

Tyrtaeus and The Spartans, Themistocles and Eurybiades, and the Mission of the Church



Dear youth and fellow parishioners,

From my studies of the ancient Hellenic history and tradition especially during my school years, there are two stories in particular that have left a lasting impression on me.

The first one refers to the Second Messenian War that lasted from B.C. 685 to 668 and was a result of a revolt from the *helot* population of Messenia as it was called by the Spartans. In an attempt to regain freedom after thirty nine years of suffering under the Spartan yoke, the Messenians took up arms against their oppressors and invaded Laconia, the broader land of the Spartans. The leader and hero of the Messenians was Aristomenes, whose wonderful exploits formed the great subject of this war. It would appear that most of the states in Peloponnesus, the southern part of Hellas (Greece), took part in the struggle. The first battle, the Battle of Deres, was fought before the arrival of the allies on either side, and, though it was indecisive, the valor of Aristomenes struck fear into the hearts of the Spartans. With his small army, he even pressed forward toward the city of Sparta, and camped within sight of its dwellings. The Spartan women could thus see a very unusual sight,—the light of the enemies' fires. To frighten the enemy even more, the hero entered Sparta by night, and affixed a shield to the temple of Athena, with the inscription, "Dedicated by Aristomenes to the goddess from the Spartan spoils." The Spartans in alarm sent to Delphi for advice. The god through the oracle bade them apply to Athens for a leader. The Spartans, being a proud people, did not like to ask aid of any one; but they made up their minds to obey this command, and so sent a messenger to Athens to ask for a good leader.

Whether the Athenians wished to render no real assistance, or whether they wanted to show them that the bodily beauty and strength which the Spartans prized so highly was not everything, no one now knows. However, the fact is that, fearing to disobey the oracle, the Athenians sent the Spartans a poor, lame schoolmaster, called *Tyrtaeus*, to lead them in battle. This man had never handled a weapon in his life, and the Spartans were very angry when he placed himself at their head with a lyre instead of a sword; but when he suddenly began to sing one of those war songs which make one's blood tingle, it roused their patriotism to such a point that all were ready to conquer or die, and their scorn was soon changed to deep admiration. Fired by these patriotic songs, and by the stirring music the lame schoolmaster played, the Spartans fought better than ever before, overcame the Messenians, and came home in triumph with their prisoners, among whom was the brave Aristomenes. It is generally admitted that *Tyrtaeus* eventually became one of the prominent elegiac poets in ancient Hellas, that he not only wrote poetry but served in the field as mentioned above, and that he endeavored to compose the internal dissensions of Sparta (Aristotle, *Politics*, v. 6) by inspiring the citizens with a patriotic love for their fatherland.

Regarding the moral of this story, it is taught in general that it was *Tyrtaeus's* martial songs that roused the fainting courage of the Spartans; and so efficacious were his poems that to them is mainly ascribed the final success of the Spartan Arms. One perspective I like to use to view this story is that in any kind of 'battle', 'war' or 'struggle' we need both the 'Spartan soldiers' and the 'Tyrtaeus's moral support'. This can apply, among others, in our everyday lives, in our work as well as in our church environment. In this way, for the broader 'war' of carrying out the mission of our church, our Lord Christ is the head with our clergy, Fr. Matthew in our case, being His generals while the 'Spartan officers and soldiers'

consist of the leaders, chairs and members of our general assembly, parish council as well as all other ministries. One might then ask, what about the ‘**Tyrtaeus’s moral support**’? There are various ways that this support can be expressed. As an example, offering our pledge cards as part of our **stewardship** in a timely manner as well as our **constructive input, feedback and ideas** can encourage and help our parish council tremendously to carry out the important operations of our parish and plan and put together a long term **vision** for our church. In addition, participation in terms of again **constructive input, feedback and ideas** as well as **attendance** can enormously contribute to successful Religious Education, Hellenic Education, Youth and all other ministries of our church. Furthermore, these are also excellent ways of **Service** that we can offer which constitutes one of the elements of our Church’s mission.

The second story mentioned above, pertains to an incident that took place right before the famous Sea Battle of Salamis. According to the ancient Greek historian Herodotus, during the conference before the battle, Eurybiades, the Spartan commander in charge of the Hellenic navy during the Persian Wars, wanted to move the fleet to the Isthmus of Corinth, where the armies of the Hellenic League were building fortifications. **Themistocles**, the great Athenian naval commander and better naval tactician, saw the benefits of fighting at Salamis and wanted to force a naval battle there. Eurybiades was insistent and in the heat of the argument he raised his wand to hit **Themistocles**. Then, **Themistocles** responded with the expression that became proverbial, that is, «*Πάταξον μεν, άκουσον δε*» (PAH-takson men, AH-kooson theh), that translates into “Hit me but at least listen to me”. At that crucial moment, Eurybiades eventually listened to **Themistocles** and the Hellenes went on to achieve, according to a significant number of historians, the most decisive and significant victory in human history. Had the Persians won this battle they would have conquered the whole Hellas and the world as we know it today wouldn’t have probably been the same.

It is an irony that the Hellenic nation, which gave birth to democracy and established the dialogue as a means of resolving conflicts, has also made *discord* probably its number one national vice. It was because of a *discord* that broke out among them when the first Hellenic state was established right after the Hellenic War of Independence, for example, that the Hellenes manage to imprison for a number of years their revolution leader and national hero **Theodoros Kolokotronis**, who is considered the ‘George Washington’ for the Hellenic nation. In addition, there are numerous examples throughout the Hellenic history when the Hellenes had either glorious national moments in times of **accord** or great national disasters when they would allow their *egos* to influence them in times of *discord*.

One of the morals that both stories teach us is to always have an open mind when we are presented like the Spartans or Eurybiades with ideas or suggestions that might look or sound different because we can never know what God might offer us as a solution to our issues, a solution that could change the ‘tides of the war’. One might ask, how can this be achieved since it is easier said than done? A starting point could be to follow **Themistocles’s** cry and try to always listen and understand first the new/different idea before we rush into any judgments. Trying to show understanding for the views of our fellow parishioner and human in general not only can contribute to a healthy environment where **accord** and **consensus** can be easily reached but also is an excellent way of practicing **Fellowship** which constitutes another one of the elements of our Church’s mission. Moreover, we read in the Gospel of John that «*και το φως εν τη σκοτία φαίνει, και η σκοτία αυτό ου κατέλαβε*» or “*And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.*”, *John 1:5*. It becomes then evident from this quote how important the art of **listening** and **understanding** also is for receiving the word of God, in other words, for experiencing the **Martyria** or **Witness** that is the third element of our Church’s mission ...

In conclusion, in addition to exercising **Service** and **Fellowship** by working, for example, like the ‘**Spartan soldiers**’ and ‘**Tyrtaeus**’ for our ministries of our church, next time we find ourselves ready to engage into a heated conflict we could **pray to God** try to control our *egos* and be good listeners first before we try to ‘hit’ or even ‘crucify’ our fellow parishioner or human or the idea in general that stands on the other side. Who knows, this might mean a healthy parish life, a successful and thriving ministry or the whole ‘war’ to them and to us ... It might even mean the **Martyria** to us

In His service,

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