



# The Holy Gospel and the Orthodox way of its study

By His Grace Bishop Joseph of Arianzos

The Gospel is not a good, beneficial, edifying book. It is not, as it has been called, "the king of books". **It is the book of life.** It is the **Word of God.** It is the voice of the Trinitarian God treasured **in the Church** and conveyed **by the Church** and **through the Church** to the world, for the salvation of humanity and the world. This is its primary distinction from every other book that has been or will be published on earth and on every planet (if there is ever life discovered beyond earth!).

The Gospel is a part of the Holy Tradition of the Church. Undoubtedly the most basic and most central, but still one section of the whole Holy and Sacred Tradition.



The Church of Christ separated it from the numerous holy texts of its saints, and said that **these specific texts** of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, as well as the remaining **particular writings** of Paul, Peter, James and Jude, constitute the **New Testament** of God with the new Israel of Grace, namely the Christ - loving people of the Church. **These and no other. In their specific form and no other.**

The Church rejected other texts, which were perhaps beneficial and full of reverence, because its divine experience and the illumination of the Paraclete, which guide the Church into the whole truth, grant the possibility of "discerning the spirits" and allow it, through its Saints, to discern the Voice of its Lord from "the voice of enemies".

Thus the Church very early laid down, established and consecrated the "**Canon**" of Holy Scripture which can neither be added to

nor subtracted from, nor in any other way changed. And at this point every kind of heretic that accepts the "Canon" and yet rejects its creator and Bride of Christ, the Church, is proved outrageously self-contradictory!

The Holy Spirit "taught wisdom to the illiterate", "rendered the fishermen theologians" and inspired the authors of the Gospels. The same Holy Spirit also enlightened other "saints of God" to discern the words of divine revelation and, to codify them into the "**Bible**" of life and salvation, and to place them in the centre of the life of the Church. This life of the Church is what is called **Holy and Sacred Tradition** and is identified with the life of the God-Man extended to the ages of ages.

The Gospel, then, is the heart of the Body of the Church, and is vigilant even when the Body appears to sleep either from extreme sin in the world (as today), or from extreme persecution and threat (former or contemporary), or else from indifference or lukewarmness of those called to be watchful guardians of the logical sheep of Christ.

For the Church, the Gospel has always been and always is the **Image in words of the God-Man** Bridegroom and Saviour, the **Image in paper and ink**. This is in any case why so great honour is attributed to the Gospel: it is placed on the fearful altar, indeed in its centre; it is covered with gold and silver ornaments, studded with precious stones; it is taken in procession with the festal proclamation and command: 'Wisdom, let us attend!'; it is kissed and venerated etc. It is characteristic that at Vespers of Holy Saturday, the Gospel is taken in procession and placed in the Holy Sepulchre of the Epitaphios while people venerate it and chanters sing the Aposticha 'When You were taken down from the Cross dead..' - here, the Gospel is **itself** the image of the buried Christ. The so-called Epitaphios (the actual material) is the material (or **Air**) borne by the Clergy on their shoulders when carrying the Gospel, for example during the Great Entrance of the Divine Liturgy with the Holy Gifts. This is why we venerate **the Gospel first** and then the Epitaphios.

Likewise, on Sunday Matins, after reading the morning Gospel which preaches the good news of the Resurrection of our Lord, the faithful approach as the Myrrhbearing women and venerate the Risen Lord in the Holy Gospel.

With all this in mind, I was greatly scandalised when I recently saw an edition of the New Testament with "blue-jean" material on the cover, in the form of a "cowboy" pock-et-book dared by Protestants, perhaps with the aim of supposedly rendering it accessible to modern youth!

\* \* \*

A detail, which is perhaps not so much a detail, is that the Gospel on the Holy Altar is **sealed**! Its frame has small locks which keep it closed. Furthermore, it is read from the height of the holy Pulpit or from the Royal Doors and by a member of the Clergy (Deacon, Presbyter, Bishop) after a special prayer is read ("Shine, O loving Master, in our hearts the unfailing light of Your knowledge, and open the eyes of our minds to the understanding of Your Gospel precepts...."). All this means that the Gospel is proclaimed by the Church! It is the Body of Christ that preaches Christ! For those outside the Church, the Gospel remains "a book sealed with seven seals"! Inaccessible and in-comprehensible! A two-edged sword! Light that burns!

Furthermore, the Holy Gospel and the Epistle readings are **chanted**, not simply read, as unfortunately certain modernising Clergy do, influenced by Western practice. The chanting signifies that it is not a normal reading of this world, but a harmonious melody of **theology**, the product of the musical harp of the All-Holy Spirit whose cords are the Evangelists.

The study of the Gospel, then, implies certain presuppositions. One not only needs to be a member of the Church, but one must also trace the way forged by the holy Evangelists who "evangelised peace and good". So one must live the holy life of the Church, struggle for cleansing from passions and for the acquisition of Christ-like virtues, be nourished by the sacred Mysteries of the Christian altar, be enlightened and sanctified by the Grace of God offered in all the Holy Sacraments and the liturgical life of the Church in general. One must at least be in the stage of purification according to Christ, in Christ and through Christ.

When one is comfortable in one's passionate and lowly life of sin, and is negligent in one's Godly struggle for salvation, for which all the Saints of the Church struggled - and they are in this respect also the infallible pointers and sure examples - then "in seeing, one does not see; and in

hearing, one does not understand". Then one may study Holy Scripture and be darkened instead of enlightened. One may be deceived instead of led towards God. One may be condemned instead of saved! This is precisely the case with all the heretics who, because they do not the necessary presuppositions, gather only darkness, deceit, corruption, death and condemnation from the Gospel! They read one thing and understand another! They see one thing and conclude another, continually being estranged from the "hidden beauty" of the saving word of God! The Light of God becomes for them the "consuming fire" of hell.

And the reading of the Gospel by a member of the Clergy has a deeper meaning. **Deacons** were ordained from those who were in the first stage of Godly life, that of "**purification**". **Presbyters** from those who had progressed to the second and more perfect stage, namely "**illumination**". And "**Bishops**" those who were raised to the third and supreme stage of "**divine theory**" or "**theosis**". Thus, the latter possessed, according to the measure of their struggle, analogous spiritual experiences with the God-bearing authors of the Holy Scriptures, although not exactly proportional since the Apostles and Evangelists are, after the Theotokos and John the Forerunner, at the highest possible point of divinisation to which one cannot, after those blessed ones, be elevated. Therefore, the Spirit-bearing Bishops had the ability to understand in depth and in precision the divine concepts of Scripture and to interpret unwaveringly and nourish with pure milk and clean food the Flock of Christ. This is seen literally in the Fathers of the Church. St. John Chrysostom, for example, interprets the Gospels or St. Paul's letters and conveys to the Church the exact meaning of the Evangelists and Apostles. The same applies to Athanasius the Great and Basil the Great and very Holy Gregory Palamas and others. The Presbyters in turn who were in the stage of illumination could also discern the divine concepts of Scripture and proclaim the Gospel without danger. The Deacons, finally, who were in the stage of purification, had the basic presuppositions with which not to lose sight of the spirit of truth behind the letter of the sacred texts.

In reading the Gospel thus, the Clergyman, in this action alone, claims that "no hand of the uninitiate should touch" "the dangerous" written word of God.

This does not in any way mean that the study of the Gospel is not permissible for all. It is most certainly allowed **but with certain conditions!**

One basic condition is that the faithful, before taking Scripture in their hands, should be deeply convinced that it is not a book of human wisdom and knowledge subject to the criticism of so called "rational logic" but it is rather the word of the Word - the Enhypostatic Wisdom of God and, therefore, must be approached "with trembling hands" **as a disciple and not as a judge, as one ignorant and not as a scholar, as a fool, and not as a wise, as a child and not as one who is "sober in oneself"**.

And before opening the holy pages, one should open one's heart before God to pray with warmth and seek with humility divine enlightenment and assistance, after of course basically cleansing oneself from the spot of sin through Confession and genuine repentance.

Having approached with these necessary conditions the Scriptural pasture with reverence and fear of God, and having delighted in the letter of the sacred text, then one should turn to the sure interpreters of Scripture. One should study the interpretation of the relevant text as offered by the divinely-enlightened Church Fathers, in order to see how the passage is interpreted by St. John Chrysostom, for example, who is more or less the simplest and most accessible to the majority. If one wishes, one could study the appropriate interpretation of the second and third and fourth Father. If one seeks deeper study, one may look for the "Consensus Patrum", the "Agreement of the Fathers", since each Holy Father, according to the variety of illuminating gifts of the Holy Spirit - which is also related to the degree of perfection of each Father - will perhaps emphasise



certain rays of the same diamond of Gospel truth more so than others. This, with very few exceptions which serve rather to underline the rule, is not contradiction at all but only agreement. I would say it is like a musical symphony (= agreement) where with different notes, with the variety of instruments and voices, the same song is sung, and in this case the all-harmonious chant of true Theology, which is none other than Christ Himself. The Enhypostatic Wisdom of God, the human-loving God-Man, the Crucified, Risen, Beneficial, Redeeming and Saviour Lord.

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The study, therefore, of Scripture which is based on our own poor ability and on our own capacity to conceive and understand the divine concepts - a capacity which is insignificant and non-existent, due to the darkness of passions reigning within us - is to be avoided as dangerous.

On the contrary: approaching the word of God with the above basic ecclesiastical presuppositions is necessary as the required nurture of the soul, as enlightenment of life without which one cannot exist, as medicine and source of immortality and as participation in God!

\* \* \*

One may rightly ask: do today's Deacons, Presbyters and Bishops have the necessary presuppositions mentioned above in order to be the precise interpreters and sure teachers of the Gospel? The answer, even if negative, is that they can be through humble discipleship before the works of the Holy Fathers. By interpreting Holy Scripture in the Patristic light and by proclaiming the Gospel in the Patristic voice, yes, the teaching of the Gospel is clearly genuine, unadulterated, sure and saving. And I believe that - thanks be to God - most of today's fathers of God's people are - to their credit - good pupils of the Church Fathers. And to the degree that they are good disciples and sons, they are good teachers and fathers, worthy of trust from the Christ-loving people of God.

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The presuppositions for the study of the Gospel equally apply to the whole of Holy Scripture. Not only for the New, but also for the Old Testament. We should add concerning the latter that, for us Orthodox, it is not examined in isolation but always in relation to the New Testament. For whatever is contained in the Old Testament is prophecy and prefiguration of the New, in a way that without the light of the New, the Old is a hidden mystery, inaccessible and incomprehensible! So incomprehensible, that a contemporary thinker inexperienced in the ecclesiastical way of approaching the Scriptures could call it "Mythology of the Hebrew people"!!!

The Orthodox Christian, standing in the courtyard of the word of God, loosens the laces of his shoes and takes off the slippery sandals of egoism, self-sufficiency and rationalism, in the knowledge that he is in a holy place; and he receives the guidance of the God-bearing Fathers, full aware of his spiritual blindness; and he seeks the illumination of God on the darkness of his soul as a result of his passions; and he studies in humility, and in studying he is a pupil who prays and comes to understanding through prayer, to light through understanding, to sanctification through light and through sanctification to salvation.

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# The Old Testament in the Orthodox Church

by Fr. R. Stergiou

## Introduction

The place of the Old Testament in the Orthodox Church is a problem "as old as the Church itself". The two major problems were whether the Old Testament was to be included in the Biblical Canon, and which version of the Old Testament was to be used. This 'problem' was not an issue for the authors of the New Testament, nor the Early Christian Church. In fact, the place of the Old Testament in the Church was defined by the Church from very early in the Christian centuries. The Church fought the Gnostics and the Marcionites vehemently against their attempts to exclude the Old Testament from the Canon, and was victorious in this endeavour.

On account of these and other historical and doctrinal events, the Old Testament received its due place and authority in the Orthodox Church. In this essay we will attempt to examine the place and authority of the Old Testament in the Orthodox Church, and analyse the reason why the Church included it in the Christian Biblical Canon. We will also discuss why the version of the Old Testament used was chosen.



## The place of the Old Testament in the early Church

It is conclusive that the Old Testament was the only form of Scripture which was used by Jesus Christ, the Apostles, and the first Christian community. However, this covenant was also understood by the early Christians as the scriptural foundation and preparation for the Incarnation of God. Evidence of the view in early Christian thought is predominant in the writings of the Apostle Paul. The great Apostle views the Old Testament as the preparation of the New, through direct methods such as typology, and through indirect methods such as prophecy. According to Paul, the Law of the Old Testament was only ever a pedagogical instrument "therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ" (Gal. 3:24) and as a measure or shadow of things to come "for the law, having a shadow of the good things to come" (Heb. 10:1).

While the books of the New Testament were being compiled, the Church's understanding of the Old Testament was slowly being converted from "the only form of Scripture" to "a preparation of the New Covenant". This view was being contested by the Gnostics who were not concerned with the inspiration or authority of the Old Testament, but on how the Old Testament was to be related with the up and coming New Covenant. This led the Early Church to responsibly look at establishing the union of both Testaments, the Old Testament being a prefigurement of the New. Even though the Biblical Canon had not been finalised until the sixth century, Christians of the Early Church read and understood the Old Testament with the above mentioned union in mind.

Although the Early Church had recognised the Old Testament in its preparatory character, it remained in the Church not only as a source of pedagogy but as an influence to all facets of

Christian communal life including education, politics, and social behaviour. Evidence of this is again found in the Apostle Paul when he states: 'All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, And for training in righteousness' (2 Tim. 3:16). >From these indications one may conclude that the Old Testament was readily available for all Christians and in fact widely read on a personal level.

## **The Canon of the Old Testament**

Etymologically speaking, the Greek term "canon" bears a striking resemblance to the Hebrew word "for a measuring rod". For the Church however, it came to mean a collection of the Old Testament and New Testament books which were accepted as "Divinely inspired". The books which were not accepted in the Canon as divinely inspired were still accepted as "holy books" and were classified as "apocrypha". What is confusing however, is the fact that there is more than one Canon of the Old Testament used by the various Christian denominations. In this section we will focus on the Old Testament Canon of the Orthodox Church.

Among other versions, the two main Canons of the Old Testament are the "Palestinian Canon", also known as the "Hebrew or Masoretic Text" and the "Alexandrian Canon" also known as the "Septuagint" translation. The main difference between these two versions is the number of books. The former contains 39 books and the later has 10 extra books referred to as "Deuterocanonical". The Protocanonical books were understood as those which directly dealt with the Salvation of humanity. The Deuterocanonical books of the Alexandrian Canon were understood in a pedagogic light and thus the Septuagint received its authority because it was adopted by the Church.

In the history of the Orthodox Church there have been inconsistencies not only by the Church Fathers, but also by many local and even Ecumenical Synods as to which Canon is to be used. For example, Cyril of Jerusalem and Athanasius support the use of the Hebrew Canon, where as John Chrysostom and Basil the Great support the use of the Alexandrian Canon. Although the local Synod of Jerusalem in 1672 stipulated that the Alexandrian Canon was to be used, the second Canon of the Council of Trullo (691) sanctioned the use of the Hebrew Canon.

The Orthodox Church accepted the Alexandrian Canon (Septuagint LXX) as divinely inspired, appropriate for reading in Church, and on a personal reading level. The shorter or Hebrew Canon remained as the Canon par excellence, and was most valuable for giving validity to basic Christian doctrines....

Not only are there inconsistencies between the use of the two different Canons, but there are also inconsistencies in the different Traditions of Orthodoxy on which books are to be included in the greater Canon. For example, the Russian Orthodox Tradition or the Slavonic Bible includes 2 Edras, whereas the Greek Orthodox Tradition of the Septuagint does not. This lack of uniform use led P. Bratsiotis to make the following observation (quoted by S. Agourides in his article The Bible in the Greek Orthodox Church, p. 240): "It is for this reason that the fixing of the Canon of the Old Testament is proposed as one of the subjects of a future Great Synod of the Eastern Orthodox Church". So even today, the issue of the Old Testament Canon remains open for discussion.

## **Divine inspiration of the Old Testament**

The subject of divine inspiration of the Old Testament by Orthodox Theologians as a whole is only now beginning to receive the attention it needs. The eminent Orthodox biblical scholar P. Bratsiotis believes that the divine inspiration of the Old Testament is: "related to the communication of Divine Truth, whereas the supervision of the Holy Spirit is related to its

accurate expression" (quoted by S. Agourides in his article *The Bible in the Greek Orthodox Church*, p. 101). So it is understood that Orthodox theology cannot speak of an Old Testament without first affirming its divine authorship. How then is divine authorship related with the human intervention of the Old Testament's compilation? Although he is not a biblical scholar, P. Evdokimov sufficiently answers this question when he stated: "God is the principal cause, while man is the instrumental cause".

On the other hand, however, neither the Old Testament nor the Church can convince the unbeliever of the Old Testament's divine inspiration and authority. In fact, one who does not accept divine inspiration of the Old Testament, may subscribe to many views. Among the many possibilities which they may subscribe to, two could be:

The Natural Theory of Inspiration: which completely rules out any divine influence in the compilation of the Old Testament, or

The Moral Theory of Inspiration: which considers that the Old Testament authors were divinely influenced in their writings through the holy life they led.

Orthodox theology does not accept either theory because they both emphasise the human or natural elements of the Old Testament's compilation. Whereas The Natural Theory excludes any divine contribution, The Moral Theory perceives Divine involvement on a passive level. The importance of distinguishing between natural and divine revelation has been sufficiently summed up by Fr. Dr. T. Adamopoulo in his book titled *Divine Revelation and the Old Testament* (p. 31):

"Divine revelation however is to be distinguished from natural revelation. Whereas the former involves a direct, first hand, special and unmistakable communication from God to Man, the later is directly involving the attestation itself as evidence of the existence, presence, attributes and power of God within the universe".

It is therefore suffice to say that the Orthodox Church claims that the author of the Old Testament is truly God Himself, but equally the work of men in different times and places. The Church also presupposes and confesses that God can and does reveal Himself, and that man comes to know Him in His self-revelation only through a deep spiritual experience found within the Church.

### **Critical scholarship of the Old Testament**

The late biblical scholar B. Vellas expressed his opinion of a critical approach to the Old Testament ... [by holding] the view that any type of critical analysis of the Old Testament should not alter its authority or authenticity, and that it is to be in accordance to the expressed views of the Fathers of the Church. This view is of course generally accepted by the Orthodox Church as a whole.

For example, in the area of authorship, it is doubtful that the books of Judges, Samuel, Kings, and many of the Psalms were written by their traditionally attributed authors. However, the Orthodox Church considers them as divinely inspired and thus keeps them in the Old Testament Canon. So in the final analysis, the Orthodox Church accepts critical scholarship of the Old Testament with the presupposition that it is interpreted within the confines of the Church....

Vellas also undertook research in the field of Orthodox critical scholarship of the Old Testament and concluded that it began in 1859 by C. Contogones. However, the discovery of a short unpublished handwritten letter in the archives of the BFBS, proves that this opinion of Vellas is invalid. The letter is actually attributed to an Orthodox Bishop -Hilarion of Tornovo - written between 1825-26. This, of course, proves that Orthodox Old Testament criticism was actually



pioneered by Metropolitan Hilarion in the 1820's and not in 1859. After carefully analysing this manuscript, one may conclude that despite its generally conservative outlook, it clearly contains valuable critical comments which do not contradict the Church Fathers, and do in fact contribute to a better understanding of the Old Testament.

### **Use of the Old Testament in Orthodox worship**

The Bible is practically the sole source of the Church's liturgy, both in form and content. The liturgical pattern of the Church, its cycles of feasting, fasting, psalmody and prayer are all expressly biblical. In the liturgy, the Bible comes alive and shows itself for what it really is: the living Word of God. Typological appreciation is central in liturgical use of the Old Testament and in the very biblical character of the liturgy itself through psalms, verses, quotations and adaptations of the Old Testament in hymns and Canons.

In order to better understand just how the Orthodox Church uses the Old Testament in worship, we must focus our attention to the selection procedures of the 'readings' found in various services. This selection of Old Testament readings did not happen fortuitously in the worship of the Orthodox Church. By choosing these texts, the Church wanted to directly unite her liturgical life with biblical revelation. By studying the liturgical books of the Orthodox Church, one may extract the following information:

1. The reading of the Old Testament occurs during ecclesiastical periods, great feast days, and on a daily basis in certain services. During all these services, biblical representation is exclusively from the Old Testament.
2. The Church uses many of the Old Testament's characteristics (history, prophecy, pedagogy) as criteria in her selection of readings. At times the selection of these texts are directly related to the message of the feast, and at other times they are indirectly related. However, the Church never selected readings which were totally unrelated to the theme of the feast but selected readings with definite elements of divine revelation which united the soteriological work of Christ, and the redemptive work of the Church.
3. In the liturgical life of the Church, some of the books of the Old Testament are read in their entirety (Genesis, Proverbs, Isaiah and Jonah), some are not read at all but most are read as extracts directly related to the feast.

Having studied the readings of the Old Testament in Orthodox worship, we have not only confirmed their dynamic presence, but their deep theological meaning for the Church. This selection of readings made by the liturgical conscience of the Church secured the articles of our faith which are founded in the text of the Old Testament. These articles of faith are: 1) The union of the two Testaments; 2) The place of the Old Testament in God's divine plan; and 3) its meaning as a 'protoevangel' of Christ.

### **The union between the two Testaments**

For the Orthodox Church, a more accurate way of expressing the relationship between the Old and New Testaments would be to state that they are identified as equal to each other. Such an understanding accommodates for a biblical union in the framework of divine revelation which is expressed in the description "prediction - prototype - fulfilment" accurately formulated by D. Doikos.

The Church not only saw Christ and His soteriological work in the prophecies of the Old Testament, but in persons, events and in the laws of ancient Israel. These "types" or

"prototypes" (such as the Cross, the Resurrection of Christ, and even Baptism) found their fullness in the soteriological realities of the New Testament and the Church. And even though all aspects of the Old Testament are not a "prediction" or a "promise", nor in the New Testament is everything "fulfilment", the formula "prediction - fulfilment" is the most satisfactory description of the Church can give in attributing her liturgical union of both Testaments.

## Epilogue

The Spiritual method of interpreting the Old Testament has been in use by the Orthodox Church for centuries. The Church may therefore be accused of not even considering other studies (archaeological, cultural, historical, or literary studies) concerning the Old Testament. At no time in history was the opportunity so great to measure the Old Testament as it is in the present, and in the study of the Old Testament there is certainly much that can be measured. It would be erroneous to insist that the Church was not interested in using other studies to measure the Old Testament given that the Church:

1. Did not have to deal with questions of today's calibre on the Old Testament.
2. Did not have an appreciation for history.
3. Lacked sufficient scholarly information
4. Tended to spiritualise everything which was holy.

These, and of course many other factors, cannot lead us to conclude that Orthodox Old Testament exegetes were indifferent to the use of other forms of study, but they studied the Old Testament to the measure which was at hand.

Critical analysis of the Old Testament, was in fact initiated and greatly developed by theology in the West. Comparatively, even though some work has begun in this field, Orthodox theology in general seems to be deficient. One thesis for this deficiency held by the biblical scholar P. Vasileiades is that the Orthodox Church did not experience the period of enlightenment and the subsequent Renaissance....

In light of this, Orthodox theologians must be encouraged to undertake other forms of study - parallel with the spiritual approach - in order to broaden our understanding of the Old Testament. However, modern radical criticism which is characterised by scepticism and the aim of demythologising not only provides a new "way" of exegesis, but also new "content". This is why V. Kesich, in his book "Criticism, the Gospel and the Church" (p. 162), recommends that Orthodox exegetes must:

"... work within a definite framework of revelation as it is given in the Bible (or Old Testament). The critic ... cannot reject the dogmas of the Church and replace them with his own. His work is marked upon the dependence of Tradition through participation, and then in freedom he can approach his material ... in order to bring out the meaning of the Scriptures".

Even though the different Traditions of Orthodoxy may differ in which books they include in the Old Testament Canon, the fact remains that the Conscience of the Church generally accepts the Septuagint (LXX) or Alexandrian Canon....

For the Orthodox Church, the Old Testament is not perceived as a magical book which fell out of the sky, but as the authentic witness of her faith. The Old Testament developed an ecclesiological character corresponding to the teachings of the Church which of course are founded on biblical revelation. For the Orthodox Church, the Old Testament is not an antithesis to the New, but is united to the New, and is as equally important in the perception of the message of salvation.

The Byzantine liturgical Tradition of the Orthodox Church simulated the authors of the New Testament, the Apostolic Fathers, and the Fathers of the Church. For its selection of Old Testament readings in its Liturgical Tradition, the Orthodox Church used the Messianic - Eschatological dimension of the Old Testament as a guide, with the certainty that it would be fulfilled in the Person of Jesus Christ.

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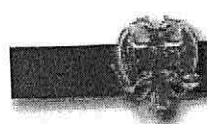
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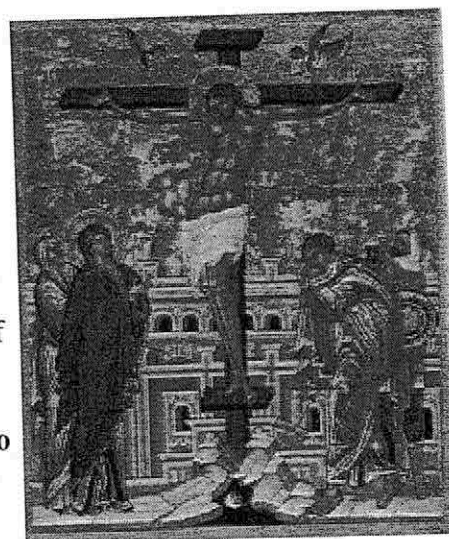
GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

## Why was Jesus crucified?

by St. John Chrysostom

In fact, He conducted us to the ancient story to forestall anyone's saying, "How is it possible for those who believe in the Crucified One to be saved, inasmuch as He Himself was possessed by death?"

It is possible, for, if the Jews escaped death by looking upon the brazen image of a serpent, then with much greater reason would those who believe in the Crucified One enjoy an even greater benefit. For the crucifixion took place, not by reason of the impotence of the Crucified, and not by reason of the superior strength of the Jews; it was because, **"God loved the world"** that His living Temple was crucified. **"That those who believe in him may not perish, but may have life everlasting"**.



Do you perceive the reason for the crucifixion and for the salvation proceeding from it? Do you perceive the relationship of the figure with the reality? In the former, the Jews escaped death, but it was temporal death; in the latter, the faithful escape eternal death. In the former, the uplifted serpent healed the bites of serpents; in the latter, the crucified Jesus healed the wounds inflicted by the spiritual dragon. In the former, he who looked with these eyes of earth was healed; in the latter, he who gazes with the eyes of his mind lays aside all his sins.

In the former, there was the uplifted brass fashioned in the likeness of a serpent; in the latter, the Lord's body formed by the Spirit. A serpent inflicted the bite in the former, and a serpent healed it; so also in the latter, death destroyed and death saved. But the destroying serpent possessed poison, while the Saviour was free from poison. And here similarly once more: the death which destroyed us had sin as the serpent has poison, but the death of the Lord was free from all sin just as indeed the brazen serpent was, of poison. The Scripture says about Jesus:

"Who did no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth" (1 Peter 2:22).

And this it is also which St Paul said:

"Disarming the Principalities and Powers, he displayed them openly, leading them away in triumph by force of it" (2 Col. 2:15).

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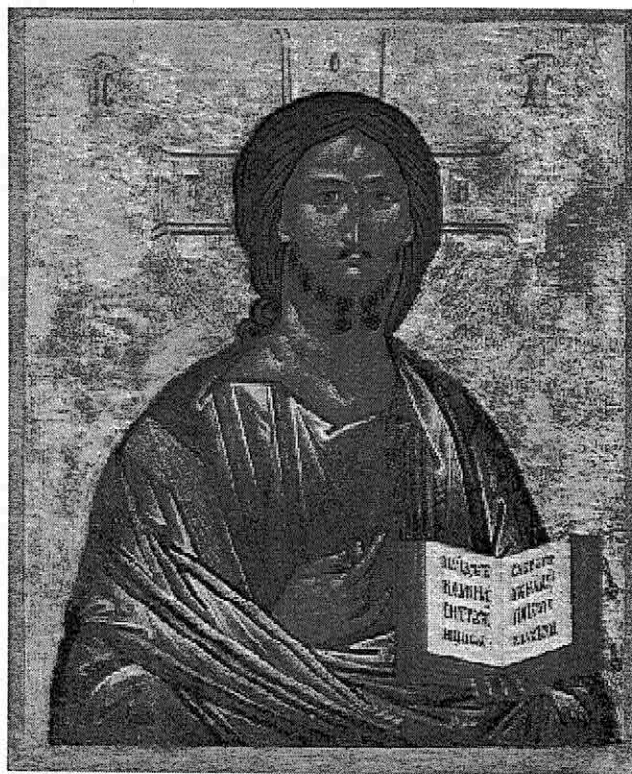


GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

## Condemned to Immortality, a meditation on the Resurrection

by Archimandrite Dr Justin Popovick

People condemned God to death; with His Resurrection He condemned them to immortality. For striking Him, God returned embraces; for insults, blessings; for death, immortality. Never did men show more hate towards God than when they crucified Him; and God never showed His love towards people more than when He was resurrected. Mankind wanted to make God dead, but God, with His Resurrection, made people alive, the crucified God resurrected on the third day and thereby killed death ! There is no more death. Immortality is surrounding man and his entire world.



With the Resurrection of the God-Man, the nature of man is irreversibly led toward the road of immortality and man's nature becomes destructive to death itself. For until the Resurrection of Christ, death was destructive for man; from the Resurrection of Christ, man's nature becomes destructive in death. If man lives in the faith of the Resurrected God Man, he lives above death, he is unreachable for her; death is under man's feet. Death where is thy sting? Hell, where is thy victory? And when a man who believes in Christ dies, he only leaves his body as his clothes, in which he will be dressed again on the Day of Last Judgement.

Before the Resurrection of the God-Man, death was the second nature of man; life was first and death was second. Man became accustomed to death as something natural. But after His Resurrection the Lord changed everything: and it was only natural until Christ's Resurrection, that the people became mortal, so after Christ's Resurrection it was natural that the people became immortal.

Through sin, man becomes mortal and temporal; with the Resurrection of the God-Man, he becomes immortal and eternal. **In this lies the strength, in this lies the power, in this lies the might of Christ's Resurrection.** Without the Resurrection there is no Christianity. Among the miracles, this is the greatest one; all other miracles begin and end with it. From it sprouted the faith and the love and the hope and the prayer and the love toward God.

from **Philosophical Cliffs**

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# Unto life, not unto condemnation

by Archbishop Paul of Finland

Christ speaks about the importance of Holy Communion.



"Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink His blood, you have no life in you; he who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day".

On hearing these words the Jews were offended. We know what is meant. "Life in us," the real life of faith, is possible only "in Christ," in the real communion, which is realised in Holy Communion. And this communion will continue until the day of resurrection: "and I will raise him up at the last day." This is an amazing mystery, which makes a person long for Holy Communion, especially when death is approaching. Regular Holy Communion has already become customary in many of our parishes. However, we must always remember the Apostle's warning,

"For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgement upon himself".

Although it is not necessary to go to confession before Holy Communion every time, nevertheless we must prepare ourselves every time to meet the Risen Christ in Holy Communion. This preparation includes fasting and prayer. In the Orthodox prayer book there is a rule of prayer, a number prayers which are to be read at home before going to church for Holy Communion. A prayerful mind has a transforming effect upon the body as well, so that the slight hunger which the body feels is changed to a spiritual hunger for Holy Communion with God, and to sense of expectation. Such preparations awaken the mood of humility and repentance which is appropriate for approaching the sacrament and about which the Apostle says:

"Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup".

Let no one, however, because of his unworthiness, fail to accept the Lord's invitation heard in the Liturgy, or think that by receiving Holy Communion less often he can prepare for it better and be more worthy. The sense of unworthiness is just the right mood, the only one which permits us to be sharers in God's supreme grace offered to us as a completely free gift.

At the end of the prayers for receiving Holy Communion are the Thanksgiving prayers which are to be read after the Divine Liturgy at home.

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GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

## A meditation on death

by Bishop Nikolay Velimirovic



About the necessity of death in order to reap a great harvest, the Lord says:

"I tell you the truth; a grain of wheat remains no more than a single grain unless it is dropped into the ground and dies. If it does die, then it produces many grains." (John, 12:24)

Why does a sower throw grain in the ground? Is it because he wishes it to die and decay: No, it is because he wishes it to live and bring forth much harvest. A sower, sowing the seed, does not even think of death and decay of the seed, but thinks of life and harvest. Truly, it is with joy that the sower sows his seed, thinking not of death, but of life and harvest.

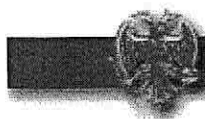
The sower is the Lord Jesus and people are His wheat. He, Himself called us wheat. There are many seeds on this earth, but the most precious seed is wheat. Why did the Lord sow us on earth: Does He want us to die and decay? No, it is because He wants us to live and bring forth much harvest.

He mentions our death as only a by-the way matter, only as a condition for life and much harvest. The purpose of sowing is not death, but life. But the seed must first die and decay: and He only mentions this because He knows that we all know this only too well. He briefly reminds us of this while the rest of His Gospel or EVANGELIE (Greek for good news) speaks extensively, because He knows of our ignorance about this and He knows that we are suffocating with doubt and lack of knowledge. Not only does He speak extensively of life, but He demonstrates life for us. By His resurrection, He shows us life and harvest, more clearly than we can see the sun. And the whole history of His Church is like a clear map of life.

O Lord of life irrepressible, save us from the death in sin. Save us from the spiritual death. To you Glory and gratitude for ever. Amen.

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GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

## Is death the end?

by Ezekiel Bozikis

Recently, I attended the funeral of a young man. Death is always tragic, but we seem to feel it more when the deceased is someone young. Why is this? Isn't it because we are thus made acutely aware of our own mortality? We expect elderly people to die (distressing, though, their deaths may be to their loved ones) - and we expect to die old ourselves. But, this isn't guaranteed. We could die in fifty years time, or we could die tomorrow. We don't know when we will die, but we do know that we will die!

"It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgement..." (Heb. 9:27).

### The question is, "Are we ready to die?"

If you knew that you were going to die within the hour, how would you react? I suspect most of us would feel scared and horrified. Why? Isn't it because we consider this life on earth to be all that we have and thus we make detailed long-term plans for our lives and, in some cases, our children's lives? Isn't it because we are afraid of the unknown, and death is the great unknown?

At this young man's funeral many people were asking: Why him? He was a good man, a good Christian, young - he had everything to look forward to. Why did he die?

We may never know, in this life, the full reason why God took this man. But many of us believe that, because this young man believed in Christ and was filled with such goodness, this evil world was not worthy of him; and God has called him home to Paradise.

See the difference when you look at it through spiritual eyes? Non-Christians can see only this life. You live seventy or so years (if you're lucky) and then you die. The End.

But as Christians, we know that life continues after "death". Our soul does not die with our body. This present existence on earth is only a tiny fraction of our whole existence. While we may live for a few years on this earth, we will be living for ever in either heaven or hell.

Isn't it amazing that we spend so much time and effort planning our education, careers, holidays, etc., and little, if any, time in planning where we will spending eternity?

It is like a young person, when they've got their first job, wanting to buy a car. Their parents say no. Save your money and buy a house, they say. They can see the long-term scenario. They know that money spent on a car is wasted money; but a house and property is something that will have value indefinitely. But the child can only see his short-term need - a vehicle so that he can be mobile and go wherever he wants.

We are like that child - seeing only the short-term. We have to quickly reprioritise things, or else we may be in for a rude shock.

This Pascha let us consider the loving work that God has done for us, in sending His beloved son Jesus Christ to die on the cross for our sins. If we believe in Jesus, and trust Him, and turn away

Death: Is it the end ?

from our sins, then death is no more to be feared - it is simply a doorway to a better life.

To quote the Apostle Paul in more detail: "And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgement, so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation. "(Heb. 9:27, 28 ).

And St. John Chrysostom confirms: "Let no one fear death for the Saviour's death has liberated us from it.... O Death, where is sin, your poisonous sting? O Hades, where is your infamous victory? Christ is risen, and you are utterly defeated!... Christ is risen, and no one will remain dead in the graves!"

from **Voice in the wilderness**  
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## Burial or cremation of the dead?

by Fr J. Scherstobit

Living in a multicultural and multi-faith society here in Australia, we have different attitudes and beliefs about death, and the disposal of the dead.

Among a few of the religions and most of the secular people the idea of cremating the dead seems simple and proper in their eyes and, therefore, is practiced widely. Since we Orthodox Christians also live amongst these people it is quite natural that some of their ideas may rub on us. One of the questions asked of us clergy today, is whether cremation is proper for disposal of the dead, or not, and if not, why not?



Burial has been traditional way of disposing the dead for thousands of years. This is proven by the fact that we find graves of all sorts, ranging from pyramids to the simplest kind. Most of them include various artifacts from the dead people's everyday life, which tells archaeologists that they had a belief in the afterlife and eternity, or at least the continuation of life to a certain degree after death.

The Old Testament, which for Christians is an "educator in Christ", contains many references to the subject of burial. For Israel, the "chosen people" of God and also for the surrounding tribes and nations, it was considered a terrible misfortune for someone to be denied burial (Psalm 78:3 Septu.), and one of the worst punishments which the prophets foretold, would take place for sinners (3 Kings 14:11 also Jeremiah 22, 18:19 Septu.). The Israelites took great care, whilst living to prepare and have things ready for their burial. The sons of the dead person had the obligation of properly burying their parents. It was a sign of respect which was obligatory to the army, at a time of war, and to every faithful Israelite.

The New Testament, also talks about burial. The contemporaries of our Lord Jesus Christ kept this tradition of the Old Testament for burial; a good example is the case of Lazarus. Jesus Christ does not condemn this practice, even when he stressed that it was more important to follow him than to perform this holy obligation of burying one's father ("...leave the dead to bury heir own dead" Matt. 8:22). He himself was aware that He would die a dishonourable death as a criminal, without funerary honours ("she [the sinful woman] undertook to anoint my body with myrrh for my burial" - Mark 14:8, John 12:7). Even though the Lord died a death on the cross he was buried and not left on the cross as was normal for those executed as criminals. The early Christians in the catacombs, following the evangelical example, also buried their dead rather than cremate them.

This practice of burying the dead is held by all Orthodox Christian's Churches throughout the world. It follows in the steps of our faith, of the resurrection of the bodies together with the souls. Other religions (Buddhism etc) teach that the bodies should be burnt to release the soul which is

## Burial or Cremation?

bad with the hope that they will be reincarnated into a better one...

Another very important matter from a Christian point of view is that with burial we have kept the relics of many Saints, many of which being full of Grace give off a most pleasing aroma and have miraculous qualities.

People who support cremation say that they have a right to choose that, and that the Church should give in to their demands. The Church replies that: as they are free to choose the method of disposal of their bodies, but the Church is free to follow her Holy Tradition and teaching, and can therefore deny to those wanting cremation a Christian funeral service. As to the question whether the souls of those cremated are rejected by the Lord, we can only say that the Lord can resurrect any body regardless of how it died and was disintegrated. We have the example of Saints who were burnt alive or were eaten by wild animals in the Colosseum of Rome etc. and it would be foolish to say that they will not be resurrected. This, though, is different from someone voluntarily wishing to be cremated and not buried because of a differing belief about the body and salvation from that of the Church.

Among the other Christian Confessions of faith, most of the protestant denominations accept cremation. The Roman Catholic faith forbade cremations until 1983. From that year, according to their new Canon Law, they will allow cremations as long as they are not done for reasons contrary to the Christian teaching, but still advises burial as the norm.

In the Orthodox Christian Funeral Service the hymns and prayers continually refer to burial and for the return of the body "to the earth from which it was taken" (Gen. 3:19).

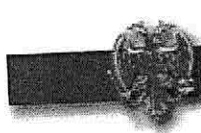
## In conclusion

1. The burial of the dead is an ancient custom of most civilisations. It is based on Holy Scripture, according to the belief that man was formed from earth "and to earth he will return".
2. Christianity, especially the Orthodox Church, teaches that the human body will rise at the Second Coming of the Lord, to attain the blessedness of the Heavenly Kingdom together with the soul, or to suffer the result of rejecting God. Therefore we must respect the body even after death. Respect is shown by burying the body and not burning it.
3. The supporters of cremation give a lot of environmental, psychological and economical reasons to push their ideas in making cremation available to Christians. Most of those putting these ideas across are either non Christians, or peripheral "Christians" who are doing their best to fight the Orthodox Christian Faith.
4. The Church has no objection to people who are not firm believers and who wish to have themselves cremated, but expects the freedom not to conduct a funeral service for them because of the aforementioned reasons

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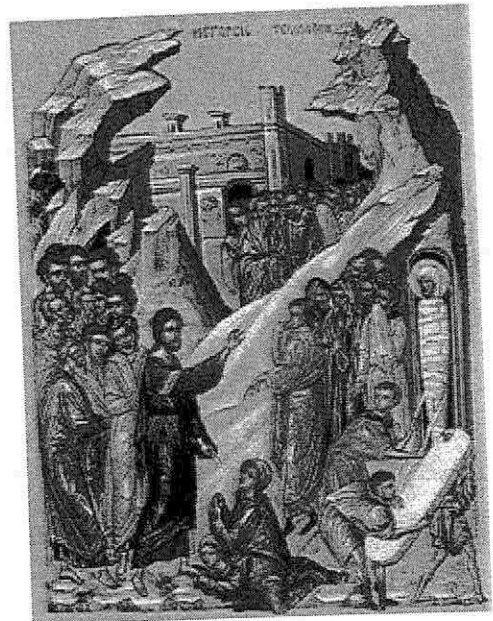


GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

## Coping with grief (according to the Church Fathers)

by N. P. Vassiliades

Death, an exceptionally emotional event, always evokes pain and grief in people. The Christian faith, which embraces humanity with special love, has always respected this kind of human pain... St. Paul teaches that we should be sympathetic, "weeping with those who weep" (Rom. 12:15). St. Basil notes that we ought to visit those who mourn and should help them with consoling words, but should neither be overcome by grief, nor should imitate the lamentations and the wails of those who do not mourn in a manner pleasing to God.



However, if the death of any person evokes considerable pain and sorrow, the death of a person related to us evokes even greater pain. The sorrow at the departure of our beloved ones - spouse, child, parent - is usually expressed by sobbing, funeral lamentations, many tears and rending of the soul.

The Christian faith, furthermore, does not expect people to be dispassionate or indifferent at the death of one's relatives; Christ Himself wept at the death of His beloved friend Lazarus. On approaching the tomb to resurrect him, Jesus was "deeply moved" and exerted great inner effort to control His emotions (cf. Jn 11:35, 38).

...Because man is a rational being, he can and must overcome this sorrow and not allow it to overwhelm him, which is exactly what Jesus did in the case of Lazarus. St. John Chrysostom advises us to imitate the Lord, "As Christ cried for Lazarus, let us also cry". He cried and presented us with "a measure and a degree" that we should not transgress. For, why was it necessary for Him to weep, since He was later to resurrect Lazarus? He did this for us to learn "how much to cry". In this manner we are shown the sympathetic aspect of human nature and the avoidable practices of unbelievers.

People who are far from God have every reason to lament and to

practices. For, besides the hope of eternal life, which offers us much consolation, we are also called to think, "Do we weep and mourn because he who died was evil?" Yet, precisely because of this we should thank God, notes St. John Chrysostom, because death has interrupted his progress in evil. Do we weep because he who died was good and kind? But for this, too, we should rejoice because he was called by God early "lest evil change his understanding or guile deceive his soul" (Wis. 4:11). Now he is in a safe place and he is in no danger of losing his good character. The holy Father also asks: Do you mourn because he was young? But for this, too, praise God who called him early and received him for a better life...

If we were destined to remain here on earth for ever, we would have every reason to weep and mourn for those who die. Since, however, we are all destined to go elsewhere, let us not lament for them who depart before us.

This is the manner in which the holy Fathers, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, console the mourning of a husband or a wife; for the deprivation of a spouse is profoundly felt by the one who remains. The death of one of the two spouses creates a deep psychic wound in the other.

Many who weep over their beloved spouse often say how used they were to him or to her. How will they now be able to live without his or her presence that filled the home? How will they live without his or her company sharing day-to-day problems and making them bearable? Indeed, the separation of two persons, who were close and used to each other, is very difficult to bear. But for someone to mourn over this separation is entirely irrational, according to St. Basil. His advice is: Do not expect moral laws to agree with your desires. Those who have been united during the course of the present life and later are separated by death, resemble travellers journeying on a single road. Having become used to travelling together, they have been joined closely on account of their companionship. But when they reach the point where they must part, and each one is obliged to follow his own way, they are not restrained by the companionship they enjoyed together. They part and each goes his own way. So is the case now; you travel along with your beloved relative - the spouse, the mother, the child - but the time has come to part. You have become accustomed to each other. But God, who created us and gave us a soul, has also determined for each one a personal way of life and a relationship. For others, moreover, God has set different terms of departure from this present life. For someone else, God through His love and great wisdom has determined that he remain here bodily for a longer period of time. For another, God has decided, in His unknowable wisdom and justice, that he be liberated sooner from the bonds of the body. Consequently, just as each one has a particular beginning, so does one have a particular ending to one's earthly life...



Others who mourn say, "he was my supporter". But if you seek support, notes St. John Chrysostom, and it is for this reason you mourn your husband, take refuge in God who is the supporter and Saviour and benefactor of all people... We may have lost the support of our beloved, but we have the powerful companionship of the omnipotent and all-compassionate God.

Others say, "I mourn and lament, because I had placed my hopes on the person who departed". But is this not an indication of a lack of faith? For you believe that you are secure because of your husband or child and not because of God. This little faith displeases God and for this reason He often takes your protectors so that you are not so dependant on them; so that you will not place your hopes on them. Because we are inclined toward earthly things and we forget God, our loving Lord, even when we do not want it, will draw us to desire Him. Do not love your husband more than you love God and you will never feel widowhood. Or better yet, even when you are widowed, you will not feel it. For you have the immortal God who loves you much more than your husband or your child as your protector.

St. Gregory of Nyssa, in order to console the parents, who mourn for the death of their child, reminds them of the word of the Lord to his Disciples: "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 19:14).

The holy Father says:

Well, your child may have departed from you, but he has gone to Christ the Lord. For you his eyes have been shut, but they are opened to the eternal light: he is gone from your table, but is now added to the table of the angels. The plant was uprooted from here, but planted there in Paradise. From the earthly kingdom he was transferred to the heavenly kingdom. You see what was exchanged for what. Are you sad because you no longer see the beauty of the face of your child? But this happens, because you do not see the real beauty of the soul with which he rejoices in the heavenly feast. How beautiful indeed is the eye that sees God! How sweet indeed is the mouth that is adorned with divine melodies! Are you sad perhaps because he did not live to reach old age? But what good do you see in old age? Is it good to have the eyes irritated and cause itching, to have the face filled with wrinkles, to lose the teeth one after the other and to have the tongue lisp, to have the hands shake, to be bent over, to have the legs limp, to have need of guides... ? Is this why we are indignant because the child died at a young age and did not have the bitter and painful experience of all these? After all, continues the Father made wise by God, let me tell you of the good things of life. Listen to them; sorrows and pleasures, angers and fears, hopes and desires. These and other similar events and circumstances are the lot with which we are

entangled in this present life. What is the evil then that has happened to your child who died early in life and was spared from many and so powerful tyrants.

from **The Mystery of Death**, p. 301-320

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# Life after death... Mysteries beyond the grave

This is a transcript of a talk given by Fr. Thomas Hopko in Brisbane Australia during October, 1999.

## Introduction

There is no clear dogmatic teaching of our Orthodox Church on death and what happens when we die. There is a lot of interest about death as reflected by the amount of books written about after death experiences, salvation and damnation. Furthermore, there are questions about the soul after death and the intermediate state (i.e. the period between when we die and the world's end). Christ is coming in glory and because the millennium is coming up, which by the way is the year 2001 with 2000 being the last year of the second millennium, has stirred interest in the 'end time', the 'coming of Christ', and 'the judgement of God on the world' are the interpretations of the time.

There is a lot of discussion going on right now on death, how we understand dying and what we are to say about those who are biologically dead already. There are related questions like praying for people who have departed this life. We Orthodox people just love to have memorial services. We have the Divine Liturgy and nobody is there, but when we have a Memorial Service the church is packed.

I will now make some very simple points, which I think are clearly the teaching of our Orthodox Church, although this may be debateable. I am not giving just my opinion; I am giving my opinion about what I believe the Church is teaching us.

Let us take the interpretation of the Holy Scripture, Church Fathers, Saints and Services of the Church together and ask certain questions, such as:

- What is death?
- How do we understand death?
- What do we think happens?
- How are we to relate to it?
- What kind of answers would we get from the Holy Scripture?

The Holy Scripture is our basic authority of faith and is the witness of what the Christian faith is, and our tradition is an interpretation and understanding of Scripture. Our tradition is a way of understanding the Scripture and has a sense of which even the Scripture itself is a testimony to the tradition of faith or the kanonaspisteos (the rule of faith) that even antedated the writing of Scripture. Because, certainly there was the Christian faith before the writing of the New Testament Scriptures, which are basically interpretations of the Old Testament Scriptures. By the way, when the New Testament says "the Scriptures" it means what we call the "Old Testament", which includes the Law, Psalms, and the Prophets.

## What do Orthodox Christians teach about death and what happens when we die?

It is beyond any doubt that we Christians are convinced that we are created for life; it is not God's will that we die. God doesn't want death; He wants life. In the Scripture, death is the enemy. The Apostle Paul even calls death, "the last enemy". Death is not natural, not a natural part of our life and not willed by God. The Wisdom of Solomon, which for us is part of the Bible, says very clearly, "God did not create death". Death comes into the world as a rebellion against God. Death comes into the world because people do not choose life, but choose death, darkness, and themselves over God.

St. Athanasios said, "if you choose yourself you are choosing nothing, because that what you are without God", since we are created out of nothing. For God gives our whole life to us, Who is the living God and the only One Who lives.

It is our teaching that death results from human rebellion against God from the beginning and with the help of the demons (who are lovers of death, darkness and evil). The Bible teaches actually teaches kind of a 'package plan', you have God, truth, life and glory, or you have the demons, darkness, death, satan, sin, corruption, ugliness and rot. This is the basic reality, and there is no middle path.

In the eight chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, the Apostle Paul says, "working in our members is always a heterosnomos (another law)". Human beings think that they are economists, in other words, they are 'a law unto themselves', but according to the Scriptures we are not. Either there is the law (nomos) of Christ, which the Apostle Paul calls the law of the Holy Spirit and Life in his Epistle to the Romans, or there is the law of sin and death. There is either one law or the other that works, if it isn't the one it is the other. Here we interpret the Genesis story as the choice of death. Furthermore, it is even not strictly Orthodox to think of sin as a corrupted choice or making the wrong choice. I believe that our teaching is that the problem is not whether it is right or wrong but choice itself (as taught by St. Maximos the Confessor), because if you are a creature you have no choice.

If there is God and God is God and God is the living God and God is Who He is, our only choice is to give up our choice and listen to and obey Him. This is very important to understand, because the modern people think that the more choices they have and the more they deliberate the more the freer they are, however this is not Biblical. What we say is that if there is God, at any given moment the only choice we have is to give up choice and obey Him, listen to Him, trust Him, to love Him and to believe Him. The primordial sin is exactly saying "no, I will not obey, trust or love God. I will do it my way". You know what takes place when you do it your way; you perish and die. That is where death comes from. Where there is obedience, love and trust in God, there can not be death. If one was to obey God totally, live in communion with God, trust and love God in everything, that person will not be able to die.

It is interesting in the Genesis story, God **did not** say to Adam and Eve, "eat of the tree and I will kill you". He said, "you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil", meaning choice rather than obedience, "for when you eat of it you will surely die", for it is sin that kills you. God doesn't kill anybody, in that sense; we kill ourselves. So the minute we take our life in our own hands to do what we want to do, and do not obey God, basically we commit suicide. Furthermore, we put that death over to our children who are born in the same condition of death when born into the world. That is what the 'ancestral sin' is all about. A second point is that we would say that the human task is to overcome and destroy death, and to make death to die so that life can then live.

The whole Old Testament, which includes the Law, Psalms and Prophets, is really about teaching people the will of God to reconstruct a rebellious humanity in order that ultimately death can be destroyed. For example, in the Law of Moses you have two very interesting things, one is God



says, through Moses, 'I present to you only two ways: the blessing and the curse' (i.e. life or death). Then it says, 'choose life and don't choose death'. The Law, Psalms and Prophets say Obey God, give up your choice, obey God and you will live. For example, Psalm 118 (119) that is read in our funeral service and on the night of Holy Saturday before Pascha says, "Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord! Blessed are those who keep His testimonies, who seek Him with the whole heart!" Then the Psalm continues "If I keep I Your law, I find life in it and I can not die". That is way it is read over the body of the dead Jesus, because He is the only One who kept the Law of God completely, and therefore could not die.

What we believe is that Jesus Christ our Saviour came into the world in order to die. He is the only One who came in order to die so that He can transform death itself into a victory through His death. He is the only One, the only Person, and the only Human who has ever been born in order to die. He is also the only Human who is the Son of God, Who is divine as the same divinity as the Father, Who is born of a virgin, Who is begotten of the Father, Who comes exactly into the world for one purpose; to destroy the work of the devil and death, and to give us life.

Before the coming of Christ, according to the Bible, everyone is caught by death, no matter how good or bad they were. We can even say to this day that is the truth. Biologically, we are all dead; we are a room of dead people. It is a good idea once in a while to remember that. In fact, many of our monastics would even put a coffin and cross in their room to remember that. There is an American church story about some southern Protestants who heard about a Roman Catholic monk who used to write "remember death" and that he had a coffin prepared for his death. One of them says to the other, "You know that they used to do that, and sometimes they'd even sleep in that coffin?" Then the other character said, "Yep, they weren't as advance as we is". However, the question is who is really advanced?

The problem, however, is that in our time death has been so naturalised nobody will even think of it as an enemy. In much literature it is considered the last stage of life, normal, or you go into some sort of light somewhere, and if you are tired of this life or this world you call some doctor to end your life. However for Biblical Christians, that is absolutely not the teaching.

Let us compare the death of Socrates to the death of Jesus. Socrates the philosophic man, corrupting the youth of Athens because of his teaching of philosophia, says that the real philosopher is the one who can face death. When they finally catch him to put him to death and his friends want to rescue him, he says no. When they bring him the hemlock he drinks it and dies. By the way, the euthanasia society in the state of Massachusetts in the United States is called the Hemlock Society.

Then look at how Jesus dies. He is in the garden and begs His Father to let 'this cup pass' and sweating blood. For Him it is an outrage to die or that any person would die; it is the total victory of the devil. We were created to sing halleluiah to God, not to be corrupted and rot in the tomb. In the Old Testament, there was a big debate about death. Some thought that death is natural and you just died and went to your fathers. They also believed that God continues to live in the people and the dry bones of Israel (or the people of Israel) are resurrected, but the individual person is lost. These people, at the time of Jesus, were called the Sadducees. The Sadducees, if you read the Bible, did not believe in the spirit, soul or the resurrection of the dead. However, the Pharisees believed in them all. They interpreted from the Scripture that there will be a resurrection from the dead and the dead will rise. They also believed that when the God Messianic age will come, when God's glory will fill creation, when God's kingdom will finally be established through the Messiah the main thing that will happen is that the graves will be open (beside the blind seeing, the lame walking, the deaf hearing and the dumb talking...). Then all the dead will rise and God will judge every single person that has lived. That was the teaching of the pharisaic party and the Apostle Paul. If you read the Book of Acts, every time St. Paul got into trouble for preaching the

Resurrection of Jesus, he would create a fight between the Jews. He would say that he was on trial because of the Resurrection, and the Sadducees would start fighting with the Pharisees and he would just stand aside and look on. Jesus, from this perspective, was a Pharisee because He believed in the Resurrection. In fact He said He was the Resurrection and the Life.

In the Old Testament, however, whatever the position was about resurrection everyone was dead. In the Bible, the place of the dead or the condition of being dead was called Sheol in the Hebrew or Hades in the Greek. One problem is that sometimes Sheol or Hades is translated into English as hell, and people speak of God descending into hell, but it should never be called hell, because there is no hell until the end of time.

In the Bible, specifically in the Wisdom of Solomon, it says that if you were a righteous, just person and died, you were still somehow in the hands of God who cares for you. People think that it is a tragedy, but it is not because God is still there. This was kind of a blissful state of death and was called the bosom of Abraham. So the righteous dead were in the bosom of Abraham, and those who believed in the Resurrection believed that they were blissfully dead until the Messianic King would come to raise the dead and then they would enter into glory. David, Solomon, the Prophets and even John the Baptist was in this state of bliss in the bosom of Abraham. In our Orthodox tradition, John the Baptist is the forerunner of Jesus even into Sheol. As expressed in his troparian, he dies before Jesus to announce that the Son of God is coming into the realm of the dead to smash it open, to raise up everyone from the dead, to usher in the kingdom of God, and to grant us the great mercy of everlasting life with God.

There is also the teaching that this realm of the dead, or Sheol, had what is called the 'pit' where the evil people were. When the Messianic King comes, those in the pit were also raised for just condemnation and judgement. It should be pointed out that the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in the Gospel is exactly about this. It has nothing to do with heaven and hell. In the parable is about the rich man in the pit talking to Abraham and not to God. The whole point of the parable is if you do not listen to Moses and the law of the Prophets and really love, choose and obey God you will not be saved even if a poor man rises from the dead. In other words, if you do not love God and do not find life before you die then you will not find it after death, even if Jesus the Son of God comes in order to be crucified and die to descend into Sheol and raise the dead. For us, that is the very center of the Gospel.

The Gospel is that we now have the new, final and last Adam named Jesus. St. Paul says that the first Adam was a 'tipos' of the one Who was to come. Jesus is the real Adam, because He is the One who really obeys God His own Father. He obeys God from all eternity as the Son of God begotten of the Father and became human born of the Virgin Mary to be the Man who literally could not die and to be the Man who was literally, totally and completely dedicated to God, His Father. His word was the word of the Father, His will was the will of the Father, His work was the work of the Father, everything that He did was the Father, and when you saw Him you saw the Father.

Everything that is attributed to God in the Old Testament is now attributed to Jesus, this Man who is a real man but not mere man. He is the Man that the Son of God, Who is the source and author of life, comes down on earth and takes on Himself the sin, the curse, and everything of our human falling's including the last enemy (death itself), in order to destroy death by death. It is our teaching that that is the only way death can be destroyed, because God desires all people to live, all sin to be forgiven, and that His is loved with all our soul, mind and love. Furthermore, if we were to keep His word and love Him, we would live forever, but nobody does this. We are all non-righteous and we can not save ourselves. The Psalm asks, 'who can bring themselves up from Sheol... who can raise themselves up from the dead?' Even the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus, could not keep herself from dying, because everyone is under the curse of death and in the hands

of the power of the evil one.

We need to be liberated and saved, but who can save us? God can not just say 'be saved', because if He could He would, but He can't. He has got to destroy death itself, and the only way that death could be destroyed is by life. The only way that darkness can be destroyed is by light. The only way that evil can be destroyed is by good, and the only way that hatred can be destroyed is by love. So you have to have the One who is Love, Truth, Light, Goodness, Beauty, and Perfection who literally has to actualise this in this life. However, if you actualise this in life the way it is you get crucified. If you live completely and totally according to God in this world you can be sure of one thing you will get crucified. Jesus came in order to be crucified.

Jesus is the only One to can in order to die, because He came in order to love, obey and trust God His Father no matter what. And how do you show that you love God? By loving your neighbour and your worst enemy, and by taking their sin and evil upon yourself and even by dying their death for them so that you can liberate them from death, because they have no power over it. That is exactly what Jesus does and that is what our faith is. So Jesus comes into the world in order to die, and He destroys death by death. In our Orthodox faith, this is the only way this can happen. That is why the center of our Church is "Xristos anesti ek nekron," (Christ has risen from among the dead,) "phanato phanaton patisas..." (by death trampling upon Death...). There isn't any other way; even for God there is no other way. He became human and had become a curse, sin and die and for us, because that is the act of ultimate obedience, trust and love. This is a perfect act of love, which destroys death from the inside and raises up all the dead whether they want it or not. In fact everyone will be raised from the dead, irrespective of his or her wishes, during the Universal Resurrection of the dead, as taught by the Orthodox Church. This is way our Paschal icon shows Jesus even pulling Adam and Eve, with all the righteous and unrighteous from the dead.

If you have even been to an Orthodox funeral, you hear the fifth chapter of St. John's gospel. It says, "... the hour is coming in which all who are in the grave will hear His voice and come forth - those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation. I can of Myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgement is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me". This part of the gospel is extremely important, which says all and everyone will be raised. Not just the good people, but everyone. This Universal Resurrection is our teaching, because death is destroyed.

## **"What about the dead now that Jesus is raised from the dead?"**

Jesus is raised and glorified... He says, 'he who can believe in Me can not die'. St. Paul says, 'I gladly die and be with Chris, but if I have to hang around here at least let it be fruitful work'. However, Christ is risen and glorified and is at the right hand of the Father. That is the most repeated sentence of the Old and New Testament, and is found in Psalm 109 (110). The Psalm says, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool'". The last enemy to be put under is death. When death is destroyed everything is subject to Christ, He subjects everything to God the Father and God will be all and in all. This then will be the Messianic age, when the dead will be raised and God with glory will fill all creation. There will then be life for all those who repent and want to be righteous with God and there will be torment for those who do not repent and do not want the righteousness of God.

## **What about those who are dead, where are they and what are they doing?**



We do not know what the dead is doing, and I did not think anybody knows exactly and clearly. However, there are some things that can be said, and I think that what we have to say is for us who believe death is already destroyed in Christ. The last enemy has already been destroyed. Christ is risen and life lives, as the last line of St. John Chrysostom's homily for the Paschal night says. "Christ is risen and the demons shutter, Christ is risen and no one is in the grave. Christ is risen and life reins" (we say in American English). This original word for 'rein' doesn't simply mean 'rein' it means abides and lives. I think, a good translation would be "... Christ is risen and life lives". Life can not be destroyed and that is our faith. We are alive in Christ and our Baptism is a death into Christ.

I said earlier that we are all biologically dead people; like it or not. However, it is also true that those who believe and those who are Baptised and accept their Baptism, and even those who St. Gregory the Theologian says who desire Baptism but may not have heard about it, are already dead in Christ. Therefore, we are not only biologically dead but also hopefully all of us are already spiritually and mystically dead. We have died with Christ and no longer live in this world. We are fellow citizens with the Saints and we eat and drink at the table of the kingdom. We already have passed through the veil. We are already raised and glorified. We are still in this world, bearing the flesh, but the Holy Spirit has been sealed all over us... Those who have been Baptised have died, raised and sealed with the life creating Spirit. They are literally raised from the dead and can not die, and death becomes the transfiguration or the passage of everlasting life in Christ, because Christ is risen. This is important, not because we have an immortal soul; our soul is as dead as our body is, as far as the Bible is concerned. We do not teach immortality of the soul in our Church; we are not Socrates or Plato, but we follow the Bible. Death is the enemy of the body and soul, and Christ raises us up in body and soul. It is because Christ is risen that we have hope over death, not because of any 'natural' teaching.

I have a feeling that most Christians generally are pagans when we are alive and Platonists when we die. We function as pagans when life is going well, and we function as pagans when things are going badly (because we want the priest to come and make everything go well). However, when ultimately things do not go well and we die then we turn into Platonists and say, "It is better anyway, because the soul goes to heaven and we are finally with God". Well let's make up our mind, if the soul is better off going to God anyway why don't we all just go off and kill ourselves? Then why do we keep calling the priest over to pray so a person can be healed or be healthy, and when they die we say "well it is God's will anyway"? Well it is God's will, but the point I am trying to make is that this whole approach is absolutely wrong according to the Scriptures and the Saints.

In this life we don't just live just for God to make us healthy, wealthy and happy, and when we die we say, "well it is better anyway". We do not live this life for clothes, health and wealth. We live this life taking on the Cross of Christ loving God with the love which Jesus Christ and God has loved us (which is the New Commandment) so that we can trample down death ourselves by faith and grace through Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit given to us. So we have to live now as dead people and if we do not live as dead people we are not Christians. If we do not live as those who are already dead to this world, we are not Christians.

There is a wonderful story from the desert fathers. One man asks an old man, "What is this Christian perfection we are seeking for?" The old man replied, "Come, I will show you" and took him to a fresh grave in a cemetery and said to the dead man, "Brother, you are the worst pig that ever lived. No one is as rotten as you". Then the old man asked the young one, "What did he do?" The young man said, "Nothing, he is dead". The old man looked again at the same grave and said, "You are the greatest person who ever was. No one is like you. You are the most wonderful, perfect person". He then looked at the young man and asked, "What did he do". The young man again replied, "Nothing, he is dead". The old man then said, "Perfect". He lives only before the



face of God. He is not living for what people say whether they flatter, curse or bless him; he lives before the face of God. Therefore, he is free and he already reigns. And if he is with the love which God and Christ loves us, it is impossible to be before the face of God without being a lover of God.

So we are all already dead. It is our teaching that we Christians who die, we die in the hope that we will enter into the glory that Jesus already has at the right hand of the Father and that we will be alive in Him until the end of the ages. However, we also believe that because Christ, the Son of God, has taken on human life and died, everyone who dies is also raised up to be at the right hand of the Father in Christ. The problem is not everyone likes, wants or believes that. Even when people are convinced that it is true, they don't want it. So we can say in Jesus everyone is raised from the dead, everyone's sins are forgiven, and everyone is saved whether they want it or not, like it or not, or know it. If you want it, like it and know it is paradise and joy in life itself. If you don't, it is hell. Hell and paradise begins when we die.

Paradoxically we say that when a person dies, they already enter into the presence of God by being spiritually raised in Christ. If they love Him, they already experience the end of the ages, the joy of heaven and in the presence of God. If they resist and do not want it, that very same experience is torment. They are tormented by the evils that they cling to, tormented by the devils they serve in place of the living God, and they are tormented by all of the evil spirits instead of the Holy Spirit that are in their life. Furthermore, they are even tormented by the presence of Christ who loves, forgives and invites them into Paradise. Yet they do not want to come still thinking that they belong there. That is how they are not there with the just and righteous. That seems to be the picture that we have from the Holy Scripture.

In this sense it is very important that when we die now, we on early already image that and pray as it will be at the end of the ages. So, we believe that those who are revealed to us as being really holy, really God and Christ loving, and really full of grace are already glorified with Christ and that is why we can pray to them. That is why we can say, pray, be and intercede with us, because Christ Himself is alive making intercessions with God the Father on behalf of us, before the end of the ages. So the dead in Christ are also in Him interceding on our behalf before the end of the ages. We see it all in terms of the end and not some immortal soul that is out there floating around somewhere and we wonder where.

No, we see it all in terms of the final victory of Christ that is already anticipated by us on earth in the Church by our Baptism and Eucharist. Furthermore, when we die we leave the temporal and spatial conditions of the planet earth and enter the very presence of God anticipating already the age to come. That is why in our Eucharist, when we offer to God that which is His, we say "That which is Yours we offer to You". Then the priest continues remember all that has happened for us, the Cross, the tomb, the Resurrection on the third day, the ascension into heaven, the sitting at the right hand, and the Second and glorious Coming are remembered in the present tense. And we relate to the Theotokos (the Virgin Mary) and all the Saints as at the end of the ages when they are at the glory and ask them to intercede for us as we are offering the Eucharist of Christ's death for them. Since we say, "and first of all we offer this for the most holy, the most glorious lady Theotokos and Ever-virgin Mary", because the death of Christ is even for her salvation.

Now having said this, the questions arise: if when we die and enter into this reality, is it too late to repent? Is it all over? Are those who are fixed in their penitent, repentant and unrighteousness totally lost? Do you have to be totally perfect to enter paradise? How does all that work? Here is an issue that has become incredibly debated today. That is the issue of what happens to a person when they die. Sometimes it is put in terms of the soul. But that can be a little misleading, because soul in the Bible means 'their life' or 'person'. It means who they are. It shouldn't be thought of as a disembodied spirit and we are not a combination of a ghost and a corpse, but we are whole people.

When we die, is there a post-mortem repentance? Is there purification after we die? Can we change our mind after our earthly life is over? How do we relate to all of that? Here I think the simplest answer would be that death is the final test. That is why the quintessential Christian is the martyr; you prove your whole life by how you die. Christian life has only one purpose, to trample down death by death through the grace of God. So the transfiguration of death is where everything is proved, and how we die proves everything. Anything that we do up until that moment is prepared for that moment. That is why if we don't die daily we will not be able to transfigure death when the moment comes when we have to go through our passion, crucifixion and death by whatever way that is going to happen. As it is clearly the Orthodox teaching that death is the moment of truth, death therefore also is the final judgement on our life and it is the final chance and opportunity.

Here I think the teaching simplicity put is this, we do not believe in post-mortem conversions or eons of life where you can keep on repenting like Buddhists believe. However, I believe that from the Holy Scripture, the lives of the Saints and the funeral service tell us that in the process of dying and entering into the presence of the risen Christ we have to be purified from everything that is contrary to life, God and truth in that particular activity. It is in the very presence of the fire of God, or the consuming fire of God as put by the Scripture, that will burn out of us in that process of dying, everything that can not enter into life or God's kingdom.

The teaching of the Scripture is that death is a cathartic process even for the most righteous person. Perhaps the only person for whom death was a sheer transition was the holy Theotokos, who was so full of God, life, faith and grace that her death is a pure entrance into paradise. All the rest of us are not the Theotokos and we are not pure. There is garbage, sin and rebellion in us even where our desire is for God and our prayer is for God and we want to repent still there is that in us that can not enter into the presence of God or the very heart of the Father (which is everlasting life). This impediment must be burnt away. I believe that our teaching is that this process of dying is this cathartic process where at the end of which you are either with God for ever or away from God forever tormenting yourself with the demons and being tormented by the love of God that is still upon you even though you are an unrepentant sinner. In fact many of the Saints say that the greatest torture of hell are not only the tortures of the evil but the torture of the mercy and love of God that is still upon you (because God loves you no matter what). St. Isaac the Syrian said that there is no greater torment than to be scourged with the scourge of love.

When you die and enter the presence of love and you resist it that becomes a torture to you. St. Mark of Ephesus, a great Church father, refused to sign the council of Florence because of the papacy, the filioque, and because of the Latin teaching on material hellfire. He said that our Church tradition has no teaching on material-hellfire. We have no such teaching; God is not a punisher. Jesus on the Cross was not punished for our sins. Jesus on the Cross loved and trusted God so He can destroy death by death. When I speak with that nuance I say that there is no such thing as punishment. The punishment comes from our own evil and the love of God upon us when we reject it. God is not torturing or punishing us. In our tradition, this teaching about the need to be purified to enter into the kingdom got developed into a kind of allegory called the 'tollbooths'. You can read in some of the Christian literature that you have to go through around 20 or 22 tests in order to make it into the kingdom of God. Then I think some weird teachings developed which are not Orthodox and not according to the Scripture, but like every crazy teaching have a kernel of truth. The crazy teachings are that when you die you have to be punished for the things that you do and go through each of these toll-booths in order to get punished by the demons for that particular sin. So you go through the tollbooth of lust to get punished for your lust, you go through the tollbooth of greed to be punished for your greed, you go through the tollbooth of anger to be punished for anger, and so on until you are punished enough and make it.

In the western church, even before the Reformation, there was a teaching that if you pray for these people you can get some of the punishment off. It was called temporal punishment due to your sin and those were called indulgences and then you could actually go to church to light a candle, say a prayer or give some money to get the time off from the punishment. This was called the "purgatorium" (or the "purgatory") connected with the doctrine of punishment and inflicted pain that had to be done away with. This is not our Orthodox teaching.

The Orthodox teaching is that we do have to be tested by every possible demon and be victorious over that demon by the grace of God, the intercessions of the Saints, and anything that we can do to open ourselves in faith to God so that we can be delivered. So the truth of the tollbooth myth or allegory is **not** that the soul will go through some "astral space" getting tempted by demons and getting punished for sin. The right interpretation is that, as taught by many holy fathers such as Sts John Klimacus and Athanasias, death is the moment of truth and every demon is going to try to get you to apostatise, hate God and try to make you cling to corporeal things. They would like to stop you from letting go of everything so that you can only love God and let God save you. So the tests will see if we hang on to our pride, arrogance and so on. These tests you have to pass through are symbolically represented by the tollbooths; you have to be 'tried'. Then we that the prayer of the Church and the prayer of the Saints do help us to resist the demons and to be faithful and to be faithful and trust God, **but** this is true at any moment of our life. We pray for one another now, we are prayer for by the Saints now so that we will not succumb to lust, greed, power etc, so that when we die we are ready to float right through and not have to deal with all that at the very end of our life. However, the teaching is this, deal with it we must because we must do the work that Jesus Christ Himself did. Jesus said, "He who believes in Me will do the work that I do". We must conquer the devils like He did. We must resist the temptations like He did. We must destroy death the way that He did. That is what He gives us the power to do through the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Sacraments and the life of the Church.

So folks, lets gets started now by being freed from all of this, because at the moment of death it is going to come upon us like a power. But not only at the moment of death, if a person tries to die now before they die all the demons will come to bother them. Evagrus Pontokos said, "If you come to the Church, say your prayers, stand there and say to God 'Lord have mercy, God save me, God be with me, God purify me' all the Panagia Theotokos with all the angels with all the Saints will come and pray with you". Then he said, "So does every demon in hell". To try to get you not to love God and not to trust God, but hang on to your own self, power, greed, money, and what ever it is that your idol. That is going on all the time, but the teaching is that it intensifies at the very moment of death. Therefore, the prayers at the very moment of death are important and we have special prayers for dying people. We have two canons and a funeral service. In our Church it takes 40 days to die.

Some people say, "Well, when you die it is too late and it is certainly too late for us to pray for a person. Why should I pray for my mother and father who have departed this life? They are dead and into the presence of God already. There is nothing that these prayers can do, because it's over for them". Here our Church would say this, "As long as I am alive in this world, it isn't over for me. And I don't know what is going on out there, but if I love my mother and father and even my worst enemy, and I know that they are dying and they are going into the presence of the Lord, and have to pass this incredible test and have to really come to love and have faith in God, then I will pray for them with all my heart and soul. I will pray to my last breath that God's mercy and love would be accepted by them and that they would be saved". But I also have to say this, our Church teaches that God hears our prayers before we even pray them. In fact our Church teaches that God hears our prayers before He even created the world and us. So if I pray today for my father like I did at the Holy Liturgy this morning, when they say remember the departed, I always say John and Anna as my parents and others, like we all do, God heard that even before He created even the whole world. That prayer becomes part of the whole divine providence for my mother and



father and others we pray for. Therefore, it isn't too late for God, because God hears our prayers whenever we make them for all eternity, and they have an effect upon the whole of creation. One little prayer changes the entire divine providence. So if I pray now for my parents, I am obviously going to pray for them as being already asleep in the Lord, because they are biologically dead. Although I believe that they are alive in God and sometimes I must say have mercy on them. One in a while I even pray to them and say "mum and dad, please help me today. Because I have to give a talk in Brisbane".

I believe that my parents are with God and I have the right to believe that. And I can risk that in faith and I can even ask for their prayers in the same way I can ask for the prayers of the Bishop. I can also ask a Bishop who has already fallen asleep in the Lord; the Bishop who ordained me. For God, this is for all eternity. So it is not too late, but we pray from our position. If a person is sick, we pray for them as sick and if they have fallen asleep we pray for them as dead... We pray for people from our perspective, but God takes the whole thing into consideration from all eternity and arranges the whole plan on the basis of our prayers, including the prayers we make for people who are dead. Therefore we believe that my prayer for my father not only helps him to enter into the presence of the Lord and to be saved in the age to come, but I believe that it helped him when his father died when he was 12 years old, before I was even born. It helped him get a job in a factory and it helped him to support me being a priest. I believe this, because God is embracing the whole thing. That is why we can have memorial services and pray. It is not that we have one more memorial service and bingo dad gets into heaven. That is not our teaching. God knows what everybody needs and He knows what we are all doing and works together the whole thing, according to love as well as He can. So we are coworkers with God and a big part of that co-work is remembering and holding before God those who are already fallen asleep and have already entered into the life of the age to come. And we relate to them that way in the life of the Church.

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## The Cross

by the Late Very Rev Fr. N Patrinos

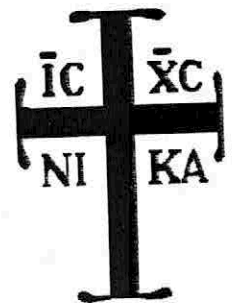


The cross has acquired an exceedingly special place in the Christian faith and worship. Since Christ suffered on it, the cross for the Orthodox is a symbol of the supreme sacrifice and of the Resurrection not only of the Lord but also of one's own in the life to come. The Greek term for cross is used by Homer, Thucydides and Herodotus. But the Seventy Translators of the Old Testament, although they seem to know the verb, do not quote the noun. The cross as the emblem signifying salvation by way of Christ's sacrifice on it comes to eminence with the books of the New Testament. The Church from the very beginning decreed special days for honouring the Cross of Christ. St. Helen, the mother of Constantine the Great, journeyed to Jerusalem about 326AD and found the place where Christ was buried and built on it the famous Church of the Resurrection. Consecrated in the year 335, it still remains

the most respected place of worship for the Orthodox where the famous Service of the Resurrection takes place at midnight of the Saturday of Holy Week. According to the greatest historians of the time, such as Socrates and Theodoret, Ambrose and Nicephoros Kallistos, together with the tomb, the Cross of Christ was also found. To commemorate this day, the Church decreed the third Sunday of Great Lent as the feast day of the finding of the Cross, calling it Sunday of the Veneration of the Cross.

Another day when the Cross is ecclesiastically venerated is September 14, the Exaltation of the Cross. This feast is connected with the historical event of emperor Heracleias' recovering the Cross from the Persians into whose hands it had fallen in 614. The Cross was raised in the Church of the Resurrection to be venerated by the people. Since then, on September 14 a special Liturgy has been taking place and the Cross is being raised and exalted by the Orthodox. The day has been specified as a fasting day of the severity of the days of the Holy Week. And since, according to the narrative, St. Helen discovered the Cross buried in a spot on which the herb basil had grown, sprigs of blessed basil are distributed to the faithful by the priest when they bow and kiss the Cross.

Apart from the formal occasions on which the Orthodox venerate the Cross as the Christian symbol signifying life rather than death, the sign of the Cross and small crosses as articles of personal piety and symbolism have played a deep reaching role in the daily experience of the Orthodox. Before kissing an icon, the Orthodox Christian crosses himself as a sign of sealing himself with the symbol most indicative of his relation with Christ and most protective against evil and other adversities of personal and communal experience. It is believed that Constantine the Great won by the sign of the Cross, not only his most decisive personal battle, but also brought about the most historical changes in the life of man since the conquests of Alexander the Great. The Christian martyrs were marching to their death holding Crosses to their heart as objects not only of complete identification with their Master, but as sources of strength as well, that rendered the pain of death an event of supreme personal fulfillment. For today's Orthodox, the Cross stands as a personal protector in



the midst of a life that tends, most of the time, to be confusing, fragmented as it is by so many enemies.

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## The sign of the Cross

The sign of the Cross has been used by the Christians since the time of the Apostles. It is a pious act, which the Orthodox Christians make in the following manner; The thumb, the index and the middle finger of the right hand are joined together, while the remaining two fingers are bent and touching the palm of the hand. At first, the forehead is touched, then the breast, then the right shoulder and finally the left shoulder. Besides the impression which the sign of the Cross makes on the senses, it reminds us of its spiritual meanings. The three fingers joined together symbolise the Oneness of God in the three Persons of the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The two fingers, bent to the palm of the hand, signify the union of the two natures in Christ, the Divine and the Human. The touch of the forehead signifies that God is in our head (in our mind), the touch of the breast signifies that God is in our heart (in our feelings), the touch of the shoulders signifies that God is in our limbs, directing them as He wills. In other words, by the sign of the Cross we dedicate to the service of God all the power of our mind, heart, and soul. We are led to this service of God by means of the sign of the Cross, because it reminds us of Christ's death on the Cross, to which "God gave His only-begotten Son" out of His love to the world (John 3:16). The sign of the Cross on our bodies is also a prayer for God's blessing upon ourselves and others. It has often proved a protection against evil, whether in ones inner thoughts or outward actions, when made in true faith in its power. Therefore, we rightly make it when we start and close our prayers; when we enter a Church; when we kiss the Icons of the Saints; when the name of the Persons of the Holy Trinity, the name of the Virgin Mary, and of the Saints are pronounced during the Services; when sacred instances occur during the Divine Liturgy; when we start and finish our meals; and on many other occasions. Its frequent repetition, when we are mindful of its significance, can become to us a source and fountain of every blessing.

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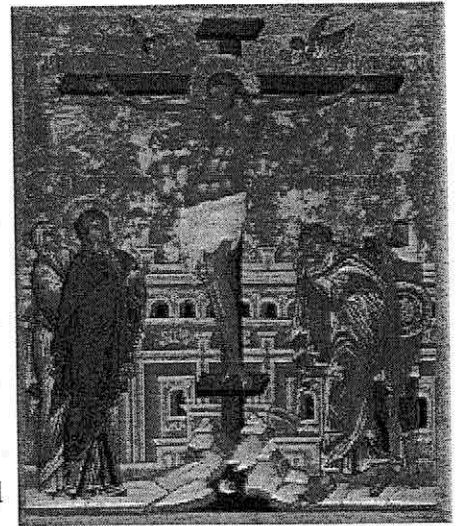


# The Cross of Christ

by Fr G. Dimopoulos

The Cross of Christ consisted of two bars of wood which were nailed together at right angles by someone in obedience to an order from the unscrupulous judges of Christ. He joined them in order to crucify upon them the Saviour of the world, the "gentle and humble of heart" (Matthew 11:29), the one who was spat upon, reviled, struck and tormented.

But "When he was insulted, he returned no insult. When he was made to suffer, he returned no threats" (1 Peter 2:23). The carpenter who cut the planks, the servant who nailed them together and the judges who pronounced sentence—none of these had the vaguest idea of importance of the event or of the cross. These two pieces were raised at the juncture of history, dividing the world into two periods of time—the eras before and after the redemption of Christ.



The Cross of Christ is a symbol of the great moral, spiritual and religious importance. It stands for the crucifixion of Christ, the unfathomable mystery of the Passion and death of the God-Man on Golgotha. Only by means of the Cross can the supreme mystery of the Incarnation be penetrated, or the mystery of the redemption of mankind.

St John Chrysostom says,

"The Cross, is wood which lifts us up and makes us great.....The Cross uprooted us from the depths of evil and elevated us to the summit of virtue".

The study of the Cross, of the great drama enacted on *Golgotha*, raises man up to the level of angels.

"You made him for a little while lower than the angels; you crowned him with glory and honour, and put all things under his feet" (Hebrews 2:7).

When man devotes his efforts to a serious contemplation of the mystery of the Cross, he is lifted up, raised in comprehension and conception; he becomes tender and gentle in thought and feeling, humble in his achievements, meek in his behaviour. Armed with the weapon of the Cross and furnished with immaterial wings of superhuman power, inspired by the Holy Spirit, he reaches the dizzying heights of Christian virtue and enters that state which St. Paul describes saying,

"The life I live is not my own; Christ is living in me" (Galatians 2:20).

The Cross has another meaning: the crucifixion, the subjugation, the annihilation of our passions; the rejection and uprooting of any feeling or intention which does not conform with the ideals of Christ. Whatever does not comply with the Spirit of Christ should be cast far away from us. Therefore the cross is inlaid with depictions of the sufferings and persecutions of Christ and all



Christians.

"It was for this you were called, since Christ suffered for you in just this way and left you an example, to have you follow in His footsteps" (1 Peter 2:21).

We suffer for the truth when we are scorned for being righteous, when we are persecuted for virtue, when we become imitators of Christ.

"Blessed are those persecuted for righteousness' sake; the kingdom of God is theirs" (Matthew 5:10).

He also said,

"If you wish to be a follower of the Crucified One, dear brother, you must take up your cross and prepare yourself for a life of deprivation, sacrifice and struggle. Do not lose courage. Let not your hearts be troubled. Have faith in God and faith in Me... Do not be distressed or fearful" (John 14:1,27).

Continue along your road, even though it is an uphill path and very tiring. But when you feel despondent, do not lose your patience, but look to the Cross of Christ. Keep in mind the words of St. Paul,

"No task has been sent you that does not come to all men. Besides, God keeps His promise. He will not let you be tested beyond your strength. Along with the test He will give you a way out of it so that you may be able to endure it" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Christian virtue is linked with pain and self-sacrifice, but also with joy and peace of mind. When the Christian suffers for the sake of the truth and righteousness, then he must understand that he suffers for Him Who said,

"I am the Way, the Truth and the Life".

For this reason we must joyfully follow Christ, repeating the words of St. Paul,

"It is your special privilege to take Christ's part-not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him" (Phil. 1:29).

The Christian suffers, is subjected to torments, is crucified and dies in order not to lose his higher spiritual and moral values, which give honour and meaning to man's life. He has found that goal at the end of the road, that blessedness to which the Lord referred when he said,

"What profit would a man show if he were to gain the whole world and destroy himself in the process?" (Matthew 16:26).

We are not alone on our road, we have the words of the Lord, "Do not be troubled, I am not leaving you like orphans". He follows us in each of our sufferings. Let us pray that he will bestow on us a little of the mysterious sanctifying power of his Cross, which is so great that it breaks and destroys mountains of evil and unrighteousness and spreads the benefits of truth and godliness throughout the world.

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## A Love story

One day, I woke early in the morning to watch the sunrise. Ah the beauty of God's creation is beyond description. As I watched, I praised God for His beautiful work. As I sat there, I felt the Lord's presence with me.

He asked me, "Do you love me?"

I answered, "Of course, God! You are my Lord and Saviour!"

Then He asked, if you were physically handicapped, would you still love me?"

I was perplexed. I looked down upon my arms, legs and the rest of my body and wondered how many things I wouldn't be able to do, the things that I took for granted.

And I answered, "It would be tough Lord, but I would still love You".

Then the Lord said, if you were blind, would you still love my creation?"

How could I love something without being able to see it? Then I thought of all the blind people in the world and how many of them still loved God and His creation. So I answered, "Its hard to think of it, but I would still love You".

The Lord then asked me, if you were deaf would you still listen to my word?"

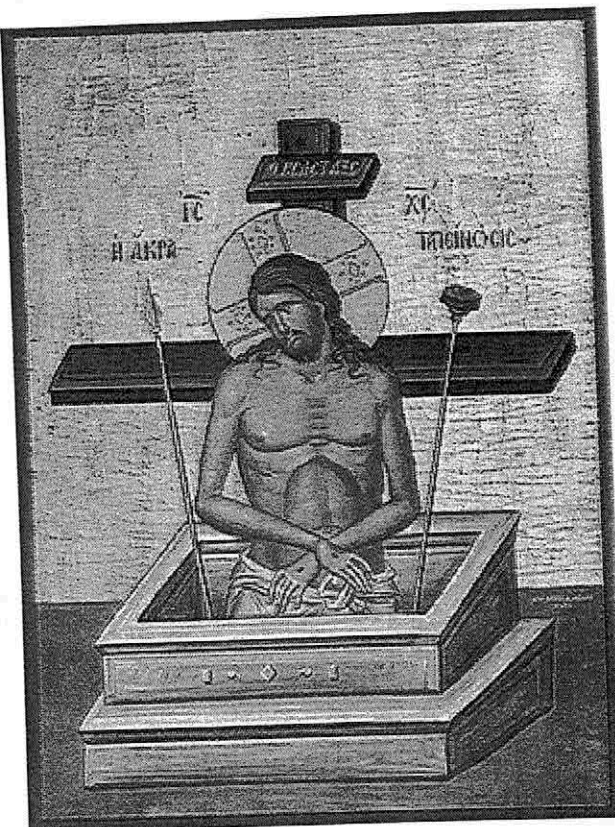
How could I listen to anything being deaf? Then I understood. Listening to God's Word is not merely using our ears, but our hearts. I answered, "It would be tough, but I would still listen to Your word".

The Lord then asked, "If you were mute, would you still praise My Name?"

How could I praise without a voice? Then it occurred to me: God wants us to sing from our very heart and soul. It never matters what we sound like. And praising God is not always with a song, but when we are persecuted, we give God praise with our words of thanks. So, I answered, "Though I could not physically sing, I would still praise Your Name".

And the Lord asked, "Do you really love Me?"

With courage and a strong conviction, I answered boldly, "Yes Lord! I love You because You are the One and True God!"



I thought I had answered well, but God asked,

"THEN WHY DO YOU SIN?"

I answered, "Because I am only human. I am not perfect".

"THEN WHY IN TIMES OF PEACE DO YOU STRAY THE FURTHEST? WHY ONLY IN TIMES OF TROUBLE DO YOU PRAY THE EARNEST?"

No answers. Only tears.

The Lord continued: "Why only sing at fellowships and retreats? Why seek me only in times of worship? Why ask things so selfishly? Why ask things so unfaithfully?"

The tears continued to roll down my cheeks.

"Why are you ashamed of me? Why are you not spreading the good news? Why in times of persecution, you cry to others when I offer my shoulder to cry on? Why make excuses when I give you opportunities to serve in my name?"

I tried to answer, but there was no answer to give.

"You are blessed with life. I made you not to throw this gift away. I have blessed you with talents to serve me, but you continue to turn away. I have revealed my word to you, but you do not gain in knowledge. I have spoken to you but your ears were closed. I have shown my blessings to you, but your eyes were turned away. I have sent you servants, but you sat idly by as they were pushed away. I have heard your prayers and I have answered them all".

"DO YOU TRULY LOVE ME?"

I could not answer. How could I? I was embarrassed beyond belief. I had no excuse. What could I say to this? When my heart had cried out and the tears had flowed, I said, 'Please forgive me Lord. I am unworthy to be Your child.'

The Lord answered, " That is my grace, my child".

I asked, " Then why do you continue to forgive me? Why do You love me so?"

The Lord answered: 'Because you are My creation. You are my child. I will never abandon you. When you cry, I will have compassion and cry with you. When you shout with joy, I will laugh with you. When you are down, I will encourage you. When you fall, I will raise you up. When you are tired, I will carry you. I will be with you till the end of days, and I will love you forever'.

Never had I cried so hard before. How could I have been so cold? How could I have hurt God as I had done?

I asked God, 'How much do You love me?'

The Lord stretched out His arms, and I saw His nail-pierced hands. I bowed down at the feet of Christ, my Saviour. And for the first time, I truly prayed.



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GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

## Do Orthodox Christians worship icons?

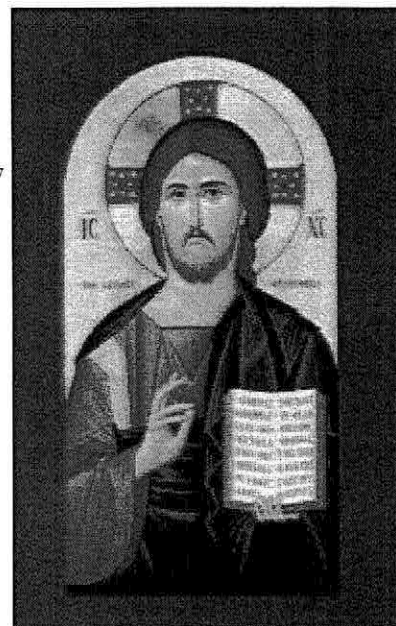
by Tony Holden

People sometimes ask if we worship Icons. The answer is simple, it is an emphatic **No!**

No Christian worships an image. Christians worship God. We do not worship Icons, but we do venerate them. That means we show special respect for the Icons. We do this because the Icons are a way of joining us to the goodness and holiness of God and His Saints.

When an Orthodox Christian goes into Church he lights a candle, makes the sign of the cross then kisses the Icons of Christ, His Mother the Theotokos, and the Saints.

A screen separates the Altar from the rest of the Church. This screen is known as the "Icon Screen" or "Iconostasis" because it supports a series of Icons. The North and South aspects of the Iconostasis is divided by central double doors known as the "Royal Doors" or "Holy Doors". Characteristically in Orthodox Churches, the first Icon to the right of the Holy Doors is the Icon of Christ, the Creator of All Things. To the left of the Holy Doors is an Icon of the Mother of God with Christ cradled in Her arms. The Icon depicted on the Holy Doors is that of the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary, where the Archangel Gabriel brings to Her the news of the impending Miraculous Conception. Icons of the four Evangelists are also often found on the Holy Doors.



The Holy Doors show us the way heaven and earth are reunited by Christ. The Icon of the Annunciation reminds us that God came down to us as a person. Mary was a doorway for Christ to enter this world, and for us to enter heaven. The Icons of the Four Evangelists remind us that we come to God through the teachings of the Gospel.

To the right of the Icon of Christ on the Iconostasis is the Icon of the Forerunner St John the Baptist. To the left of the Icon of the Virgin and Christ Child is the Patron Saint of that particular Church Parish

Every orthodox home has its Icon shelf, and family Prayers are said there.

### The meaning of Icons

Images have always played a part in teaching Christians about their faith. Icons are much more than religious pictures. They are a way of telling people about some complicated Christian teaching in a simple form that anyone can see and start to understand -- even a tiny child. Icons in the earliest days of the Church were a means of depicting Gospel events to Christians who may not have been able to read the Gospel themselves.



Christians of the Orthodox Church say that it is

## The Holy Icons

both wrong and impossible to make a picture showing what God looks like. We have never seen Him, we hardly know Him, We cannot draw Him. However, God came into this world as a person. He became flesh and blood as Jesus Christ. This is what Christians call the "Incarnation". This belief that God became a man is one of the most fundamental of Christian teachings. We can paint a picture of Christ because He lived here as a person. The word "Icon" means a picture or image. In simple terms an Icon of Christ is a picture of Christ which tells everyone that God became a man.

The meaning of Icons goes even further than this. In Icons of the Saints, the pictures do not look like pictures of ordinary flesh and blood. They look strange. The Church teaches that Christ had a human body in order to save our bodies as well as our souls. At the end of time, when Christ comes again, everyone will rise from the dead. We will not look the same as we do now. We will be utterly changed, and we will shine with the glory of God. Icons show people with that sort of body -- a Resurrection body. The Church also teaches that all people are made in the image and likeness of God. In a way then, the Saints are living 'Icons' of Christ. Because Christ was God and Man at the same time. He was able to show us just what that image and likeness of God can actually look like. The Gospels tell us that once, at a place called Mount Tabor, the Apostles saw that Christ was shining with light. (Matt. 17. 1-13; Mark 9. 2-13; Luke 9. 28-36) The same thing sometimes happens to people who live a very holy life. When they are deep in prayer they shine with a mysterious light. Their bodies have been changed so that they show the image and likeness of God. They are holy flesh. Not all of the Saints show this sort of holiness on the outside in their lives. More often they grow into the likeness of God in a hidden way, but all Icons of the Saints show that they have already changed from ordinary flesh and blood. Saints are depicted with a halo of light around their head.

There are many examples of miraculous Icons throughout time. Some even today. Orthodox Christians believe firmly that God can use things of this world [such as wood and paint] to help us to share in the heavenly world. We use water in Baptism or bread and wine in Holy Communion. We ask God to bless these ordinary things so that they can bring us to Him. Similarly, we ask God to bless Icons as well, so that the paint and wood and the artist's skill can be used in His service. Icons are blessed to bring us to God. This is the reason why we call them "Holy Icons".

## Windows into heaven

In an ordinary picture things seem to get narrower as they go into the distance. This gives the picture its feeling of depth. It is called "perspective". Icons are different. On many of them the picture seems to get wider as it goes into the distance -- the perspective is back to front.

In an ordinary painting you can often see the sun, or else you can see light and shadow. You can tell the time of day, or you can see that it is night. You can not see these things in an Icon. There are no shadows, or ways of showing day and night. An Icon shows a view of heaven, so it is lighted by the unchanging light of God.

Icons are painted this way on purpose. An Icon is a window into Heaven. The veneration granted to the Icon is said to pass on to Heaven and the person depicted therein.

## The struggle against iconoclasts



A violent disagreement shook the Christian Church 1200 years ago.

From the time of St Constantine the Great, the Roman emperors accepted Christianity. Most of them encouraged the Christians to build Churches and to use pictures to explain their faith to all the people of the Roman Empire. There were a few Christians who thought you should not use pictures at all, and the Church had to be careful that people did not worship statues or icons in the way that the pagans did. However, in most parts of the Christian world, the people developed their religious art for almost 500 years.

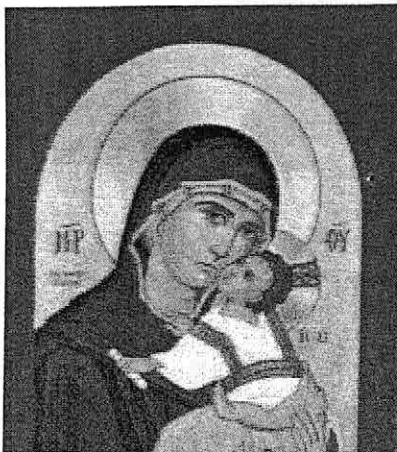
Quite suddenly the Byzantine emperors ordered the Church to stop using pictures or any sort of images. Icons were smashed and mosaics were painted over. For a while there was a fierce struggle between the icon smashers and the icon users.

Quite a few of the Byzantine emperors hated Icons, so did the courtiers and many of the soldiers. These people who hated icons, or smashed them, are often called the 'iconoclasts'. The iconoclasts taught that physical things had nothing to do with spiritual things. They said you could not use a man made icon to help you with prayer, or to bring you closer to God. They also said that you should not have any pictures of people in Church. The only picture they allowed was a fresco or mosaic picture of the Cross. Some of them even believed that Christ should not be shown in a picture because He was good and had nothing to do with the material of this world which was evil.

All this made the Orthodox Christians think carefully about using icons and mosaics. Christians also had to think about the physical matter of which the world is made. In fact the icon smashers called themselves Christians, but their ideas were not really Christian at all. The Orthodox Church prepared the full Christian answer to their attack.

The Old Testament teaches that God created all the world, and mankind as well. He saw that all the things that He had made were good. It was later that man turned away from God, and the whole world fell under the power of death, evil and sin. In other words, there was nothing wrong with matter in the first place because God made it good.

The New Testament teaches that God loves us so much that He sent Christ to become a human being. Christ came in order to save us, and to give us a chance to come back to God again. He became matter just as we are. Because God became a man in Christ, this physical world has begun to be reunited with the heavenly world again. Matter has started to regain its full glory. Christ has shown us that human flesh can become filled with God. He was physical matter that was God bearing. In the same way all physical matter can become filled with God's presence. This happens to the saints, to the water at a baptism, or to the bread and wine for Holy Communion. It can also happen to the wood and paint of an Icon.



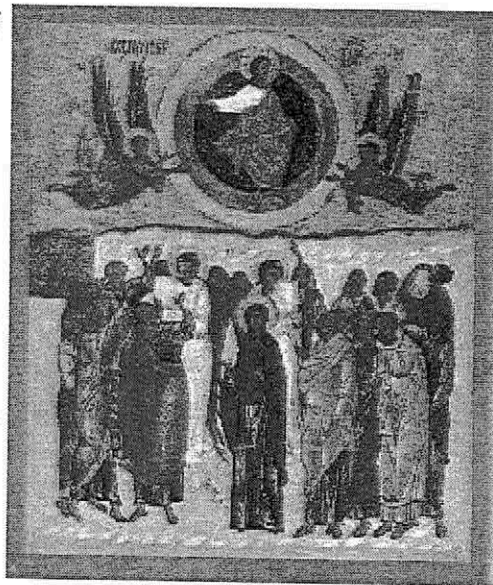
The Church believes that Christ was both God and man. Firstly, He united Divinity with the matter of this world by His Incarnation. Secondly, in Christ, matter was drawn up into Divinity with His Ascension into Heaven. Anyone who said God and matter were opposite like good and evil was attacking this teaching about Christ.

The Church accepts that before Christ came into the world it was impossible to make a picture of God: no one had seen Him or understood Him enough. Once Christ came and dwelt on earth, it was possible to make a picture of God because Christ was God. Anyone Who said you should not make a picture of God as Christ



seemed to be saying that Christ was not really God.

Finally, Orthodox Christians believe in the Resurrection of Christ in a physical body. We believe in a physical resurrection for all believers when Christ returns in Glory. We do not believe that our minds will survive alone, or that some ghostly spiritual form will rise from the dead. Both body and soul will be saved, matter and spirit together. So we believe that mind and body should join in worship. Spirit and matter should unite in praising God. In Orthodox services and worship this teaching of the Church is put into practice. Decorations of flowers stand beside icons made from wood and egg and the colours of the earth. Candles of brown beeswax glow beside golden olive oil in glass lamps. Incense made from resin and tree sap sends up its smoke from golden incense burners. Human beings, wearing cotton and linen and wool from sheep, bow or cross themselves, pray silently or raise their voices in praise. Offerings of bread and wine, full of sunshine and the goodness of the earth, are laid on the altar. All of creation dances before the creator. All of God's goodness is offered up to God. In a mystery the Holy Spirit descends to confirm that this is truly heaven on earth, and that God's kingdom is coming now.



It took about a hundred years for all these ideas to be argued out. In the end the iconoclasts were overcome, and in 843AD at the Seventh Ecumenical Council, icons were put back into the Churches.

The effect of the iconoclast controversy can still be seen to have an effect on Orthodox Christians even to this day. Orthodox Christians will kiss the Icons at the front of the Church just before receiving Holy Communion -- before the priest comes out of the altar with the Holy Gifts. This custom began as a way of showing you really were Orthodox. Kissing the Icons showed that you have reverence for them and proved that you weren't an iconoclast. It showed that you believed the things that the Orthodox Church taught.

On the Sunday of the Triumph of Orthodoxy (first Sunday of Great Lent) we celebrate the triumph of true Orthodox believers over the Icon smashers. Icons are brought from home, and others are lifted down from the walls of the Church for a procession to show everyone how we feel about them.

St John of Damascus says "The Icon is a song of triumph, and a revelation, and an enduring monument to the victory of the Saints and the disgrace of the demons."

adapted from "**Explaining Icons**"  
Stylite Publishing Ltd.

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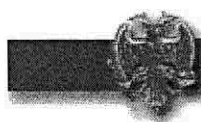
For a more authoritative approach to the subject of the Holy Icons, see St John of Damascus' "**On the Divine Images**", St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.

There is also an excellent site by the Orthodox Church in America.

More Icon resources on the Internet

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GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

## In defence of the Icons

by Bishop Nikolay Velimirovic



As a true and faithful Orthodox believer, you would like to defend your faith from the agents, with the instinct of Judah, who have turned away from the true faith. They say to you that the icons are idols and that bowing to icons is against and in defiance of the Second Commandment of God. It would seem that the true Christianity is nothing more than idol-worship. This is said by the sect which has appeared only a life-time ago.

Ask them, who has removed and destroyed idols on the Balkans? Who has emptied Athens and Rome of forests of idols and idolised statues? Who has toppled Jupiter, Diana, Astarte of Babylon and Isis of Egypt? Who has dragged down Perun from the hill of Kiew and thrown him into the River Dnjeper? Who has cleared

idols from Asia Minor, Africa and all Europe? Was it the sect followers or was it the true Church of Christ, who in her bitter battle against idol-worshippers sacrificed thousands of martyrs for the faith in one true God and their names fill our calendar? Their sect has not one martyr for Christ, nor have they destroyed one idol in the world. They do not even possess a Christian calendar. If they wished to make one up, they could not, because they have no saints.

If they are after a fight with the idol worshippers, why are they looking for it on the Balkans, where the pagan idols are confined to museums? If their hearts are burning against idols, why don't they go into deep Asia and Africa or amongst the Red Indians of America, where unfortunately paganism is as strong as it was a thousand years ago? They don't go probably because the life of a missionary there could be quite dangerous.

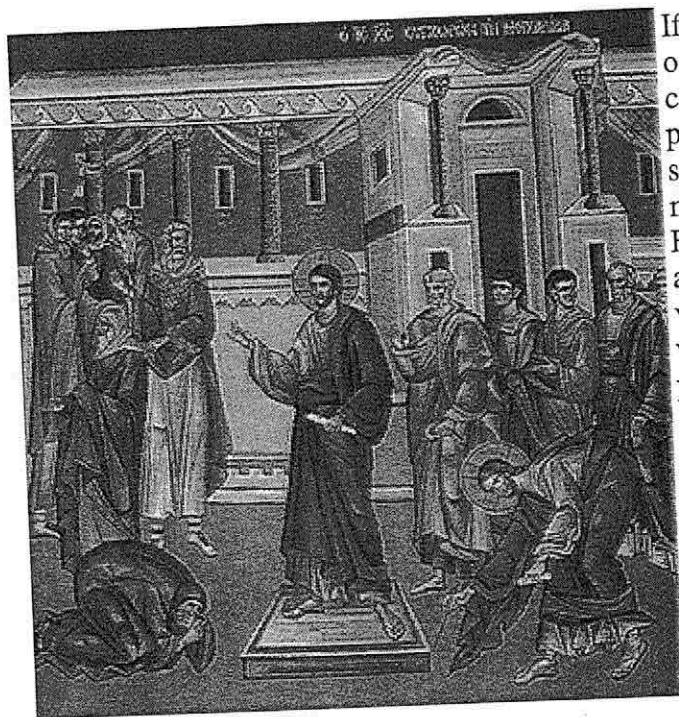
I have read about Don Quixote, who imagined the windmills belonging to peaceful citizens to be the fortresses of his enemies. He would charge them with the intention of overpowering and occupying them. So too, the sect followers have proclaimed our icons to be idols and are frantically charging them, mainly because they don't feel like going to the jungles of Africa and Asia.

Let there be no doubt in your mind that, as the day is different from the night, so too is the difference between the icons and the idols, idols are the statues of imaginary and non-existent beings, while the icons are the images of saints who have actually lived on earth and who have celebrated Christ and thus made themselves worthy of the Kingdom of God. Over there, fantasy, over here reality. Over there, lies and fallacies, over here truth and nothing but the truth. Idols separate man from God, icons bring man to union with the one true God. With the Second Commandment, the Creator wished to deter man from that which would separate him from Him. That is, God wanted to direct man from demonic lies, fantasy and imaginary falsehoods.



## Waging war against the passions

by St. Nikodemus the Hagiorite and St. Theophan the Recluse



If you want to gain a speedy and easy victory over your enemies, brother, you must wage ceaseless and courageous war against all passion, especially and preeminently against self-love, or a foolish attachment to yourself, manifested in self-indulgence and self-pity. For it is the basis and source of all passions and cannot be tamed except by constant voluntary self-inflicted suffering and by welcoming afflictions, privations, calumnies, persecutions by the world and by men of the world. Failure to see the need of this pitiless attitude to yourself has always been, is and will be the cause of our failure to achieve spiritual victories, and of their difficulty, rarity, imperfection and insecurity.

So this spiritual warfare of ours must be constant and never ceasing, and should be conducted with alertness and courage in the

soul; they can easily be attained, if you seek these gifts from God. So advance into battle without hesitation. Should you be visited by the troubling thought of the hatred and undying malice, which the enemies harbour against you, and of the innumerable hosts of the demons, think on the other hand of the infinitely greater power of God and of His love for you, as well as of the incomparably greater hosts of heavenly angels and the prayers of the saints. They all fight secretly for us and with us against our enemies, as it is written: 'The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation' (Ex. xvii. 16).

So you must never be afraid, if you are troubled by a flood of thoughts, that the enemy is too strong against you, that his attacks are never ending, that the war will last for your lifetime, and that you cannot avoid incessant downfalls of all kinds. Know that our enemies, with all their wiles, are in the hands of our divine Commander, our Lord Jesus Christ, for Whose honour and glory you are waging war. Since He Himself leads you into battle, he will certainly not suffer your enemies to use violence against you and overcome you, if you do not yourself cross over to their side with your will. He will Himself fight for you and will deliver your enemies into your hands, when He wills and as He wills, as it is written: 'Thy Lord thy God walketh in the midst of thy camp, to deliver thee, and to give up thine enemies before thee' (Deut. xiii. 14).

If the Lord delays granting you full victory over your enemies and puts it off to the last day of your life, you must know that He does this for your own good; so long as you do not retreat or cease to struggle wholeheartedly. Even if you are wounded in battle do not lay down your arms and turn to flight. Keep only one thing in your mind and intention - to fight with all courage and ardour, since it is unavoidable. No man can escape this warfare, either in life or in death, and he who does not fight to overcome his passions and his enemies will inevitably be taken prisoner, either here or yonder, and delivered to death.



It is not without profit to bear in mind also the purpose for which God is pleased to leave us in this state of war. This purpose is the following. In the days of old, when God led Israel into the promised land, He did not order them to destroy all the peoples dwelling there, but left five tribes alien and hostile to Israel - first, to prove the chosen people and to see how firmly they believed in Him and faithfully kept His commandments, and secondly, to teach His people the art of warfare (Judges ii.21-23,iii.1-2). In the same way, He does not destroy all our passions at once, but leaves them in us, letting them fight against us till our very death, for just the same purpose, namely, to prove our love for Him and our obedience to His will, and to train us in spiritual warfare.

The blessed Theodorite speaks of this in greater detail. God, he says, does this for the following ends:

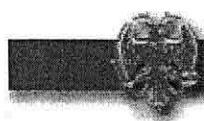
1. to prevent us falling into carelessness and negligence, and to make us watchful, diligent and attentive;
2. to remind us that the enemy is ever ready to attack us, lest we unexpectedly find ourselves surrounded by the enemy and overcome by passions;
3. so that we should always have recourse to God, asking and hoping for His help;
4. so that we should not be proud, but should think humbly of ourselves;
5. so that we should learn to hate with our whole heart the passions and the enemies, who so tirelessly attack us;
6. to prove whether we keep to the end God's honour, love and faith;
7. to urge us to a more strict observance of God's commandments, so that we do not overlook the least of them;
8. to learn from experience the great value of virtue and so never to consent to abandon it and fall into sin;
9. in order that constant warfare should give us the possibility to gain greater and greater crowns;
10. that we should glorify God and shame the devil by our patience to the end;
11. that we should get accustomed to warfare during life and so not fear it in the hour of death, when we are to be subjected to the greatest of all attacks.

Thus, since we are always surrounded by so many enemies, whose hatred of us is so bitter, we can expect no peace or respite from them, no cessation or postponement of attacks, but must be ready for an onslaught at any moment and, when it comes, must immediately engage the enemy with courage. Naturally it would have been better, if we had not originally opened the doors of our being and let enemies and passions enter our heart and soul; but since they have already found their way into us, we cannot afford to be negligent, but must arm ourselves against them to drive them out of us. They are shameless and stubborn and will not leave, unless driven out by force.

from **Unseen Warfare**

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GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

## A list of the passions

by St Peter of Damaskos

The passions are:

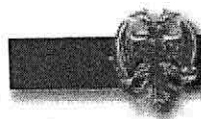
harshness, trickery, malice, perversity, mindlessness, licentiousness, enticement, dullness, lack of understanding, idleness, sluggishness, stupidity, flattery, silliness, idiocy, madness, derangement, coarseness, rashness, cowardice, lethargy, dearth of good actions, moral errors, greed, over-frugality, ignorance, folly, spurious knowledge, forgetfulness, lack of discrimination, obduracy, injustice, evil intention, a conscienceless soul, slothfulness, idle chatter, breaking of faith, wrongdoing, sinfulness, lawlessness, criminality, passion, seduction, assent to evil, mindless coupling, demonic provocation, dallying, bodily comfort beyond what is required, vice, stumbling, sickness of soul, enervation, weakness of intellect, negligence, laziness, a reprehensible despondency, disdain of God, aberration, transgression, unbelief, lack of faith, wrong belief, poverty of faith, heresy, fellowship in heresy, polytheism, idolatry, ignorance of God, impiety, magic, astrology, divination, sorcery, denial of God, the love of idols, dissipation, profligacy, loquacity, indolence, self-love, inattentiveness, lack of progress, deceit, delusion, audacity, witchcraft, defilement, the eating of unclean food, soft living, dissoluteness, voracity, unchastity, avarice, anger, dejection, listlessness, self-esteem, pride, presumption, self-elation, boastfulness, infatuation, foulness, satiety, doltishness, torpor, sensuality, over-eating, gluttony, insatiability, secret eating, hoggishness, solitary eating, indifference, fickleness, self-will, thoughtlessness, self-satisfaction, love of popularity, ignorance of beauty, uncouthness, gaucherie, lightmindedness, boorishness, rudeness, contentiousness, quarrelsomeness, abusiveness, shouting, brawling, fighting, rage, mindless desire, gall, exasperation, giving offence, enmity, meddlesomeness, chicanery, asperity, slander, censure, calumny, condemnation, accusation, hatred, railing, insolence, dishonour, ferocity, frenzy, severity, aggressiveness, forswearing oneself, oath-taking, lack of compassion, hatred of one's brothers, partiality, patricide, matricide, breaking fasts, laxity, acceptance of bribes, theft, rapine, jealousy, strife, envy, indecency, jesting, vilification, mockery, derision, exploitation, oppression, disdain of one's neighbour, flogging, making sport of others, hanging, throttling, heartlessness, implacability, covenant-breaking, bewitchment, harshness, shamelessness, impudence, obfuscation of thoughts, obtuseness, mental blindness, attraction to what is fleeting, impassionedness, frivolity, disobedience, dullwittedness, drowsiness of soul, excessive sleep, fantasy, heavy drinking, drunkenness, uselessness, slackness, mindless enjoyment, self-indulgence, venery, using foul language, effeminacy, unbridled desire, burning lust, masturbation, pimping, adultery, sodomy, bestiality, defilement, wantonness, a stained soul, incest, uncleanness, pollution, sordidness, feigned affection, laughter, jokes, immodest dancing, clapping, improper songs, revelry, fluteplaying, license of tongue, excessive love of order, insubordination, disorderliness, reprehensible collusion, conspiracy, warfare, killing, brigandry, sacrilege, illicit gains, usury, wiliness, grave-robbing, hardness of heart, obloquy, complaining, blasphemy, fault-finding, ingratitude, malevolence, contemptuousness, pettiness, confusion, lying, verbosity, empty words, mindless joy, daydreaming, mindless friendship, bad habits, nonsensicality, silly talk, garrulity, niggardliness, depravity, intolerance, irritability, affluence, rancour, misuse, ill-temper, clinging to life, ostentation, affectation, pusillanimity, satanic love, curiosity, contumely, lack of the fear of God, unteachability, senselessness, haughtiness, self-vaunting, self-inflation, scorn for one's neighbour, mercilessness, insensitivity, hopelessness, spiritual paralysis, hatred of God, despair, suicide, a falling away from God in all things, and utter destruction; altogether 298 passions.

These, then, are the passions which I have found named in the Holy Scriptures. I have set them down in a single list, as I did at the beginning of my discourse with the various books I have used. I have not tried, nor would I have been able, to arrange them all in order; this would have been beyond my powers, for the reason given by St. John Klimakos: 'If you seek understanding in wicked men, you will not find it.' For all that the demons produce is disorderly. In common with the godless and the unjust, the demons have but one purpose: to destroy the souls of those who accept their evil counsel. Yet sometimes they actually help men to attain holiness. In such instances they are conquered by the patience and faith of those who put their trust in the Lord, and who through their good actions and resistance to evil thoughts counteract the demons and bring down curses upon them.

from **A list of the passions,**  
**The Philokalia**, v. 3, faber and faber 1984  
translated from the Greek and edited by G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherard, Kallistos Ware

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GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

## The cause of pain

by the Very Rev. Archimandrite + Seraphim Papakostas

Where did pain come from? Why do we suffer? Can it be that we were made to suffer? how does it happen that rational man, the most perfect of earth's creatures, suffers more than all the others?

These questions have bothered the minds of the world's wisest man. Their failure to find the cause of pain, the irrelevant and mistaken answers which they give, and their ignorance, of the cause and purpose of the afflictions, increase the pain and multiplies the grief of the soul. We hear these questions so often: Why must I suffer? What evil have I done? Why does God punish me so? How many such complaints are uttered by sufferers. Even worse, nearly everybody considers himself faultless and guiltless. He blames his pain on God. But is the Creator the cause of our pain? God forbid!

God, who is good, is never the cause of evil. Such a blasphemous idea comes only from those who are deeply ignorant, not only of the cause of pain, but also of the true God. What, then, is the cause of pain? We ourselves! Man is the cause of his pain!

Indeed. When man came forth out of the creative hand of God, he was truly happy. From the blessedness of the Creator he drew his sorrowless and peaceful life. Clouds of tribulation never over-shadowed the horizon of his soul. No pain of any kind ever pressed on his heart. No obstacle hindered his relationship with God. His life in the Garden of Eden was like a pleasant day in springtime when the mild temperature, the gentle breezes, the growth of nature, the variety of colours, and the fragrance of flowers, create an inexpressible pleasure.

But suddenly a terrible whirlwind rushed in and overturned and destroyed this pleasure-filled and sorrowless life. An evil spirit found entrance to the soul of the first creatures. By means of deceit he drew them into sin, into revolt against God. This introduced moral evil, until then unknown, to earthly creation. Since then, moral evil, sin, as thought and desire and act, has multiplied and grown and predominated in the soul and life of man-kind.

Wherever moral evil rushed into the world, physical evil also followed as an inevitable consequence: sickness, pain, affliction, and indeed the height of misfortunes, death, plagued man. It was necessary for the prestige of the law (which the supreme law-maker, God the Creator, had given to man) to be restored by the punishment of disobedience.

Man had to feel in the deepest way that sin, the trampling down of divine law, is not a harmless little game, but that it has the most terrible consequences. When you don't listen to the skilled chemist, who tells you that a certain liquid can poison your system, create horrible pains and bring death, but you want to gain experience and drink it, naturally you must suffer all the terrible consequences of your disobedience.

This is what happened to man. He was told by his Creator that the transgression of the law would bring death as an immediate penalty and consequence. He was, of course, destined to be immortal and to have bodily immortality as well. "To live forever" was his original destiny (Gen. 3: 22). But since he didn't believe God, but wanted to personally experience this psychic poison which is called disobedience or moral evil or sin, he learned that "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:



23). His life in the paradise of pleasure was without pain and sorrow. "Rule all the earth, and subdue it", was the will and commandment of God for man.

But since he wanted to reject those priceless gifts which were offered to him, naturally, "The Lord God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken". Now, in return for his trouble and sweat, the earth would bring forth "thorns and thistles".

In sorrow he would eat its poor products; his grief would be greatly multiplied; he would no longer be the ruler of the earth, its subduer, but the earth and nature in general would revolt against revolting man. Physical evil would flood his life with disease and natural disasters. Behold the originating cause of pain, the sinister, deep cause of every disorder of all the disorders which occur in human life.

It is sin, the mortal evil which man committed and transmitted by inheritance to his descendants and jealously retains as his beloved possession. "Most diseases are caused by sins", St. John Chrysostom says, and rightly so.

A multitude of people are suffering. Daily experience demonstrates it. They comprise an inexhaustible clientele for hospitals, sanatoriums, and clinics, where, because of their sinful lives, they have to drag their wounded bodies. The reader knows that among the sins which are immediate causes of pain debaucheries have first place and exert the worst influence. Debaucheries are the so-called sins of the flesh and the sins of immorality, which create such dissipation and misery in the body. These sins multiply the number of wounded people, the paralytics, the insane.

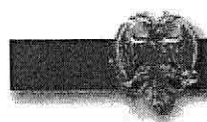
This, then, is the cause of pain.

from **For the Hours Of Pain**  
published by the Brotherhood of Theologians "Zoe" Athens, Greece.

For more on this topic of pain, we suggest you read [The Purpose of pain](#).

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GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

## The purpose of pain

by the Very Rev. Archimandrite + Seraphim Papakostas

Man broke the moral law and rebelled against the moral order. To punish man, God permits pain and physical evil. However, He has another reason. God, who is good, gives pain a purpose.

The purpose of pain is the healing of the soul. God permits pain, not only to punish the transgressor and the rebel, but also to heal him--primarily to heal him, to save him, to do him good.

What do doctors do, in order to counteract bacteria, to neutralise a sickness, to restore a human organism to health? They give drugs, many times bitter and unpleasant tasting. They perform operations, which are often painful and exhausting. They impose diets, many times long and rigid.

God also uses such methods; or rather, the wisdom and goodness of God present an incomparably wiser combination for the chastising affliction. It looks like He punishes sin, because pain is, of course, punishment. It establishes the prestige of His law, which the sinning person violates.

With pain, however, He also heals the soul, poisoned by sin. His intervening love gives pain a healing quality. He changes it into a drug which draws the poison from the soul. He uses it as surgery, which removes the malignant tumour of sin from the soul, and destroys the death-bearing microbe and saves the soul from eternal death. He uses it as a kind of spiritual diet which hinders the advance of sin. He nails the sinner to a bed of sickness, in order to prepare his repentance is conversion, his restoration to spiritual health. Thus pain, even though it comes from sin, is changed by the wise educator, by the unique physician of the soul, by God, into a medicine of the highest quality, for the healing of sin.

But does God really need to use pain, grief, privation, and tears, to draw the sinner to repentance?

Here is another torturing perplexity for people who don't know the wisdom and love of God. How shall we answer it?

We answer that for most people pain is the only means by which they will repent and be saved. For others, it is the superior, invigorating medicine which will make them perfect. Even experienced doctors can make mistakes and use drastic therapy, when milder and gentler means would bring the same results. For the infallible physician, however, the all-wise God, this is never the case. He is always right.

Undoubtedly, when the prodigal son announced his decision to rebel, his father gave him advice and warned him. He used all the means of pressure which are applied to free men in order to make them willingly obey the law of God. But these methods are weak and feeble, when sin fills the mind with the fruits of egotistical rebellion, when it hardens the heart with its lust and poison, when it imprisons the will with its demonic impulses.

Then, only "the discipline of the Lord, opened the ears." Only pain softens the heart, as fire softens iron, only pain makes the heart long for repentance; it clears the mind so that it can see

and hate the trickery of sin; it frees the will so that it can decide to make its return.

Only when the prodigal lost his riches, only when he became a wretched slave and a debased swine herder, naked and hungry, only then did "he come to himself"; he realised that he was lost and he made the heroic decision:

"I will arise and go to my father, and I will say unto him, Father, I have sinned."

If the paralytic of Capernaum, whom they lowered through the roof in order to reach the Lord, had not been thrown into bed as a living corpse, by a painful disease, it is doubtful if he ever would have left sin, and if he ever would have approached the Saviour. Finally, purified by disease and repenting, he heard the Saviour say,

"Son, thy sins be forgiven thee."

If the other paralytic of Bethesda, who was bed-ridden for 38 years, had not been purified in the furnace of pain, from the corrosion of sin, he never would have known the Saviour and heard the saving commandment (which also applies to us):

"Sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee."

For, in addition to the persistent diseases and life long afflictions of earth, there are even worse pains which the unrepentant person might finally experience.

So there is no medicine more beneficial than pain, and no higher purpose than repentance and return to God. This is the target which pain aims at and sorrow works for. There is no knowledge more useful to man, and especially to the Christian, than this knowledge about the purpose of pain.

How many tears would be wiped away, how much darkness would be made light, how many hearts would be comforted, how many sufferers would more quickly find the solution to their pain, if only they wanted to learn about God's beneficial purpose, and to believe in it. Surely then they would see that pain is the beneficial knife of the surgeon-physician. Not only would they suffer patiently, but they would gratefully thank the Good Physician. They deserted Him, but He did not desert them. They forsook Him, but He visited them through pain; He called them through pain, He guided them with pain to the sorrowless and blessed life.

from **For the Hours Of Pain**  
published by the Brotherhood of Theologians "Zoe" Athens, Greece

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## Faith and Good Works

by St Symeon the New Theologian

If we desire the kingdom of Heaven we must have great care and diligence and willingness in practising the commandments of God. In order to be saved, it is not sufficient to believe in the true God and to be Orthodox Christians. We must also fight "the good fight", live "worth of the vocation we are called", that is to say perform Christian acts since we are baptised Christians and we are honoured with the name of Christ.

Let us not think that we shall be saved by faith alone. Faith without works do not benefit in anything. Of course the Lord said "he that believes and is baptised shall be saved; but he that believes not shall be damned", but He also said this "not every one that says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven". If one would be saved by faith alone then everybody will easily secure salvation. Because "the devils also believe and tremble. As the body with out the soul is motionless and lifeless so faith without works is dead. Let us hear St. James the brother of God, who very lucidly stresses "what does it profit, my brethren, though a man says he has faith, and has no works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, depart in peace, be warmed and filled; not withstanding you give them not those things which are needful to the body; what does it profit? Even so faith, if it has not works, is dead, being alone". After these it is obvious that we must have works together with faith.

For this reason whoever believes in God and his providence, shares out his money to the poor, hoping that he will receive "a hundredfold wage" and will inherit everlasting life. Whoever believes, struggles to be humble, repents for his sins, he is meek and peaceful, hates injustice and loves justice, because he remembers the verse from the Psalms "he who loves injustice hates his own soul".

He, who believes, endures without grumbling every temptation in order to be crowned with the crown of the incorruptible glory. He is prudent and does not molest himself. He, who truly believes, is not lazy and negligent of prayer, does not condemn anybody and does not follow the "broad road", but the "narrow and sorrowful road". He does not love the world, neither parents, nor brothers and sisters nor wife and children, more than the Lord. Those, who believe, love the Lord and hate evil acts. They do not bear a grudge against his brother and do not return evil for evil. They do good to those who treat them badly, they bless those who curse them and they bear patiently those that persecute them.

Those, who believe do not practise hypocrisy, flattering or person favouritism, because in all their activities they are straight, honest and sincere. They have no pride and are not magnanimous for the sake of praises and flattering that others give them. They detest the world of sin, following the exhortation of Apostle Paul "no man that war entangles himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who has chosen him to be a soldier. And if a man also strives for mysteries, yet he is not crowned, except he strives lawfully".

Those, who believe, never lie, they are not greedy, they do not have Holy Communion without having confession, they do not condemn others. In brief, they follow care fully and steadfastly the way of the commandments of Christ and they have faith in Him, not in words but "in deeds and



truth". Do you now see how, those who believe live? So how can we consider somebody as faithful if he is poor in works?

If we truly believe, let us fight sin and abandon every evil that we have been doing so far. Let us struggle with willingness in order to be ready to stand before the Lord on the fearful day of Judgement. Let us wake up from the sleep of negligence. Let us correct our thoughts and let us drive away the evil thoughts. Let us try to fulfil the commandments of God, in order to be crowned by Him and to inherit the Kingdom of Heaven.

from **The Orthodox Messenger**, July-Aug 1998  
a Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia publication

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## The Second Coming (Parousia) of Christ

The Orthodox understanding of the Second Coming of Christ is clear: the Lord Jesus Christ truly will return. His second advent is not a myth, nor an empty promise, nor is it a metaphor. In fact, each time the Divine Liturgy is celebrated, the priest makes a proclamation to the Father which reveals how the Church responds not only to the Second Coming of Christ, but to all of His work.

"Remembering this saving commandment [Jesus' command to eat His flesh and drink His blood] and all that has been done for us -- the Cross, the Tomb, the Resurrection on the third day, the Ascension into Heaven, the sitting at the right hand and the Second and glorious Coming -- we offer You Your own, from what is Your own, on behalf of all and for all."

Orthodox Christians also believe the New Testament revelation of the Second Coming of Christ is meant to stimulate our preparation for it, not our speculation about it. This explains the relative simplicity with which the Nicene Creed, the most universal confession of faith in all of Christendom, addresses Christ's return:

"He... will come again, with glory, to judge the living and the dead, whose Kingdom shall have no end," The emphasis of historic Orthodoxy is that Jesus will come again, not when He will come again.

Thus, St. Paul writes,

"denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works" (Titus 2:12-14).

There are signs of Christ's coming, to be sure. Jesus prophesied many events that would take place in the world prior to His return (Matt. 24; Luke 21:7-36). But even here the teachings of Jesus in these gospels close with His exhortation to virtue, righteousness, and preparation for the Judgment. Christ and His apostles issue severe warnings, implicit and explicit, against second-guessing the time of His coming (Matt. 24:3 -- 8, 36, 43, 44, 50; Luke 21:7-9, 34; Acts 1:7; 1 Thess. 5:1-3; 2 Pet. 3:8 -- 10). Much of modern Christendom has succumbed to divisive speculation regarding Christ's return. We are divided into pre-millennial, post-millennial, and a-millennial camps. Breaking it down even further, there are pre-tribulation, mid-tribulation, and post-tribulation adherents. Christians part ways and new denominations spring up around interpretations of events which have not yet even come to pass!

Throughout history the Orthodox Church has steadfastly insisted on the reality of the Second Coming of Christ as a settled belief, but granted liberty on the question of when it will occur. In the last chapter of Revelation, Jesus speaks the words, "I am coming quickly" three different times (Rev. 2:21:7, 12, 20). His coming will occur on a day, at an hour when it is not expected. The Apostle John, the author of Revelation, concludes his book with a warning:

"For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If

anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book" (Rev. 22.18, 19).

To confess the return of Christ is to stand squarely within the apostolic tradition, To add "when" to the promise of His coming is warned against in the Scriptures. As members of the Bride of Christ, let us attend instead to being ready.

from **The Orthodox Study Bible**,  
Nelson Publishing

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## Concerning the second coming of Christ

by St. Tikhon of Zadonsk

"This is written for you concerning the second coming of Christ, of which we spoke briefly when you visited me. I send you this letter and advise you to do that which is written therein. Christians (especially in this last time, when 1,780 and more years have already passed since the first coming of Christ), Christians, I say, should every day expect the last judgment and prepare for it with fitting penitence.

When an earthly king plans to visit a city, and the city is informed of his coming, all the citizens await him and prepare to receive him. The heavenly King, Jesus Christ, intends to descend to earth a second time. This He Himself declared when He lived on earth, and His servants, the holy Apostles, announced as much, and Holy Church awaits His coming.

Therefore Christians, being informed of this second coming, must every day prepare themselves to receive Christ, for He will come when least expected. He will not come this time as He came before - that is, in poverty and humility - but in terrible glory. He will come, not to live on earth, to teach and to suffer (for this has already been accomplished), but to judge, and to render to each his due.

If an angel should visit us and say to us that Christ would come one of these days, we should be seized with trembling and should turn to sincerer repentance. We should guard ourselves from all sin and implore God's mercy with sighs and tears.

But who knows how far off this coming of Christ is? It may occur any day now. For no one knows the counsel and intentions of God, and it has been said,

"Wherefore be you also ready, because at what hour you know not the Son of man will come".

Truly our Lord will come. He will come to judge. He will come soon, and at a time when men do not expect Him. And he will render to each what he has merited. The greater the time which has elapsed since the first coming of Christ, the nearer draws His second coming; and the longer we live, the nearer we are to His universal judgement.

Already we are closer to this day and hour of judgment than we were yesterday and before yesterday. Let us inscribe this in our memory and prepare for that day with true repentance.

"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering (for he is faithful that hath promised), and let us consider one another, to provoke unto charity and to good works: Not forsaking our assembly, as some are accustomed; but comforting one another and so much the more as you see the day approaching".

Let us repent, beloved in order that this day terrible to sinners may bring comfort to us instead of terror and despair,

"Because he that appointed a day wherein he will judge the world in equity".



Hence we find comfort in that Christ Our Lord will judge the world; this is why God commands all men to repent, so that they may avoid that fearful condemnation,

"Depart from me, you cursed, into everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels".

Let us turn, beloved with all our love to God. Let us repent, and our sins will be forgiven, and we shall avoid condemnation; and Christ's judgment will not inspire us with fear and trembling but will give us comfort and eternal salvation.

For Christ, Our Lord, will condemn not those who have sinned, but those who have sinned without repenting. He will forgive and will save those who have repented of their sin, for He has come into the world to save those who have sinned and have repented, and this I desire for you as well as for myself".

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GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

## The last things and the Kingdom of God

This is Chapter 13 of "Jesus Christ our Lord Basic Points of the Gospel" by Fr Maximos Moschos of Mount Athos, translated from the Greek by Fr Peter A. Chamberas.

It is characteristic and remarkable that St. John the Baptist preached repentance because the Kingdom of God is coming (Mt. 3:2.). Our Lord also preached repentance and belief in the Gospel because the Kingdom of God is at hand; it has come (Mt. 4: 17; Mk. 1:15). Following the commission of Christ, the Disciples also preached repentance (Lk.6:12.) precisely because the Kingdom has come (Mt. 10:7). And at the end of his public ministry, Christ directed the Disciples to preach in His name repentance and forgiveness of sins (Lk.24:47). That is, the basic point of the preaching centred around the Kingdom of God, and all the details had to do with how this Kingdom could prevail. The Kingdom of God has no end (Lk. 1:33); it will be given to all those who would observe its prerequisites (Mt. 21: 43). One enters the Kingdom of God after a struggle (Mt.1 1:12) and it comes quietly into the heart of the believer (Lk.17:20-21). Some of the prerequisites for entrance into the Kingdom of God are: doing the will of God (Mt. 7:21), spiritual rebirth through faith and baptism (Jn. 3: 3-8), humility (Mt.18:3), a child-like attitude (Mt.19:14), patience in persecution (Mt. 5:10), sacrifice of possessions (Mt. 13:44-46), a greater perfection than that of the Pharisees (Mt. 5:20), love for the needy brethren (Mt. 25: 34-36), and finally seeking after the Kingdom of God (Mt. 6:33). The Kingdom of God is also called eternal life, which is the blessed and thrice-happy life in Paradise near our heavenly Father, but which begins in part from here and now. It is noted here that certain words have a double meaning, a literal and a metaphorical meaning. There are those people who are bodily dead and those who are spiritually dead (Lk. 9:60). There is the physical death, but also the spiritual death, which is the result of sin and the carnal mind (1 Cor. 15:56; Rom.8:6). There is also the natural life, such as that of the animals, and the spiritual life that comes as an added gift of God (Jn. 5:40; 6:53). He who believes in the Lord and keeps His Word will go from death to life and will never see spiritual death (Jn. 5:24; 8:51). Our Lord is the Resurrection and the Life (Jn. 11:25). He gives the eternal life (Jn. 10: 28). His words are truth and life, and they guide us to eternal life (Jn. 6: 68). The obedience to His will brings us to eternal life (Jn. 12:50). Also, He who receives Holy Communion, that is, eats and drinks Christ through the Holy Eucharist, has eternal life (Jn. 6:54). He who believes in Christ has eternal life, and he who does not believe has the wrath of God (Jn. 3:36). Eternal life is the knowledge of God, which we acquire through faith, virtue and experience of the divine blessings (Jn. 17:3).

The Kingdom of Heaven however will be preceded by other significant events, such as the general Judgment, the Second Coming or Parousia of Christ, and other fearful events, such as the appearance of the Antichrist. Whatever is to take place just before the end of this age and whatever is to follow this end, we refer to as the "**Last Things**", and the study of these events is called "**Eschatology**". Among the many things referred to in the New Testament about the last things there is also the following information contained in the four gospels.

The Second Coming of the Lord will be preceded by the "**signs of the times**", certain signs which we are obliged to observe carefully and to prepare ourselves, increasing our faith and our spiritual struggles. Many people observe the natural phenomena and predict the changes of the weather, while neglecting the signs which usher in the end of the world. Such people will hear the indicting word of the Lord, for they know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but give no

attention to the signs of the times (Mt.16:1-3; Lk.12:54-56). One day the Disciples approached the Lord and asked Him, what will be the sign of His Parousia and the end of the world, and when will this take place." And Jesus began to teach them: "Take heed that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray. And you will hear of wars and rumours of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: all this is but the beginning of the birth-pangs" (Mt. 24:4-8; Lk. 13:5-9; Lk. 21:8-11). Also, before these things take place, Jesus taught that the believers will suffer persecutions. He said: You will be delivered over to synagogues and prisons; you will be beaten and will stand before governors and kings, who will condemn you for calling upon the name of the Lord. But this will be an opportunity to bear testimony for Christ that will be heard by your persecutors and by all the nations. Moreover, the gospel must first be preached to all the nations. And when you are delivered up for trial by your persecutors, do not prepare an apology, what you will say. At that time you will be given utterance by the Holy Spirit, and no one will be able to resist you or to rebut your words. You will not be persecuted only by strangers, but also by parents and brothers; by relatives and friends. The father will deliver his child, and the children will rebel against the parents, and some of those delivered will be killed. Everyone will hate you because you are my disciples. Then many will be scandalised, and one will hate the other. Many false prophets will appear to lead many astray. The love of the many will become cold because lawlessness will prevail. And if I do not allow it not even a hair on your head will be disturbed. He who endures to the end will be saved (Mt. 24: 9-14; 10:17-22; Mk. 13: 9-13; Lk. 21: 12-19; 1 2: 11-12). When you see the desolating sacrilege, that hateful abomination which the Prophet Daniel spoke about, that is, the Antichrist, sitting on the holy place of the temple in Jerusalem, then you should know that there will be a great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now. And if those days had not been shortened, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened. Then if any one says to you, 'Here is Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it. Many false Christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. I have told you these things beforehand to prepare yourselves and to be vigilant. If they tell you, 'Christ is in the desert,' do not go out there to meet him; if they tell you, 'He is in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of man. When the corruption of the world reaches its climax, then the angels of punishment will come down like eagles upon their prey (Mt. 24:15-28; Mk. 13: 14-23; Lk. 21: 20-24; 17: 23-24, 37; these prophecies also refer to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman General Titus in 70AD). Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven. And there will be great suffering and confusion among the nations of the earth, not knowing how to protect themselves. Men will, faint and lose their senses from fear and the anticipation of the evils that will befall the world.

After all this, the form of the world will change and the entire universe will be renewed. And then His sign will appear in the sky, that is, the Cross. Then all the nations of the earth who did not believe in Christ will mourn, and will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four regions of the earth. As the fig tree becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, and you know that summer is near, so also when you see all these signs taking place, know that the end is near. Heaven and earth that seem so steadfast and permanent will pass away and be no more, but my words will not pass away but be fulfilled completely (Mt. 24: 29-35; Mk.13: 24-31; Lk. 21: 25-33). When exactly all these things take place is not something that is beneficial for you know. What is important is to be vigilant, to be prepared, to be always ready, because the end will come suddenly at a time when you will not know it beforehand. Be vigilant therefore and do not allow your souls to become heavy and indolent with prodigality, neglecting the work of the spiritual life, and be not so preoccupied with the cares of this life that the coming

of the Son of man catches you by surprise, as if in a trap. You must pray at every hour and every instant, beseeching God for grace and power to be worthy to escape without harm from these catastrophic future events, and thus to stand before Him without fear and condemnation. The Second Coming of Christ will take place as did the great flood in the time of Noah. Then people were eating and drinking and carrying on their normal way of life until Noah entered the ark and the flood came and swept everyone away. The same thing happened with the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. They were eating and drinking, buying and selling, and when Lot left the city, fire and brimstone fell from the sky and destroyed that city and all its people. Therefore you must watch and be ready for the Son of man will come at a time when you do not expect it. You must always be ready. At that time every one will be caught wherever and however he or she is (Mt. 24:36-44; Mk.13: 32-35; Lk. 21:34-36; 17:26-36; 12:39-40). Moreover, do not be like that foolish servant who neglected his duties and abused his fellow servants, thinking that the Lord is absent and will not be coming soon (Mt. 24: 45-51; Lk. 12: 41-46). Also, do not resemble the foolish virgins who were not prepared to receive the Lord with lighted lamps Mt. 25:1-13; Lk. 12:35-38; 13:25-28; 12:40). Do not follow the example of the other foolish servant who hid his one talent in the earth, but rather follow the example of the other servants who developed their talents and multiplied them (Mt. 25:14-30, Lk.19:11-27). The Lord made it clear that at the General Judgment He will separate all mankind as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And this separation will be made on the basis of the good that each person has done for others (Mt. 25:31-46; 16:27). Finally, as Christians we are called to be ever well girded and ready for spiritual action, and our lamps to be always lit and shining brightly (Lk.12:35).

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GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

# Fasting in the Orthodox Christian Church

by A. M. Coniaris

The Orthodox Church has always placed great emphasis on fasting. We fast on **Wednesdays** because on this day the decision was made to arrest Jesus. We fast on **Fridays** because it is the day on which Jesus was crucified. Fasting helps us remember that these are special days in the history of salvation. Other periods of fast are during Lent, Advent (pre-Christmas fast), the first fifteen days of August, etc.

Orthodox Christians fast from meat and products derived from meat, i.e., milk, cheese, eggs, butter, etc.

The purpose of such fasting is threefold:

1. it helps us concentrate more on prayer. A full stomach is not as conducive to prayer as one not so full;
2. it helps strengthen our will power. By learning to say "no" to certain types of food, we shall find it easier to say "no" to temptations;
3. it is a way of helping us identify with those who hunger and provide food for them.

Jesus fasted. He tells us in the Bible, "When you fast ..." He does not say, "If you fast ..." He expects us to fast.

An early Christian, Aristides, wrote:

"If there is a poor person among the Christians and they do not have the means to help him, they fast two or three days and give the food they have saved through fasting to the hungry person."

Orthodox Christians are called upon to fast not only for reasons of self-control and prayer, but also for reasons of love: to deny ourselves something that we may share what we have saved with a needy person.

from **Making God Real in the Orthodox Christian Home**  
Light and Life Publishing, 1977, p. 51-52

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