

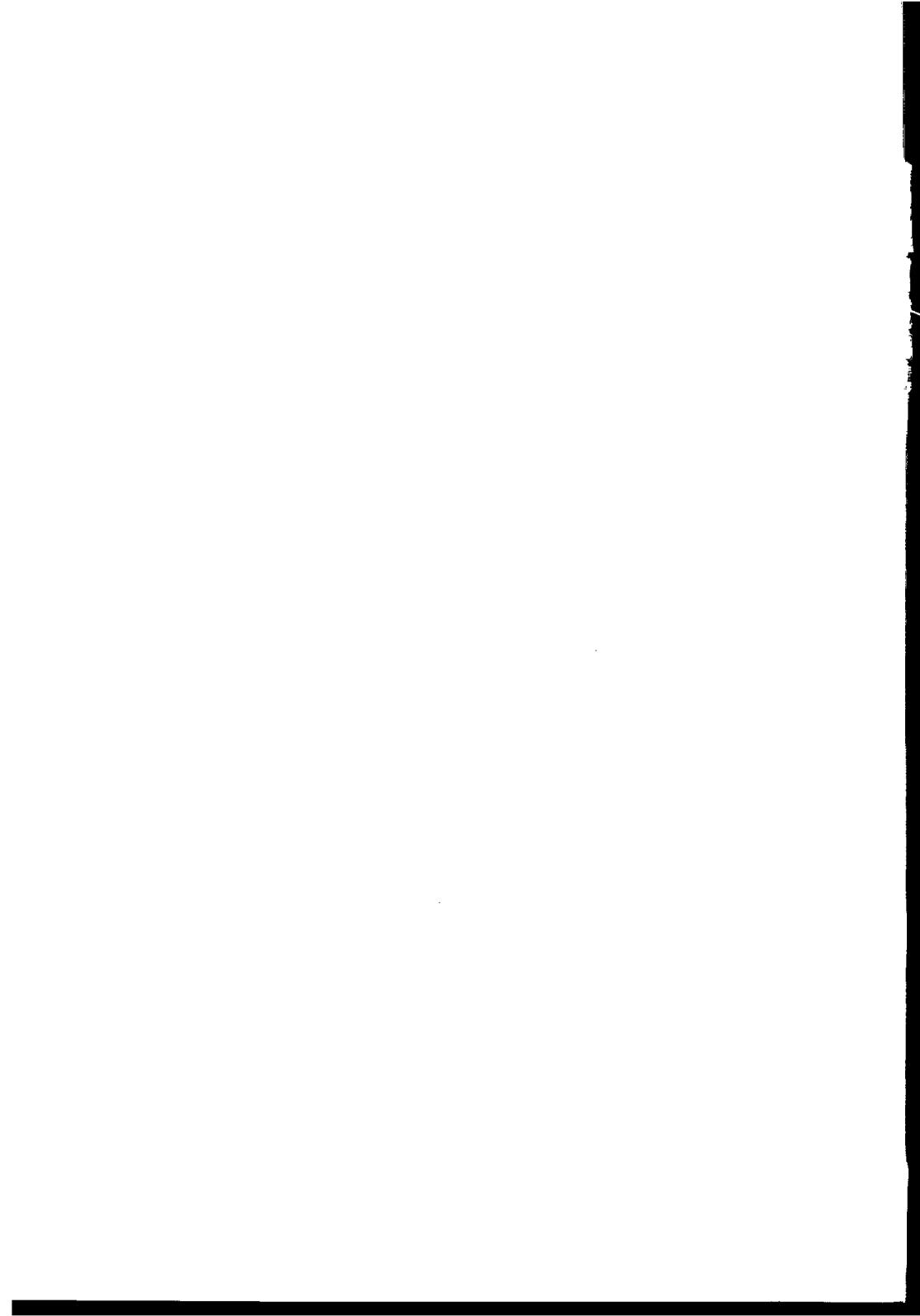
# Resurrection and Redemption in the Orthodox Concept



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**RESURRECTION AND REDEMPTION  
IN THE ORTHODOX CONCEPT**

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# RESURRECTION AND REDEMPTION

## In the Orthodox Concept

Father Matta El Meskeen

**G**REAT is the Church's jubilation with which it celebrates in this season the resurrection of Christ from the dead, repeating the words "*Christos Anesti*". For the Church these words mean that redemption is accomplished and that it has become a right of all sinners to receive with faith and freely the bond of freedom from the captivity of sin and death and to accept the call to eternal life.

In order to acquire a faith of such strength we have to penetrate into the depth of the Church's faith which closely links the mystery of the Last Supper (Thursday evening) the mystery of crucifixion (Friday) and the mystery of resurrection (dawn of Sunday).

During the Supper of Thursday evening the Lord for the first time revealed the meaning and reality of the forthcoming crucifixion of which he had often talked as mere suffering and death. Now suddenly he explained quite briefly and mystically that he would give himself as a sacrifice on behalf of the world, and that this self-sacrifice would be offered complete to the Father just like the Passover offering, a broken body for them to eat and a shed blood for them to drink for the remission of sins and for life eternal.

What astonished the disciples at Supper and still astonishes the whole world is that Christ was not theoretically explaining how he would be slain on Friday, but he anticipated events, and a full day before crucifixion he offered himself actually slain to his disciples, not as a mere act of intention or illustration but as an actual act of breaking, slaying and blood shedding deeper and clearer than what happened on Friday on the cross, so that all the mysteries of Christ's self sacrifice on the cross on Friday – impossible for any human to perceive or comprehend – were revealed by him at the Thursday Supper and practically illustrated to his disciples.

After breaking the bread and mixing the wine, Christ offered both to

his disciples not merely as a representation or symbol of the breaking of his body and the shedding of his blood on the cross, but he said to them "This is my broken body, this is my shed blood." Here Christ performed an act of voluntary death by an ineffable mystery.

He then declared the cause of breaking or slaying: "on your behalf," then the purpose: "for the remission of sins".

Over and above he ordered them *to eat and drink of it*, not as bread as yet unbroken or wine as yet unmixed, but an actually slain body, thus demonstrating that the mystery of Friday was present before them as a real divine Passover, so that the death on the cross on Friday would not only be an offering to the Father for the sins of the world, but a sacrifice of love and a perpetual Supper in which the whole world could share. In this way Christ clearly and openly revealed that his self-sacrifice on the cross was an atonement sacrifice which he would offer before God the Father not only as a spontaneous act on behalf of the people, but a sacrifice of personal love where atonement would not be accomplished except by actual sharing in it. Thus in the mystery of the Supper Christ explained that the perfect actual sharing in the belief in the crucified Christ as a sacrifice of salvation and remission of sins must be accomplished by actual partaking of the body and the blood in accordance with the mystery perfected in the Thursday Supper. Only in this way are accomplished atonement, forgiveness and union with Christ for extension in life eternal.

The Orthodox Church thus believes that the Thursday Supper which is the Eucharist, and the Friday crucifixion are one and the same mystery, and the one cannot be comprehended without the other, nor can the secret of the power of one be attained without the other. Love was the motive for both of them. St. John says of Jesus when he sat for Supper before the feast of the Passover "When Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end." (*Jn. 13:1*). It is for this love that Jesus died and rose from the dead.

Again a deep look into the mysteries of the Supper will reveal that the declaration of the mystery of resurrection within the declaration of the mystery of his death was quite clear. For while Christ offered himself to his disciples by saying: "Take, eat my broken body, and drink my shed

blood," he offers body and blood with his own hands, alive and not dead Christ in the Thursday Supper was at once slain and risen, dead and alive. It is an amazing mystery by which Christ could strongly yet mystically unveil the resurrection inherent in the imminent death on the cross on Friday: "I am the first and the last, I am he that liveth, and was dead; and behold I am alive for evermore" (*Rev. 1:17,18*).

Thus we can perceive the magnitude of the Eucharist accomplished by Christ in the Thursday Supper and by the Church until today, it being the mystery which explains not only the secrets of crucifixion on Friday but of the Christ dead and alive, and of redemption in its entirety, considering that the death inflicted on Christ was but a voluntary and atoning love sacrifice implying the power of death on behalf of the others and the power of resurrection along with the others. Consequently it is a sacrifice capable of giving eternal life instead of death for the sins of the past, through the mystery of the communion accessible to man conveyed by this sacrifice, a communion in the body and blood of the Christ slain and risen.

The Church realized that death on the cross was both a living and a life-giving sacrifice, atoning and also able to raise from the dead. All this was comprehended by the Church through the mystery of the Supper. Here again the Church goes back to the secrets of the Last Supper and unveils essential facts related to the events of Friday.

For Christ the cross was not, as the high priests mistook it, an instrument of torture and death to a sinner and blasphemer "Crucify him, crucify him!" but in the mind of the Father and in the depth of Christ it was an instrument of self-sacrifice stemming from a sweeping and atoning love. This was concluded by the Church from the mystery of the Last Supper and the discourses of Christ according to the Gospel of St. John. Did he not foretell the kind of death he would suffer? "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

Thus through resurrection, the cross was transformed from the concept of retribution and death by the crucifiers to an effective instrument of divine love in the hands of the good Shepherd who redeemed his sheep and who until today follows the lost sheep to the end of earth. What place in the world is without a raised cross? A cross that seeks sinners to restore them to the Father's fold. The cross has become

an instrument of joy for all those who comprehend the mystery of forgiveness in it, nay, the mystery of divine love "for He loved me and gave Himself for my sake."

So Christ died only to offer himself as a sacrifice of all sinners in the world, and through this sacrifice to give his broken body and shed blood to every person just as he did on Thursday, so that he might eat and drink forgiveness, resurrection and everlasting life.

Christ still practises in every church and among his beloved the mystery of his Supper. Just as he did at the Thursday Supper he offers on every altar with his own hands his body and blood to communicants for remission of sin and life eternal, for the Eucharist has come to convey to us all the Thursday Supper power of infinite love, of the pains endured by the flesh on the cross, and of the resurrection in which the body rose and left the grave empty.

But let us not forget that these deep meanings treasured in the mystery of the Supper, and all the light emanating from them to reveal the glory of the cross, were not grasped by the disciples until they were sure that Christ had risen. During the Supper the disciples understood nothing at all of what the Lord said and explained, and the words of Christ on the new covenant, the shed blood, the remission of sins and the eternal life conveyed no sense to them; the Gospel says "their hearts were filled with sorrow." So when the hour came and steps were taken to arrest Jesus, and when they were faced with the publicity of the accusations and the declaration of crucifixion, they panicked and fled, and some denied in spite of all that Christ had told them beforehand. It is as if Christ had not celebrated the Eucharist, nor washed their feet, nor talked on his death for at least six hours at a stretch (according to St. John's timing), his resurrection, his return and his sending the Comforter to them, on how he would not leave them comfortless and how he would see them again and they would rejoice. All this vanished before their fear of violence, the appearance of the high priests' soldiers and the proceedings of arrest.

Hence Resurrection in the Church's theology on the concept of the cross – as a voluntary self-sacrifice in atonement of the sins of all the world – stands both as foundation and summit. The mystery of resurrection as a tangible reality of faith was like a heavenly glorious

light which, when it entered the hearts of the disciples, transformed all the humiliating and painful sorrows of the cross into honor, triumph and glory. Death became redemption, and the grave became not a pit of death, but a fountain of life.

It is not without reason that St. Paul said, "And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins." (*ICor.15:17*). What is more important in the theology of the Church which actually believes that He had risen is this "If Christ be raised and His resurrection became a reality within us, then our faith is true and we are no longer in our sins." This means that Christ's resurrection in the flesh on the third day has become the fundamental and effective power for the forgiveness of sins. Consequently the resurrection in view of the Church is the backbone of the concept of atonement. Therefore we cannot say that Christ's death – by itself – meant the payment of the price of our sins and the appeasement of God to remove His wrath from us. It is the resurrection which gave the death of Christ this force, atonement and reconciliation.

Hence when we consider the joyful song of the Church "*Christos Anesti*" we realise the reason for this overwhelming joy which annihilated all the sorrows and agonies of the cross, nay all the pains of sin and death from our being. For if Christ had risen, then our faith is true and we are no longer in our sins, and his cross was not an ignominy but a glory, and if his body which we eat and drink is the body of his crucifixion, it is also the body of his resurrection, and we are partakers in the self-same resurrection and life eternal.

Christ's resurrection turned the disgrace and curse of the cross into grace, salvation and glory, and made the broken body and the shed blood not only alive but also life-giving. Moreover, if death was paid as a price for our sins, Resurrection increased this price by making it openly and permanently acceptable both in heaven and earth.

Hence our dire need of a resurrection with the same strength and revelation given to the disciples on the third day, that it may correct all our erroneous concepts of fear from sufferings and from the cross, and become a beginning for our faith and a force from which we draw our ability not only to comprehend the power of Christ's cross to forgive our sins, but also to endure the same agonies of the cross with all joy. They

will no longer be agonies but a communion in glory, as St. Paul discovered: "If so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together" (*Rom. 8:17*).

Thus in the doctrine of the Orthodox Church resurrection has come to be the foundation of the act of redemption which was latent in the heart of Christ from the very beginning. Redemption did not mean merely that Christ should pay the price of our sins, or remove the wrath of God upon the reprobate who were enslaved to sin, but to Christ redemption in the first place meant something beyond forgiveness and reconciliation – to restore to man the love and eternal life which he had lost through transgression and separation from God. This was originally implied in the concept of incarnation as understood by the fathers of the Church such as St. Athanasius who says: "The Word became human that we might become gods in Him" (that is partakers of the divine nature).

The aim of incarnation therefore in the view of the Orthodox Church fathers<sup>1</sup> never stopped short at the atonement of the cross or redemption by blood, but always proceeded further to resurrection for the renewal of man as the ultimate end of incarnation. Why? Because man did not stop at falling in sin or breaking with God and incurring the divine wrath, so that if his sins were remitted and he got reconciled to God he would be restored to his original state. Unfortunately man went beyond all this, for he lost his original gifts and the image of God was distorted in him, in the sense that he finally lost his power to know and love God, and consequently to return to life with God by purgation, knowledge and instruction. This we hear from Christ himself when he approached this problem with rabbi Nicodemus, "Except a man be born from above he cannot see the kingdom of God." This means that it is not a question merely of repaying the debt of our sins, but there must needs be a re-creation of man.

The resurrection of Christ from the dead in the same body with which he had died gives the practical and divine answer to the manner of man's new birth as a new creation. The power of Christ to restore life to man

(1) Some scholars concerned with contrasting the saints of the West and those of the East say that the former always bear the stigmata of the cross, while the latter always shine with the transfiguration of the Resurrection.

through his resurrection has become the greatest hope of the Church ever since the day of resurrection. Through his resurrection alive and victorious not only over sin but over death, Christ once and for all opened the door for man's return to the kingdom of God, that is to eternal life, after he had paid the price of his sins on the cross.

Thus the resurrection of Christ reveals to us the stronger motive behind the cross. Behind the sacrifice which was accomplished with the full consent of the Son and the pleasure of the Father who bruised him with grief, there were paternal mercy and supreme affection from the Lord Jesus towards sinners and humanity at large, not merely for the forgiveness of their sins, but for their re-creation in him and in his spirit that he might present them with him in his love to the Father after being washed in his blood, and present them in his rising and sitting on the right hand of the Father, that they might be without blemish before God the Father in love, and be a new creation drawing its very breath from the spirit of God, beloved like him – or in the words of Christ himself: “The love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them.” Therefore the Orthodox Church believes that redemption continued even after Christ's entrance into the higher holies, “entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us” (*Heb.9:12*).

Thus the doctrine of the Orthodox Church, in emphasising the love of God as a basic motive, extends to the very end, from the cross to the resurrection to the ascension, and even to the entry into the holies and the sitting on the right hand of the Father in order to ensure the consummation of redemption. Christ is still alive, and even after he died for us and justified us with his blood he still intercedes for us before God the Father by the boldness of the love with which he accomplished the redemption, so that no wrath or blame may befall us on account of our ignorance and daily transgression, “but God commendeth his love towards us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him” (*Rom.5:8-9*).

How erroneous we are when, after this wonderful and glorious salvation has been accomplished in all its stages, we sever the cross from the resurrection, considering the cross in our heart and mind an area of grief and disgrace which we shun and apprehend, while making

resurrection a cherished exultation and glory. For is not the resurrection the price of the cross and the cross the price of resurrection, and were not the two one glory for Jesus and for us? Was not the cross in the eyes of the Father the true glory of Christ while he was hanging on it and beset with disgrace? Did not Jesus himself reveal this fact in his prayer to the Father when Judas went to carry out his act of betrayal and Christ realized that the hour of the cross was at hand? "He then having received the sop went immediately out: and it was night. Therefore when he was gone out, Jesus said, Now is the Son of man glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God be glorified in him, God shall also glorify him in himself, and shall straightway glorify him" (*Jn.13:30-32*).

That was the halo of glory which Jesus saw beforehand surrounding him on the cross and in resurrection in the same measure.

With its keen theological sense the Orthodox Church comprehends that Christ subjected himself to death while not under its sway. Resurrection was immanent in him, and he consented to crucifixion only in the measure of his own commitment to his love for sinners. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" and his obligation of obedience to the Father, "became obedient even unto death, the death of the cross."

This is why the Scripture and the prophets stated that it was not possible that he should be holden of the grave. Resurrection here came to emphasize his voluntary death.

How often Jesus alluded to this subtle and basic point. "I have power to lay it down and I have power to take it again (rise)" (*Jn. 18:11*). "The cup which my Father gave me shall I not drink it?" (*Jn. 18:11*) "For this cause came I into the world," (*Jn. 18:37*). When Pilate wanted to show his superiority over the "king of the Jews" and that he could crucify or set him free, Christ immediately objected: "Thou couldst have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above" (*Jn. 19:11*).

Pilate accomplished his task, gratified the high priests and crucified Jesus just as they wished and as the devil wished, so that the cross might be a shame upon Christ and a final retribution, and that the Jews might do away with him once and for all. But through his triumph and resurrection from the dead the Lord foiled all the plotting they contrived

with the prince of this world and the power of darkness, the Lord reversed the situation, so that to Christ and every believer in Christ the cross has become glory and peace, and to the devil and all the haters of Christ's name disgrace and horror.

Resurrection seated Christ in heavens as King of kings and Lord of lords and master of all ages, and made the death of Christ a propitiation not only for the remission of sins and the reconciling of the world to God, but a renewal of human creation and a radical change in the very nature of man from a physical life according to the flesh to a spiritual one according to the Spirit, in preparation of the corruptible to put on incorruptibility right from now, and of the mortal to put on immortality. According to St. John in the Revelation: "He that is holy let him be holy still."

For our life in Jesus Christ is henceforth written for us in heaven in the newness of the spirit that we may reign with Christ. All the daily deeds of the Church have become known to and read by all heavenly beings, because Christ who sits on the right hand of power in heaven is also the king of saints for the heavenly Church, and he is here the head and the bridegroom of the Church on earth, just as St. Paul says: "To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the Church the manifold wisdom of God according to the eternal purpose which He purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord" (*Eph. 3:10,11*). Whether in the sacrament of baptism where death with Christ and resurrection with him are accomplished for obtaining the new birth which qualifies us to enter the kingdom of heaven and behold it from now, or in the sacrament of Eucharist where the body of Christ is revealed, the spirit descends and the believers partake of the oblation, declaring his death and confessing his resurrection in preparation for the sharing in his resurrection.

Thus whenever the Church sings the words "*Christos Anesti*" (Christ is risen) the echoes of their response resound in heavens from the mouths of saints "*Alithos Anesti*" (Verily risen).



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