

*A Liturgical Explanation for the Days of Holy Week*

by

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1. The Beginning of the Cross:  
**Saturday of Lazarus**

"Having fulfilled the Forty Days... we ask to see the Holy Week of Thy passion." With these words sung at Vespers of Palm Friday, Lent comes to its end and we enter into the annual commemoration of Christ's suffering, death and resurrection. It begins on the Saturday of Lazarus. The double feast of Lazarus' Resurrection and the Entrance of the Lord to Jerusalem is described in liturgical texts as the "beginning of the Cross" and is to be understood, therefore, within the context of the Holy Week. The common troparion of these days explicitly affirms that "by raising Lazarus from the dead Christ confirmed the truth of universal resurrection." It is highly significant that we are led into the darkness of the Cross by one of the twelve major feasts of the Church. Light and joy shine not only at the end of Holy Week, but also at its beginning; they illumine darkness itself, reveal its ultimate meaning.

All those familiar with Orthodox worship know the peculiar, almost paradoxical character of Lazarus Saturday services. It is a Sunday, i.e., a Resurrection service on a Saturday, a day usually devoted to the liturgical commemoration of the dead. And the joy which permeates these services stresses one central theme: the forthcoming victory of Christ over Hades. *Hades* is the Biblical term for Death in its universal power, for that inescapable darkness and destruction that swallow all life and poison with its shadow the whole world. But now -- with Lazarus' resurrection -- "death begins to tremble." For there begins the decisive duel between Life and Death and it gives us the key to the entire liturgical mystery of Pascha. In the early church Lazarus Saturday was called "announcement of Pascha": it announces and anticipates, indeed, the wonderful light and peace of the next -- the Great and Holy Saturday, the day of the Life-giving Tomb.

**Lazarus, the Friend of Jesus**

Let us first of all understand that Lazarus, the *friend* of Jesus, personifies the whole mankind and also each man, and Bethany, the *home* of Lazarus the Man, is the symbol of the whole world as home of man. For each man was created friend of God and called to this Divine friendship: the knowledge of God, the communion with Him, sharing of life with Him. "In Him was life and Life was the light of men" (John 1:4). And yet this Friend whom God

loves, whom in love He has created, i.e., called to life, is destroyed and annihilated by a power which God has not created: death. God encounters in His own world a power which destroys His work and annihilates His design. The world is but lamentation and sorrow, tears and death. How is this possible? How did this happen? These are the questions implied in John's slow and detailed narrative of Jesus' coming to the grave of His friend. And once there, "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). Why does He weep if He knows that in a moment He will call Lazarus back to life? Byzantine hymnographers fail to grasp the true meaning of these tears. They ascribe them to His human nature, whereas, the power of resurrection belongs to God in Him. But the Orthodox Church teaches that all actions of Christ are "theandric", i.e., both Divine and human, are actions of the one and same God-man, the Incarnate Son of God. He who weeps is not only man, but also God and He who calls Lazarus from the grave is not God alone but also Man. But then His very tears are Divine. Jesus weeps because He contemplates the triumph of death and destruction in the world created by God.

### **Love, the Power of Life**

"It stinks," say the Jews trying to prevent Jesus from approaching the corpse, and this awful warning applies to the whole world, to all life. God is Life and the Giver of Life. He called man into the Divine reality of Life and behold "it stinks"... The world was created to reflect and proclaim the glory of God and "it stinks." At the grave of Lazarus, God encounters Death, the reality of anti-life, of destruction and despair. He meets His enemy, who has taken away from Him His world and become its *prince*. And we who follow Jesus as He approaches the grave, we enter with Him into that *hour of His*, which He announced so often as the climax and the fulfillment of His whole work. The Cross, its necessity and universal meaning are announced in the shortest verse of the Gospel: "and Jesus wept"... We understand now that it is *because* He wept, i.e., loved His friend Lazarus that Jesus had the power of calling him back to life. The power of Resurrection is not a Divine "power in itself," but power of love, or rather love as power. God is love and Love is Life, Love creates Life... It is Love that weeps at the grave and it is Love that restores life. This is the meaning of the Divine tears of Jesus. In them, love is at work again -- recreating, redeeming, restoring the darkened life of man: "Lazarus, come forth!..." And this is why Lazarus Saturday is the beginning of both: the Cross, as the Supreme sacrifice of love, the Resurrection, as the ultimate triumph of love.

"Christ-- the Joy, the Truth and the Light of all  
The Life of the World and the Resurrection --  
has appeared in His love to those on earth.  
He has become the Image of our Resurrection,  
Granting divine forgiveness to all."

--Lazarus Saturday Kontakion

## 2. Hosanna: Palm Sunday

The Saturday of Lazarus, from the liturgical point of view, is the pre-feast of Palm Sunday -- the Entrance of our Lord into Jerusalem. Both feasts have a common theme: triumph and victory. Saturday reveals the Enemy, which is death; Palm Sunday announces the meaning of victory as the triumph of the Kingdom of God, as the acceptance by the world of its only King, Jesus Christ. In the life of Jesus, the solemn entrance in the Holy City was the only visible triumph. Up to that day, He consistently rejected all attempts to glorify Him. But six days before the Passover, He not only accepted to be glorified, He Himself provoked and arranged this glorification. By doing what the prophet Zechariah announced: "behold, your king is coming, sitting on an ass' colt!" (Zechariah 9:9), He made it clear that He wanted to be acclaimed and acknowledged as the Messiah, the King and the Redeemer of Israel. And the Gospel narratives stress all these messianic features: the Palms and the Hosanna, the acclamation of Jesus as the Son of David and the King of Israel. The history of Israel is now coming to its end, such is the meaning of this event. For the purpose of that history was to announce and to prepare the kingdom of God, the advent of the Messiah. And now it is fulfilled. For the King enter His Holy City and in Him all prophecies, all expectations find their fulfillment. *He inaugurates His Kingdom.*

The Liturgy of Palm Sunday commemorates this event. With palm branches in our hands we identify ourselves with the people of Jerusalem, together with them we greet the lowly King, singing Hosanna to Him. But what is the meaning of it *today* and *for us*?

### **Citizenship in the Kingdom**

First, it is our confession of Christ as our King and Lord. We forget so often that the Kingdom of God has already been inaugurated and that on the day of our baptism we were made citizens of it, have promised to put our loyalty to it above all other loyalties. We must always remember that for a few hours, Christ was indeed King on earth, in this world of ours. For a few hours only and in one city. But, as in Lazarus we have recognized the image of each man, in this one city we acknowledge the mystical center of the world and indeed of the whole creation. For such is the Biblical meaning of Jerusalem, the focal point of the whole history of salvation and redemption, the holy city of God's advent. Therefore, the Kingdom inaugurated in Jerusalem is a universal Kingdom, embracing in its perspective all men and the totality of creation... For a few hours -- yet these were the decisive time, the ultimate *hour of Jesus*, the hour of fulfillment by God of all His promises, of all His decisions. It came at the end of the entire process of preparation, revealed in the Bible, it was the *end* of all that God did for men. And thus, this short hour of Christ's earthly triumph acquires an eternal meaning. It introduces the reality of the Kingdom into our time, into all hours, makes this Kingdom the meaning of time and its ultimate goal. The Kingdom was revealed in this world and from that hour; its presence judges and transforms human history... And when at the most solemn moment of our Liturgical celebration, we receive

from the priest a palm branch, we renew our oath to our King, we confess His Kingdom as the ultimate meaning and content of *our* life. We confess that everything in our life and in the world *belongs* to Christ and nothing can be taken away from its sole real Owner, that there is no area of life in which He is not to rule, to save and to redeem. We proclaim the universal and total responsibility of the Church for human history and uphold her *universal mission*.

### **The Way of the Cross**

But we know that the King whom the Jews acclaimed then and whom we acclaim today, is on His way to Golgotha, to the Cross and to the grave. We know that this short triumph is but the prologue of His sacrifice. The branches in our hands signify, therefore, our readiness and willingness to follow Him on this sacrificial way, our acceptance of sacrifice and self-denial as the only royal way to the Kingdom.

And finally, these branches, this celebration, proclaim our faith in the final victory of Christ. His Kingdom is yet hidden and the world ignores it. It lives it as if the decisive event had not taken place, as if God had not died on the Cross and Man in Him was not risen from the dead. But we, Christians, believe in the coming of the Kingdom in which God will be all in all and Christ the only King.

In our liturgical celebrations, we remember events of the past. But the whole meaning and power of Liturgy is that it transforms remembrance into reality. On Palm Sunday this reality is *our own involvement, our responsibility to, the Kingdom of God*. Christ does not enter into Jerusalem anymore, He did it once and for all. And He does not need any "symbols," for He did not die on the Cross that we may eternally "symbolize" His life. He wants from us a *real* acceptance of the Kingdom which He brought to us... And if we are not ready to stand by the solemn oath, which we renew every year on Palm Sunday, if we do not *mean* to make the Kingdom of God the measure of our whole life, meaningless is our commemoration and vain the branches we take home from the Church.

### 3. MONDAY, TUESDAY, WEDNESDAY:

#### **THE END**

These three days, which the Church calls Great and Holy have within the liturgical development of the Holy Week a very definite purpose. They place all its celebrations in the perspective of End; they remind us of the *eschatological meaning of Pascha*. So often the Holy Week is considered one of the "beautiful traditions" or "customs," a self-evident "part" of our calendar. We take it for granted and enjoy it as a cherished annual event which we have "observed" since childhood, we admire the beauty of its services, the pageantry of its rites and, last but not least, we like the fuss about the paschal table... And then, when all this is done we resume our normal life. But do we understand that when the world rejected its Savior, when "Jesus began to be sorrowful and very troubled... and His soul was exceedingly

sorrowful even unto death," when He died on the Cross, "normal life" came to its end and is no longer possible. For there were "normal" men who shouted "Crucify Him!" who spit at Him and nailed Him to the Cross. And they hated and killed Him precisely because He was troubling their normal life. It was indeed a perfectly "normal" world which preferred darkness and death to light and life... By the death of Jesus "normal" world, "normal" life were irrevocably condemned. Or rather they revealed their true and *abnormal* nature, their inability to receive the Light, the terrible power of evil in them. "Now is the judgment of this world" (John 12:31). The Pascha of Jesus signified its end to "this world" and it has been at its end since then. This end can last for hundreds of centuries, this does not alter the nature of time in which we live as the "last time." "The form of this world is passing away..." (I Corinthians 7:31)

### The Ultimate Passage

Pascha means passover, passage. The Feast of Passover was for the Jews the annual commemoration of their whole history as salvation, and of salvation as passage from the slavery of Egypt into freedom, from exile into the promised land. It was also the anticipation of the ultimate *passage* -- into the Kingdom of God. And Christ was the fulfillment of Pascha. He performed the ultimate passage: from death into life, from this "old world" into the new world, into the new time of the Kingdom. And he opened the possibility of this passage to us. Living in "this world" we can already be "not of this world," i.e., be free from slavery to death and sin, partakers of the "world to come." But for this we must also perform our own passage, we must condemn the old Adam in us, we must put on Christ in the baptismal death and have our true life hidden in God with Christ, in the "world to come..."

And thus Easter is not an annual commemoration -- solemn and beautiful -- of a past event. It is this Event itself shown, given *to us*, as always efficient, always revealing our world, our time, our life as being at their *End*, and announcing the *Beginning* of the new life... And the function of the three first days of the Holy Week is precisely to challenge us with this *ultimate* meaning of Pascha and to prepare us to the understanding and acceptance of it.

1. This eschatological -- and it means ultimate, decisive, final -- challenge is revealed, first, in the common *troparion* of these days:

"Behold, the Bridegroom comes at midnight  
and blessed is the servant whom He shall find watching,  
and again, unworthy is the servant whom He shall find heedless.

Beware, therefore, O my soul,  
do not be weighed down with sleep,  
lest you be given up to death,  
and lest you be shut out from the Kingdom.

But, rouse yourself crying:  
 Holy, Holy, Holy art Thou, O God.  
 Through the Theotokos, have mercy on us."

Midnight is the moment when the old day comes to its end and a new day begins. It is thus the symbol of the time in which we live as Christians. For, on the one hand, the Church is still *in* this world, sharing in its weaknesses and tragedies. Yet, on the other hand, her true being is not of this world, for she is the Bride of Christ and her mission is to announce and to reveal the coming of the Kingdom and of the new day. Her life is a perpetual watching and expectation, a vigil pointed at the dawn of this new day... But we know how strong is still our attachment to the "old day," to the world with its passions and sins. We know how deeply we still belong to "this world." We have seen the light, we know Christ, we have heard about the peace and joy of the new life in Him, and yet the world holds us in its slavery. This weakness, this constant betrayal of Christ, this incapacity to give the totality of our love to the only true object of love are wonderfully expressed in the exapostalarion of these three days:

"Thy Bridal chamber I see adorned, O my Savior;  
 but I have no wedding garment that I may enter.  
 O Giver of Light, enlighten the vesture of my soul,  
 and save me."

2. The same theme develops further in the *Gospel readings* of these days. First of all, the entire text of the four Gospels (up to John 13:31) is read at the Hours (1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>). This recapitulation shows that the Cross is the climax of the whole life and ministry of Jesus, the Key to their proper understanding. Everything in the Gospel leads to this ultimate *hour of Jesus* and everything is to be understood in its light. Then, each service has its special Gospel lesson:

### **On Monday**

At *Matins*: Matthew 21:18-43; the story of the fig tree, the symbol of the world created to bear spiritual fruits and failing in its response to God.

At the *Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts*: Matthew 24:3-35; the great eschatological discourse of Jesus. The signs and announcement of the End. "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."

### **On Tuesday**

At *Matins*: Matthew 22:15-23:39; condemnation of Pharisees, i.e., of the blind and hypocritical religion, of those who think they are the leaders of man and the light of the world, but who in fact "shut the Kingdom of heaven against men."

At the *Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts*: Matthew 24:36-26:2; the End again and the parables of the End: the ten wise virgins who had enough oil in their lamps and the ten foolish ones who were not admitted to the bridal banquet; the parable of the ten talents "... Watch, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." And, finally, the Last Judgment.

### **On Wednesday**

At *Matins*: John 12:17-50; the rejection of Christ, the growing conflict, the ultimate warning: "Now is the judgment of this world... He who rejects me and does not receive my sayings, has a judge; the word that I have spoken will be his judge on the last day."

At the *Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts*: Matthew 26:6-16; the woman who poured the precious ointment on Jesus, the image of love and repentance which alone unite us with Christ.

3. These Gospel lessons are explained and elaborated in the hymnology of these days: the stichera and the triodia (short canons of three odes each sung at Matins). One warning, one exhortation runs through all of them: the end and the judgment are approaching, let us prepare for them:

When the Lord was going to His voluntary Passion,  
He said to His Apostles on the way:

"Behold, we go up to Jerusalem,  
and the Son of Man shall be delivered up,  
as it is written of Him. "

Come therefore, and let us also go with Him,  
purified in mind.

Let us be crucified with Him and die through Him  
to the pleasures of this life.

Then we shall live with Him and hear Him say:

"I go no more to the earthly Jerusalem to suffer,  
but to My Father and your Father,  
to My God and your God,

I shall raise you up to the Jerusalem on high  
in the Kingdom of Heaven."

(Monday Matins)

"Behold, O my soul, the Master has entrusted you with the talent;  
receive the gift with fear;

Repay the One who gave by giving to the poor,  
and gain the Lord as your Friend;  
so that, when He comes in glory,

you may stand at His right hand  
and hear His blessed voice:

"Enter, my servant, into the joy of your Lord."

Though I have gone astray, make me worthy of this, O Savior,  
through Thy great mercy."

(Tuesday Matins)

4. Throughout the whole Lent the two books of the Old Testament read at Vespers were *Genesis* and *Proverbs*. With the beginning of the Holy Week they are replaced by *Exodus* and *Job*. Exodus is the story of Israel's liberation from Egyptian slavery, of their Passover. It prepares us for the understanding of Christ's exodus to His Father, of His fulfillment of the whole history of salvation. Job, the sufferer, is the Old Testament icon of Christ. This reading announces the great mystery of Christ's sufferings, obedience and sacrifice.

5. The *liturgical structure* of these three days is still of the Lenten type. It includes, therefore, the prayer of St. Ephraim the Syrian with prostrations, the augmented reading of the Psalter, the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts and the Lenten Liturgical chant. We are still in the time of repentance for repentance alone makes us partakers of the Pascha of our Lord, opens to us the doors of the Paschal banquet. And, then, on Great and Holy Wednesday, as the last Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts is about to be completed, after the Holy Gifts have been removed from the Altar, the Priest reads for the last time the prayer of St. Ephraim. At this moment the preparation comes to an end. The Lord summons us now to His Last Supper.

#### 4. Thursday: **The Last Supper**

Two events shape the liturgy of the Great and Holy Thursday: the Last Supper of Christ with His disciples and the betrayal of Judas. The meaning of both is in *love*. The Last Supper is the ultimate revelation of God's redeeming love for man, of love as the very essence of salvation. And the betrayal of Judas reveals that sin, death and self-destruction are also due to love, but to deviated and distorted love, love directed as that which does not deserve love. Here is the mystery of this unique day, and its liturgy, where light and darkness, joy and sorrow are so strangely mixed, challenges us with the choice on which depends the eternal destiny of each one of us.

"Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (John 13:1). To understand the meaning of the Last Supper we must see it as the very end of the great movement of Divine Love which began with the creation of the world and is now to be consummated in the death and resurrection of Christ.



## Love, Life, Communion

God is Love (I John 4:8). And the first gift of Love was life. The meaning, the content of life was *communion*. To be alive man was to eat and to drink, to partake of the world. The world was thus Divine love made food, made Body of man. And being alive, i.e., partaking of the world, man was to be in communion with God, to have God as the meaning, the content and the end of his life. Communion with the God-given world was indeed communion with God. Man received his food from God and making it his body and his life, he offered the whole world to God, transformed it into life in God and with God. The love of God gave life to man, the love of man for God transformed this life into communion with God. This was the paradise. Life in it was, indeed, eucharistic. Through man and his love for God the whole creation was to be sanctified and transformed into one all-embracing sacrament of Divine Presence and man was the priest of this sacrament.

But in sin man lost this eucharistic life. He lost it because he ceased to see the world as means of Communion with God and his life as eucharist, as adoration and thanksgiving... He loved himself and the world for their own sake; he made himself the content and the end of his life. He thought that his hunger and thirst, i.e., his dependence on his life on the world -- can be satisfied by the world as such, by food as such. But world and food, once they are deprived of their initial sacramental meaning -- as means of communion, with God, once they are not received for God's sake, and filled with hunger and thirst for God, once, in other words, God is no longer, their real "content" can give no life, satisfy no hunger, for they have no life in themselves... And thus by putting his love in them, man deviated his love from the only object of all love, of all hunger, of all desires. *And he died*. For death is the inescapable "decomposition" of life cut from its only source and content. Man thought to find life in the world and in food, but he found death. His life became communion with death, for instead of transforming the world by faith, love and adoration into communion with God, he submitted himself entirely to the world, he ceased to be its priest and became its slave. And by his sin the whole world was made a cemetery, where people condemned to death partook of death and "sat in the region and shadow of death..." (Matthew 4:16).

But if man betrayed, God remained faithful to man. He did not "turn Himself away forever from His creature whom He had made, neither did He forget the work of His hands, but He visited him in diverse manners, through His tender mercies" (Liturgy of St. Basil). A new Divine work began, that of redemption and salvation. And it was fulfilled in Christ, the Son of God, Who, in order to restore man to his pristine beauty and to restore life as communion with God, became Man, took upon Himself our nature, with its thirst and hunger, with its desire for and love of, life. And in Him life was revealed, given, accepted and fulfilled as total and perfect Eucharist, as total and perfect communion with God. He rejected the basic human temptation: to live "by bread alone," He revealed that God and His Kingdom are the real food, the real life of man. And this perfect eucharistic Life, filled with God, and, therefore Divine and immortal, He gave to all those who would believe in Him, i.e., find in Him the meaning and the content of their lives. Such is the wonderful meaning of the Last

Supper. He offered Himself as the true food of man, because the Life revealed in Him is the true Life. And thus the movement of Divine Love which began in paradise with a Divine "take, eat..." (for eating is life for man) comes now "unto the end" with the Divine "take, eat, this is My Body..." (for God is life of man...) The Last Supper is the restoration of the *paradise of bliss*, of life as Eucharist and Communion.

But this hour of ultimate love is also that of the ultimate betrayal. Judas leaves the light of the Upper Room and goes into darkness. "And it was night" (John 13:30). Why does he leave? Because he loves, answers the Gospel, and his fateful love is stressed again and again in the hymns of Holy Thursday. It does not matter indeed, that he loves the "silver." Money stands here for all the deviated and distorted love which leads man into betraying God. It is, indeed, love *stolen* from God and Judas, therefore, is the *Thief*. When he does not love God and in God, man still loves and desires, for he was created to love and love is his nature, but it is then a dark and self-destroying passion and death is at its end. And each year, as we immerse ourselves into the unfathomable light and depth of Holy Thursday, the same decisive question is addressed to each one of us: do I respond to Christ's love and accept it as my life, do I follow Judas into the darkness of his night?

### **The Services of Thursday**

The liturgy of Holy Thursday includes: a) *Matins*, b) *Vespers* and, following Vespers, c) the *Liturgy of St. Basil the Great*. In the Cathedral Churches the special service of the Washing of the Feet takes place after the Liturgy; while the Deacon reads the Gospel, the Bishop washes the feet of twelve priests, reminding us that Christ's love is the foundation of life in the Church and shapes all relations within it. It is also on Holy Thursday that Holy Chrism is consecrated by the primates of autocephalous Churches, and this also means that the new love of Christ is the gift we receive from the Holy Spirit on the day of our entrance into the Church.

At *Matins*, the Troparion sets the theme of the day: the opposition between the love of Christ and the "insatiable desire" of Judas.

"When the glorious disciples were enlightened  
 At the washing of their feet before the supper,  
 Then the impious Judas was darkened, ailing with avarice  
 And to the lawless judges he betrays Thee, the righteous Judge.  
 Behold, O lover of money, this man who because of money hanged himself.  
 Flee from the greedy soul which dared such things against the Master.  
 O Lord, who art good towards all men, glory to Thee!"

After the Gospel reading (Luke 12:1-40) we are given the contemplation, the mystical and eternal meaning of the Last Supper in the beautiful canon of St. Cosmas. Its last "irmos" (9<sup>th</sup> ode) invites us to share in the hospitality of the Lord's banquet:

"Come, O faithful! Let us enjoy the Master's hospitality:  
the Banquet of immortality!  
In the upper chamber with uplifted minds,  
let us receive the exalted words of the Word, Whom we magnify."

At *Vespers*, the stichera on "O Lord, I have cried" stress the spiritual anticlimax of Holy Thursday, the betrayal of Judas:

"Servant and deceiver,  
disciple and betrayer, friend and devil,  
Judas has been revealed by his deeds.  
While following the Master, he plotted His betrayal... "

After the Entrance, three lessons from the Old Testament:

- 1) Exodus 19:10-19; God's descent from Mount Sinai to His people as the image of God's coming in the Eucharist.
- 2) Job 38:1-23, 42:1-5; God's conversation with Job and Job's answer: "who is this that hides counsel without knowledge? Things too great and wonderful for me, which I did not know..." -- and these "great and wonderful" things are fulfilled in the gift of Christ's Body and Blood.
- 3) Isaiah 50:4-11; the beginning of the prophecies on the suffering servant of God.

The epistle reading is from I Corinthians 11:23-32; St. Paul's account of the Last Supper and the meaning of Communion.

The Gospel reading (the longest of the year) is taken from all four Gospels and is the full story of the Last Supper, the betrayal of Judas and Christ's arrest in the garden.

The Cherubic Hymn and the hymn of Communion are replaced by the words of the prayer before Communion:

"Of Thy mystical supper, O Son of God,  
accept me today as a communicant;  
For I will not speak of Thy Mystery to Thine enemies,  
Neither like Judas will I give Thee a kiss,  
But like the thief will I confess Thee:  
Remember me, O Lord, in Thy kingdom."

## 5. Friday: The Cross

From the light of Holy Thursday we enter into the darkness of Friday, the day of Christ's Passion, Death and Burial. In the early Church this day was called "Pascha of the Cross," for it is indeed the beginning of that Passover or *Passage* whose whole meaning will be gradually revealed to us, first, in the wonderful quiet of the Great and Blessed Sabbath, and, then, in the joy of the Resurrection day.

### The Day of Darkness

But, first, the *Darkness*. If only we could realize that on Good Friday darkness is not merely symbolical and commemorative. So often we watch the beautiful and solemn sadness of these services in the spirit of self-righteousness and self-justification. Two thousand years ago *bad* men killed Christ, but today we -- the good Christian people -- erect sumptuous Tombs in our Churches -- is this not the sign of our goodness? Yet, Good Friday deals not with past alone. It is the day of *Sin*, the day of *Evil*, the day on which the Church invites us to realize their awful reality and power in "this world." For Sin and Evil have not disappeared, but, on the contrary, still constitute the basic law of the world and of our life. And we who call ourselves Christians, do we not so often make ours that logic of evil which led the Jewish Sanhedrin and Pontius Pilate, the Roman soldiers and the whole crowd to hate, torture and kill Christ? On what side, with whom would we have been, had we lived in Jerusalem under Pilate? This is the question addressed to us in every word of Holy Friday services. It is, indeed, the *day of this world*, its real and not symbolical, condemnation and the real and not ritual, judgment on our life... It is the revelation of the true nature of the world which preferred then, and still prefers, darkness to light, evil to good, death to life. Having condemned Christ to death, "this world" has condemned itself to death and inasmuch as we accept its spirit, its sin, its betrayal of God -- we are also condemned... Such is the first and dreadfully realistic meaning of Good Friday -- a condemnation to death...

### The Day of Redemption

But this day of Evil, of its ultimate manifestation and triumph, is also the day of Redemption. The death of Christ is revealed to us as the saving death *for us* and *for our salvation*.

It is a saving Death because it is the full, perfect and supreme Sacrifice. Christ *gives* His Death to His Father and He *gives* His Death to us. To His Father because, as we shall see, there is no other way to destroy death, to save men from it and it is the will of the Father that men be saved from death. To us because in very truth Christ dies *instead of us*. Death is the natural fruit of sin, an immanent punishment. Man chose to be alienated from God, but having no life in himself and by himself, he dies. Yet there is no sin and, therefore, no death in Christ. He accepts to die only by love for us. He wants to assume and to share our human condition to the end. He accepts the punishment of our nature, as He assumed the whole

burden of human predicament. He dies because He has truly identified Himself with us, has indeed *taken upon Himself* the tragedy of man's life. His death is the ultimate revelation of His compassion and love. And because His dying *is* love, compassion and co-suffering, in His death the very nature of death is changed. From punishment it becomes the radiant act of love and forgiveness, the end of alienation and solitude. Condemnation is transformed into forgiveness...

### **The Destruction of Death**

And, finally, His death is a saving death because it destroys the very source of death: evil. By accepting it in love, by giving Himself to His murderers and permitting their apparent victory, Christ reveals that, in reality, this victory is the total and decisive defeat of Evil. To be victorious Evil must annihilate the Good, must prove itself to be the ultimate truth about life, discredit the Good and, in one word, show its own superiority. But throughout the whole Passion it is Christ and He alone who triumphs. The Evil can do nothing against Him, for it cannot make Christ accept Evil as truth. Hypocrisy is revealed as Hypocrisy, Murder as Murder, Fear as Fear, and as Christ silently moves towards the Cross and the End, as the human tragedy reaches its climax, His triumph, His victory over the Evil, His glorification become more and more obvious. And at each step this victory is acknowledged, confessed, proclaimed -- by the wife of Pilate, by Joseph, by the crucified thief, by the centurion. And as He dies on the Cross having accepted the ultimate horror of death: absolute solitude (My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me!?), nothing remains but to confess that *"truly this was the Son of God!..."* And, thus, it is this Death, this Love, this obedience, this fullness of Life that destroy what made Death the universal destiny. "And the graves were opened..." (Matthew 27:52) Already the rays of resurrection appear.

Such is the double mystery of Holy Friday, and its services reveal it and make us participate in it. On the one hand, there is the constant emphasis on the Passion of Christ as the sin of all sins, the crime of all crimes. Throughout Matins during which the twelve Passion readings make us follow step by step the sufferings of Christ, at the Hours (which replace the Divine Liturgy: for the interdiction to celebrate Eucharist on this day means that the sacrament of Christ's Presence does not belong to "this world" of sin and darkness, but is the sacrament of the "world to come") and finally, at Vespers, the service of Christ's burial the hymns and readings are full of solemn accusations of those, who willingly and freely decided to kill Christ, justifying this murder by their religion, their political loyalty, their practical considerations and their professional obedience.

### **Now is the Son of Man Glorified**

On the other hand, the sacrifice of love which prepares the final victory is also present from the very beginning. From the first Gospel reading (John 13:31) which begins with the solemn announcement of Christ: "Now is the Son of Man glorified and in Him God is glorified" to the stichera at the end of Vespers -- there is the increase of light, the slow growth of hope and certitude that "death will trample down death..."

"Hell shuddered when it beheld Thee,  
 The Redeemer of all who was laid in a tomb.  
 Its bonds were broken; its gates were smashed!  
 The tombs were opened; the dead arose.  
 Then Adam cried in joy and thanksgiving:  
 Glory to Thy condescension, O Lover of man!

And when, at the end of Vespers, we place in the center of the Church the image of Christ in the tomb, when this long day comes to its end, we know that we are at the end of the long history of salvation and redemption. The Seventh Day, the day of rest, the blessed Sabbath comes and with it -- the revelation of the Life-giving Tomb.

## 6. Saturday This is the Blessed Sabbath

The "Great and Holy Sabbath" is the day which connects Good Friday, the commemoration of the Cross with the Day of His Resurrection. To many the real nature and the meaning of this "connection," the very necessity of this "middle day" remains obscure. For a good majority of Church-goers, the "important" days of the Holy Week are Friday and Sunday, the Cross and the Resurrection. These two days, however, remain somehow "disconnected." There is a day of sorrow, and then, there is the day of joy. In this sequence, sorrow is simply replaced by joy... But according to the teaching of the Church, expressed in her liturgical tradition, the nature of this sequence is not that of a simple replacement. The Church proclaims that Christ has "trampled death by death." It means that even before the Resurrection, an event takes place, in which the sorrow is not simply replaced by joy, but is itself *transformed* into joy. Great Saturday is precisely this day of transformation, the day when victory grows from inside the defeat, when before the Resurrection, we are given to contemplate the death of death itself... And all this is expressed, and even more, all this really takes place every year in this marvelous morning service, in this liturgical commemoration which becomes for us a saving and transforming presence.

### **Psalm 119 – Love for the Law of God**

On coming to the Church on the morning of Holy Saturday, Friday has just been liturgically completed. The sorrow of Friday is, therefore, the initial theme, the starting point of Matins of Saturday. It begins as a funeral service, as a lamentation over a dead body. After the singing of the funeral troparia and a slow censuring of the church, the celebrants approach the Epitaphion. We stand at the grave of our Lord, we contemplate His death, His defeat. Psalm 119 is sung and to each verse we add a special "praise" which expresses the horror of men and of the whole creation before the death of Jesus:

"O all ye mountains and hills, and all ye gatherings of men,"  
 "Mourn, weep and lament with me,"  
 "The Mother of your God..."

And yet, from the very beginning, alongside with this initial theme of sorrow and lamentation, a new one makes its appearance and will become more and more apparent. We find it, first of all, in Psalm 119 -- "Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord!" In our liturgical practice today this psalm is used only at the funeral services, hence, its "funeral" connotation for the average believer. But in early liturgical tradition this Psalm was one of the essential parts of the Sunday vigil, the weekly commemoration of Christ's Resurrection. Its content is not "funeral" at all. This psalm is the purest and the fullest expression of love for the law of God, i.e., for the Divine design of man and of his life. The real life, the one which man lost through sin, consists in keeping, in fulfilling the Divine law, that life with God, in God and for God, for which man was created.

" I have rejoiced in the way of Thy testimonies  
 as much as in all riches." (Verse 14)

"I will delight myself in thy statutes; I will not forget thy word." (Verse 16)

And since Christ is the image of a perfect fulfillment of this law, since His whole life had no other "content" but the fulfillment of His Father's will, the Church interprets this psalm as the words of Christ Himself, spoken to His Father from the grave.

"Consider how I love thy precepts!"

"Preserve my life according to thy steadfast love." (Verse 159)

The death of Christ is the ultimate proof of His love for the will of God, of His obedience to His Father. It is an act of pure obedience, of full trust in the Father's will; and for the Church it is precisely this obedience to the end, this perfect humility of the Son that constitutes the foundation, the beginning of His victory. The Father desires this death, the Son accepts it, revealing an unconditional faith in the perfection of the Father's will, in the necessity of this sacrifice of the Son by the Father. Psalm 119 is the psalm of that obedience, and therefore the announcement that in obedience the triumph has begun...

### **The Encounter With Death**

But why does the Father desire this death? Why is it necessary? The answer to this question constitutes the third theme of our service, and it appears first in the "praises," which follow each verse of Psalm 119. They describe the death of Christ as His *descent into Hades*. "Hades" in the concrete biblical language means the realm of death, that state of darkness, despair and destruction which is death. And, being the realm of death, which God has not created and which He did not want, it also signifies that the Prince of this world is all powerful in the world. Satan, Sin, Death -- these are the "dimensions" of Hades, its content. For sin comes from Satan and Death is the result of sin -- "sin came into the world, and

death through sin" (Romans 5:12). "Death reigned from Adam to Moses" (Romans 5:14), the entire universe has become a cosmic cemetery, was condemned to destruction and despair. And this is why death is "the last enemy" (I Corinthians 15:20) and its destruction constitutes the ultimate goal of the Incarnation. This encounter with death is the "hour" of Christ of which He said that "for this purpose, I have come to this hour" (John 12:27)...

Now this hour has come and the Son of God enters into Death. The Fathers usually describe this moment as a duel between Christ and the Death, Christ and Satan. For this death was to be either the last triumph of Satan, or his decisive defeat. The duel develops in several stages. At first, the forces of evil seem to triumph. The Righteous One is crucified, abandoned by all, and endures a shameful death. He also becomes the partaker of "Hades," of this place of darkness and despair... But at this very moment, the real meaning of this death is revealed. The One who dies on the Cross has Life in Himself, i.e., He has life not as a gift from outside, a gift which therefore can be taken away from Him, but as His own essence. For He is the Life and the Source of all life. "In Him was Life and Life was the light of man." The man Jesus dies, but this Man is the Son of God. As man, He can really die, but in Him, God Himself enters the realm of death, partakes of death. This is the unique, the incomparable meaning of Christ's death. In it, *the man who dies is God*, or to be more exact, the God-man. God is the Holy Immortal; and only in the unity "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation" of God and Man in Christ can human death be "assumed" by God and be overcome and destroyed from within, be "trampled down by death..."

### **Death is Overcome by Life**

Now we understand why God desires *that* death, why the Father gives His Only-begotten Son to it. He desires the salvation of man, i.e., that the destruction of death shall be not an act of His power, ("Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?" Matthew 26:53), not a violence, be it even a saving one, but an act of that love, freedom and free dedication to God, for which He created man. For any other salvation would have been in opposition to the nature of man, and therefore, not a real salvation. Hence the necessity of the Incarnation and the necessity of that Divine death... In Christ, man restores the obedience and love. In Him, man overcomes sin and evil. It was essential that death were not only destroyed by God, but overcome and trampled down in human nature itself, by man and through man. "For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead." (I Corinthians 15:21).

Christ freely accepts death, of His life He says that "no one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord." (John 10:18) He does it not without a fight: "and He began to be sorrowful and troubled." (Matthew 26:37) Here is fulfilled the measure of His obedience, and therefore, here is the destruction of the *moral root* of death, of death as the ransom for sin. The whole life of Jesus is in God as every human life ought to be, and it is this fullness of Life, this life full of meaning and content, full of God, that overcomes death, destroys its power. For death is, above all, a lack of life, a destruction of life that has cut itself from its



only source. And because Christ's death is a movement of love towards God, an act of obedience and trust, of faith and perfection -- it is an act of life (Father, into Thy hands I commit my spirit -- Luke 23:46) which destroys death. It is the death of death itself...

Such is the meaning of Christ's descent into Hades, of His death becoming His victory. And the light of this victory now illumines our vigil before the Grave.

"How, O Life, canst Thou die? Or abide in a grave.  
 For Thou dost destroy the kingdom of death, O Lord,  
 and Thou raisest up the dead of Hades realm."  
 In a grave they laid Thee, O my Life and my Christ.  
 Yet behold now, by Thy death, death is stricken down,  
 and Thou pourest forth life's streams for all the world.  
 O, how full that joy was! O, how great that delight!  
 Wherewith Thou didst fill all them that were held by Hades,  
 when Thou shonest forth Thy light in those dark depths."

Life enters the Kingdom of death. The Divine Light shines in its terrible darkness. It shines to all who are there, because Christ is the life of all, the only source of every life. Therefore He also dies for all, for whatever happens to His life -- happens in Life itself... This descent into Hades is the encounter of the Life of all with the death of all:

"Thou hast come down to earth to save Adam,  
 and having not found him on earth,  
 Thou hast descended, searching him, even into Hades... "

Sorrow and joy are fighting each other and now joy is about to win. The "praises" are over. The dialogue, the duel between Life and Death comes to its end. And, for the first time, the song of victory and triumph, the song of joy resounds. It resounds in the "troparia on Psalm 119," sung at each Sunday vigil, at the approach of the Resurrection day:

"The company of the angels was amazed, when they beheld thee numbered  
 among the dead! By destroying the power of death, O Savior, Thou didst raise Adam  
 and save all men from Hell."

"In the tomb the radiant angel cried to the Myrrh-bearing women: "Why, O women disciples, do you mingle sweet-smelling spices with your tears of pity? Behold the grave and understand; for the Savior is risen from the dead."

## The Life-giving Tomb

Then comes the beautiful Canon of Great Saturday, in which once more all the themes of this service -- from the funeral lamentation to the victory over death -- are resumed and deepened, and which ends with this order:

"Let all creation rejoice, and all the earth be glad; for Hades and the enemy have been spoiled. Let the women meet me with myrrh; for I redeem Adam along with Eve and all their descendants, and will rise on the third day."

"And will rise on the third day." From now on paschal joy illumines the service. We are still standing before the Tomb, but it has been revealed to us as the life-giving Tomb. Life rests in it, a new creation is being born, and once more, on the Seventh Day, the day of rest -- the Creator rests from all His work. "The Life sleeps and Hades trembles" -- and we contemplate this blessed Sabbath, the solemn quiet of the One who brings life back to us: "O come let us see our life, resting in the grave..." The full meaning, the mystical depth of the Seventh Day, as the day of fulfillment, the day of achievement is now revealed, for

"The great Moses mystically foreshadowed this day, when he said:  
 God blessed the seventh day.  
 This is the blessed Sabbath.  
 This is the day of rest,  
 on which the only-begotten Son of God rested from all His works.  
 He kept the Sabbath in the flesh,  
 through the dispensation of death.  
 But on this day, He returned again  
 through the resurrection.  
 He has granted us eternal life,  
 for He alone is good, the lover of man."

We now go around the Church in a solemn procession with the Epitaphion, but it is not a funeral procession. It is the Son of God, the Holy Immortal, who proceeds through the darkness of Hades, announcing to "Adam of all generations" the joy of the forthcoming Resurrection. "Shining as the morning from the night," He proclaims that "all the dead will rise again, all those in the graves will live, and all those created will rejoice..."

## Expectation of Life

We return to the Church. We know already the mystery of Christ's life-giving death. Hades is destroyed. Hades trembles. And now the last theme appears -- *the theme of Resurrection*.

Sabbath, the seventh day, achieves and completes the history of salvation, its last act being the overcoming of death. But after the Sabbath comes the first day of a new creation, of a new life born from the grave.

The theme of Resurrection is inaugurated in the Prokeimenon:

"Arise, O Lord, help us, and deliver us, for the glory of Thy name.  
O God, we have heard with our ears."

It is continued in the first lesson: the prophecy of Ezekiel on the dry bones. (Chapter 37)  
"...there were very many upon the valley; and lo, they were very dry." It is death triumphing in the world, and the darkness, the hopelessness of this universal sentence to death. But God speaks to the prophet. He announces that this sentence is not the ultimate destiny of man. The dry bones will hear the words of the Lord. The dead will live again. "Behold, I will open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you home into the land of Israel..." Following this prophecy comes the second Prokeimenon, with the same appeal, the same prayer:

"Arise, O Lord my God; lift up Thine hand..."

How will it happen, how is this universal resurrection possible? The second lesson (I Corinthians 5:6; Galatians 3:13-14) gives the answer: "a little leaven leavens the whole lump..." Christ, our Pascha, is this leaven of the resurrection of all. As His death destroys the very principle of death, His Resurrection is the token of the resurrection of all, for His life is the source of every life. And the verses of the "Alleluia," the same verses, which will inaugurate the Easter service, sanction this final answer, the certitude that the time of the new creation, of the day without evening, has begun:

"Alleluia! Let God arise, let His enemies be scattered,  
and let them that hate Him flee from before His face...  
Alleluia! As smoke vanishes, so let them vanish,  
as wax melts before the fire."

The reading of the prophecies is over. Yet, we have heard but prophecies. We are still in Great Saturday before Christ's tomb. And we have to live through this long day, before we hear at midnight: "Christ is risen!", before we enter into the celebration of His Resurrection. Thus, the third lesson -- Matthew 27:62-66 -- which completes the service, tells us once more about the Tomb -- "So they went and made the sepulcher secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard."

But it is probably here, at the very end of Matins, that the ultimate meaning of this "middle day" is made manifest. Christ arose from the dead, His Resurrection we will celebrate on Easter Day. This celebration, however, commemorates a unique event of the past, and anticipates a mystery of the future. It is already His Resurrection, but not yet ours. We will have to die, to accept the dying, the separation, the destruction. Our reality in this world, in this aeon, is the reality of the Great Saturday; this day is the real image of our human condition. We believe in the Resurrection, because Christ has risen from the dead. We expect the Resurrection. We know that Christ's death has annihilated the power of death, and

death is no longer the hopeless, the ultimate end of everything... Baptized into His death, we partake already of His life that came out of the grave. We receive His Body and Blood which are the food of immortality. We have in ourselves the token, the anticipation of the eternal life... All our Christian existence is measured by these acts of communion to the life of the "new aeon" of the Kingdom... and yet we are here, and death is our inescapable share.

But this life between the Resurrection of Christ and the day of the common resurrection, is it not precisely the life in the Great Saturday? Is not *expectation* the basic and essential category of Christian experience? We wait in love, hope and faith. And this waiting for "the resurrection and the life of the world to come," this life which is "hid with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3-4), this growth of expectation in love, in certitude; all this is our own "Great Saturday." Little by little, everything in this world becomes transparent to the light that comes from there, the "image of this world" passes by and this indestructible life with Christ becomes our supreme and ultimate value.

Every year, on Great Saturday, after this morning service, we wait for the Easter night and the fullness of Paschal joy. We know that they are approaching -- and yet, how slow is this approach, how long is this day! But is not the wonderful quiet of Great Saturday the symbol of our very life in this world? Are we not always in the "middle day," waiting for the Pascha of Christ, preparing ourselves for the day without evening of His Kingdom?