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Transfiguration

THE SUNDAY OF PASCHA

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I. Preface

The apex of the liturgical year in the Byzantine tradition is the Sunday of Pascha (*ê kyriakê tou pascha*); in English, "Easter Sunday." Most of the ancient lectionaries began here, a practice still reflected in the Greek *Apostolon* (Book of Epistles) and *Evangelion* (Book of Gospels), and in the lists of readings appended to the Slavonic lectionaries which present a continuous text. The night-time service of Resurrection Matins¹ on this day, more than any other Byzantine service, has captured the attention and admiration of guests by its opening procession, the beauty of its chant, and the overwhelming spirit of joy. Early on the morning of the Sunday of Pascha, the entire Byzantine world echoes with the chant: "Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and on those in the tombs bestowing life." It is sung before the doors of the church, expressing faith in the renewal of time and of creation, in the midst of an imperfect and as-yet unfulfilled world.

The story is told of an Orthodox priest who replied to a criticism of Byzantine "ritualism" saying: "To understand the mystery of the Risen Christ, neither your books nor your sermons are of any help. For that, one must have lived with the Orthodox Church the Joyous Night (of Easter).¹ And he blessed himself."²

¹ The morning service in the Byzantine Church is "*Orthros*"; in Slavonic, "*utrenja*"; that is, a combination of what the West would call "Matins" and "Lauds."

² C. Bourgeois, S.J. "Chez les paysans de la Podlachie et du nord-est de la Pologne. Mai 1924 - décembre 1925," *Etudes* 191 (1927) 585, quoted and translated by Robert Taft, S.J., "Sunday in the Eastern Tradition," in *Sunday Morning: A Time for Worship* (ed. Mark Searle; Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1969) 62-63.

II. The Centrality of the Resurrection.

The Resurrection of our Lord is the central mystery of Christianity, therefore of Christian liturgical celebration. This is true for the whole Church. Within a few years after the historical Resurrection, St. Paul was to write: "if Christ has not been raised, then empty too is our preaching; empty, too, your faith" (1 Cor.15:14). It was the mystery of the Resurrection that made Sunday the first day of the week, the important liturgical day for the early Christians.³

The annual celebration of Passover and its implications for the Christian faith in Jesus' dying and rising soon gave rise to an annual Christian feast of "Pascha" to commemorate the Crucifixion and Resurrection of the Messiah. At first it was confined to one day, the 14th of Nisan, but very early it was connected with the Sunday celebration of the Resurrection and made into a *triduum* from Friday to Sunday. The movement can be seen in the victorious struggle of the Sunday Pascha over the Quartodeciman Pascha in the second century.⁴

The Byzantine tradition has consistently accented the Resurrection aspect of this feast because of its theological-anthropological emphasis on "deification." In the fourth century, Athanasius epitomized the idea: "The Son of God became the Son of Man so that the son of man, that is to say, of Adam, might become son of God."⁵ From this time onward, the theme has been reiterated and developed by theologians, especially by St. Maximos the Confessor. Building on the name for the mystery of Baptism, "Enlightenment," which was performed on this day, the liturgical celebration of Pascha became a feast of glory or light. The same Christ who was transfigured in glory on Mount Tabor shone forth from the tomb with light, and "Today all things are filled with light, earth and heaven and the world beneath" (Paschal Canon Ode 3, Troparion 1).⁶ This does not mean that the suffering aspect of the salvation event has been forgotten or obscured.

³ Cf. C.S. Mosna, *Storia della Domenica dalle Origini fino agli inizi del V secolo* (Rome: Libreria Editrice dell'Università Gregoriana, 1969) 42-60.

However, Thomas Talley is of the view that the Sunday celebration of the Resurrection has liturgical priority over the annual Pascha, and that therefore it is "senseless to describe" it "as a 'little Easter'." Cf. Thomas Talley, "History and Eschatology in the Primitive Pascha" in *Worship: Reforming Tradition* (Washington, DC: The Pastoral Press, 1990) 76.

⁴ Talley, "History and Eschatology" 79-83.

⁵ *The Incarnation*, PG 26, 996.

⁶ Translations of the Paschal Canon and Stichera are from the Pentecostarion (Uniontown, PA: Liturgical Commission of the Sisters of the Order of St. Basil the Great, 1986).

The Sunday *Octoechos* (the Book of the Eight Tones) contains a Canon "To the Cross and the Resurrection" for each of the eight tones. The way to exaltation is through *kenosis*, "emptying" (Phil.2:6-11).

The Byzantine Paschal liturgy has developed the theme of glory, of light, of splendor. However, the veneration of the suffering of the Cross remains, for "Christ trampled down death by death." This theme of Death and Resurrection, so well expressed in the Byzantine tradition, is the spiritual basis of the universal Christian faith. It is easy to trace the evolution of these theological concepts (with variations in emphases) in the West as well as in the East. Shortly after Athanasius in the East, Augustine in the West was to say, "If we are made sons of God, we are made gods."⁷ In the Middle Ages, before Gregory Palamas elaborated his theology of the Light of Tabor, Thomas Aquinas wrote, "The Incarnation accomplished the following: that God became human and that humans became God and sharers in the divine nature."⁸ Good Friday then may be viewed as the ultimate act of love of God for humanity, the consummation of the mystical marriage; and the Risen Christ is our glorious destiny, as we, "bearing torches...meet the bridegroom as He comes forth from the tomb" (Paschal Canon Ode 5, Troparion 2).

This may well be in harmony with modern needs and with "American theology." McGowan observed, "American theology...by putting emphasis on creation as the epiphany of God in all things, has the great advantage of dealing...directly with the gift of the seventh day, that is, the sanctification of the world in the glory of God's presence."⁹

III. The Structure of the Office

We will treat the offices of the Sunday of Pascha: Resurrection Matins, the Divine Liturgy, the Hours, and Vespers.

Resurrection Matins begins in the middle of the night. In the Slavonic tradition, the burial shroud¹⁰ is removed from the "tomb" just

⁷ *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 49.2. PG 36, 565.

⁸ In Eph. 3, lectio 5. Cf. Matthew Lamb, *Thomas Aquinas' Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians* (Albany, N.Y. Magi Books, 1966).

⁹ Thomas McGowan, "American Theology," *Commonweal*, June 30, 1972, 356.

¹⁰ In Greek: *sinдонê*; in Slavonic *plaschanitza*. The "burial shroud" is a strip of cloth upon which an icon of Jesus after His deposition from the Cross has been painted. At the procession of Good Friday Vespers, the "shroud" is placed on the "tomb" (Greek: *epitaphios*; Slavonic: *hrob* or *grob*), a representation of the tomb of Christ. In the Greek tradition, it is usually a flat platform with four pillars and a canopy; in the Slav tradition, a wooden box with a slanting platform to display the *plaschanitza*.