

Paschal Epistle of His Eminence Valentine Metropolitan of Suzdal and Vladimir First Hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church

“These things I command you,
That ye love one another.
If the world hate you, ye know
That it hated Me before it hated you...
The servant is not greater than his lord.
If they have persecuted Me, they will also persecute you.”
(John 15:17-20)

Dearly beloved in our risen Christ, Right Reverend Arch-pastors, Reverend Fathers,
Honorable Monastics, Brothers and Sisters,

Christ is risen!

This is not the first year that our holy martyric Church is meeting the most divine day of the Resurrection of our Lord and Savior in difficult circumstances. People with minds attuned only to earthly, worldly, things suppose that persecutions should darken our joy in the resurrected Christ. However, true Christians know that to suffer for our Lord, to suffer together with Him, without having renounced even one word of His truth, is the very essence of joy.

The glory and the dignity of the Church does not consist in seeing gold cupolas on the streets of this world, and having the powerful of this world “donating” to her out of their ill-gotten gain. No! The glory and the dignity of the Church are Her Martyrs and Confessors, the living witnesses to the fact that the Truth is not susceptible to any violent force, and that there is no power in this world capable of stifling the inspiring words of the Gospel, and destroying True Orthodoxy.

This is what the Lord Jesus Christ was speaking about in His farewell talk with His Disciples in the garden of Gethsemane the night before His crucifixion. With this moving conversation, which should shake any man to the core of his being, begins the first, and longest, Gospel reading on Holy Thursday evening, when we perform the service of the Lord’s Passion in our churches. With this conversation begins also our mental, spiritual participation in the sufferings of Christ, and it is with this reading that we have decided to begin our Paschal epistle.

At this holy moment of the sacrament of Pascha, let us offer up praise, from the depths of our hearts, for our courageous brothers and sisters, the heroes of our Faith, who have been evicted from their churches on the very eve of this great feast, in the towns of Pavlovskoye, Ivanovskoye, Krapivye, Borisovskoye, Omutsk, and Vesi, all

towns close to Suzdal, but who have not betrayed our True Church! We also make a full prostration to the loyal flock of Suzdal, who have lost eleven churches, their most precious treasures, in which now, in accordance with the will of the devil and of his obedient authorities, we now see the “abomination of desolation” in full swing. Our ardent prayers also do not cease for all other true Orthodox Christians, who are being chased out of their churches, insulted, shamed, and demeaned for the sake of the Holy Church. You are all worthy descendants of our Fathers, the New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia, upon whose blood our Church stands, and who will meet their Bridegroom and Creator in the day of His second coming clad in snow white garments. You have already been united to God through your sufferings, for, as He Himself said, you have been persecuted, as He was persecuted, so that you might be resurrected and glorified, and inherit His divine life together with Him.

We are all aware that without the Cross there is no Resurrection, and that without self-sacrificial loyalty to the Truth, there is no genuine Paschal joy. The Russian people have also said since time immemorial, that the true Church is not the one that persecutes, but the one that is persecuted. Those of our persecutors who are in government, together with those belonging to the reigning false church, say that they are also celebrating the resurrection of Christ, and that they also experience a certain Paschal joy. These vain festivities of theirs, taking place inside churches that have been confiscated from the True Church, and rebuilt on the tears and blood of true Christians, by ill-gotten gain, were boldly exposed by the great Prophet Isaiah many centuries ago, who spoke the word of God unto unfaithful Israel, “Your new moons and your appointed feasts My soul hateth: they are a trouble unto Me; I am weary to bear them... Cease to do evil; Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed...” (Isaiah 1:11-17). Will our persecutors heed this prophetic voice, as once the “faithful remnant” of the Jewish nation did, which accepted Christ? Let us pray that the words of Christ should not ultimately be fulfilled in them, “They look with their eyes, but do not see; they listen with their ears, but do not hear” (Mark 4:12).

Let us not celebrate our Pascha as worldly people celebrate their’s, giving themselves over to every kind of outward entertainment, with decorations, drunkenness and gluttony, emotional exaltation, indulging the flesh and fulfilling the lusts of their eyes. The Apostle Paul calls us to “Purge out therefore the old leaven... For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness...” (1 Cor. 5:7-8).

Let us honor this day not in feasting and carnal delights, but with prayers of thanksgiving for all that the Lord has done, and by sacramental communion with Him in the communion of His Body and Blood. Reproaching our persecutors, who have perverted the essence of Christianity, and, in part, have turned Pascha into a light-minded popular carnival, let us not self-satisfactorily lord it over them. Our Lord Jesus Christ loves all people; He bore His sacrifice on the Cross, died, and rose from the dead in order to make it possible for all people to live forever, in the fullness of divine joy and happiness. Our mission, as the small, but faithful remnant of true Christians, is to help our wayward brethren understand the wrongness of their erroneous ways, and show them the way out of the Babylon of sin and heresy to the

New Jerusalem of eternal righteousness, shining “with the divine radiance of the resurrection.”

Let us turn away from the external conditions in which we meet the present feast to its internal content, which, undoubtedly, is the most important for us, and should fully occupy our thoughts and feelings on this light-bearing and divine night. As the holy Apostle Paul teaches, the risen Lord is the Firstborn of the dead. What does this mean? When the first people sinned and fell away thereby from God, as from the fountain of life, they were doomed to death, because sin, evil, and untruth are incompatible with life, which consists entirely of goodness and truth. Beginning with Adam and Eve themselves, together with all their children and descendants, right up to and including Christ, all people died and could not inherit eternal life. Our Lord, being eternal God and Creator, loves man so much that, two thousand years ago, He took upon Himself our human nature and lived upon the earth in our human flesh. In His body, the Lord was crucified and died on the Cross, and in His immortal soul, descended into Hades, into the kingdom of eternal death. But death cannot swallow the Source of life, and her confrontation with God signified the death of death, the despoiling of Hades. According to the imaginative expression of one of the Saints, having swallowed the bait of the human flesh of Christ, Hades and the devil were pierced through with the radiance of His Divinity, and gave up all of the dead which they had been holding, beginning with Adam and Eve. “Today thou shalt be with Me in paradise,” the Lord Jesus Christ surely promised to the repentant thief, who was crucified to the right side of Him. It is not coincidentally, as the Evangelist Matthew witnesses, during the days of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, that “many bodies of the saints which slept arose, and came out of the graves after His resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many” (Matt. 27:53). And as is well known by everyone, the holy friend of the Lord, Lazarus, who lay already stinking in the tomb for four days, became the “first-born of the dead,” when Christ raised him eight days before His Own resurrection.

One image of the future general resurrection, which is visible for all men to see, is the resurrection of nature in the spring, which, not coincidentally, takes place at the same time every year as our radiant feast of Pascha, and is the most life-producing time of the year, when the freezing cold ceases, the snow melts, and everything around us comes to life and turns green; when the sun shines, streams burgle happily, and birds sing for joy. As revealed to us in the Book of Revelation, the same thing will happen on the last day with the bodies of the dead. In Matins for Holy Saturday, we hear the amazing prophecy of Ezekiel, to whom the Lord revealed a little of the mystery of the last day: “The Lord... set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones,... Thus saith the Lord God unto these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live... So I prophesied as I was commanded: and behold a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to his bone... And they lived, and stood up on their feet, an exceeding great army... Thus saith the Lord God; Behold, O My people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves...” (Ezekiel 37:1-12).

Receiving the Body and Blood of Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist, we all become organic members of that same Body of the Lord, Whose resurrection we now celebrate. And so, we should speak not of “celebrating” in the usual sense of this word, but rather of direct participation in the resurrection. Just as we inherited a body from the first Adam, with its DNA, so also do we inherit resurrection and eternal life from the New Adam - Christ. Through Holy Communion, as if by means of a visible type, we become co-resurrected with Christ, and co-participants of His eternal life, mystically taking part in His Divinity, indivisible with the Father and the Holy Spirit. And having been united with Him in this way, we will rise from the dead, and live with Him in His Divinity.

Dearly beloved in the Lord!

Greeting you with the all-joyous feast of the Resurrection of Christ, and calling down upon you the blessing of God, I wish for all of you to keep the joy of our divine Pascha in your hearts, never to be lost. May the light brightening your faces this night lighten the darkness of the world in which you live, and become a living, clear, witness of the Truth for all that you encounter.

Truly Christ is risen!

Lowly Valentine

Metropolitan of Suzdal and Vladimir

Pascha, 2011

Suzdal