

## The “Blessing of the New Light”: An Inquiry into the Origins of a Distinctive Holy Saturday Ritual

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Despite its inveterate traditionalism, the Byzantine Church admits of some substantial variations, even in its rituals of Great and Holy Week, which are among the most scrupulously maintained of its observances. A comparison of the ritual books of the various churches of Byzantine tradition reveals few significant divergences in these rituals – with a noteworthy exception. The Melkite Church, a Byzantine-rite Church in communion with the See of Rome, practices a ritual on Holy Saturday morning, the “Blessing of the New Light,” which is not found in any of the other contemporary Byzantine typikons. The purpose of this essay is to describe this ritual in detail, to speculate regarding its origin, and to consider the advisability of its broader practice within the Byzantine tradition.

### *The Ritual*

This ritual<sup>1</sup> normally takes place on Holy Saturday morning, immediately preceding the vespereal Liturgy of St. Basil the Great. None of the candles in the church are lit. The priest is fully vested in purple vestments and, holding an unlit candle in his left hand, censes the four sides of the altar, the icons, and the congregation while the cantors sing several *idiomela* (a class of hymns with a distinctive meter, not patterned on the

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<sup>1</sup> The text and rubrics given here are taken from J. Raya and J. de Vinck, *Byzantine Daily Worship* (Allendale, NJ: Alleluia Press, 1969), 835-838.

meter of other hymns) in the eighth tone. (These hymns are also used in the liturgy that follows.)

Today Hades tearfully sighs: “Would that I had not received Him who was born of Mary, for He came to me and destroyed my power; He broke my bronze gates, and being God, delivered the souls that I had been holding captive.” O Lord, glory to Your cross and to Your holy resurrection!

Today Hades groans: “My power has vanished. I received One who died as mortals die, but I could not hold Him: with Him and through Him, I lost those over whom I had ruled. I had held control over the dead since the world began, and lo, He raises them all up with Him!” O Lord, glory to Your cross and to Your holy resurrection!

The priest then hands over the censer to the acolytes, who empty it and clean it out so that no live charcoal remains in it. The priest, standing before the Holy Table, facing east, then begins with the opening exclamation:

Blessed are You, O Christ our God, in the temple of Your holy glory, now and always and forever and ever. Amen.

The priest then proceeds to the back (eastern side) of the Holy Table, and facing the east, he sings the usual Great Litany of the Byzantine tradition, to which the usual responses are rendered.<sup>2</sup> Immediately afterwards, tapers are distributed to the congregation, and the priest, still facing east, offers the lengthy Prayer for the New Light, as follows:

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<sup>2</sup> In some parishes, the response “Lord, have mercy” is repeated continuously as the priest sings the petitions, all of this being done in a hushed tone of voice.

Let us pray to the Lord.  
Lord, have mercy.

Lord Jesus Christ, our God, Source of Life and Immortality, Eternal Light born of Eternal Light, Immortal Light, invisible, incomprehensible, unchanging and unchangeable: You are the True Light who dwell in the Unapproachable Light and shine forth from Him: You are the Light of the Father's glory and its radiance; You are the Light of the heavenly hosts and of every man who comes into the world. O Savior, You established a law for the first man who lived in the state of light, in order to guide him and lead him to the new world of heaven and incite him to grow in the love of eternal life. But he transgressed that law, and fell from that great glory in which You had established him, and by this fall he dealt death to himself and estranged himself from You, O Glorious Light! But You, O Lord, the Lover of Mankind, in your great bounty and infinite mercy, submitted yourself to death and condescended to share the lowliness of us wretched sinners, in order to lead us back to that former glory and light from which we had fallen away. For the sake of us transgressors of your divine law, You accepted to be buried, to go down into Hades, to the depths of the earth. Then, O Lord, You destroyed the gates of death, delivering and raising up those who had been chained in its darkness: You filled our human nature with the light of your resurrection, bestowing upon the world a new life and a new light brighter than the sun. Merciful as You are, You restored our human nature to its former beauty and to that glorious light from which we had been exiled.

Now, O Lord and God, our Savior Jesus Christ, grant spiritual and physical light to our minds and hearts that had been blinded with worldly errors: enlighten us as You enlightened the holy Marys and the holy women who came to your tomb with spices, so that they could