

Discovering the Rich Meaning of Pascha (Easter) (William Bush)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)

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Pascha service

It is impossible to describe the profound, almost visceral shock I received when, as a new convert, I came face to face with my first Good Friday in the Greek parish in London, Ontario. Only weeks before, I had been received into the Orthodox Church by chrismation in that very ethnic community. My whole first Pascha as an Orthodox Christian was therefore, understandably, somewhat overwhelming. Though now incongruously «one of them,» I was still very much an extremely self-conscious anglophone outsider.

My visceral shock on that Good Friday did not come about, however, from not having previously experienced an Orthodox Good Friday. Ten years before, while a graduate student in Paris, I had lived through an entire Orthodox Holy Week with great devotion, following the long daily offices at St. Sergius' Russian Seminary. It was, in fact, the Easter celebration crowning that week that had brought me to the conclusion that I had, at long last, by some sweet miracle, found my own kind of

Christianity there among those Russians in Paris. They made it very plain indeed that they really believed that Jesus Christ had come out of the tomb.

From the time I was a little Southern Baptist boy growing up in Florida I had always believed in the physical Resurrection of Jesus Christ, just as stated in the Gospel. And I had certainly believed it with no less intensity when, during my university years, I embraced the more sacramentally-oriented form of Christianity I had discovered in high Anglicanism. An Anglican monastery located outside our university town had allowed me even to familiarize myself with the rich, pre-Vatican II Pascal ceremonial of the Roman Church, so scrupulously observed, in excellent English translation, in that very high Anglican milieu.

Still, it was only in Paris on that Saturday night leading into Easter morning in 1957, when I heard the Russians shouting, over and over again, «Christ is risen! Indeed He's risen!» with all the fervour and unbridled joy of fans at a football game, that I knew I had at last, and after a very long journey, really reached my goal. Tears of joy bathed my face. I had found a joy which could not be taken from me.

Was it perhaps by some ancestral call, by some atavistic grace inherited from my ancient Celtic forbears and their so very Orthodox church, that I felt so resolutely sure of everything that night? I sensed very deeply that I had finally discovered what, by instinct, I sensed must exist somewhere, but which I had never been able to discover until then either in Protestantism or in Catholicism. It was a joy surpassing all desire. For me it represented a fullness of the presence of the living, risen Christ in the midst of His people.

So it was that, as a Christian, I felt completely at home that night in Paris, and completely at ease for the first time with what I was religiously. Strange as it may sound, it seemed to me that I had at long last finally touched the power of His Resurrection, that mysterious power which, I realized, had proven the great driving force behind Christianity's miraculous expansion in the first centuries of its history. Yet I had never imagined it possible in the twentieth century, even if one could discover it, to be able to partake of it in such a graphic way. Whether by sight, sound, smell, or – what was most important – by the very heart and soul, all of my being seemed able to participate with no rational reservations whatsoever in the extraordinary and unprecedented event of the Resurrection of Christ.

That evening I was, for once, totally free of the too-familiar human equivocation I had so often encountered in Easter sermons. No poor preacher tried his best to make Easter «relevant for us today» as he deified all intellectual odds to explain exactly what had happened at the tomb, how it had happened, and how such an event might still be of significance to «modern man.» What blessed, sweet relief to find that those shouting Russians had no need for such a preacher! Not only did they already know exactly what had happened at the tomb, but also, with no one having to say anything at all, they knew as well that it was the single most

important truth in human life. And that truth was, quite simply, that «Christ is risen!»

I had not, however, I hasten to say, arrived at my conclusions that night totally all on my own. Due credit for a large part of my grasp of the deep implications of what was happening that Easter night in 1957 must certainly be given to a great servant of God placed on my path in Paris two years before.

II

Throughout Paris' large Russian community Sophia Mihailovna Zernoff was known and admired for her selfless devotion in assisting eastern European refugees and their children to settle in France. For a quarter of a century an unending flow passed through the humble little office she called simply her «Assistance Centre.» Once she had found housing and jobs for the parents she would assume full responsibility for their children's housing, secular education, and Orthodox religious instruction. For this purpose she had acquired an impressive chateau with a mill in the Parissuburbs at Montgeron. To this establishment she again gave a very simple name: «The Children's Home.» The acquisition and maintenance of «The Children's Home» claimed a great portion of Sophia Mihailovna's heart and mind over the years as she fought fearlessly for its survival as a Russian institution. Moreover, by an on-going series of rather startling miracles wrought by her prayers, «The Children's Home» flourished until after her death in 1972. In Orthodox tribute to her great heart and soul a small, exquisite Serbian-style church she herself had had constructed there and dedicated to her beloved St. Seraphim of Sarov, today stands within the grounds of the Moulin de Senlis at Montgeron.

Some months before my first Easter in Paris, Sophia Mihailovna had invited me to supper in her little maid's flat, high up above the rooftops. Also invited that evening were an American Methodist pastor and his wife who were passing through Paris. They were friends of Sophia Mihailovna's well-known Oxford-professor brother, Dr. Nicholas Zernov, from one of his American university visits. Ever zealous to proclaim her conviction that the fullness of Christ is found only in Orthodoxy, Sophia Mihailovna did not fail her three non-Orthodox American supper guests that evening in speaking of her own vision of God and His «beautiful world.» Her subject was Orthodoxy's Saturday midnight Easter service.

Why is it, she asked, that in the very first hours of Easter morning, when the shouts of «Christ is risen!» «Indeed, He's risen!» first burst forth from the crowd, the non-Orthodox outsider suddenly sees everyone around him start kissing everyone else? Her unforgettable pale blue eyes, aflame with holy zeal, reflected the flickering candles on the table. Forcefully, as always when she spoke of such things, Sophia Mihailovna tried to convince us that, just as Orthodoxy holds, Easter night makes all men brothers.

Certainly, since my first meeting with her two years before, I had never failed to be struck by Sophia Mihailovna's frequent reflections on God and His relationship with man as manifested in Orthodoxy. Even her most casual remark could prove memorable. Whenever she spoke of God she always seemed to challenge one with the potential for a much fresher and far greater relationship with God, a relationship which, as in her own case, ever moved towards greater and greater intimacy as our love and fear of Him grew.

Indeed, it seemed to me that man's relationship with God was the one question dominating Sophia Mihailovna's whole life. I thus had had no difficulty at all in grasping, even from my initial encounter with her, that as great as her humanitarian work for refugees and their children was – a work gratefully recognized and honoured even by an admiring French government – it was not that work which really preoccupied her great heart's deepest love. Alone mattered to her that great, dynamic force fuelling her selfless and complete consecration of her energies to her work: her holy Orthodox faith.

I do not think I exaggerate at all in saying that as the Methodist pastor and his wife and I listened to her that evening, we were all equally filled with awe. No one of us, I feel sure, had ever heard anyone speak of Easter as she was speaking to us. Nor, I dare say, would any of us ever again find Easter taking on the challenging, cosmic dimension she gave it as she spoke.

«Why do you see the Orthodox all kissing one another as soon as the priest announces 'Christ is risen!' on Easter night?» Sophia Mihailovna asked, as though challenging us, none of whom, in fact, had ever even seen an Orthodox midnight Easter service. Our collective gaze fixed on her, we waited as she moved to what was obviously, for her, the great and essential Orthodox revelation she wanted to share with us.

«It is because on that night we remember that we are all brothers. By nature we are all born brothers, but brothers because we are all destined for death. Yes! We are naturally all born to die. But on Easter night we remember that through our baptism in Christ we have all been born again. We have all been reborn in Him! At our baptism we all put on Christ and now, at Easter, we remember: Christ is risen! It is our baptism into Christ that makes us all brothers in His Resurrection on that night! That's why in our joy we kiss one another and exchange the greetings, «Christ is risen!» «Indeed He's risen!» Death has been trodden under foot by Jesus Christ! We are now all truly brothers in the life given us by His Resurrection. At Easter we remember we have all been set free from death!»



Holy Week

III

My first Orthodox Easter at St. Sergius had thus been much enlightened by Sophia Mihailovna's burning words as I followed the long Saturday night ceremonies, culminating, in the early hours of Sunday morning, in the celebration of the Pascal Divine Liturgy by the white-clad bishop and priests. Ten years later in London, Ontario, however, as deeply as her holy memory still burned within me, no words she had ever said made my shock any easier to bear on that first Greek Good Friday. My mind flayed around, groping for something to grab hold of. How to cope with what the Greeks made so blatantly obvious that Good Friday evening? It contrasted so sharply with my first Orthodox Good Friday evening at St. Sergius in Paris!

Indeed, in Paris, I had been surrounded by all that deep piety for which the Slavs are known. Russian piety in Paris moreover always seemed of a very rare fervour to me. So many of those who prayed with such zeal had, I knew, lost everything this world had to offer save their holy Orthodox faith and their fervent prayer.

Even more special to me, however, was the zeal in prayer I discovered at St. Sergius Seminary. Indeed, St. Sergius had long been a unique site, a high, holy place for Russians throughout the world. During the Great Soviet Persecution prior to World War II it was, in fact, the only functioning Russian Orthodox seminary in the world.

Standing there for hours on end that first Good Friday in Paris, with aching feet and tired back in the packed, hot church, pressed in by my fellow worshippers and unable to budge, I had sweatily, wearily clutched my candle. Yet I sensed that my

discomfort could only mean that I was consciously making some poor effort to participate in the great mystery of the Passion of Christ. My heart had been at peace, whatever may have been my body's discomfort.

At the solemn procession in the afternoon, with the winding sheet of Christ suspended above the bishop's head, the greatest expressions of piety and humility had been displayed by the faithful, with prostrations and endless signs of the cross. That same evening, during the hushed procession carrying the image of the dead Lord around the church three times, I recall asking my American seminarian friend in a whisper just what they were so solemnly singing. His whispered reply that they were singing the familiar «Holy God! Holy Mighty! Holy Immortal! Have mercy on us!» had provided me with yet another clue to Orthodox truth which at once burned into my consciousness. What else indeed could men pray at such a commemoration? Our own human race had not only slaughtered the Creator of heaven and earth when He came to save us the first time, but would most surely do exactly the same thing again.

The solemnity of the music that Good Friday night in Paris, the very serious demeanour of the people: how it was to contrast with the joyous shouting and jubilant singing I was to hear the next evening! That sharp contrast in Paris, however, was something I expected and, to me, seemed normal and very much within the natural order of things. A sombre, mournful Good Friday, it seemed to me, should be followed by a bright and glorious Easter. First there is sorrow, then joy. Yet ten years later in London, Ontario, with my Greek co-parishioners, how vainly I was to search for an atmosphere vaguely reminiscent of what I had known at St. Sergius!

Liturgically, of course, I could not complain. The Greeks sang the long lamentations over the image of the Lord's dead body. They duly carried that image around, in solemn procession. The icons of the Lord's Crucifixion and Descent into the Grave – called «The Divine Humility» – were set out for veneration. Everything I could have anticipated and might have imagined from my Paris experience was there with my new Greek co-religionists. But what upset me was that there was also something more.

That something more, neither expected, nor even imaginable for me, was a veritable outpouring of celebratory Pascal joy, already bursting out on Friday night, twenty-four hours prior to the Saturday night Pascal celebration! The fact that it was so generally present, and truly inescapable, astounded me. My religious aesthetics felt violated by that incessant and irrepressible assault of Pascal joy welling up from so deeply within all my Greek fellow-parishioners. It was there with no apology: before me, behind me, beside me, all around me.

Everyone, it seemed to me, was decked out in their finest, brightest Easter dress. The Greek ladies sported new Easter bonnets, the men their best suits, the children

all their Easter finery, many holding ornate, special festive candles bedecked with ribbons, tinsel and artificial flowers as though it were already Pascha! What a jarring, slightly tawdry, and totally inappropriate contrast, I reflected, with the very proper funereal austerity of that slavish Good Friday I had experienced ten years before!

But the worst was the Greeks' very audible manifestation of their celebratory joy. Unashamedly they greeted one another enthusiastically with one greeting: «Happy Easter!» unquestionably confirming for me that all that so inappropriate joy I found assaulting me from every side was indeed a Pascal joy. Their pointed politeness in courteously wishing me «Happy Easter!» in English did not fail to touch me, of course, but such joy on such a day completely confounded me.

Indeed, when the attendant behind the candle-stand in the church narthex had first wished me «Happy Easter!» upon my arrival at church that Good Friday evening, I found myself, as it were, biting down hard on my wounded religious sensitivity. Completely startled, I fear I managed only a feeble, and very half-hearted «Happy Easter!» in reply. Yet, by the end of the long evening, though still as baffled as at the beginning, I actually found myself wishing people «Happy Easter!» almost without a wince. Greek Pascal joy was contagious! It was after all, I realized, a very Christian joy, even if I judged it a bit misplaced in regard to the day.

IV

What was of course being revealed to me that evening was an aspect of Orthodoxy I could never, ever have dreamed up, or even have imagined. Yet it was an aspect I would subsequently find borne out by Orthodoxy's liturgical texts as well as by her practices. But that I had yet to discover.

What I did sense immediately, however, was the Greek refusal to play-act in commemorating the burial of Christ. They made no hollow pretence of somehow bottling up the presence and joy of the risen Christ until the next day, or of pretending that there was to be a sort of magical «moment» of Resurrection which would allow man to control the situation, decreeing that there were indeed certain solemn moments, such as Good Friday evening, when this joy was neither relevant nor available.

Logic alone moreover immediately convinced me that pretending there has to be a special «moment» of Resurrection at midnight on Saturday, and that the deepest sorrow must reign until that precise moment, could never be more than an extremely tenuous concept – relative, even. Did that «moment» not always depend upon where one lived, differing from time zone to time zone, given the world order that is ours? Man's imposition of the International Date Line in the Bering Sea pushes the whole concept of a precise «moment» to the absurd, particularly among the Orthodox. Orthodox natives in the islands attached to Russia are celebrating

their «moment» of Pascha twenty-four hours ahead of their native Orthodox cousins situated only a few miles away and attached to the United States. Yet, the mystery of the Resurrection is no less valid for either of them.

It is good, of course, that this is so, for man always needs to be reminded that though he may be used by God to do very great works as a saint, he is ever incapable of actually duplicating any great work of God. To try to duplicate God is the work of the Enemy, after all. Therefore, within the Church, recalling the great works wrought by God and entering into them mystically through liturgical commemoration is one thing. To attempt to re-create them is another.

In addition to these reflections I also found myself asking a very simple question. Who was I, after all, to question these Greeks? Some of them no doubt had ancestors converted by St. Paul himself at a time when my own pagan Celtic ancestors were still suspending the heads of their enemies outside their primitive huts in the British Isles.

I knew myself moreover unworthy of participating in the fullness of this Christianity I had discovered, just as I was also unworthy of this people whose Christian pedigree was so far superior to my own. Had they not provided martyrs from the beginning? Had they not seen the fall of the Roman Empire as also that of Byzantium? Living for generations under the Turks they had proven themselves capable of furnishing numerous «new martyrs,» whereby the tradition of martyrdom, handed down by their first Christian ancestors, was continuously renewed.

So it was that the shocking greeting of «Happy Easter!» on Good Friday became for me a matter for thoughtful reflection, not for judgement. As Good Friday ended and Holy Saturday began I pondered deeply on all this, trying to grasp what could possibly be behind the Greeks' Pascal joy on Good Friday.

V

Was it those twenty-four hours of intense reflection that were responsible for my sensitivity to the strange paradox I encountered the next evening as the Saturday night Resurrection service began? The long and seemingly interminable chant which had begun the Good Friday service, was, I discovered, being sung again, word for word, all the way from beginning to end as the Resurrection Service began. Why sing that long text a second time? What could it possibly contain that justified its double duty as overture for the two most notable – yet contrasting – services of Orthodoxy's entire liturgical calendar?

Thanks to a squat little volume containing the Holy Week services presented me by my Greek Godmother for Pascha, I could set myself to scrutinizing the long text as the Greeks sang it again that Saturday evening. My squat little book informed me that this long affair, punctuated throughout with the incessant refrain of «Glory to

Thee, our God, glory to Thee!» was called the «canon.»

As any Orthodox convert soon learns, there is no lack of canons in Orthodox worship. One or more canons comprise a major portion of Orthodox Matins, and canons may also be integrated into other offices. Composed of a series of thirty or more short texts, or «troparia,» a canon is normally divided into a familiar pattern of nine odes. In practice, however, as a convert soon learns, only eight odes are utilized, the second, deemed too long, being normally left out. Once seasoned to Orthodox ways, the convert blithely passes from Ode One to Ode Three without the slightest blink!

Be that as it may, each of the nine odes is inspired by a particular biblical canticle or prayer dealing with a revelation of God as Saviour of His people in Jewish history. The first eight odes are based on Old Testament examples, the ninth on the two canticles found in the first chapter of St. Luke's Gospel: that of the Holy Virgin, «My soul doth magnify the Lord» (Lk 1, 46-55), and that of Zacharias, father of St. John the Baptist (Lk 1:68-79). The First Ode draws its inspiration from the canticle of Moses celebrating his triumph in leading the Hebrews through the Red Sea (Ex 15:1-9), as does also the Second (usually omitted) Ode, based on a much longer text of Moses (Deut 32:1-43). The Third Ode is inspired by the canticle of Hannah (I Sam 2:1-10), mother of the prophet Samuel, who joyously conceived in her old age and cried out, marvelling: «There is none holy but Thee, O Lord!» The Fourth Ode takes as its inspiration (Hab 3:2-19) Habbakuk the prophet who foresaw that in coming to save man, the Lord would empty Himself of His glory: «Thou wentest forth for the salvation of thy people.» The prayer of Isaiah (Is 26:9-20) where the prophet announces the resurrection of the dead and the disappearance of the impious on earth inspires the Fifth Ode, while the Sixth is based on the Prophet Jonah's prayer for deliverance from the belly of the whale (Jon 2:3-10). Both the Seventh and Eighth Odes are based on texts from the Septuagint's book of Daniel where the three Hebrew youths are condemned to the fiery furnace in Babylon. Their final prayer before that ordeal inspires the Seventh Ode (Dan 3:26-56), their canticle of praises actually sung in the furnace (Dan 3:57-88), the Eighth. This then leads directly to the Ninth Ode with the magnification of «God my Saviour» by the Theotokos (Lk 1: 46-55) and the canticle of Zacharias (Lk 1: 68-79) in celebrating the birth of John the Baptist: «And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest, for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways.»

For the most part, however, the original biblical texts served as mere points of departure for the Byzantine poets composing the four or more highly poetic troparia making up each ode. Though some subtle reference to the original biblical text is frequently discernible in the first troparia of each ode, as a whole a canon composed for a feast completely takes on the identity of the feast.

Of course, on my first Holy Saturday evening as an Orthodox Christian I knew

nothing at all either about canons, their derivation, or their significance in Orthodox worship. Be that as it may, the deep, underlying pascal joy announced in the texts I was scrutinizing was overwhelmingly evident as I attentively followed along. Even though aesthetically my feathers were a bit ruffled by the fact, there was no doubt that the Greeks had valid theological grounds in wishing each other «Happy Easter!» on Good Friday evening. The Ninth Ode actually proclaims the ultimate, definitive victory of Christ over Death. At the end of last troparia the Word of God Himself announces in that text (already sung the night before for Good Friday): «Hell is harrowed, the Enemy destroyed!»

So it was that upon confronting Orthodoxy's canon for Good Friday evening I was forced to allow that my very western idea of Easter's being, first and last, a matter of the myrrh-bearing women's discovery at the tomb, was terribly limited and sadly wanting. It left no place whatsoever for the vast, cosmic mystery of the «universal kingdom» announced by St. John Chrysostom in his liturgical text universally read at Pascha as Orthodoxy's Easter sermon. In that sermon we are told that Hades has been harrowed and, by Christ's Resurrection, the vast, cosmic mystery of the universal kingdom has been revealed.

Yet the harrowing of Hades, I must confess, was as alien to my own consciousness as it was obviously inextricably entrenched in the whole of Orthodox consciousness. For a western Christian's ever-grappling and self-centered logic, belief in the mystery of the Resurrection was, I knew, already problematic. But how much more then must that logic be painfully challenged by the mystery of the harrowing of hell!

I knew, of course, that Christ's descent to the realm of the dead by the Lord is alluded to by St. Peter (I Pet 3:19; 4:6). It must therefore, I realized, have been a basic tenant of Christianity since apostolic times. As an Anglican I had moreover learned the familiar phrase, «He descended into Hell» as an article of the apostolic faith taught in the short «Apostle's Creed.» Never, however, would I have dreamed that the implications of this «descent into hell» could prove of such importance, or that it could take on the cosmic dimensions I had discovered in Orthodoxy.

Though the short «Apostle Creed» is not generally used in Orthodoxy, and though Orthodoxy's Nicean Creed makes no reference whatsoever to the «descent into hell,» her liturgical texts do bristle with the boldest and most insistent references to it, repeatedly announcing Christ's victory over the kingdom of death through that descent. It is to be noted, moreover, that though the harrowing of hell long provided a popular subject for artists in the Christian West, the radical reforms effected by the Counter Reformation to all aspects of the Latin Church's ecclesiastical life mysteriously seem to have caused that mystery to pass into almost total eclipse.

Orthodoxy, on the other hand, uncompromisingly maintains the importance of this

mystery of the holy Christian faith, taught by St. Peter himself. Even in its Resurrection icon Orthodoxy insists upon this mystery as the fundamental one of Easter. In that holy image one sees the Lord standing on the broken doors of the kingdom of the dead, stretching forth his nail-pierced hands to draw Adam and Eve and all their descendants out of realm of Death and into His kingdom of the Resurrection.

Nothing, however, is more enlightening on this subject than the texts making up that canon I had discovered common both to Good Friday and Holy Saturday evenings. These texts demonstrate not only what Orthodox Pascha is all about, but, what is more important, how this basic dimension of the apostolic faith remains pristine and intact in Orthodoxy today. Untouched either by the Reformation or the Counter Reformation, these texts graphically illustrate just what the mystery of the harrowing of hell represents to the Orthodox Christian psyche.

VI

Ode One

The First Ode's initial troparion immediately links the burial of Christ to the miraculous passage of the Hebrews through the Red Sea. The dead Christ is, after all, none other than the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the Word of God, who once caused the old tyrant, Pharaoh, to disappear in the waves of the Red Sea. Yet He has now, quite incongruously, been buried by the descendants of those He saved that day. It is not for man to judge this divine irony, however, but to praise Him as being glorified in glory, just as did the Hebrew maidens who praised Him for saving them from Pharaoh and the Red Sea.

The second troparion affirms our resolve to honour Christ's burial not just with funeral dirges, but also with paeans of praise. Has He not, by His death, caused us to enter into Life? Has His death not caused both Death and Hades to die? This thought continues into the third troparion where we are reminded that the paradoxical nature of simultaneously singing dirges and paeans of praise is experienced not just by us men, but also by the angelic hosts. Unlike us men, these incorporeal beings, situated both above and below the earth, can behold Him simultaneously seated on His throne on high, and lying in the grave. They tremble at seeing that He, the very Element of Life, is truly dead in a way that transcends human minds.

In the fourth troparion we recall that He descended, in all the splendour of His Godhead, to fill all Hades with His glory. Recalling the creation of the first man, we confess that our future existence, totally invisible and only latent in Adam, was nonetheless not at all hidden from the all-knowing gaze of the second Adam, whose burial we now hymn. As the great Lover of Mankind, He who by His rising has renewed each of us in our corrupt state, had, from the beginning of time, foreseen

our hidden existence in Adam.

Ode Three

The Third Ode starts with the paradox of the Creator of the world, He who had once suspended the earth in the midst of the waves, now being suspended on Golgatha from the tree of the cross. Beholding this ironical situation Creation cries out in wonderment, as did Hannah, the prophet Samuel's mother: «There is none holy but Thee, O Lord!»

The second troparion recalls that many visible signs were given us by the Lord at the time of His burial. But it is only now, with His descent into Hades, that the hidden secrets of God have been fully revealed to those imprisoned there since the death of Adam. They too now cry out: «There is none holy but Thee, O Lord!»

The third troparion states that the Lord, by stretching His arms out on the cross, had gathered unto Himself all that had formerly been dispersed. Now, by submitting to the bonds of being restrained in a linen shroud, He also loosens the death-bonds of those captive in Hades. Whence their cry: «There is none holy but Thee, O Lord!»

The paradox is pushed further still in the fourth troparion. He, the uncontainable God, has been contained both by a grave and by seals. Still, through these divine acts, God has made His great power known to all those who cry out: «There is none holy but Thee, O Lord!»

Ode Four

The Fourth Ode emphasizes the kenosis of God in Jesus Christ, that is His self-willed emptying out of the glory of His Godhead in order to become accessible to mortal, fallen man and thereby harrow hell. The first troparion notes that the prophet Habbakuk had foreseen this divine condescension of God through which he would offer up His only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, incarnation of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. The prophet also foresaw how the unassailable and ancient prestige of Death and Hades would be shattered when the immolated, crucified Word appeared there, transforming all by His presence. For the Almighty's divine condescension in stooping to such lengths in His love for man so utterly dazzled Hades that its previously definitive power was shattered.

The second troparion reminds us of the holiness of the Sabbath whereon God rested after creating the world, and states that by resting in the tomb He is now once again keeping the Sabbath, His great work of re-creation accomplished. Through His Passion and Death, the Lord of glory Himself has not only brought forth everything, but has renewed and restored it to its first, unfallen state.

The third troparion probes the theology of the suffering and death of incarnate God. Though His soul was separated from His body, the Word's power has won out, bursting asunder the bonds of Death and Hades through His unassailable might as

the only-begotten Son and Word of God. This is further pursued in the fourth troparion. Hades was truly vexed in beholding the Almighty One appear in its depths as a defied Man, marked with wounds. At such a terrible and paradoxical sight, almighty Hades itself at last cried out in fear.

Ode Five

The Fifth Ode, inspired by the prayer of Isaiah (Is 26:9-20), invokes the resurrection of all those in the tombs, saying that Isaiah made this prophecy because he had foreseen the light of the divine condescension of Christ coming in pity to visit mankind. Thus was he enabled to proclaim that all in the tombs would arise and that all on the earth would rejoice.

The second troparion states that all earthly being was renewed by its Creator when He Himself became an earthly being. The linen and grave both point to this hidden plan of the divine condescension, a plan fulfilled by Joseph of Arimathea who came to shroud the immolated body of incarnate God by which we have all been renewed. The third troparion describes how our mortality itself was transformed from death and corruption through the burial of Christ. Through His divine power, the human nature He took upon Himself was rendered immortal, His flesh was made incorruptible, and His soul, in a strange manner, was not left to abide in Hades.

Finally, the fourth troparion recalls that the Word was born from a Virgin who knew no labour in giving birth. Utilizing the image of Eve's being fashioned by God from a rib from the sleeping Adam's side, we are told that through the piercing of the side of this New Adam, the re-creation of Eve has been made possible. Moreover, through the supernatural sleep into which the New Adam has fallen, the Almighty has renewed both nature and life from the corruption into which it had fallen.

Ode Six

The Sixth Ode, based on the prayer of Jonah (Jon 2:3-10), draws a parallel between the belly of the whale and the tomb of Christ, recalling that Jonah too was buried and came forth from his tomb. Moreover, aware of God's great mercy to men, he cries out as a prophet to those keeping watch at the tomb: «Ye are watching in vain, O watchmen, for you have neglected to consider mercy.»

The second troparion teaches us that the Word was not separated from the slain body which He shared with us men. Though the bodily temple was dissolved at the time of the Passion, His humanity and divinity were still intact in the one Person He is: both God and Man, the only-begotten Son and Word of God.

The third troparion recalls that the fall of Adam did not result in the death of God, but rather in the death of man. Whence it is that although the earthly substance of Christ suffered in His passion, His divinity did not suffer. Thereby was the corrupt transformed into incorruptibility: by His Resurrection He has uncovered the incorrupt fountain of Life.

The fourth troparion recalls that though Hades long ruled the race of men, it was not destined to be forever. For when placed in the grave He, the Almighty One, the very Element of Life, demolished the locks of death with the palm of His hand, proclaiming a true salvation to all those who had been sitting in darkness throughout the ages. Thereby He indeed became the first-born of the dead.

Ode Seven

The Seventh Ode begins with a marvelling exclamation, for it is indeed an ineffable wonder that He who delivered the holy children from the fiery furnace in Babylon has now, as a lifeless body, Himself been placed in the grave for our deliverance and salvation. Whence our song: «O our God! Deliverer! Blessed art thou!» Next, the second troparion states that Hades itself was pierced and destroyed by divine fire when, for the salvation of us who sing, «O our God! Deliverer! Blessed art thou!» it received into its heart Him whose own heart had been pierced by a spear thrust into His side.

The third troparion states that the tomb, in receiving within itself the Creator, the Treasure of life, is happy and has become divine. Indeed, He who had been placed there is slumbering for the salvation of us who sing: «O our God! Deliverer! Blessed art thou!»

In the fourth troparion we contemplate the Life of All willing to lie in a grave, in complete accord with the law of the dead, thus making the grave appear as the fountain of resurrection for the salvation of us who sing: «O our God! Deliverer! Blessed art thou!» Finally, the fifth troparion probes the theological question of the Godhead of the crucified Christ. It was for the salvation of us who sing: «O our God! Deliverer! Blessed art thou!» that His Godhead was ever with the Father and the Holy Spirit. For the Godhead of Christ remained ever one, and was without separation, whether in Hades, in the tomb, or in Eden.

Ode Eight

The Eighth Ode opens with yet another paradox. He who dwells in the highest heaven has been counted among the dead and been a guest in an humble tomb. The text calls upon the earth to quake and upon the heavens to be amazed. It concludes with the refrain, «Wherefore all ye priests praise Him! And all ye youths bless Him! Let people now exalt Him unto all ages!»

The second troparion sees the crucified Lord as the pure Temple – or tabernacle – which has been destroyed. But, in rising, He raised up with Him the fallen tabernacle, Adam. Indeed, this second Adam who dwelt in the highest heaven had been obliged to descend to the depths of Hades to save the first Adam. Whence the refrain: «Wherefore all ye priests praise Him! And all ye youths bless Him! Let nations now exalt Him, unto the ages of ages!»

Recalling the very human fear of the disciples, the third troparion begins by saying

that their courage had come to an end, but Joseph of Ramah (i.e. of Arimathea) had shown valour. On beholding the God of all, dead and naked, he had sought out His Body and clothed Him, shouting: «Wherefore all ye youths bless Him! And all ye priests praise Him! Let nations now exalt him unto all ages!»

The fourth troparion evokes the dazzling wonder, the endless goodness and the ineffable endurance of God's great and divine mercy. For He who dwells in the highest heaven has been sealed up under the earth by His own will. God the Creator and Redeemer of mankind has Himself been slandered by man, His creature, as being a criminal: «Wherefore O all ye youths bless Him! And all ye priests praise Him! Let people now exalt Him, unto all ages!»

Ode Nine

The Crucified addresses His holy Mother in the first troparion, telling her not to mourn for Him in seeing Him in the grave. For He, her Son, whom she conceived in her womb without seed, shall rise and be glorified. And since He is God, He will always exalt and ennoble those who, with faith and longing, magnify His mother.

The second troparion consists of her answer. She recalls that at His strange birth she was supernaturally blessed in being spared the normal sufferings of childbirth. Now, however, beholding Him dead and breathless, she is pierced with the spear of bitter sorrow. She pleads with Him to arise that she may be magnified by Him.

The third troparion gives His reply. He assures her that the earth has hidden Him only by His own good will. Moreover, the gatekeepers of Hades trembled at beholding Him, clothed in a robe splattered with the blood of man's revenge. But He, being God, has vanquished His enemies by the Cross and will arise and magnify her.

In the fourth and final troparion all is summed up. He Himself calls upon all creation to rejoice, and upon the earth to be glad. For «Hell is harrowed, the Enemy despoiled!» He proclaims. Anticipating the Resurrection, He invites the myrrh-bearing women to come forth now with their spices to meet Him. He is indeed redeeming Adam and Eve and all their descendants, and will rise on the third day.

VII

As we have seen, the basic thrust of biblical texts serving as inspiration for the canon's nine odes is the revelation of God's will to save His people from the dilemmas and disasters that befall them, be it Pharaoh and the Red Sea, the sterility of Hannah, Jonah and the whale, or the furnace of Babylon. The supreme revelation of this divine will for the salvation of the human race, however, came only in the fullness of time. With the Annunciation to the most holy Virgin, it was at last revealed that God was to be incarnate in Jesus Christ through her assent to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in bringing Him forth into the world.

Orthodoxy's firm insistence on the correct translation of the original Greek text of the Creed of Nicea should moreover be underlined at this point. In the Greek text the holy Fathers of Nicea insisted that Jesus Christ was incarnate «by the Holy Spirit AND the Virgin Mary,» making her role both an active one, and one equal to the role of the Holy Spirit. This Greek text, faithfully translated over the centuries by the Orthodox, therefore stands in sharp contrast to the erroneous Latin translation consistently utilized throughout the whole of western Christendom. There, instead of «et» it was «ex» that was used to render the Greek «kai» (i.e. «and»). Whence the normal western rendering of that phrase: «and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit OF the Virgin Mary.» Too trusting of its Roman mother, Protestant Christianity failed to go back to the Greek text, thereby perpetuating the Latin distortion throughout the reformed churches. As a result, throughout the West a far more passive and submissive role has come to be envisaged for the Theotokos than that one seen by the holy Fathers of Nicea.

As minimal as this nuance might seem on the surface, it is by no means minimal when its Orthodox dimensions are understood. Orthodoxy regards the Theotokos is the prime example of «synergy,» that is of man working together with the Holy Spirit to bring forth Christ into the world. In Orthodoxy therefore the Theotokos is consciously held up as the supreme role-model for all Christian vocation, be it male or female. The image of the Theotokos hangs therefore from the neck of Orthodox bishops, for her vocation to bring forth Christ into the world is as applicable to a bishop or to the Ecumenical Patriarch as it is to the lowest monk or nun, or the humblest man or woman in the congregation.

To be baptized into Christ is one thing. To show Him forth and make him present in the world by working with the Holy Spirit is another. This is, of course, the vocation of a saint, a vocation to which every Orthodox Christian knows he is called from the time he puts on Christ in his baptism. Regardless of one's sex, regardless of worldly status or ecclesiastical position, regardless of one's wealth or poverty, all Christians are called to the vocation the most holy Theotokos has shown us.

The western mistranslation of the Greek word «and» in the Latin Creed has unfortunately had its consequences. A lamentable shift – one might even say a denigration – has resulted whereby the active role envisaged for the Theotokos in the text of the First Ecumenical Council has become primarily a passive role, a role most suitable for women. Shrill cries for «equality for women» as priests and bishops do not come so thoughtlessly, however, from those who, praying in awe before the icon of the Theotokos, marvel at the fact that, in eternal glory, she alone, out of the whole of the human race, past and future, will eternally outshine all priests, bishops and patriarchs, even the holiest of them. She, the human race's supreme offering to God, bore the Creator of heaven and earth in her womb, thereby making her «higher than the Cherubim and incomparably more glorious

than the Seraphim.»

It is curious to note that where the Theotokos has been viewed only as a submissive, passive vessel, and a role-model for females rather than for males, the image of her holding the merciful Christ yields its place as the supreme Christian image to the crucifix. Such concentration upon the crucifix echoes yet another basic theological distortion in the West, long reflected in the interminable juridical debates about how man's salvation was accomplished at Calvary. Such debates, concentrating almost uniquely upon the sacrifice on Good Friday, exclude almost every other dimension of the Incarnation.

Orthodoxy's timeless equilibrium insists however that it is in the Incarnation as a whole that is to be found the supreme manifestation of God's will to save man, His creature, from the lordship of Death. In her texts and liturgical expressions, moreover, Orthodoxy attempts to demonstrate the extent to which God, as the great Lover of mankind, ever bears man a selfless, suffering love. Since man could not bear to behold the divine glory in all its fullness, He, the Immortal One, emptied Himself of that glory to become mortal. He suffered and died as man in order that he might, as God, harrow hades.

The ineffable goodness and divine condescension of God in stooping to such lengths is therefore repeatedly emphasized in Orthodoxy's canon celebrating the harrowing of hell for, as is usual with all canons, it is preoccupied with historic revelations of God's desire to save man. The supreme revelation of this divine desire, however, was that action which crowned His death and burial: the harrowing of hell prior to His Resurrection. The immolated Christ's great, divine work of redeeming the dead through His own death and descent into the place of departed spirits thus rises in Orthodoxy as the pinnacle of the divine condescension. It was, and is, a veritable on-going kenosis on which the salvation of the human race continues to depend. Orthodox Christians moreover continue today to insist that they can know, and that they can experience this divine condescension in their liturgical worship where they are given the means to partake of its life-giving glory. It is to this that the Orthodox are referring in so incessantly speaking or singing of the «Great Mercy.»

The fact that, as St. Peter plainly states in his First Epistle, the Divine Logos of God, even as His body lay sleeping in the tomb, actually continued his saving action for the human race by preaching to the «spirits in prison» (I Pet 3:19), does indeed greatly enlarge our conception of the vastness of God's unimaginable mercy to the whole human race. Though hidden and totally unseen by mortal eyes, that on-going work of mercy to save the race by descending into Hades proved far greater than the human sorrow and the very human desolation experienced by those who had watched Him die and buried His body. It is moreover to this unimaginable, thorough-going redemption of the race of men through His descent into hell that St.

John of Chrysostom is referring when he proclaims in his Easter sermon: «the universal kingdom has been revealed.»

How legitimate then that bright paschal joy I found expressed by the Greeks on that first Holy Friday evening I found myself Orthodox and in their midst! To partake of it, it is not imperative at all that one await the culmination of these great events effected by the announcement at midnight on Holy Saturday that Christ is risen. That midnight announcement is but the climax of the hidden, cosmic drama of the Lord's victorious descent into hell, as first announced by St. Peter and still vibrantly celebrated each year at Pascha by the Orthodox throughout the world.

VIII

What I learned about Pascha from the Greeks has thus taken me much further than merely justifying their cry of «Happy Easter!» on Good Friday. Subsequently I was to become aware of numerous liturgical examples underlining the fact that Pascal joy is by no means something to be bottled up until the announcement of the women's discovery at the tomb is made at the midnight service.

Does not the purest of paschal joy burst forth Holy Saturday morning at the vesperal liturgy of St. Basil when, according to Greek custom, the priest, prior to reading the Gospel announcing the Risen Lord's appearance, emerges from the Holy Doors, scattering bay leaves and singing, «Arise O God, and judge Thou the earth...»? Also, at the beginning of that same vesperal liturgy other liturgical texts insist on the Resurrection. The second troparion accompanying the psalm-verses of «Lord I cry unto thee» invites the people to go about Zion and give glory to God Who, in her, «rose from the dead,» while the third troparion admonishes: «Come ye people, let us praise and worship Christ, and glorify His Resurrection from the dead...»

In the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, it is during the repeated singing of the vesperal hymn, «Phos Ilaron» early on Holy Saturday afternoon, that the miraculous Holy Fire descends each year, gladdening the hearts of Orthodox Christians world-wide. It is also salutary to recall that in the West, the first Mass of Easter is celebrated in Rome on Saturday, not on Sunday. The tendency therefore to want to «hold off» on the joy of Easter until midnight of Holy Saturday is neither indicated, nor called for, in either the liturgical texts, or the liturgical practices of the Orthodox Church – or even those of the Church of Rome.

Should this really be surprising? The joy of the Resurrection is the basis for the whole of Christian consciousness. More especially is this true of the Orthodox consciousness with its deep commitment to the fullness of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. On Holy Thursday evening, as Good Friday matins with its twelve Passion Gospels is sung by anticipation, and precisely at a moment when the whole thrust of the service is upon the graphic reality of the Crucifixion, the Resurrection

is nonetheless dramatically invoked.

This occurs following the Fifth Gospel, during the singing of the Fifteenth Antiphon, at which point Greek custom dictates that a large, almost life-sized cross with the flat image of the Crucified attached to it, be brought out of the altar and slowly borne in solemn procession around the church by the chanting priest. Mournfully he chants the first of the many paradoxes making up that Antiphon's text: the Creator who suspended the earth in the midst of the waters is today Himself suspended from the tree of the cross. The tolling of bells, clouds of incense, and the tears of the prostrate faithful accompany the Antiphon's paradoxical exclamations until the priest, having reached the centre of the church, sets up the large crucifix for veneration, thrice proclaiming: «We bow before thy Passion, O Christ!» Each time the answer comes back: «Show us also Thy holy Resurrection!»

It is said that at the end of his life, when he finally opened up his cell to the world, St. Seraphim of Sarov unfailingly greeted each visitor with one, universal cry: «Christ is risen, my joy! Christ is risen!» The news that Christ is risen after harrowing hell and vanquishing death is moreover proclaimed, week in and week out, in the texts touching the Sunday offices of the Orthodox Church, be it Saturday Vespers or Sunday Matins. In Orthodoxy every Sunday truly commemorates the one Resurrection, specifically recalling man to the fact that, through the great mercy of a God who would harrow hell for him, he has been destined for something other than death and oblivion.

At His Transfiguration the Lord discussed the divine plan of His Passion with Moses and Elijah. Yet we know that the Uncreated Light of the Resurrection poured forth on the three chosen Apostles during that discussion, causing St. Peter (who, when the time came, however, would deny Him) to discover something so wonderfully positive (even if he failed to understand its implications at the time) that he never wanted to leave that site. This unique fusion of the Passion with the glory of the Lord's Uncreated Light manifested at both the Transfiguration and the Resurrection holds a particular place in Orthodox devotion.

It is fitting that tears and extraordinary acts of devotion on Good Friday take their place in Orthodox worship, as they always shall amongst the pious and God-fearing. How vividly, and with what humble gratitude do I recall examples of extraordinary piety among my Greek fellow-parishioners! As alive in me today as on the Holy Thursday evening it took place is the memory of an elderly, distinguished Greek lady, modestly waiting until most of the congregation had left, before quietly undertaking to creep all the way up the central aisle of the church on her knees to approach the large crucifix set up for veneration. Such a noble expression of man's very human love for the wounded humanity of God is part of that human nature He renewed at such a terrible price to Himself through a kenosis crowned by His descent into hell.

Still, it was even as God's divine plan to save His people through the passion and death of that immolated Lamb «slain from the foundation of the world» (Rev 13:8) was being discussed with Moses and Elijah, that the Uncreated Light of the Transfiguration manifested itself to the three chosen apostles. The liturgical texts for the Transfiguration insist moreover that this event, simultaneous with the discussion of His Passion, was to serve as a sort of consoling promise, affording the three apostles a luminous foretaste of the mystical joy of Pascha. For on experiencing the Holy Light of the Resurrection they would recall that they had already experienced it on Mount Tabor, and that it had been in conjunction with the discussion which had taken place between Moses, Elijah and the Divine Logos Himself. And the sublime subject of that discussion had been the mystery of God's great dispensation, of God's eternal divine economy, to which not only the Divine Logos bore witness, but also the Law and the Prophets.

So it is that the Uncreated Light of Mount Tabor continues to assure us that, within the divine economy, the sorrow, anguish and sufferings of us all, when touched by the emanations pouring forth from the radiance of the Lord's risen presence, can indeed be transfigured into tears of marvelling joy through His divine energies. So it is also that I have at last come to realize the divine source of that brightness I witnessed not only on the faces of the Greeks on that first Good Friday that I found myself Orthodox, but also, a decade before, and for the very first time, on the faces of those Russians in Paris in 1957 as, with lungs strained to bursting, they half sang, half shouted with a totally unearthly joy:

Christ is risen from the dead,
having trampled Death by death,
and, upon those in the tombs,
having life bestowed!

By William Bush

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