

# Services of Orthodox Great Lent and Holy Week

In the Orthodox Church the last week of Christ's life is relived in what is known as Passion Week or more commonly, Holy Week. Each day of Holy Week is dedicated to a particular theme as recorded in the four Gospels thus offering the faithful the opportunity to "go up with the Lord to Jerusalem."

Holy Week in the Orthodox Church is the center point of the whole liturgical year of the Church. Even though each Sunday Liturgy is referred to as a "*small resurrection*" Easter, or Pascha as it is called in Orthodoxy, is the ultimate celebration of the Jesus' resurrection and victory over death. One hundred days are dedicated to the Paschal celebration, 50 before it for preparation, and another 50 after it, all to commemorate our Lord's saving passion, His conquering of death through His death, and His restoration of the immortality we had in Paradise. For these reasons the Orthodox Church considers Pascha as the "Feast of Feasts."

The 50 days before Easter is known as the Τριῳδίον period (Triodion - Greek for "three odes"<sup>1</sup>) and focuses the faithful on preparation and strengthening for this journey with our Lord. The 50 days following Easter are signified by the Πεντεκοστήριον<sup>2</sup> period and runs from Easter Sunday to Pentecost. This period is marked by spiritual joy in the deep belief that the Triune God remains active in our everyday life and thoughts.

## Historical Development of Holy Week<sup>3</sup>

Early Christians connected a Paschal Fast with the rites of Christian initiation through baptism, which at first spanned a few days increasing to six already by the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. The earliest source for a ritual of Holy Week comes from Dionysius of Alexandria, in his *Letter to Basilides* (260 CE). While the letter focuses mainly on questions of Paschal fasting, this is one of the earliest links of a "Holy Week" ritual to events in Christ's Passion and resurrection. Other early (3<sup>rd</sup> century) sources include the *Didascalia*, Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition* and Cyprian.

*In the late 4<sup>th</sup> century a pilgrim from Spain named Egeria visits the Holy City of Jerusalem where Cyril is in his final years as bishop. In her diary Egeria records the rites she observed during the Paschal period summarized below.*

*It begins on Passion Sunday with a procession to Bethany where the gospel of the raising of Lazarus is read. On the afternoon of Palm Sunday the whole church goes out to the Mount of Olives and returns in solemn procession to the city bearing branches of palm. There are evening visits to the Mount of Olives on each of the first three days of Holy Week, in commemoration of our Lord's nightly withdrawal for the city during that week. On Thursday morning the eucharist is celebrated (for the only time in the year) in the chapel of the Cross...and all make their communion. In the evening after another eucharist the whole church keeps vigil at Constantine's church of Eleona on the Mount of Olives, visiting Gethsemane after midnight and returning to the city in the morning for the reading of the gospel of the trial of Jesus. In the morning of Good Friday all venerate the relics of the Cross, and then from noon to three p.m. all keep watch on the actual site of Golgotha with lections and prayers amid deep emotion. In the evening there is a final visit by the whole church to the Holy Sepulchre, where the gospel of the entombment is read. On*

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<sup>1</sup> This refers to the reduction of the number of biblical odes used in matin canons from the standard nine to three.

<sup>2</sup> The word is Greek for 50. In English *Pentecostarion*

<sup>3</sup> Source material for this section is from *The Historical Development of Holy Week Services In the Orthodox/Byzantine Rite* by Fr. Nabil L. Hanna

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*Holy Saturday evening the paschal vigil still takes place much as in other churches, with its lections and prayers and baptisms....*

The practices she and other pilgrims observed soon spread across the Christian lands and were incorporated into the various liturgical rites of these areas.

In the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Theodore and Joseph, Studites of the Monastery of Studios in Constantinople, created the Triodion. Since their text was primarily intended for monastic communities the Studites focused on a return to biblical roots, in particular readings from the Old Testament. In doing so, the theme of Holy Week shifted from baptism to the commemoration of the salvific works of Christ and His ethical and moral teachings.

The Triodion and Pentecostarion that the Studites wrote continue mainly unchanged in the Orthodox Church today, although the Church, having been influenced by the humanistic movements of the American Churches, have added dramatic visual events to the rites of Holy Week in an effort to elicit sentimental responses from the faithful.

The services of the Paschal season in the Orthodox Church are made up of four periods<sup>4</sup>.

## 1) Preparation for Great Lent<sup>5</sup>

- The Desire – Sunday of Zacchaeus
- Humility – Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee
- Return from Exile – Sunday of the Prodigal Son
- Final Judgement – Meat-Fare (Judgement) Sunday
- Forgiveness – Cheese-Fare (Forgiveness) Sunday

## 2) Great Lent (according to the Greek tradition)

- Every Wednesday – Liturgy of the Pre-Sanctified Gifts
- First four (4) Fridays – Salutations to the Theotokos
- Fifth Friday - Akathist Service
- Saturday of Souls Liturgy (Ψυχασάββατο)
- Prayer of St. Ephraim

## 3) Holy Week

- Lazarus Saturday
- Palm Sunday
- Monday and Tuesday - Bridegroom Services
- Holy Wednesday – Holy Unction
- Holy Thursday – 12 Gospel Readings
- Good Friday – Un-nailing of Christ from the Cross and the Lamentations
- Holy Saturday Morning – Proti Anastasis
- Holy Saturday Evening – Resurrection & Divine Liturgy
- Easter Sunday Agape Service

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<sup>4</sup> See page 2 of the Liturgical Calendars in Session 4 for a chronological listing of these Lenten/Paschal celebrations.

<sup>5</sup> The terms here are borrowed from [Great Lent - Journey to Pascha](#), by Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996.

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## 4) Services of Bright Week

### Services of Great Lent<sup>6</sup>

#### Liturgy of the Pre-Sanctified Gifts

In contrast to a typical Divine Liturgy, the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts (or Pre-Sanctified Liturgy) is celebrated as an evening liturgy. It is a combination of a Vespers service and Divine Liturgy with the chief difference being that there is no consecration of the eucharistic gifts at the presanctified liturgy. The Lamb (Body of Christ) is sanctified on the previous Sunday Liturgy hence the name Pre-Sanctified Liturgy. Other differences are that the Small and Great Entrances are missing from the Pre-Sanctified Liturgy.

The Roman Catholic Church celebrates a similar rite but only on Good Friday, referred to as the [Mass of the Presanctified](#). As in Orthodoxy there is no consecration of the gifts, but only the reception of Holy Communion from the reserved sacrament which was consecrated previously at Mass on Holy Thursday.

#### History of the Pre-Sanctified Gifts

The evolution of the pre-Sanctified Liturgy came about as a response to Canon 49 of the Synod of Laodicea of 363 AD which stated, *“During Lent the Bread must not be offered except on the Sabbath Day and on the Lord's Day only<sup>7</sup>.”* As regular receipt of Holy Communion has been an essential part of Orthodox life and due to the strict nature of the Lenten fast, the Church recognized the need to provide a way for the faithful to sustain and strengthen their efforts during Great Lent. The Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts, hence, was a practical response to allow the faithful to receive Holy Communion on days when the Eucharistic Liturgy could not be celebrated. The official proclamation to celebrate the Pre-Sanctified Liturgy was given by Canon 52 of the Quinisext Council<sup>8</sup> in Constantinople in 692 and stated, *“On all days of the holy fast of Lent, except on the Sabbath, the Lord's Day, and the holy day of the Annunciation, the Liturgy of the Presanctified is to be served.”* This official reference indicates that the practice of celebrating a Presanctified Liturgy was already in use throughout the Orthodox lands.

While the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts is traditionally considered to be the work of the Saint [Gregory the Dialogus](#)<sup>9</sup> of Rome, the reality is that he more likely documented the rite and tradition that was already in practice throughout the Byzantine Empire.

#### When is the Pre-Sanctified Liturgy Celebrated?

The Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts is served on Wednesday and Friday evenings during the entire period of Great Lent, although in the Greek tradition it is celebrated only on Wednesday since the Salutations to the Theotokos are celebrated on Fridays. Just as one would prepare with prayer and fasting for Divine Liturgy so there is also both a spiritual and physical (fasting) preparation for receiving Holy Communion at the Pre-Sanctified Liturgy. And as with the Divine Liturgy the faithful who are unable to make the effort of total fasting because of weakness or work, however, normally eat a light lenten meal in the early morning.

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<sup>6</sup> For a more complete explanation of the events of Great Lent see the book by Fr. Alexander Schmemmann entitled *Great Lent – Journey to Pascha*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> “Ὅτι οὐ δεῖ ἐν τῇ Τεσσαρακοστῇ ἄρτον προσφέρειν, εἰ μὴ ἐν Σαββάτῳ καὶ Κυριακῇ μόνον.

<sup>8</sup> Also referred to as the Council of Trullo.

<sup>9</sup> St Gregory (540-604) was selected to the Roman See after the death of Pope Pelagius.

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**Salutations to the Theotokos** The Service of the Salutations is known as one of the more beautiful hymnological services of the Church and is similar in structure to the Paraklisis<sup>10</sup> service. More rightfully a poem composed by This service is performed on the first four (4) Fridays of Great Lent.

With the addition of the Salutations to Great Lent the Church ensures that we recognize the Theotokos' role in our lives as one who mediates on our behalf to her Son. As one theologian as stated: *"Within this service, we all supplicate our Mother to support us in our struggle [of Great Lent]. To intercede for us to God for the salvation of our souls and for a happy ending to this struggle, that it may be peaceful and sinless, so that with pure souls we will experience the Holy and Awesome Passion of our Lord and then His bright Resurrection. And the presence of the Panagia in the world is great and salvific in our daily life..."*

As given in the Synaxarion of the Church, the service commemorates the events of 626 AD, when the Byzantine capital of Constantinople was attacked by the Persians and Avars in the [Siege of Constantinople](#). While the Persians prepared for the final attack, Patriarch Sergios led a procession around the city walls with the icon of the Theotokos of Blachernae and encouraged the people in resistance. That night, a fierce wind, which was attributed to divine intervention, created a storm at sea and destroyed the enemy fleet, while the defenders caused huge losses to the Avars and Persians, who were forced to withdraw thus saving Constantinople after which the people of the city gathered in the Church of the Theotokos of Blachernae to celebrate their salvation.

During the first four Salutation services, the Akathist Hymn is sung in parts and is comprised of twenty-four stanzas, divided into four parts. One stanza is sung on each Friday of Great Lent and on the fifth Friday, the entire set of stanzas are sung.

**[Akathist Service](#)** From the Greek Ἀκάθιστος meaning *"not seated."* The service dates back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century and the authorship is somewhat disputed however the most likely are Romanos the Melodist, Sergios Patriarch of Constantinople, and St. Photios. This hymn is sung on the last (fifth) Friday of Great Lent and is the same hymns as sung in the Salutations service except all the preceding four salutations plus an additional fifth Akathist is then sung. The service is divided into four stasis' following the letters of the Greek alphabet.

As with the Paraklisis service, the Salutations and Akathist services can be controversial for Protestants converting to Orthodoxy is the refrain of *Υπεραγία Θεοτόκε, σώσον ημάς* (Most Holy Theotokos save us) after each stanza which seems to contradict the idea of Christ as the only Mediator. For a discussion of this please refer to the Paraklisis section under Devotional Services in Session 5, Orthodox Services.

**Saturday of Souls Liturgy (Ψυχασάββατο)** Commemorations for the departed has been a tradition of the Church since her beginning on earth as is evident in the marking of the catacombs by the early Christians. The Church formalized these commemorations through the 4<sup>th</sup> century [Apostolic Constitutions](#) of which chapter 42 reads,

*Let the **third** day of the departed be celebrated with psalms, and lessons, and prayers, on account of Him who arose within the space of three days; and let the **ninth** day be celebrated in remembrance of the living, and of the departed; and the **fortieth** day according to the ancient pattern: for so did the people lament Moses, and the anniversary day in memory of him. And let alms be given to the poor out of his goods for a memorial of him.*

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<sup>10</sup> See session 5 – Orthodox Services

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However throughout Christian history many have died as unknown in war, plaques, lost in faraway places, or other adverse circumstances, without having the honor of one of these appointed memorial services. The Holy Fathers of the Church, out of compassion for them, decreed that a common memorial be made for all pious Orthodox Christians who have reposed, so that those who did not have particular memorial services may be included in this common one for all and that through these prayers God will have mercy on us and those departed. The common hymn that is sung during each Saturday of Souls services, in addition to all funeral and memorial services, clearly speaks to this intent.

*Give rest, O Christ, among the Saints to the souls of Your servants, where there is no pain, no sorrow, no grieving, but life everlasting.*

The Saturday of Souls service is conducted on four specific Saturdays; the two Saturdays preceding Great Lent; the first Saturday of Great Lent; and the Saturday before Pentecost.

Saturday of Souls is similar in nature to “All Souls Day” which is practiced in the Catholic Church and some Protestant Churches such as Anglican. However, while the Orthodox Church believes that the prayers of the living offered on behalf of the dead do have the potential to invoke God’s mercy on the departed, the Orthodox Church does not connect these memorial services with the theology of purgatory as does the Catholic Church.

### Prayer of St. Ephraim

This short prayer is attributed to Saint [Ephrem the Syrian](#) and used during the period of Great Lent. There is a Byzantine and Slavonic version however in both cases this prayer represents the most succinct summation of the spirit of Great Lent, a decrease in the vices and an increase in the virtues of a Christian life. This prayer is typically read at the end of the Presanctified Liturgy and on other services during the Triodion period of Lent to include Holy Week.

O Lord and Master of my life! Take from me the spirit of sloth, faint-heartedness, lust of power, and idle talk.

But give rather the spirit of chastity, humility, patience, and love to Thy servant.

Yea, Lord and King! Grant me to see my own errors and not to judge my brother, for Thou art blessed unto ages of ages. Amen.

Κύριε καὶ Δέσποτα τῆς ζωῆς μου, πνεῦμα ἀργίας, περιεργίας, φιλαρχίας, καὶ ἀργολογίας μὴ μοι δῷς.

Πνεῦμα δὲ **σωφροσύνης**, ταπεινοφροσύνης, ὑπομονῆς, καὶ ἀγάπης χάρισαί μοι τῷ σῶ δούλῳ.

Ναί, Κύριε Βασιλεῦ, δώρησαι μοι τοῦ ὁρᾶν τὰ ἐμὰ πταίσματα, καὶ μὴ κατακρίνειν τὸν ἀδελφόν μου, ὅτι εὐλογητὸς εἶ, εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων. Ἀμήν.

One significant difference between the Byzantine and Slavonic is the English translation of the Greek word σωφροσύνης in the second line of the prayer. In the Byzantine this is often translated as 'chastity' which leads many to associate this only with sexual abstinence and thus leading to a shallow interpretation. This word is actually a compound word consisting of σώος (soundness) and φρενες (mind). Therefore, in the purist sense σωφροσύνης has the broader meaning of rationality without illusion, a sense of purposefulness and discretion. The Slavonic version translation of *soundness* or *soberness of mind* more fully captures the intent and the nature of what the penitent should be asking for during this time of Lent where watchfulness and preparedness is a central theme.

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## Services of Holy Week

With the faithful having prepared properly through prayer, fasting and acts of charity, they are now ready to follow our Lord through His Passion. The first three (3) days of Holy Week presents us with themes based mainly on the last days of Jesus' earthly life made up of a series of incidents located in Jerusalem, parables, and discourses that focus on Jesus' divinity, the kingdom of God, the end times. Equally we are witness to Jesus' , and Jesus' harsh rebukes of the hypocrisy of the religious leaders. These three days have the same cycle and order and thus constitute a single liturgical unit.

The title Bridegroom suggests the intimacy of love and it is not without purpose that the Church compares the kingdom of God to a bridal feast and a bridal chamber. The Church historically has presented Christ as the divine Bridegroom and the Church as His Bride thus connotating a union of the Lover and the beloved. In the patristic tradition, the Bridegroom services also call us to remember the eventual Second Coming and the need for spiritual vigilance and preparedness,

## Saturday of Lazarus

Holy Week begins with the Saturday of Lazarus. One the eve of Lazarus Saturday one of the Vespers hymns shows that the Church recognizes the efforts undertaken during the Lenten Fast,

*Having accomplished the forty days for the benefit of our souls, we pray to Thee, O Lover of Man, that we may see the holy week of Thy passion, that in it we may glorify Thy greatness and Thine unspeakable plan of salvation for our sake.*

The Liturgy of Lazarus Saturday emphasizes Christ as “the Resurrection and the Life” who, by raising Lazarus, has confirmed the universal resurrection of mankind even before His own suffering and death.

His performing this last of His seven signs<sup>11</sup> (miracles) at Bethany reveals the two natures of Christ, God and Man. In His humanity and genuine grief as Christ wept for his friend Lazarus (John 11:35).

Moments later Christ raises Lazarus from the dead disclosing the fullness of His divinity. This dual revelation of the Lord's divinity and His humanity is a foreshadowing of what will come on Holy Friday when on the Cross we see not only suffering Man but suffering God. Lazarus Saturday also recalls that while this miracle led many to faith, it also cemented the chief priest's and Pharisees' decision to kill Jesus.

At the Divine Liturgy of Lazarus Saturday, the Thrice-Holy Hymn, is replaced with the baptismal verse, "As many as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ."<sup>12</sup> " This is a reminder that Lazarus Saturday was once among the few great baptismal days in the Orthodox Church Year.

Scripture readings for the Saturday of Lazarus are [Hebrews 12:28-13:8](#) and [John 11:1-45](#).

## Palm Sunday

Palm Sunday commemorates the Entrance of our Lord into Jerusalem following His miracle of raising Lazarus. After this miracle, Christ was hailed by the masses as the long-expected Messiah-King of Israel.

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<sup>11</sup> The term “seven signs” refers to the seven (7) signs identified in the Gospel of John through which Christ “reveals Himself to the world and to his own ...” Introduction to the New Testament, Fr. Raymond Brown, 1997

<sup>12</sup> Galatians 3:27

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In fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament, He entered Jerusalem riding on the colt of a donkey<sup>13</sup>.

The crowds greeted Him with branches in their hands and called out to Him with shouts of praise, *Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.*<sup>14</sup> On this day, we also receive and worship Christ in the same manner, acknowledging Him as our King and Lord. However, this reaction from the crowd cemented the plan by the Pharisees and Jewish leaders to put Him to death<sup>15</sup>.

### Bridegroom Services – Sunday, Monday and Tuesday

Beginning on Palm Sunday evening and continuing through the evening of Holy Tuesday, the Orthodox Church observes the services known as Bridegroom Services. The name of these services comes from the figure of the Bridegroom in the parable of the Ten Virgins found in Matthew 25:1-13.

The chief hymn of the Bridegroom services offer the stern warning of watchful which echoes Jesus' own words,<sup>16</sup>

*Behold, the Bridegroom comes in the middle of the night, and blessed is the servant He shall find vigilant; but unworthy is he whom he shall find neglectful. Beware therefore, O my soul, lest you be weighed down by sleep, lest you be given over to death and be closed out from the kingdom.*

The theme of Monday is that of the fig tree which yields no fruit and is condemned by Jesus, while the on Tuesday the accent is on the watchfulness as indicated by the parable of the ten virgins.<sup>17</sup>

In the Greek tradition the [Hymn of Kassiani](#) is sung on Holy Tuesday. Written in the 9<sup>th</sup> century by Saint Kassiani the Hymnographer and poet, it is also known as the *Hymn of the Sinful Woman*, it is sung on Tuesday evening in anticipation of the theme of Wednesday which is the fallen woman who repents and gives her wealth to Christ and kisses his feet. This hymn, with it's focus on repentance calls to mind the stern warnings of John the Baptist who proclaimed the new era of Jesus Christ, saying, *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"*<sup>18</sup>

### Holy Wednesday – Holy Unction<sup>19</sup>

While most other Orthodox Churches will celebrate Holy Wednesday with a Pre-Sanctified Liturgy, in the Greek tradition Holy Wednesday is celebrated with the Sacrament of Holy Unction. This is offered for the healing of soul and body. As with Chrismation, the oil used is a sign of God's presence, strength, and forgiveness. The theme of this day is watchfulness and is reflected in the Gospel readings, in particular the Parable of the 10 Virgins. The service consists of hymns, seven Epistle and Gospel readings and the offering of seven prayers, which are all devoted to healing. Following the service,



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<sup>13</sup> Zechariah 9:9

<sup>14</sup> Psalm 118:26

<sup>15</sup> John 11:47-53

<sup>16</sup> Luke 12:20, Matthew 24:36-51, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-6,

<sup>17</sup> Matthew 25:1-13

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 3:2

<sup>19</sup> See Session 7 Sacraments Part A for more details on the sacrament and service of Holy Unction.



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the priest anoints each person with oil which was blessed during the service.

## Holy Thursday<sup>20</sup>

Holy Thursday begins in the morning with the celebration of a Vespereal Liturgy of St. Basil, in remembrance of the earthly presence of Christ at the Last Supper. In the evening, again anticipating the Matins of Friday morning, Christ's Passion is recalled with the reading of the **Twelve Gospels**.

Four events are commemorated: the washing of the disciples' feet, the institution of the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist at the Last Supper, the agony in the garden of Gethsemane, and Judas' betrayal of Christ.

In these readings we hear the events of Christ's Passion from the perspective of each of the Gospel writers. We also join His disciples in receiving the new commandment that He gave to them and us.

*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*<sup>21</sup>

In Greek tradition, a procession is made after the reading of the fifth gospel with the chanting of "[Today He Who Hung](#)". During this procession, a large cross with the body of Christ is carried through the church as the faithful prostrate themselves. Upon reaching the Solea, the cross, with Christ's body hung upon it, is placed in front of the Royal Doors.

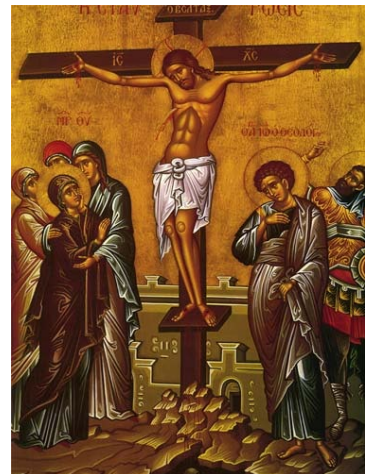
## Holy Friday<sup>22</sup>

On Holy Friday the Orthodox Church commemorates the death of Christ on the Cross. This is the culmination of the observance of the final stage of His Passion. The services of Great Friday and Saturday direct our attention to His trial, crucifixion, death and burial.

Christ, as the New Adam<sup>23</sup>, offered His life into death, to destroy it; and to break the bond of evil brought about by the sin of Adam and Eve. Christ's death is the final and ultimate revelation of His perfect obedience and love of the Father. With the words "*My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me!*"<sup>24</sup>

### How Can We Understand "*Why has Thou Forsaken Me?*"

It is important to pause at this point and answer a difficult question. This anguished cry of the Lord at His final moments has been another source of controversy and misunderstanding. Through these words of Jesus are we to understand that God the Father abandoned His son? In particular, there has arisen the notion that God the Father actually did



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<sup>20</sup> Also referred to as **Maundy Thursday** in the Catholic and Protestant traditions. Maundy" comes from the Latin word *mandatum*, or commandment, reflecting Jesus' words "*I give you a new commandment...*"

<sup>21</sup> John 13:34-35

<sup>22</sup> Reference Fr. Alkiviadis Calivas, *Great Week and Pascha in the Greek Orthodox Church*, Holy Cross Press, 1992

<sup>23</sup> Ref Romans 5:14 and 1 Corinthians 15:22

<sup>24</sup> Mark 15:34



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forsake His Son hanging on the Cross. Two major theological explanations have been offered for Jesus' statement.

a) ***The Father abandons His Son as the price of salvation.***

This is an ontological abandonment of Jesus by God the Father and presents an image of God the Father as One who seeks to have His wrath appeased through a sacrifice of one without sin and becomes the source of the theology of propitiation. God cannot look upon sin and rejects (abandons) His Son. Against this theory are the first canons of the Councils of Constantinople and Ephesus affirming that it was not possible for God the Father to forsake His Son in any real sense, since the Father and the Son are of "one being" (*ομοούσιος*) and indivisible.

b) ***This is not a "cry" but a statement conveying His human experience on behalf of all humanity.***

Here the abandonment was psychological, not ontological. Throughout Biblical history God has never abandons His loyal servants, so why would He abandon His Son in "*Whom I am well pleased.*" It is important to take Jesus' prayer of Psalm 22 in it's full context. While the words "*My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?*" While this would seem to indicate despair Jesus could not have prayed this unless He knew the Father was still "my God" as expressed in the next verses of the Psalm.

*You are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the one Israel praises.*

*In you our ancestors put their trust; they trusted, and you delivered them.*

*To you they cried out and were saved; in you they trusted and were not put to shame.*

Jesus' utterance was thus not expressing a sentiment unique to Himself, but rather identifying Himself with every human being who has ever felt a sense of great distance from God. Humanity's deep sense of abandonment, present in Jesus' time via the ongoing oppression and persecutions by the Romans, and even unto to us today is bestowed the ultimate revelation of God to His people; "*the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us.*"

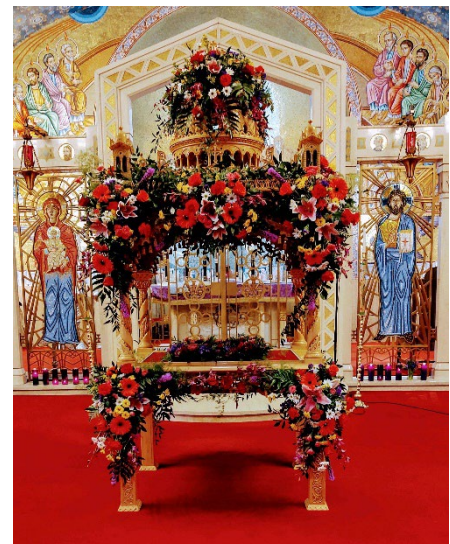
His suffering and death were at one and the same time an indication that He was in control of His death and that His work of redemption was accomplished, finished, fulfilled in His final words "*It is finished.*"<sup>25</sup>

As the church becomes dark for these services, we meet Christ in this deep gloom and awesome mystery of the extreme humility of our suffering God. However, there is still the watchful expectation of His defeat of death by His glorious resurrection. "*Come, let us see our Life lying in the tomb, that he may give life to those that in their tombs lie dead.*"<sup>26</sup>

### Highlights of the Services of Holy Friday

Holy Friday is marked by three services, the Royal Hours in the morning, the Un-nailing (*Αποκαθήλωσής*) in the afternoon, and the Lamentations (*Εγκώμια*) at night.

**Royal Hours** These services consist primarily of prayers, hymns, and passages from the Old Testament, Epistles, and Gospels and are read in the morning. In the Orthodox Church, the Royal Hours are celebrated three times a year, Eve of the



<sup>25</sup> John 19:30

<sup>26</sup> One of the hymns of Holy Saturday Orthros (Matins)

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Nativity, Eve of Theophany (Epiphany), and Holy Friday with the hymns and reading significant to the feast being celebrated.

Historically, it was customary for the Byzantine emperor to be in attendance for the entire Service, hence the title Royal Hours.

This is also typically when the Kouvouklion, a wooden carved funeral bier symbolizing the Tomb of Christ, is decorated with flowers in anticipation for the evening Lamentations service.

**The Un-nailing (Αποκαθήλωσης)** Later in the afternoon there is a continuation of the Royal Hours service with particular attention to the un-nailing of Christ from the Cross and the placement of His body in the tomb.

Once again, the priest reads the entire Gospel pertaining to the removal of Christ from the Cross and the wrapping of His body with a white sheet as did Joseph of Arimathea. As the priest reads the Gospel, either he or sometimes the children present will carefully remove the Body of Christ from the Cross, wrap it in a white cloth and bring it to the altar, while the priest chants, *"When Joseph of Arimathea took Thee, the life of all, down from the Tree dead, he buried Thee with myrrh and fine linen . . . Glory to Thy humiliation, O Master, who clothes Thyself with light as it were with a garment."*

The priest then exchanges the wrapped Christ with an Επιτάφιο (an embroidered or painted cloth on which the Body of Christ is represented) and processes around the church before placing it inside the Kouvouklion. This procession also reminds us that during Christ's entombment He descends into Hades to free the dead of the ages before His Resurrection.

**Lamentations (Εγκώμια)** This is an evening Vesper service which includes the procession with the Epitaphio and Kouvouklion and the singing of the Lamentations. This, in a poetical form, is actually a eulogy offered to Christ by His people.



A final observation on the events of Holy Friday is given by St. Theodore the Studite in his Catechism 73 where he connects Jesus, as the Creative Word (Λογος) of God with Creation itself. He writes of the Lord who planted the tree of life in Paradise is the one who is hanged upon a tree. How at His crucifixion the elements of creation responded to the "outrages done to the Master." The sun faded, the moon darkened, the earth was shaken, and the rocks split.<sup>27</sup> He goes on to ask, *"The lifeless elements which have no senses, as if endowed with life and sensation from fear of the Lord and from the spectacle of what is seen, were amazed and altered; and do we, who have been honored with reason, for whose sake Christ died, remain untouched and without tears in these days? How could we be less rational than things which have no reason, more unfeeling than the stones? In no way, my brothers, in no way. Let us rather be amazed in a manner worthy of God..."*

## Holy Saturday

Great and Holy Saturday is the day between Jesus' death and His resurrection. It is the day of watchful expectation, in which the mourning that had been experienced on Holy Thursday and Friday is being transformed into joy. The hymnography of the Church recounts this mystery in poetic dialogue between Jesus and His Mother:

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<sup>27</sup> Matthew 27:45,51-52

## Services of Orthodox Great Lent and Holy Week

*"Weep not for me, O Mother, beholding in the sepulcher the Son whom thou hast conceived without seed in thy womb. For I shall rise and shall be glorified, and as God I shall exalt in everlasting glory those who magnify thee with faith and love."*

*"Let the creation rejoice exceedingly, let all those born on earth be glad: for hell, the enemy, has been despoiled. Ye women, come to meet me with sweet spices: for I am delivering Adam and Eve with all their offspring, and on the third day I shall rise again."* (9th Ode of the Canon)

Holy Saturday in the Orthodox Church is also referred to as the Πρώτη Ανάσταση or the first resurrection as Christ descends into Hades to break the bonds of Hades and release those in bondage who came before the Son of God entered into human history.

In this journey to salvation, Holy Saturday is the day the battle is fought, which will result in the ultimate victory of Pascha. Holy Saturday is the pivotal day in the Paschal celebration. The day that the sorrow of this Holy Week begins to transform into joy<sup>28</sup>.

It begins with the Vespereal Liturgy of St. Basil with the hymns speaking to Christ's descent into Hades and His victory over it. Hades, the Greek expression for the Judaic idea of Sheol is the place of the dead. Death, which was brought into Creation through Adam and the Deceiver, is now defeated by the Christ, the New Adam. The hymns from this liturgy reflect this.

*Today Hades cried out, "My power has been destroyed. I received Him as a mortal, one among the dead, but this One I am powerless to restrain and instead with Him I lost all those I ruled over. I held the dead from the ages, but He resurrects all. Glory Lord to Your cross and Your resurrection."*

### Highlights of the Service of Holy Saturday

The Old Testament readings speak of the history of salvation from Genesis up through Daniel and includes many of the prophecies that foretold of the coming of Christ as well as the reading of the Song of the Three Youths who danced in the furnace fire praising God<sup>29</sup>. Prior to the Gospel being read, the priest scatters bay leaves, laurel leaves or rose petals throughout the whole church symbolic of Christ's shattering of the gates of Hades and the breaking of the chains of those in bondage.

The typical Trisagion Hymn is replaced with the baptismal hymn<sup>30</sup> since it was during this time in the ancient Church that the Catechumens were baptized in anticipation of Pascha. The Epistle and Gospel readings speak in anticipation of the Jesus' resurrection and of St. Paul reminding us that with our baptism "we are united with Him in a resurrection like His."<sup>31</sup>

### Paschal Celebration

Holy Week comes to an end at sunset of Great and Holy Saturday, in preparation of the Church's most ancient and preeminent festival,



<sup>28</sup> Source: Great and Holy Saturday: The Forgotten Feast, by Daniel Manzik, *The Word*, April 2008.

<sup>29</sup> Daniel 3:8-97

<sup>30</sup> The hymn is "As many as have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ. Alleluia."

<sup>31</sup> Romans 6:3-11

## Services of Orthodox Great Lent and Holy Week

Pascha, known as the feast of feasts. The service begins with the church darkened as a shortened Matin service is chanted<sup>32</sup>.

In imitation of the glorious light of the risen Christ emanating from the empty Tomb dispelling the darkness of Holy Week, Christ, the priest emerges from the Altar with the vigil light. Joyfully singing *"Come ye and receive light from the unwaning light, and glorify Christ, who arose from the dead"* the priest then lights the candles of the faithful and as the entire church is slowly bathed in candlelight we are reminded of the words in the prologue of John's Gospel,

*"In [Christ] was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. In Him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world."*

The priest, walking to the rear of the church where a podium is setup reads the Gospel which refers to the Angels statement to the women who were first at Christ's tomb:

*"Don't be amazed, for you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. "* (Mark 16:1-8).

The people's response to this is the climatic moment that has been anticipated since the beginning of Great Lent and Holy Week and is the joyful singing of the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection.

Χριστὸς ἀνέστη ἐκ νεκρῶν, θανάτῳ θάνατον πατήσας, καὶ τοῖς ἐν τοῖς μνήμασι, ζωὴν χαρισάμενος!

Christ is risen from the dead, by death trampling death, and to those in the tombs He has granted life!

Following this the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom is then celebrated with the Scripture reading being the prologue of John's Gospel, John 1:1-17. At the completion of the Liturgy, the inspiring festival sermon of Saint Chrysostom is read which calls upon all people to

"Take part in this fair and radiant festival. Let no one be fearful of death, for the death of the Savior has set us free . . . O Death, where is thy sting? O Hades, where is Thy victory? Christ is Risen and Thou art overthrown. To Him be glory and power from all ages to all ages."

### Easter Sunday (Agape Service)

Agape is the term used by the early Christians to refer to the fellowship meal that Jesus had with His disciples. This fellowship meal, as instituted by Christ at His "Last Supper" was the origin of the salvific sacrament of the Eucharist. This is where Jesus, using bread and wine, told His disciples to eat of His Body and drink of His Blood for the forgiveness of sin. Although these words seem common to us now, there were a stumbling block for those who first heard Jesus say this, Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, *"How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"* (John 6:52). Even His disciples found this difficult, saying *"This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?"* (John 6:60).

By the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the Agape Meal was separated from the Holy Eucharist, as most Christian Churches began celebrating the Holy Eucharist in the morning and the Agape Meal in the evening. While the Holy Eucharist continued to be celebrated in the Orthodox Church on Sundays and other holy days, the Agape Meal faded out by the end late of the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

The Agape Service is a Vesper service with excerpts from the Gospel read in several languages in remembrance of the command of Christ to, *"Go and make disciples of all nations..."*

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<sup>32</sup> This is a repeat of the odes of The Canon that was sung on Holy Friday prior to the Εγκώμια (Lamentations)