

**PASTORAL LETTER
AT THE FEAST OF THE LORD'S RESURRECTION, 2020**

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by the mercies of God

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To our beloved Clergy and Orthodox Christians,

peace and joy from Christ the Lord,

and from us, hierarchical Blessings.

In their fright, the women bowed their faces to the ground, but they said to them,

“Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; He is risen!

Remember how He spoke to you, while He was still with you in Galilee.

(Luke 24:5-6)

Most Reverend Fathers,

Beloved Faithful,

Christ is risen!

“This is the day which the Lord has made: let us be glad and rejoice therein.” (Psalms 117:24), says one of the verses of the Matins of Resurrection. It is the holy and blessed night of the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. There are countless readings in which the Evangelists give us the testimonies of the apostles, the myrrh-bearing women and other disciples who saw the Risen Christ. And St. John the Evangelist concludes: *“But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing, you may have life in His name”* (John 20:31). All these are testimonies for us to believe in the salvation made possible through the death and resurrection of the Son of God.

In one of these testimonies (Luke 24:1-10), the myrrh-bearing women, knowing what happened to the Lord, that is, his death and hastened burial, because of the Sabbath day, on the first day of the week, early in the morning, go anxiously to the grave to fulfill what was due for a dead man, according to the tradition of the Old Covenant. Although they had known Christ well, had seen the healings and believed in Him as the coming Messiah, they did not seem to have fully realized the significance of the historical moment they were experiencing. This becomes even more evident if we also consider the encounter of Christ the Savior with Luke and Cleopas on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:18), with Mary Magdalene in the Garden of Gethsemane (John 20:14) and their difficulty in recognizing Him. To these could be added the anxiety of the myrrh-bearers regarding the removal of the stone from the door of the tomb (Mark 16:3). The routine of their current life doesn't seem to be changed in any way, compared to what was normal for them to do. And yet, it will be changed in a surprising but not unforetold way: *“For He taught His disciples and said to them, The Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill Him. And after He is killed, He will rise the third day. But they did not understand this saying and were afraid to ask Him”* (Mark 9:31-32). A special event happened. Jesus rose from the dead, on the third day, as He had announced, and the tomb remains empty.

We can draw a parallel between our situation and that of the myrrh-bearing women. We are engaged in our daily routine without paying too much attention to it. We go to work, we come home, we take care of the children, we, perhaps, assist the neediest among us, we even go to church and do what we've learned that needs to be done.

However, taking into account what happened to the myrrh-bearing women, we can ask ourselves: What does the empty tomb really mean to us? What is our real search? Are we really engaged in an authentic search, or do we stick to the routine that encloses us in our everyday habit?

What can we do so that we no longer seek the Risen Christ where He is no longer? Is there an encounter with the Risen Christ that overturns our routine?

“The Word of God lives forever and by His own nature He is life - says St. Cyril of Alexandria. However, when He humbled and emptied Himself, making Himself like one of us, He tasted death. But this proved to be the death of death, for He rose from the dead to be the way by which, not so much He Himself, but rather we could regain incorruption. Let no one seek among the dead Him who lives forever. But if He is not here, with mortality and in the tomb, where is He? Obviously, in heaven and in the divine glory.”¹

The Great Alexandrian Church Father gives answers to our questions and to our search as Christians, specifying at least two important things. First, Christ is the Son of God and the eternal life itself. Out of love for man, through the iconic descent from His transcendence, he becomes one of us, except sin (Hebrews 4:15). He tastes death as a man, He who is eternal life, but a death that becomes the giver of eternal life and the leaven of a renewed humanity. The death of Christ meant the death of our death. It was the way by which God could again give man the possibility of incorruption. Second, the One we are looking for, Christ dead and resurrected, is no longer here in the way we would expect Him to be. St. Cyril says that Christ is *“in heaven in divine glory.”* His transfigured human nature becomes the anchor through which He can carry us in the most holy place into the bosom of the Father, that is, in the kingdom of God.

The women were looking, just like us, for the limited, palpable and circumscribed to His humanity Jesus that they had known. But as the accounts of Holy Evangelists say, Christ the Savior is no longer physically present as everyone expected, including the myrrh-bearing women. Christ, even though He went through bodily death, this did not have the same meaning as ours.

We are, like the myrrh-bearers, circumscribed in time and space but we seek the Eternal in the *‘naturalness of our limitations.’* We contend with the limits of physical death and the fragility of our lives. On Easter night, the Christian comes to find the empty tomb of the circumscribed and human Christ. The Gospel reading of the Resurrection service (Matthew 28:1-16) does nothing but re-affirms, re-actualizes this old and new miracle. The bodily life of Jesus and ours ends here but it continues beyond in a fuller way thanks to Him. The body of Christ disappears from the tomb because He is already in heaven. He, being the eternal life, could not be held by death.

On Easter night, the Christian understands from the Gospel account that the absence of the body of Christ the Savior is healing, beneficent, and full of hope. He is replaced by the resurrected Christ who abolishes the limits of death. The Christian understands that his/her life is no longer a prisoner of the physical death, but that it finds a new starting point toward a way of being divine. The absence of the material body of Jesus makes the Christian feel a higher, graceful presence that will lead him/her toward the transfigured humanity of the Savior Jesus Christ, of whom St. Cyril of Alexandria speaks and which is no longer limited by our fallen and sinful world. The Christian understands that, due to the work of the Son of God, another reality opens before him/her - that of the Kingdom of Heaven.

How does this new reality make itself present and operate a change in us?

“The Divine Liturgy - says Father Staniloae - can also be considered as a means for people to transcend from a life closed in selfishness and in the world, to a life of communication in God the Trinity, or of love, even when the content of prayers consists of things necessary for earthly life, as conditions for preparation for the Kingdom of God. (...) So, this is what we learn during the Divine Liturgy: to transcend or rise above our selfish and bodily interests that bind us to the world

¹ *Commentary on Luke* chap. 24 in Thomas C. Oden (ed.). *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (New Testament III Luke)*. Ed. InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, IL, USA 2003, p 375 coll. 1-2

and our union in the spirit of sacrifice with Christ and, through Him, with the Father in the Holy Spirit. And by coming together in the ambiance of communion of the Holy Trinity, we strengthen the communion between us.”²

The Church is constituted through the Divine Liturgy and the Holy Sacraments are its arms. We, as a Church, live in the Divine Liturgy the overlapping and interaction of the two plans – that of eternal life and of the renewed earthly life.³ We live at the same time the paradox of the daily material reality and of the mysterious but real presence of the eternal kingdom toward which we aspire. The Church is always the same and completely new each time. In the Divine Liturgy the person transcends itself from the limited life of corruption and sin, to a new life, modeled after the infinite divine virtues. Selfishness and passions shape the human person after the wicked and relative world. Man’s daily life is a horizontal communion that handcuffs him to the material and relative world. In the Divine Liturgy man is led toward something else, to the endlessly rich and new communion through Christ with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Man’s life begins to be shaped according to the image of God, entering communion with the Holy Trinity and other people.

“Mainly, the Eucharist is given for eternal life, therefore for rising above the earthly life”⁴ - says Father Dumitru Stăniloae. The Eucharist, which is the Body and Blood of Christ, nourishes our growth and renewal into the mystery of the eternal kingdom. We partake in the resurrected humanity of Christ. Progressively, our human nature is transfigured by the cooperation of our will with the grace received in the Holy Communion, a work that leads to diminishing or even dissolution of personal selfishness. Our fundamental preoccupation is no longer the material things but God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit – vertically, and my neighbor, horizontally. God and our neighbors are two transcendences, not of the same nature, but which provide us with a vital space, filled with authentic, natural and meaningful relationship. This way, we remain in a dynamic, permanently renewed relationship with God and our neighbor. We seek God and our neighbor every time and are surprised by the unexpected novelty of both. God and those around us, each become an intimate and immediate transcendent. Every time we seek in the one next to us the renewed image of God and by this, we seek God Himself.

Archimandrite Vasile Vasilachi captures very well the unity of our world in God.

“For us people there is a past, a present and a future under the veil of eternity. (...) The past has a divine basis of creation, so that the present and the future rest on these eternal arms of Divinity, under the veil of eternity. For us Christians, the future is not a shattering nor a dissipation into nonexistence, but we have a Paradise of the beginning and a heaven of the future. It is a beginning of eternity and an everlastingness of future with God. We do not walk here, in the present or in the future, into an abyss, but we enter the garden of Paradise.”⁵

The Christian has a vision that is hopeful but also realistic for he knows that at the foundation of creation is a divine act, that the road between the beginning and the end, passing through the past, present and future, is under the sign of divine eternity, which can make our present world a garden of Paradise. The Church is the garden of Paradise that surprises us every time.

² Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae. *Spirituality and Communion in the Orthodox Liturgy* (2nd ed.). Ed. IBMBOR: Bucharest 2004, p 9 (in Romanian)

³ *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology* (vol. 3 / 3rd ed.). Ed. IBMBOR: Bucharest 2003, p 86 (in Romanian)

⁴ *Ibidem* p 85-86

⁵ Archimandrite Dr. Vasile Vasilachi. *Under the veil of eternity*. Ed. Word of Life - Theological Collection: Book Masters, Inc. Ashland (OH) USA 1995, p 9-10 (in Romanian)

Beloved brothers and sisters in the Lord,

This is the *Homage Year of the Pastoral Care of Parents and Children* and the *Commemorative Year of Romanian philanthropists*. These are two themes of special significance for us as a Church.

The family has been and remains the fundamental institution of our Church and society. In the family are taught the first rudiments of life and within it are transmitted and reinforced the Christian and human values, such as: faith, hope, love for God and neighbor, kindness, patience, understanding, charitable deeds, help, etc. We must remember that our God is the Father of all. The Holy Trinity - the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit - is the model to follow in our own way of activating the paternity or vocation of sonship. Beyond the fashionable and modern ideologies, there remains a millennial tradition of the Christian family in the Church that we must treasure and draw inspiration from.

Philanthropy is essential to our Christian life. Let us be mindful of the fact that God is the first who is "*Merciful and Loving of humankind.*"⁶ The possibility of our salvation has been granted to us by God through His Son. Our philanthropy is rooted in and is the extension of God's philanthropy. This pertains to the care for the frailest and the elderly, for those of more modest means than us, for the stranger and so on. The world has and will always need philanthropy.

Today, when we are at a crossroads because of the deadly pandemic we have to contend with, let us seek God and examine our deeds in order to understand what needs to be done and what we have failed to do, which might have contributed to the suffering of the whole society. Let us also join together in prayer, fasting and charitable deeds in the effort to defeat this invisible enemy, which causes suffering and death, knowing that the last and greatest Healer and Victor of disease and death is God.

On the occasion of the Feast of the Lord's Resurrection, let us give glory to God for all His blessings!

I wish you all, during these trying times, comfort, health, peace and blessing in Jesus Christ our Lord!

Christ is risen!

Yours in prayer to the Risen Lord,
† *IOAN CASIAN*

Saint-Hubert / Montreal 2020

⁶ "*For You are a merciful and loving God, and unto You do we send up glory, to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages*" (Ecphonesis of the Divine Liturgy).