their blood curdled.



The various centres of the empire were subject in reality to the policy of the Arian emperor. This came about because the Orthodox were persecuted; their assets were confiscated; they were harassed and violently constrained. Anyone resisting was removed.

The hate and ferocity knew no bounds. It reached the point where, in Nikomedia, they burnt Orthodox priests on board a ship. In fact, the nearer they got to Caesarea the more vicious their ferocity became. Henchmen of the emperor desecrated the churches. In one city they entered the church, climbed onto the holy altar and danced on top of it. In another church, where the Orthodox priest was doing his best to hinder the desecrators, they murdered and poured human blood onto the holy altar itself. It was the priest who was the victim. Accounts of this violence assailed the ears of the Caesarean Orthodox on a daily basis.

It must have been around November or December time. The pressures on Saint Basil were unrelenting. One day they insulted him, the next they promised him much.

Before making a decision as to the timing of his final onslaught, Valens attempted various means of winning Saint Basil over. Understandably, he felt the fact that Basil remained the Orthodox Metropolitan of Caesarea was a sign of the failure of his policy, a mockery of his royal prestige. A significant role in the build up of pressure was played by the magistrates, who had entirely become instruments of the emperor. Not that the army was any better.

His stratagems were getting him nowhere and Valens was becoming impatient. He wanted to be finished as quickly as possible with this last remaining locus of resistance, with Basil. So he decided to subdue Cappadocia, Pontos, and Armenia immediately. Of necessity, therefore, the emperor played his last card. He sent Prefect Modestos, the captain of the Praetorian Guard, to Caesarea as his envoy. He knew what he was doing.

Now, Modestos was one of the worst types of people who, in order to keep his position, acted more imperiously than the emperor. In order to serve his master, he was unscrupulous and inhumane. The Church in the East was very well aware of his atrocities.

Once in Caesarea, Modestos took up residence in the Government Headquarters. The confrontation, however, probably took place in the Courts. He ordered them to bring in Saint Basil, who was already prepared.

The bishop had spent the whole night praying. At one point he felt weak at the knees from fear. How would he manage? Would he be able to stand his ground before this beast? A bitter cup is no less bitter even for great people. However, his trepidation passed. The Holy Spirit strengthened him and he began to feel better.

And Modestos? Once he was told, he went to the official hall and sat on the throne, aggressive or, perhaps more, vindictive.

He had, from the outset, to catch Saint Basil off guard. All that he had heard about this man with the spare frame made him feel less certain. He felt suddenly awkward and a nameless fear stabbed at his heart and refused to let go.

He therefore had to make him succumb from the beginning, in a brusque, arbitrary and harsh manner. To get it over and done with.

Just behind the prefect stood certain official personages: a governor, eunuchs, passed-over judges.

They brought Saint Basil into the chamber. He went boldly up to the throne, but not

was not provocative. Good-natured, but not smiling.

Modestos tensed, put iron and ice into his voice and spoke:

“Basil, how dare you- you alone- go against the will of our emperor? Who are you to dare to show your contempt for him?”.

Basil understood the tactic: attack and surprise. He was not to be swayed, however. He would impose his own pace on these dreadful proceedings. He would become the rock against which the anger and hatred of the heretics would shatter. He would loom as a symbol for the rights of the Church in the face of the authorities of this world. He therefore demanded specific facts, a clear charge:

Basil “What am I charged with? Where am I at fault, because I don’t know?”.

Modestos: “You don’t have the emperor’s faith, even though everyone’s submitted to him now”.

Basil: “I’m behaving like this because my own emperor doesn’t stoop to the faith of Valens, who worships something created (the Arians believed that the Son was created). How can I do so, when I, who am created, have been called upon to become God? I worship the Son as God, not as a created being”.

Modestos: “And what are we, then, who believe the same as the emperor?”.

Basil: “Nothing, as long as you order such goings-on!”.

Sweat, anxiety and fury fought in the troubled spirit of the prefect. He began to become confused, as well. This explains his naïve question.

Modestos: “Why don’t you think it important to be on our side, to have us for friends?”.

Basil: “Of course, you’re prefects and among the most powerful, to be sure, but I don’t hold you in higher esteem than God! As the children of God that you are, it’s important for me to have you as friends. Just as important as it is for me to have your subordinates as friends. Christianity doesn’t depend on office, but on the faith of the persons involved”.

With these words, the saint illumined the powerful magnate. He showed him how insignificant he really was and how comical his insolence was becoming.

Modestos realized what was going on. He felt he’d been stripped bare. That the power he used to terrify lesser people had been taken away from him. His anger

flared. His veins stood out. All of a sudden he stood up from the throne and, almost inarticulately, menaced the saint.

Modestos: "So, you're not afraid of my power?".

Basil: "What can you do to me. What'll happen?".

Modestos: "What can I do? One of the many things within my jurisdiction".

Basil: "What's going to happen to me. Tell me. I want to hear".

Modestos: "Confiscation of your property, exile, torture, death".

Basil: "Threaten me with something else. That doesn't scare me".

The furious prefect felt those words as a stab to his vitals. His eyes became red, his voice hoarse. His nerves were shot to pieces and nothing around him made any sense. From powerful, he'd gone to weak. He felt he was shrinking. He became what he really was: petty. He gathered his strength, however, and whispered:

Modestos: "How is it that you're not afraid?".

Basil: "Because if you've got nothing but shabby old clothes and a few books, you don't fear them being confiscated. That's all I've got in the world, Modestos. Exile doesn't frighten me, because I have no place of my own anyway. Even Caesarea, where I'm living now, isn't mine. So wherever you cast me will be a place of God and I'll be a pilgrim and a stranger.

Torture? How would that affect a body like mine? At the first blow, it would be all over. That's something you'd be able to do. You threaten me with death? You'll be doing me a good turn. It's what I desire, to go quickly to God, for Whom I live and struggle. I'm in a hurry to get to my God, my Father!".

Modestos: "Nobody has ever been so outspoken to Modestos. Nobody has ever shown so much boldness towards me".

Basil seized his opportunity.

Basil: "That's because you've never met a real bishop. If you had, he'd have spoken in the same way, because he'd be struggling for such important things". (Basil saw how affected the prefect was and toned down his language and lightened the atmosphere). We Orthodox, Prefect, are kinder and more humble than other people. We're not arrogant towards the emperor, nor to the least of his subjects. If our faith in God is in jeopardy, though, we ignore everything else and

cleave to it. Then the fire, the executioner's sword, the wild animals, the torturers tearing at our flesh with their nails all bring us more satisfaction than fear. So do your worst; whatever it lies in your power to do. Curse me, threaten me as much as you want. But let the emperor be made aware of this, too: you'll never make me accept a false faith, however much you threaten me".

This was the final damper the tragic prefect received from Basil at this dreadful and historic encounter. Numbed, Modestos, like a beaten animal, made a sign to the guards to allow Basil to go free.

What happened to Modestos?

He rose and went to the emperor, who was arriving in Caesarea.

He did not hesitate to tell the truth: "We've been defeated, my liege, by the bishop of this Church here. He's not afraid of threats. He's more stable than our words, more powerful than our convictions. Let's threaten some coward, but not Basil. If we want to get anywhere, we'll have to resort to enforcement" (i.e. to exile him).

The emperor, who had in the meantime learned everything there was to know about Basil's power, didn't agree. He had the courage to admire people's virtues.

He gave an order that force was not to be used.

Source: Stylianos G. Papadopoulos, *Η ζωή ενός Μεγάλου (Βασίλειος Καισαρείας), [The Life of A Great Man (Basil of Caesarea)] Publications of the Apostiliki Diakonia 1979, pp. 308-320, excerpts.*