

Paschal Epistle

Of Archbishop
THEODORE
Of Suzdal and Vladimir



“Great and holy is the Passover of the Lord. It is the Word of God, Light, Life, Wisdom and Might. The Passover of the Lord is as far exalted above all other triumphs, even those of Christ, and those done in honor of Christ, as the sun is exalted above the stars!” (St. Gregory the Theologian, Oration 45 “On Holy Pascha”)

Dearly beloved in the risen Christ, Most Reverend Archpastors, right honorable Pastors, respected Deacons, God-loving monks and nuns, God-fearing monastics, and pious laymen of the Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church!

By the mercy of God, we again experience the ineffably radiant feelings of the joy of Paschal; feelings which again move us to share them with those who share our lives with us, both near and far. The joy of Pascha by far supersedes all the other usual experiences that our souls feel, for it opens for us the door to spiritual triumph, since with the resurrection of Christ, the doors have been opened for us which lead to the eternal joy of the New, Heavenly, Jerusalem.

The risen Christ “destroyed the power of the Enemy, and established the Cross as an emblem of victory for Christians” (St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Paschal Homily*). That is, together with the spiritual joy of the risen Christ, we have also acquired the responsibility for our own spiritual lives, which we are obliged to renew and transfigure under the grace-filled direction of the grace of the Holy Spirit. St. Gregory the Theologian teaches: “rising together with Christ, you have been re-constituted as a new kind of creature, made for the doing of good; that your entire life might be renewed; that all the channels of your energies might be renewed.” (Oration 45 “*On Holy Pascha*”).

The resurrection of Christ is the center of our Faith; of our spiritual life. Through our baptism into Christ, we all participate in the Passover of Christ as well, for “we are buried with Him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.” (Rom. 6:4). Through our participation in the Sacraments of the Church, and by living a life in accordance with the commandments of the Lord, we are given the possibility to conquer our passions and sins. This victory is possible for us because Christ rose from the dead.

“In Christ we have everything...,” says St. Ambrose of Milan, “If you want to heal your wound, He is the doctor. If you are burning with fever, He is the fountain. If you are in need of help, He is strength. If you are in dread of death, He is life. If you are fleeing the darkness, He is light. If you are hungry, He is food: ‘O taste and see that the Lord is good! Happy are they who take refuge in Him’ (Psalm 34:8).” (“*On Viriginity*” St. Ambrose of Milan 16:19).

From the empty tomb, the light of Christ’s resurrection spilled out across the face of the entire world, chasing death away and making our life life in very truth. Every feast of the Church, every remembrance of holy events finds its sense only in light of the resurrection.

The news of Christ’s resurrection resounds especially triumphantly and victoriously today. It is illumined by the light of His victory over sin and death, by the light coming through the open royal gates in all the Orthodox churches of the world, like the open gates of the Kingdom of Heaven.

“I am the way, and truth and life,” the Lord said to us, and not only does He say this to us today, and now, but for all time. Life has vanquished death. The disciples of Christ did not hope to see Him alive, but they met Him risen and in reality. Did we ever imagine that we also would meet Him on the paths that our lives take? And yet, the way we greet divine Pascha serves as the witness of this meeting. It consists not only in the making of paschal breads, paschal cheeses, and decorated eggs, nor even in attending all of the services of Holy Week leading up to Pascha, but in our participation in the holy and saving Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, the Body and Blood of our Lord and Savior. This is the source of our rejoicing and our illumination by the spiritual light of the present paschal triumph, when “yesterday I was crucified together with Thee, O Christ, and now I am co-resurrected together with Thee.”

We must also remember those times when the feast of divine Pascha was outlawed. When the joyous words of the paschal greeting were pronounced in a whisper and circumspectly, and those who openly confessed faith in the risen Christ were branded as shameful. It used to be that on the eve of Pascha, the central and local newspapers tried to outdo each other on the pages of their publications in maligning this bright feast, trying to tear any last vestiges of spiritual belief in the risen Christ out of the hearts of people. Under all kinds of pretexts, the day of Pascha was made a regular workday, and the entrances of those churches that had survived the pogroms of the atheists were guarded by “activists” who tried to keep as many people as possible from attending the Paschal services. In those days, the cemeteries were the only places where one could speak openly about our radiant feast, where the faithful in Christ were not prohibited from expressing their

religious sentiments. This is how, in Russia, the custom of visiting cemeteries on the first day of Pascha came to be.

But times have changed. Now, the resurrection of Christ is announced from the television screens. Millions of people wait for reports about the miraculous descent of the holy fire in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. It used to be that it was mainly elderly people that came to our late night services. But now, we can see the representatives of the ruling authorities and young people at such services, along with middle aged people. The risen Christ is honored and called upon in the prayers of millions of people from across the entire world. The light of Christ illumineth all! The light of Christ chases away the darkness! “Do not allow, O Lord, that our evilness should overpower Thine ineffable goodness and mercy!”

In spite of the pressure which has been placed on our Church of late, through methods reminiscent of the years of the Khrushchev “thaw,” we, dearly beloved in Christ, celebrate divine and saving Pascha!

This year, we celebrate this shining feast as orphans. We have lost our loving and beloved father and chief hierarch, His Eminence Metropolitan Valentine. Today is our first Pascha without him; without the words of his paschal greeting to us. But he has left us an example of true service, and of standing for the truth even unto death. If our Lord Jesus Christ had simply died without rising from the dead, then there would be no victory, but a defeat, with no hope and no future. But our Lord did rise from the dead. He is alive. And for this reason, even though we still experience bodily death, it is not the end for us, but only a beginning. Because those who believe in the risen Christ have life for all eternity.

We have been instructed in Metropolitan Valentine’s will to remain faithful to true Orthodoxy. And on this radiant and divine night, we will take comfort in the joy which comes from the resurrection of Christ. Yes, they have taken our churches away from us, they have persecuted us, they vilify us, insult us, slander us, but we must accept all of these things with joy, for the Lord said, “Blessed are ye, when [men] shall revile you, and persecute [you,] and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for My sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great [is] your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.” (Matt. 5:11-12), for there is no servant who is greater than his Master.

Pascha is a feast of victory for all mankind, for each one of us individually, praying in our humble home churches, in our cells, in caves in the earth, and in every place where we may be. If the victory was wrought by our risen Christ, then that means that there was a battle, and if there was a battle, then there were enemies. Christ had victory over His enemies, even while outwardly seeming to have been vanquished by their evilness, cunning, and hatefulness. For this reason, we must

remember that even though it sometimes seems outwardly that we are being defeated, yet we are the victors, for we have taken upon ourselves the cross of humiliation and exile, and this is the victory of Christ. We belong to that group of people who many times saw defeat and experienced its consequences. And how we would rejoice if that which was taken away from us by force or by deception, that which was mocked, spit upon, that which was ordered to be removed from us, that which died and was buried, came back to us. We have comfort in this, for it is indeed possible.

The first witnesses to the resurrection, outside of themselves from joy, and later dozens of others, bear witness today to all those who are abused, deceived and belittled the happy paschal news. If we give ourselves to God, and hope in Him, if we stay loyal to Him even in the darkest of days, this always means rebirth, recompense for labor, glory and final victory, even if not everything goes as smoothly as we would like in the beginning. There is a salvific harrowing taking place, during which all the weeds and chaff are being separated out, so that there remains nothing but pure wheat, fit for spiritual regrowth. Let us become together that good wheat, that will grow up to where Christ is. Let us pray that the joy of the risen Christ displace our fears and weaknesses, reduce our sinful inclinations to nothing, and raise us up from our powerlessness, which we sometimes feel in the face of the seductions of this life.

Dearly beloved in the risen Christ!

By the mercy of God, we have been given yet one more Pascha, and together with it, joy and triumph. Enlightened by the rays of the resurrection of Christ, let us become bearers of light, joy, and spiritual perfection. The risen Christ goes with us, for He said: "I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen." (Matt. 28:20).

Christ is risen! Truly He is risen!

Lowly Theodore,

Archbishop of Suzdal and Vladimir

Pascha 2012

Suzdal, Russia