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Day of the Resurrection”
(Pre-Paschal Sermon)**

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**“One Must Not Abandon Christ on the Day of the Resurrection”
(Pre-Paschal Sermon)**

As Great Lent comes to an end, let us examine its final goal, the holy, light-bearing night of Pascha. On this night, the Church dons Her finest garb and sings Her inspired prayers, meeting Her Resurrected Groom, Christ. Orthodox Christians are vigilant! In days of old, it was carefully seen to that no one slept on this night... In a word, we are preparing for a great event.

Indeed, if Metropolitan Anthony (Khrapovitsky, +1936) of blessed memory correctly stated that each holiday is a mystery, then the holiday of holidays, Pascha, is the mystery of mysteries, and I will not—I dare not—speculate idly on this.

But while pausing to consider the depth of Pascha, let us at least point out one truth, that on this night, the Lover of Mankind is doubly merciful to us. Many of our sins, so burdensome to our conscience (if it is vigilant, and if we repented of them), are now lightened with one sigh of tender emotion. Let us believe in these “riches of loving-kindness” of which the divine John speaks, let us savor the “feast of faith,” which the Church, through his Golden Mouth, summons us to do. The homily of St. John Chrysostom to which I refer so perfectly speaks of Pascha that on this bright night no one replaces it or adds their own words to it. In Russian churches, it is read without fail. In fact, speaking of the Russian people, it is well-known that not one other people celebrates Pascha so. Let us give thanks to the Lord for this!

But let us set aside our dear and beloved Russian Paschal traditions, the indescribable beauty of the Russian Paschal services: let us now think of the most important thing, the highest moment of the celebration of Pascha. Let us ponder it, and humble ourselves, and recognize that many--yes, many--of us have not yet learned to truly celebrate Pascha as the Church would have us do.

What is this feast of faith to which St. John Chrysostom calls us?

On the Sunday of the Prodigal Son, when we are still preparing ourselves for Great Lent, the Church interprets this Gospel parable by explaining that the prodigal son is each and every one of us, and that the father of the prodigal son is our Heavenly Father. The Church says: “And he slaughters the fatted calf for him (that is, for us!), his only-begotten Son, and the Father grants him communion of his body and blood” (Synaxarion of the Sunday of the Prodigal Son). This is a wonderful parable, and its manifestation is Pascha.

Let us keep our Heavenly Father in our minds, let us draw closer to Him, for He opens His Fatherly embrace for us and allows us to partake of the Body and Blood of His Only-Begotten Son. If this is the case upon the repentance of each sinner, then the Paschal night maximally reduces the period of time between the decision to return to the Father and the Father’s embrace, into which our souls fall to enjoy the utterly undeserved feast of the Body and Blood of Christ. This is why the Chrysostom in that

same famous homily says: "The table is full-laden; feast ye all sumptuously. The calf is fatted; let no one go hungry away. Enjoy ye all the feast of faith..."

Heed the words: "feast ye all sumptuously."

That is why in days past, everyone partook of Holy Communion on the Paschal night—elders, children, men and women, the healthy and ailing (to whose beds the Holy Gifts were brought). Even on the evening of Great Thursday, when this mystery was established, mostly priests communed of the Holy Gifts, as servants of the altar, for the altar is the room of the Last Supper. But on Pascha, everyone took Holy Communion.

We read in the 66th Rule of the VI Ecumenical Council: "From the holy day of the Resurrection of Christ our God until the next Lord's day, for a whole week, in the holy churches the faithful ought to be free from labor, rejoicing in Christ with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs; and celebrating the feast, and applying their minds to the reading of the holy Scriptures, and delighting in the Holy Mysteries; for thus shall we be exalted with Christ and together with him be raised up."

If the Holy Fathers had deemed this for the entire Bright Week, how can we not remember these words on the first and brightest of these days?

For it is because we forget the feast of the Holy Gifts, alas, that many have begun to forego the Paschal Liturgy, and, staying through the Paschal matins, which is all but a precursor, go home to feast.

But it was not for eating and drinking that the church bells summoned us! It was not for this that the candles were lit and the words "Christ is Risen" were exclaimed so many times!

"Let it be known," states the church law on the blessing of Paschal foods (meat, kulich, eggs, cheese pascha, etc.) "that these are not the Pascha nor the Lamb, as some mistakenly perceive, and which they piously partake of as though they were some holy things, but are merely an offering, for they are brought forth not as sacrifices to God, but so that the priest prayerfully bless the resumption of eating after lent of meat and cheese (and everything non-Lenten). For Pascha and the Lamb are Christ Himself, Who took upon Himself the sins of the world, brought by the priest on the altar-table to God and the Father in the Most-Pure Mysteries of the Honorable Body and Life-creating Blood. And those that partake of Him (Christ) are truly partake of the Pascha."

This is also sung during the antiphonies of Great Friday: "Let us not keep the feast like the Jews, for our Passover, Christ God, has been slain for us" (antiphon 15).

But, they will say, we commune of Christ also when we partake of the Holy Mysteries, on the first or fourth week of Lent, on Great Thursday, Great Saturday and on other days...

True, but there is more! "The desired Pascha," as St. Theodore the Studite says, "is the cleansing of sins, meekness and humility of heart, purity of conscience, the alienation of passions of the flesh. Who achieves these good works will celebrate the

Passover of the Lord and will celebrate the bright and much-desired feast day, not once a year, but throughout his entire life" (St. Theodore the Studite, Homilies to Catechumens).

The appearance of the chalice to the people always signifies resurrection, and during every full liturgy, a priest, after partaking of the Holy Gifts, secretly reads the Paschal songs: "Shine, shine new Jerusalem" and "O Great Pascha."

But why are these very prayers not sung aloud on this great night? Why not the words: "Receive the Body of Christ; taste of the fount of immortality," which usually accompany communicants to the chalice, but on Paschal night are sung before the chalice appears, as though urging all to approach? And how is it that on other days we have the salvific thirst for Communion, but on His day, the day of Christ, we do not burn with this thirst?

From Paschal night, the Royal Doors do not close for seven days. On Great Thursday, the wondrous evening of the Mysteries, they are opened to offer Holy Communion to the faithful laypersons as usual after the Mystical Meal of the priests. But on Pascha, all are given the opportunity to see the Mystical Meal itself.

"Did not our heart burn within us?" (Luke 24:32) asks Luke and Cleopas when He revealed Himself and broke the bread. How are we not to burn, knowing that He is this Bread, and that He rose from the dead?!

And for seven days, the artos bread will stand before the altar as a reminder of the bread of life—the Resurrected Christ.

Why are we instructed to perform the Paschal Liturgy "early?" Why does the Church hurry us, or rather, where is Christ our God Himself so rushing us on this salvific night?

"In My Kingdom I shall drink a new vintage," promises Christ to His Apostles (Canon of Great Thursday, Canticle Four). And on Holy Night we will all hear the words: "Come, let us drink a new beverage, the Fountain of Incorruption" (Second irmos of the Paschal Canon).

Already from the vespers of Great Saturday, during the reading from the Prophets (Exodus 12:1-11), on the hurried eating of the proto-image of the lamb of Moses, we are being prepared for this haste.

Wonderful is the Russian tradition of beginning the Paschal service at midnight, performing all the services of the Lord through until morning without pause.

Our natures weakened, but girded with strength from above, folding our hands in a cross, with the staff of prayer, we will hasten to the chalice. "It is the Lord's Passover!" (Exodus, 12:11).

You might say: "I dare not, I have not prepared myself." But you dared on other days. And on this night, the Lord forgives all. On this day, at dawn, He had sent the myrrh-bearers through an angel to give the good news to Peter, who had betrayed him (Mark 16:7).

You might say: how will I then celebrate, eat and drink? But on this day, the Church not only does not ask us to fast, but forbids fasting (Carthage Council, Canon 64, and Council of Gangra, Canon 18).

“If I am among people, I will not be able to keep my mind collected.” Well, then, remember that His power and glory are reflected in every drop of food and drink.

I heard of a certain priest of God who offered all those who remained at Liturgy to partake of the Holy Gifts, even those who had not made confession. Had he introduced this as a customary practice, it would have been very troublesome. But if he had experienced a gust of zeal one time only, and dared to take upon his own conscience the unpreparedness of his flock, if only for the purpose of waking them and showing them that it was for THIS flock that the Lord gave this holy night, I would not cast a stone upon him.

I also met another priest who boasted that he taught his flock to partake of Communion on Pascha. “Though they say that they did not do this in Russia...” What can one say to that?

The entire duration of Great Lent is a preparation for us to approach the chalice. A week before this, the Church sings: “Let us return through repentance, and enlist for the battle!

Let us complete the days of fasting, that our flesh may be cleansed. Strengthening our hearts with the hope of grace, let us not labor for the food which perishes, for the Lamb of God will feed us on the radiant night of His resurrection (Sticheron on Cheesefare week).

Two days later we hear: “Let us pray to behold the fulfillment of Pascha, the true revelation!” (Tuesday of Cheesefare week).

A week later we pray: “We who are enslaved to the tyranny of the flesh may become worthy to partake of the Lamb, the Son of God, slain of His Own will for the sake of the world, and may spiritually celebrate the feast of the Savior’s resurrection from the dead!” (Tuesday of the first week of Great Lent).

Two days later, again we sing: “Desiring to commune with the divine Pascha, the Pascha, not from Egypt, but from Zion, let us renounce the drink of sin through repentance!” (Thursday of the first week of Great Lent).

On the next day: “Let us sign ourselves with the blood of the One Who, for our sake, was voluntarily led to death, so that the destroyer might not touch us. So we will partake of the sacred Pascha of Christ” (Friday of the first week of Great Lent).

The closer Pascha approaches, the greater is our striving towards it: “Let us strive, rejoicing with steadfastness, and attain his most honored and holy resurrection!” (fourth week of Great Lent).

It cannot be that such strenuous preparation would end in only a symbolic, though inspired, celebration of the Resurrection of Christ!

On this day, “created by the Lord,” when the good news is declared that the “Word was made Flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14), let us open our hearts, let us fit within ourselves also the Word God in the Most-Pure Mysteries of His Body and Blood, so that He would dwell within us.

Make note of how a Christian generally prepares for Communion. With prayer, confession... and what else? With fasting, reading of spiritual books, through making peace with his neighbor...

How does the Church prepare us for Pascha?

Through fasting... We have the Great Forty-Day Lent, and before Pascha itself the only strict Saturday of fasting, Great Saturday.

With reading... During Lent the Psalter is read intensively, the books of Genesis, Proverbs, Prophet Isaiah... Before the Bright midnight office the entire book of the Acts of the Apostles are read.

With regard to making peace with one’s neighbors, remember how in the early Church, before each raising of the Holy Gifts, after the words “let us love one another,” the believers (and they were always in preparation for Communion) would kiss one another. Here is how St. Symeon of Solun described it: “As a sign that people must love each other... one seeking to commune of Him (Christ) must approach without enmity, for in the next world all will be friends.” Later this custom of kissing was abandoned, maybe because the absolute custom of partaking of the Holy Gifts during each Divine Liturgy or on each holiday was set aside, because the old Christians were more spiritual, because we have weakened. But on the night of Pascha, which is an image of the future life, we all are invited to the holy feast and we sing “Let us forgive all through the Resurrection,” and kiss each other three times.

One priest told me how as a boy he would run into the emptied church the morning after Paschal services. It is bright, decorated, but silent and abandoned. And the boy became sad: Christ is alone!

Brethren! One must not abandon Christ on the day of the Resurrection! Let us all take Him in as a wanderer, He who is alone with no place to lay His head, into our hearts. Let us all take into ourselves His Body and Blood.

Amen.

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