

Chapter 15

Christ is Risen!

On Easter night, when the paschal procession outside the church stops in front of the closed doors, during that last moment of silence before the eruption of resurrection joy, a question rises in our hearts consciously or unconsciously. It is the very same question that was in the hearts of the women who, early in the morning "just as the sun had risen," first came to Christ's tomb: "Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?" Will this miracle take place once again? Will the night once again become brighter than the day? Will we once again be filled with that inexplicable joy which is so utterly independent of anything in this world, that joy which all this night and for many days to come will ring out in the embrace of the paschal greeting: "Christ is risen! Truly He is risen!" That moment always comes. The doors open. We step into a church now filled with light, and we enter the triumphant service of Easter Matins.

But somewhere within the soul a question remains. What does all this mean? What does it mean to celebrate Easter in this world filled with suffering, hatred, triviality and war? What does it mean to sing of "trampling down death by death" and to hear that "not one dead remains in the grave," when death, disregarding all our day-to-day hurry, still remains the one absolute earthly certainty... Is it possible that Easter, this radiant and triumphant night, is merely a momentary escape from reality, a spiritual drinking binge after which, sooner or later, the same routine will return, the same gray reality, the same pitiless checking-off of days, months, years, the same race toward death and non-existence? After all, we've been told for such a long time that religion is self-deception and opium, an invention to help man cope with his hard fate, an ever-dissolving mirage. Would it not be more courageous, more worthy of man's dignity to renounce this mirage and face squarely the simple and sober reality? What is the answer to all this?

I think that the first tentative answer could be this: it's just not possible that all of this is a fabrication! It's just not possible that so much faith, so much joy, so much light over these almost two-thousand years could only be escape and mirage. Can a mirage continue for centuries? This argument has some weight, but it is still not completely convincing, and it must be stated plainly that no absolutely convincing answer exists, one that would be totally acceptable and publishable as a scientific explanation of Easter faith. Here, each person can only testify of his own personal and living experience and speak for himself. In living and personal experience, in considering it and reflecting upon it, you suddenly find the foundation of everything else, you discover what illumined everything with such blinding light and truly melts doubts and questions as wax melts before fire. But what experience?

I cannot describe or define it other than as the experience of the living Christ. My belief in Christ does not come from the opportunity given to me to participate since earliest childhood in the paschal celebration. Rather, Pascha is made possible, that unique night fills with light and joy and such victorious power in the greeting "Christ is risen! Truly He is risen!" because my faith itself was born from experience of the living Christ. How and when was it born? I don't know, I don't remember. I only know that every time I open the gospel and read about Christ, read his words, read his teaching, I consciously repeat, with all my heart and being, what was said by those who were sent to arrest Christ but who returned to the Pharisees without him: "No man ever spoke like this man" (In 7:46). Therefore what I know first of all is that Christ's teaching is alive, and that nothing on earth can be compared with it. And this teaching is about him, about eternal life, about victory over death, about a love that conquers and overcomes death. I know as well that in a life where everything seems so difficult and tiresome, the one constant that never changes and never leaves is this inner awareness that Christ is with me. "I will not leave you as orphans, I will come to you" (In 14: 18). And he does come and give the feeling of his presence through prayer, through a thrill of soul, through a joy so incomprehensible yet so very alive, through his mysterious, but again so certain, presence in church during services and in sacraments. This living experience is always growing, this knowledge, this awareness which becomes so obvious that Christ is here and that his word has been fulfilled: whoever loves Me, "I will love him and manifest myself to him" (On 14:21). And whether I am in a crowd

or alone, this certitude of his presence, this power of his word, this joy of faith in him remains with me. This is the only answer and the only proof.

"Why do you seek the living among the dead? Why do you mourn the incorrupt amid corruption?" All Christianity, therefore, is the experience of faith repeated again and again as if for the first time, through its incarnation in rites, words, music, and colors. To the unbeliever, it may indeed seem like a mirage; he hears only words, he sees only incomprehensible ceremonies, and he understands them only outwardly. But for believers, all of this radiates from within, and not as proof of his faith, but as its result, as its life in the world, in the soul, in history. Therefore the darkness and sadness of Holy Friday is for us something real, alive, contemporary; we can cry at the cross and experience everything that took place in that triumph of evil, treachery, cowardice, and betrayal; we can contemplate the life-bearing tomb on Holy Saturday with excitement and hope. And therefore, every year we can celebrate Easter, Pascha, the Resurrection. For Easter is not the remembrance of an event in the past. It is the real encounter in happiness and joy, with him whom our hearts long ago knew and encountered as the life and light of all light. Easter night testifies that Christ is alive and with us, and that we are alive with him. The entire celebration is an invitation to look at the world and life, and to behold the dawning of the mystical day of the Kingdom of light. "Today the scent of Spring begins," sings the church, "and the new creation exults..." It exults in faith, in love and in hope.

This is the day of resurrection,
Let us be illumined by the feast,
Let us embrace each other.
Let us call "brothers" even those that hate us,
And forgive all by the resurrection,
And so let us cry: Christ is risen from the dead,
Trampling down death by death,
And upon those in the tombs bestowing life.

Christ is risen!

About the Book

There is no human society without celebrations, holidays and feasts, "The feast is part of man's inescapable rhythm of work and rest," observes Fr Schmemmann. But beyond the need to rest from work, the development of celebrations in human culture has much deeper root in man's absolutely irrepressible need, not just for rest, but for joy, for meaning that we find the true source of celebration and its tenacity in human society. Feasts, in every culture, have become the repository and expression of a society's goals, ambitions, and worldview. As Fr Schmemmann writes, "tell me what you celebrate, and I will tell you who you are."

Christianity is also best understood through its celebrations rather than through abstract dogmatic and theological formulas. Orthodox Christianity in particular has from its earliest days expressed its faith, its understanding of the world and its approach to life through a network of feasts that embrace the entire year. "Without exaggeration we can say that the believer lives from feast to feast, and that for him these feasts sanctify all time through the coming and going of each season."

In this volume, Fr Schmemmann examines first the phenomenon of celebration and then its expression in the Orthodox Christian church year, focusing especially on the Christmas and Easter cycles. His reflections on feasts devoted to Mary, the Mother of God, will be included in Volume III of Celebration of Faith: I Believe...III: The Virgin Mary. Celebration of Faith: I Believe... I is dedicated to answering the question 'what is faith?' and explaining the Nicene Creed.

These books are [available in our bookstore](#).

