

# *The Confessor's Tongue for May 9, A. D. 2021*

Thomas Sunday; Prophet Isaiah

In honor of St. Maximus the Confessor, whose tongue and right hand were cut off in an attempt by compromising authorities to silence his uncompromising confession of Christ's full humanity & divinity.

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## **Thomas Sunday and Antipascha**

This Sunday commemorates the appearance of the Lord to the Apostles after His resurrection and the touching of His wounds by the Apostle Thomas. The circumstances of these events are sung in all the stikhera and troparia of the canon on Apostle Thomas Sunday and in the stikhera of the other days of this week. The appearance of the risen Lord to the Apostle Thomas and all the eleven is selected for the first Sunday after the Paschal Sunday because the circumstances of this appearance serve as the indisputable proof of the resurrection of the Lord from the tomb, "as from the chamber, with His immaculate flesh". It assures not only believers and the amazed of the joy of all the followers of the Lord, but even the infidel pagans and the enemies of Christ the Savior - the Judeans. It assures that by the power of His Divinity Jesus Christ is risen again from the tomb, that after the resurrection He did not have an imaginary or illusory flesh in which form the bodiless spirits or inhabitants of heaven are vested when they sometimes appear to us or to the holy brethren, but the real immaculate flesh which He has assumed from the womb of the All-holy Theotokos, with which He was nailed to the cross and on which there remained wounds even after the resurrection.

The eighth day after Pascha as the ending of the celebration of Bright Week was a special celebration since ancient times, as if it replaced the very same Day of Pascha and was called Antipascha, which means 'instead of Pascha.' From this day the cycle of Sundays and weeks of the entire year begins. On this day the commemoration of the resurrection of Christ is updated for the first time. This Sunday of the Antipascha was called the New Sunday, i.e. the first day of renewal or simply renewal. The more proper name is the real day, the eighth day after Pascha, that on this eighth day the Lord Himself willed the renewal of the joy of His resurrection with a new appearance to the Holy Apostles.

St. Gregory the Theologian says in his Homily on this Sunday, "With the ancient and good purpose, it is to honor the day of renewal as established law, or better to say, to honor the new benefactions with the day of renewal. But was not the day of renewal also the first Resurrection Day, followed by the blessed and radiant night? Why you give this name to the present day? That was the day of salvation, but this day is the commemoration of salvation. That day differentiates the burial and the resurrection in itself, but this day is purely of the new birth. It is the first day among those following it and eighth among those coming before it".

Commemorating this day of "renewal" the Holy Church inspires in us the necessity for our beneficial spiritual renewal. "The real renewal", the same Holy

Father teaches, "we now celebrate, is the going from death to life. And so we put off ourselves the old man and renewed ourselves; that we too might walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:4)". "The old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17).

## **Radonitsa**

On this day, the Tuesday of St. Thomas week, according to the order instituted by our Holy Fathers, we call to remembrance, in Paschal joy, all those who have died from the beginning of the ages in faith and in the hope of resurrection and life eternal.

Having previously celebrated the radiant feast of Christ's glorious Resurrection, the faithful commemorate the dead today with the pious intent to share the great joy of this Pascha feast with those who have departed this life in the hope of their own resurrection. This is the same blessed joy with which the dead heard our Lord announce His victory over death when He descended into Hades, thus leading forth by the hand the righteous souls of the Old Covenant into Paradise. This is the same unhopied-for joy the Holy Myrrhbearing Women experienced when discovering the empty tomb and the undisturbed grave clothes. In addition, this is the same bright joy the Holy Apostles encountered in the Upper Room where Christ appeared though the doors were closed. In short, this feast is a kindred joy, to celebrate the luminous Resurrection with our Orthodox forefathers who have fallen asleep.

There is evidence of the commemoration of the dead today in the writings of the Church Fathers. St. John Chrysostom mentions the commemoration of the dead performed on Tuesday of St. Thomas week in his "Homily on the Cemetery and the Cross."

Today, the faithful departed are remembered in Divine Liturgies, 'koliva' is prepared and blessed in the churches in memory of those who have fallen asleep, and the Orthodox graves in cemeteries are blessed by the priests and visited by the faithful. On this day alms are given to the poor. Furthermore, it should be noted that due to the great spiritual joy this jubilant commemoration bears, it is called in the Slavonic tongue, 'Radonitsa,' or Day of Rejoicing.

*We will observe this day with Divine Liturgy, Kolivo, remembrance of the departed, and visitation of graves.*

*From the "Synaxarion of the Lenten Triodion and Penecostarion" (published in 1999 by HDM Press, Rives Junction, Michigan) on "Radonitsa"*

## **From Fr. John (Krestiankin, +2006)**

*Fr. John was an elder at the Pskov Caves Monastery (Pechory) during Communism. You can read more about him in the book Everyday Saints. He will be canonized one day. Here is a selection of his counsel from his letters.*

You can and need to fulfill God's will in every matter, in any occupation, in any place. It is not a

matter of what we do, but how we relate to our work, and what is most important to us. *p. 107*

Do not take offense at your mother. Taking offense is demonic; you should rather feel sorry for her that she does not understand something which is quite essential. *p. 40*

The main thing is to live for God, for His sake, and do everything to the glory of God. *P. 38*

Read a chapter of the Gospels and two of the Epistles every day, give your life over to the Lord without murmuring, and willingly bend your neck beneath your life's cross. May the Lord give you strength! *p. 37*

It would be best if you did not murmur against anyone; for now, my dear, you should already know that our life flows in the Stream of God's Providence, and nothing happens without His holy will. I will only add that every man goes to meet God's Providence, and is himself the co-creator of his own life. Thus has it happened with you—the Lord gave you the gift of feeling Divine grace, but you have not yet re-sought it, and life has rolled back into its former rut.

Furthermore, your gift has been stolen through unnecessary conversation—you have been robbed by the enemy. Now against who are you complaining? If Fr. A. decided to exorcise you, then surely there was something to exorcise you of. He was a godly elder. *p. 36*

There are two paths to salvation: family life and monasticism. Look into your heart and ask it where it wants to God. May God give you wisdom! *p. 33*

Every man has to choose his own life's path. This is so that no one can hide behind another person's back. Think through everything well. There are only two paths blessed by God: family and solitary—monastic. Both of these are paths of the cross. So, make your choice, which cross is more suitable for your salvation. May God give you wisdom! Your first blessing after you have chosen should be that of your parents, and the second, that of your father confessor. *p. 30-31*

Dear M! It would be good for you to work as a chef, and until you are twenty-five years old, root yourself in Orthodox life and in the Church, getting to know yourself. There is no need for you at this point to discuss monasticism or marriage. That would be all too early. You need to grow some more in order to choose your cross consciously and responsibly. Also, remember that without your parents' blessing you should neither join a monastery nor start a family. Work also on bringing your parents to God. There is no other way. *p. 31*

Because of my aged infirmity, I cannot become anyone's spiritual guide. For a start, you should be guided by the books of St. Theophan [the Recluse]. This would be more reliable. Pray also to the Lord that He give you a spiritual guide. But do not rush to call the first priest you meet your spiritual father. God to church, confess, ask many about the questions that trouble you, and only when you find that one of of many is the closest to your soul, can you start

turning to hi only [for spiritual guidance]. May God give you wisdom! *p. 100*

### **The Suicidal Church, in Body or in Spirit**

*Archimandrite Gregorios Estephan, Abbot of Holy Dormition of the Theotokos Monastery, Bkeftine, Lebanon*

*This piece hails from Pascha in 2020, but its message remains relevant for us to ponder and move to prayer.*

Christ is risen! Indeed, He is risen!

Christ is risen despite all of Satan's attempts to prevent His Resurrection. Neither pandemics nor all of the evils of this world are able to prevent Christ's Resurrection. Christ is risen and creation still trembles until this day as it beholds the light of the Resurrection, just as it did 2000 years ago. There are still people who perceive Christ's Resurrection, and although they are few in number, they shout: 'Christ is risen!', and thanks to their shouts, Christ's victory over evil and corruption is still ongoing in the world.

Right now, we are able to experience the resurrection of our souls, while we await the day when Christ our God will come! Then our bodies will be resurrected into immortality. The resurrection of the soul occurs when its sins are forgiven, whereas the resurrection of the body is established in its asceticism and its death from the passions of this world. The Lord Jesus Christ clearly taught about the eternal difference between the soul and body, between the salvation of the soul and the health of the body: "For which is easier, to say, *Thy sins have been forgiven thee*; or to say, *Arise, and walk?*" (Matthew 9:5). Christ clearly commanded us to struggle for the resurrection of our souls and not to fear the death of our bodies. The true fear is that both our souls and bodies will perish in hell (Matthew 10:28). Living this resurrection requires first the true Faith in the Son of God; "But without faith *it is impossible to please Him*" (Hebrew 11:6). The fullness of the Faith is man's submission of his whole self into God's hands, which occurs when he fully exercises God's work. He who in Faith submits to God Himself and His will, God becomes for him everything in all.

Through this firm and strong Faith, whereby God becomes everything for man, the Church was able, since the beginning, to confront the powers of hell and to defeat them. Through Faith, our Fathers spoke Theology and confirmed the Church dogmas, and walked in the darkness of this age despite the persecutions and death threats, "through faith they subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became strong in battle..." (Hebrews 11:33-39).

As our Fathers faced, through this Faith, the harsh temptations of this world, likewise, until this day, they face the growing evils, both of the natural and moral types. Among these evils, is this pandemic that is shaking the world today, and which God allowed to thoroughly test the Faith of many who believe in Him. It is clear that this pandemic, whether it is natural or synthesized, has been exploited for a goal beyond what is apparent, that is to destroy what remains, in the believers in Jesus Christ, of the hope in the Resurrection and Eternal victory over death. A Satanic plan was fulfilled through this pandemic that spread in most areas of the globe; this plan is summarized in the following: promoting fear of the pandemic – introducing people into a state of horror –

resulting in the collapse of living Faith in Jesus Christ. This collapse of the living Faith, which is taking place in Christian souls, is necessary to prepare for the coming of the Antichrist. The media has sown the fear of death in the souls of men, causing them to panic. Even many Christians who are not supposed to fear death, knowing that life is in God's hands, are panicking because of this pandemic. They become fearful of the death of the body, while forgetting that which is related to the spiritual death of the soul.

This fear of disease and death is prevailing over the souls of many, leading to a collapse of faith. This reveals how their faith was weak and fragile to begin with. When faith is weakened, and even to the point of doubting God's providence, and as a result fearing to go to Church and to partake of the Body and Blood of Christ, Christ Himself is banished from the souls of these "faithful". The entirety of our life journey to Christ Jesus is first and foremost a journey of Faith: "the life which I now live in the flesh I live in faith, in that of the Son of God, Who loved me, and gave Himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). This unjustified fear which the world has sown within the souls of so many should have been faced by the Church by strengthening the Faith of her people and their attachment to her Savior Jesus Christ! But instead, they surrendered unto this fear along with the people. The Faithful flock vitally needed to solidify their Faith in Christ, while avoiding a collapse of Faith as a result of the planned and focused pressure exercised by the media. When Churches are closed during tribulations, does not the trust of the faithful in the Church weaken?

We ask with honesty, was there no other way or a dispensational solution, taking into account all the health measures, to face this pandemic, without closing the Churches and surrendering to a collective spiritual suicide? Going to Church during pandemics, temptations, hardships and persecutions does not mean that we are tempting God as if we are inviting something to befall us, but rather, by this, we are saying to Him that we walk with Him in Faith, revealing that what we need the most is to be with Him during these very afflictions, united with Him in His Body and Blood, in order to confront this pandemic and the dangers of disease, as well as all of the other catastrophes awaiting us. When Christians, during major persecutions and communism, risked their lives to go into the catacombs and gather around the Lord's table, it was an expression of their loving Christ more than themselves, an expression of their knowledge that true life exists within this Eucharistic table, and not in their bodies.

We are witnessing a clash between man's intellect and Faith. God gave the intellect to be enlightened by Faith, but not in order for it to wander without Faith! Not in order for it to doubt God's economy unto our race, thus identifying itself as self-sufficient.

In the Orthodox Church there has always been this clash between two principles: rationalism and Faith or spirituality. For since the days of the Gnostics and Arius, and on through the scholasticism and Barlaam, until the worldly rationalism perpetrated by contemporary Ecumenism, the Church has been in a state of unceasing struggle in order to preserve God's revelation which He offered unto us, that has been treasured within our Orthodox Faith. This Faith is not only one of dogmas but also the Faith of piety and true spiritual life. By Faith, the Christian submits his life unto Christ, without any fear of what could happen to his life. However, rational logic justifies fear and the running away of man, even from

before the face of God, in order to protect the life of his body.

Atheism which vigorously spreads in the West, and from it unto the entire world, was mainly the result of this rationalism, which dominated the theology of the West since the 9th century. Scholasticism established the western man in the rationalization of all aspects of life, resulting, for them, in the worship of God which no longer abided in "spirit and truth", but rather was carried out with the intellect and human feelings. Faith that is examined by experience renders God a living God and not an abstract thought. Thus, the western man was led from rationalism to nihilism and unto atheism that followed thereafter.

Those who worship God in "spirit and truth" are able to perceive God's hand and His Wisdom in everything that happens in this life. But the rational man cannot see anything beyond his intellectual analysis of events for he gazes upon everything through the lens of his fallen human logic. This is what was revealed in the recent pandemic experience: some looked at it as a sign of God's wrath resulting from all the iniquities, defilements, atheism and apostasy that now overruns the world. But intellectuals only saw in it a natural incident, as a consequence of human or natural causes, for to them God is "love" and infinite mercy, and He is truly so. But these who delight in their ideas overlook that God's love is only given to those who respond to His love by offering repentance and laboring to keep the commandments and to acquire the virtues. God wants the salvation of man, "For whom the Lord loveth He correcteth" (Proverbs 3:12). When we talk about God's wrath, it is not that wrath and passions exist in God's nature, rather it is because man who is darkened by sin cannot see God except in this state, the darkened state of his soul reflects God's gift in itself in a distorted manner. The more evil and corruption are rooted in man's heart, the more he needs tougher temptations to move away from his evil; the goal is man's repentance and salvation. God's wrath is God's righteous judgment.

Those intellectuals who reject this Divine wrath, are usually those who understand Christianity as a moral religion, and contend to apply matters that are external to the law. Their God is emotional, who forgives men's iniquities, whether they repent or not, whether they are purified of their passions or not. This is the result of the protestant thinking that is promulgated in Orthodox theological circles, the goal of which is to relieve the conscience of people who are satisfied with their passions, and do not want to struggle to be freed from them. Those who promote Church modernism, that is, to adapt with the spirit of the modern age, under the influence of contemporary ecumenism, are compatible only with such a god, a god created in the image of man and his likeness; that is a god that descends to man, not to raise him to the level of his divinity, but to coexist with man's passions.

Since the time of the fall, God's warning was clearly expressed, "thou shalt surely die" if you transgress the commandment. "But if ye will not hearken unto Me, and will not do all these commandments; And if ye shall despise My statutes, or if your soul abhor My judgments, so that ye will not do all My commandments, *but* that ye break My covenant: I also will do this unto you; I will even appoint upon you perplexity and the itch, and the fever which causes your eyes to waste, and disease which consumes your life ... And if ye will not be reformed by Me by these things, but will walk contrary unto Me; Then will I also walk contrary unto you, and will punish you yet seven times for your sins. And I will bring a sword upon you, that shall

avenge the cause of *My* covenant: and when ye are gathered together within your cities, I will send the pestilence among you; and ye shall be delivered into the hand of the enemy." (Leviticus 26:14-25).

Those who rely on their intellect offer, instead of the Faith moved by the grace of the Holy Spirit, symbolic meanings to most events in the Bible, when they do not conform with their own thoughts. The Church saw that God's sayings in the Bible are clear: that all plagues and natural and human disasters have no cause except the sins of men. Since the beginning, God made a connection between the irrational creation and man created in His image and likeness, this creation is regulated with man's repentance and it revolts under the action of his sins. The Bible is clear, God allows plagues to be unleashed upon men, yet the goal is not vengeance, but so they might repent. The Prophet Jeremiah says: "Return, thou backsliding Israel, saith the LORD; *and* I will not cause Mine anger to fall upon you: for I *am* merciful, saith the LORD, *and* I will not keep *My* anger forever." (Jeremiah 3:12-13). Sin separated man from God, "But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid *His* face from you, that He will not hear" (Isaiah 59:2). For God wants to reform His people not to terrify and destroy them. Thus, the world is reconciled and escapes God's wrath and judgment through repentance, "except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." (Luke 13:3,5). Saint Basil the Great reveals that plagues and illnesses are allowed by God in order to heal sin and evil, because the goal of such afflictions is to warn the faithful to avoid the torments of the eternal judgment<sup>[1]</sup>.

The duty of Christians is to pray without ceasing for all people, while being full of the hope that they will reconcile with God through repentance. For God's Mercy will continue in the world as long as there are people who repent in the world. Repentance is fulfilled by living the Mystical life of the Church.

God sent the Prophet Jonah to warn the people of Nineveh that His wrath is coming upon them. The Bible says about the repentance of the people of Nineveh: "let man and beast be covered with sackcloth" (Jonah 3:8). Saint John Chrysostom explains this saying: "We have heard that when the city received such news it did not fall into despair, but it was energized for repentance, and while it did not have a salvation counselor, it began to worship God and reconcile with Him". Saint John continues by asking: "What did they do to achieve reconciliation?" and he answers that it was the repentance of the whole people with their leaders which effected this: "the Book says: For word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from off him, and covered *himself* with sackcloth, and sat in ashes". O the wise king! He himself was the first to declare repentance, in order to bring his city unto a better state. For who can see the king himself struggling for salvation and languishes from now on?... The wounds of the crown are healed by sackcloth, he wipes the sins of the throne by sitting in ashes, he treats the illness of pride by humbling his appearance, by fasting he treats the wounds of luxury... and by doing so, he was practically awakening everybody by his call to walk in the same manner."

By their repentance, they defeated the demons that were trying to drive them away from God. St. John Chrysostom continues while commenting on the verse "let man and beast be covered with sackcloth": "O the Heavenly ordering! What convoy terrifying Satan! Satan was standing weeping as he saw its whole army turning to

God and fighting the demons. There are children, women, and infants fighting alongside the men in this battle, even the irrational creatures participated in the war".

Since ancient times, this was the state of the people who hear God's warning and repent. The spread of pandemics is not something new in history, it happened several times. But the difference is in the method used to face them. Secular history itself witnesses how during the times when natural disasters, plagues and different diseases spread among the people, the Church used to confront them by a series of works of piety, such as fasting for several days, processions with icons, with prayers to receive God's mercy and His compassion on the ailing people, to forgive their sins. During plagues, the faithful used to strive, before anything else, to drive out all demonic imaginations that might be defiling them with the disease, and so by reciting the Divine Names and asking for refuge in the Church along with the Saints, Sacred objects and Wonderworking icons, they used to seek holy men of God in order to ask them for their intercession before God to stop the calamity and to pray for their healing<sup>[2]</sup>. Yet of even more importance was the actions of repentance and the partaking of the Holy Mysteries, this was the medicine, in addition to the prayers for the sick<sup>[3]</sup>. It is said of the bubonic plague which hit Moscow in 1770, that many priests vehemently resisted the government policies of forbidding Church services and the traditional practices; the resistance of the clergy and laity resulted in a dangerous protest where the Archbishop, who was an agent of the government, was killed<sup>[4]</sup>.

The Church faced the consequences of sin through such firm Faith and by strengthening piety in the souls of her members. Today also, if we do not stand up to this current pandemic by prayer, supplication and repentance, and more importantly, by holding Divine Liturgies, and receiving the Body and Blood of Christ which frees us from eternal death, what should we confront it with? By running away and isolating oneself? Christians, in prisons and mines during exile, perceived in depth their great need to partake of the Body and Blood of Christ, so their priests used to celebrate the Divine offering on the breasts of the faithful; the breast of the faithful became an altar for God.

We are in a time when we need the Body and Blood of Christ, more than at any other time, in order to be nourished and to receive the strength to resist every evil and disease. Although we know that, by God's permission, we can fall sick due to this pandemic, but the faithful who becomes ill and continues his struggle in the Church and his participation in its Mysteries, is like a soldier in the battle arena resisting all evil, not by his own strength, but by the power of the salvific gift of Redemption. Does the one who partakes of the Body and Blood of Christ, knowing that it is the true food for eternal life, think of bodily death anymore? The death of such person therefore resembles the death of Martyrs<sup>[5]</sup>.

Some faithful could die before the end of the pandemic; they should be ready by partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ as a provision of their salvation, it is the seal of their passing through all those unruly spirits of the air.

Saint Cyprian of Carthage faced the suffering of Christians who, not only endured the plagues that devastated the empire between 250 and 270 and claimed their lives by diseases and death, but also the accusations of the pagans that these diseases and plagues were caused by the refusal of the Christians to worship the gods of the empire. Saint Cyprian wrote a treatise "on mortality" to

make the Christians steadfast in their Christian Faith and to strengthen this Faith in the face of the dangers of these plagues. He tells them to welcome death without fearing it; and that confusion in front death indicated a strong attachment to worldly pleasures; and that suffering and death from diseases frees them from the world and advances them more quickly toward Eternal Glory<sup>[6]</sup>.

Some wrongfully and aggressively criticized and reproached us as if we were promoting some horrific heresy, because we demanded that the Churches remain open, however, we were simply exercising our Orthodox right of speech as being faithful members of the Holy Church. Intolerance against other's opinions indicates an individualized authoritarian spirit and not a conciliar Orthodox spirit. This holds true when we do not cross the limits of Faith and speech established within our Orthodox Tradition. Every speech that is not rooted in the theology of our Orthodox Tradition is rooted in vanity and quickly transforms into heresy. Obedience is essential in the Church, it is obedience in the One Truth. Everything in the Church must abide by obedience, except that which conflicts with the Faith and Mysteries. Thus, all obedience which does not find its roots in obedience to the Church Tradition, which includes the Faith, Dogmas and Canons is a futile obedience, and the corresponding humility (that is being promoted) is a false humility.

Demanding that the Churches close and, by this, depriving the faithful of the Body and Blood of Christ should not have taken place by force when there is no reason for this rooted in the Faith. We do not judge anyone, but we were hoping that those who aggressively resisted the opening of the Churches for the sake of the faithful and made it a matter of life or death, would leave those who wanted to keep the Churches open for the faithful, and let them bear responsibility of their acts before Christ on the last day, when we will all stand, especially bishops and priests, to render an account, whether good or evil, for all we did toward His Holy Church.

It would be more profitable for such people to look, on the other hand, at the more dangerous issues that deal with the Faith and disturb our Holy Church, such as allowing communion to the non-Orthodox, and the participation of Orthodox priests in liturgical services with the non-Orthodox and vice-versa. Would it not be more beneficial for them to go after and confront those who promote such ideas which are at odds with the Orthodox Tradition, and which even resound in their own ecclesiastical circles? Those who sow the idea of secularizing the Church, altering the pious lifestyle, and modernizing the Orthodox Faith, started with the acceptance of homosexuality as a normal state, the promotion of women to the priesthood, the exchange of spiritual experiences with the heterodox, and finally by saying that contagious diseases are transmitted through the bread and wine, which the Holy Spirit has changed into the true Body and Blood of Christ. Saying that the divine Body of Christ, that became a source for the deification of man, might be a source which transmits disease, is equivalent to saying that the true Body of Christ that He took in His Incarnation and which rose from the dead and ascended into Heaven might transmit diseases and plagues. The Church never saw in the Body and Blood of Christ anything but a way to man's deification and his full union with God the Word, and a provision for Eternal life. Everyone who thinks otherwise, that the Body and Blood of Christ can transmit diseases in any form,

surely is in apostasy from the Holy Spirit Who causes this Change.

The True Body and Blood of Christ only transmits Eternal life, by entering our body and blood, Christ Himself changing us into His Body and Blood; we become a deified body and blood by Christ's Body and Blood. Does this transmit diseases and germs? In the Holy Church of Christ, only ideas which are poisoned by heresy truly transmit plagues and fatal spiritual diseases; the germs of corrupt teachings are the true pandemic in the Church of Christ, they are immeasurably more evil than any material pandemic. They kill the soul and destroy the journey unto salvation.

Why is everyone silent in front of all these evils and perversions that are afflicting the Church of Christ and disorienting its mission of the salvation of mankind? Do those speaking with such an unlawful enthusiasm in support of the Church closures have such a zeal for the purity of the Orthodox Faith? Would they be as zealous in applying the Church Canons as they are to submit to the laws of the nations? Everyone emerged as being zealous for the salvation of the bodies of the faithful yet they did not tell them anything to strengthen their Faith in Christ and unto the salvation of their souls. Such a salvation consists of repentance and the preservation of the Orthodox Faith, of asceticism and the struggle to keep the commandments of Christ. All these issues reveal the weak and worldly spiritual state of the Church and the uprooting of the faithful from the liturgical and ascetical Tradition. This is the result of ecumenism and the lacking of that discernment which divides between Orthodox truth and heresies, between standing firm in Tradition and the openness to heterodox teachings and experiences.

The heterodox, along with the Orthodox who have been influenced by them, promise an easy salvation in which the Spirit blows randomly "wherever He wishes", and thus they promote the idea that He will save everybody randomly as well. In our Orthodox Theology, "the Spirit blows wherever He wishes," yet He wishes not as we wish (in our passions of pride and self-love); rather, since He is the "Spirit of Truth", He blows in the non-faithful in order to lead them to "the Truth" - to the true Christ (unaltered by heterodox teachings). This is how He leads those who follow Him unto Eternal salvation.

For those intellectuals who strive to modernize the Orthodox Faith, Dogmas are nothing but philosophical and theoretical principles with no value at the level of practical life. But according to the true Orthodox Faith, Dogmas are the entrance into the experience of the true knowledge of God; a knowledge enlightened by Dogmas which teach us about the living God. "The Sacred Dogmas are Divine, Eternal and salvific truths, by the live-giving power of the Tri-Hypostatic Divinity"<sup>[7]</sup>. Only through correct Dogma are we led to the fullness of Faith and the experience of the vision of God. This is the way unto healing and salvation, which reveals the Divine Truth in its entirety, while drawing the boundary between truth and falsehood, between life and death, between Christ and the antichrists.

The European union, in most of her member countries, has imposed this closure upon the Orthodox Churches, thus interrupting the work of sanctifying creation. What the European market was not able to fulfill in our countries was fulfilled by the ecumenical movement - it was able to close our Churches and transfer the Mystery of our salvation unto this theater play which they transmit to our homes through the online media; and our shepherds are proud of it, sadly.

He who understands the Mystery of the Cross, the Mystery of the entirety of Christ's work, Who Himself did not run away from death but rather went to it willingly in order to sacrifice Himself for the salvation of His beloved, understands that it is also our duty to meet the Lord in the Mystery of His death and resurrection without fearing disease or death. Therefore, we cannot stop this ongoing Divine work that exists only in our Divine Eucharist. "It is the time for the Lord to act", and every time spent outside of the Eucharist, or that does not receive its strength from this Divine Eucharist, is a time when the devil is working. In this Eucharist, we reiterate all of the Mystery of the Cross and Resurrection in a mystical way, the Mystery of salvation which, if interrupted, causes an interruption in the journey of man and creation toward salvation. For we who are Orthodox, the place of the Eucharist remains totally different than how it is for the non-Orthodox. The Divine Eucharist gives us Christ Himself with His Body and Blood, it is a true union with Jesus Christ, of course, according to the Divine Energies not the Divine Essence. It is not an icon of the Kingdom but the first experience and a real foretaste of the Kingdom and Divine life - an experience in this world that is bleeding from the wounds of all types of sins, heresies and evils. In this Eucharist that is celebrated frequently, or rather daily, the Church lives all the experience of Eternal life. It is the key of the heavenly Kingdom, while the cessation of this Eucharist, through [this] interruption, is nothing other than the closing of the door to the Kingdom.

Saint Ignatius of Antioch considers that the Divine Liturgy is necessary for two reasons: to preserve us from spiritual death and to "provide us the everlasting life in Christ", this is why he calls it "the medicine of immortality". As the body is necessary for the life of the soul, so the Divine Eucharist is necessary for creation. The body needs to breathe continuously, so too does creation need this Eucharist continuously, for otherwise it dies and the entire structure of its existence is disturbed. This Eucharist is the spirit that all creation breathes, both rational and irrational, even the angels themselves receive from it the means to worship God in Jesus Christ. Christ was clear when he said: "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink His blood, ye have no life in you." (John 6:53).

Days of extreme difficulties shall soon come upon our world when worse and more innumerable evils will be seen. "This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come" (2 Timothy 3:1), because people departed from the true Faith, "giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils" (1 Timothy 4:1). This is what the Lord meant when he warned His people in the Old Testament, that if they do not repent and keep His commandments, He will add the plagues over them seven-fold, and He reiterates this warning of the seven-fold plagues four times. Saint Justin the Martyr says that: "God delays, for the human race, the work of judgment (the end of the world) for He knows beforehand that there will still be some who will be saved by repentance, and maybe some of these have yet to be born"<sup>[8]</sup>.

The end of the world will come, not when the antichrist becomes strong, but when the Church becomes weak (Archbishop Sergei Baranov). If the strength of the Church exists in her Mysteries, and especially in the Mystery of the Eucharist, then her weakness, rather her death, is found in the interruption of these Liturgies.

We must also consider that since the Church has surrendered so easily because of this pandemic, even unto

the closing of her doors, what is she going to do when the Antichrist comes? Do any of us ask this question? The interruption of these Liturgies, although temporary, is nothing but a sign among the signs of the end of times. Concerning the latter days, Saint Ephraim the Syrian (of the fourth century) reveals that: "the Churches will pathetically weep for the holy services will cease to take place in them and there will no more be Eucharistic oblations"<sup>[9]</sup>. The Church of Christ which is ever strong and victorious over Satan, sin and death, and concerning which the Lord promised that the gates of Hades shall not prevail over her, is submitting that simply? Does not this reveal its weakness and the fragility of its earthly journey?

Christ is in His Church and with His Church. Christ made His Body a Church and all that befalls the Church befalls Christ Himself. For all the Mystery of Christ, the Mystery of His Divinity and Incarnation, exists in His Church, "the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, Who created all things by Jesus Christ: To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God" (Ephesians 3:9-10).

All of these spiritual struggles should take place with piety, for this was "the practice of the Saints in every age". Saint Athanasius urges us that it also be "our path in this current age", in order for us to be able to celebrate with them the feast which the Divine Word invites us unto, "for what is the feast other than the continuous worship of God, the knowledge of piety, and the unceasing prayer from every heart"<sup>[10]</sup>. April 4, 2020 (Translated by: Maber Salloum)

[11]. Saint Basil the Great, Quod Deus non est auctor malorum 5 in PG. 31, 337Cff

[12]. Procopius, BP 2.22.10-12, pp. 454-57; similar in Lemerle, Les plus anciens recueils 37, p. 78. For the church as sanctuary and healing place, Vie de Theodore de Sykeon 8, pp. 7-8; See: Dionysios Stathakopoulos, Crime and Punishment, The Plague in the Byzantine Empire, 541-749 in Plague and the End of Antiquity, p. 109-110.

[13]. Peregrine Horden, Sickness and Healing, Early Medieval Christinity c. 600- c. 1100, The Cambridge History, p. 430

[14]. Alexander, Bubonic Plague in Early Modern Russia, 186-95; See: Jo N. Hays, Historians and Epidemics, in: Plague and the End of Antiquity, p. 41.

[15]. Eusebius of Caesaria, Euseb. HE 7, 22, 7

[16]. Saint Cyprian of Carthage, De mortalitate 1-17

[17]. Saint Symeon the New Theologian, (Centurie Ascétique et Gnoséologique. 12) P. Justin Popovitch, Les Voies de la Connaissance de Dieu, Tr. Jean-Louis Palierné, L'Age D'homme 1998, p. 155.

[18]. Saint Justin the Martyr, I Apol. 28, 2

[19]. Saint Ephraim the Syrian, Τόμ. Δ', 198 και σ. 126-127

[10]. Saint Athanasius the Great, Επ. 11, 11

### Upcoming Events 2021

31 May: Memorial Day Picnic, noon

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!