

Chapter 8



Good Friday: The Epitaphion and the Tomb of Jesus

The happenings of Great and Holy Friday are proclaimed in the Orthodox Church not only by word but also by dramatic action. It is one of the most beautiful services of the Orthodox worship cycle. One of the prominent symbols of Good Friday is the Epitaphion (in Slavonic, plaschanitsa), a rectangular piece of stiffened cloth on which is painted or embroidered the Body of the dead Christ laid out for burial—much like the image of Christ's Body on the Shroud of Turin.

The Epitaphion occupies an integral part of the Good Friday service because on it is inscribed the history of our salvation in blood-red letters. It speaks eloquently of God's unfathomable love. The Epitaphion itself is considered by some to be a vestige of the winding sheet in which our Lord's body was wrapped when it was laid in the tomb.

The Cross: Early Focal Point of Good Friday Worship

It is noteworthy that the use of the Epitaphion in the Good Friday service is hardly a few hundred years old. The early Chris-

tians in the Church of Jerusalem used as the focal point of their Good Friday worship not the Epitaphion but the wood of the cross which was discovered in Jerusalem by St. Helena at the beginning of the fourth century. An early pilgrim to Jerusalem, Silvia of Aquitaine (4th century), describes this rite in her *Diary of a Pilgrimage*. On Good Friday the bishop of Jerusalem, attended by priests and deacons, made a procession to Golgotha where a throne was set up for him on the exact spot where Jesus was crucified. Before him was placed a table covered with a white cloth on which was placed the sacred wood of the cross with its inscription. As the bishop held the ends of the cross with his hands, the faithful approached one by one, bowed profoundly before the sacred relic of the cross and kissed it.

Custom Retained

This beautiful custom of venerating the Cross on Holy Friday later spread from Jerusalem to the Orthodox Church in general where today after the reading of the fifth Passion Gospel on Holy Thursday evening, the priest takes the cross from behind the altar, carries it in a procession through the sanctuary and plants it in the middle of the soleas. During this procession, the beautiful hymn "Today He hangs on the Cross" is sung. As the following words of this hymn are sung, "We worship Thy passion, O Christ . . ." the priest, followed by the congregation, bows to the ground three times and then kisses the Precious Cross.

Origin of the Epitaphion

The origin of the Epitaphion as it is used on Good Friday is intriguing. During the Divine Liturgy, the Orthodox Church covers the sacred gifts during the proskomidi with a large veil called the "aer." The veil, also known as the "aer," began to be used in the liturgy in Jerusalem at the time of St. Savas (+532). According to Simeon of Thessalonica, the "aer" represents the naked and dead body of Jesus as it was placed in the tomb. It is for this reason, he states, that the picture of the placing of the body of Christ in the tomb is often depicted on the aer. At the Great Entrance the deacon carries the aer in a procession immediately before the Holy Gifts. When the procession reaches the holy table, the priest covers the chalice and paten with the aer as he prays silently:

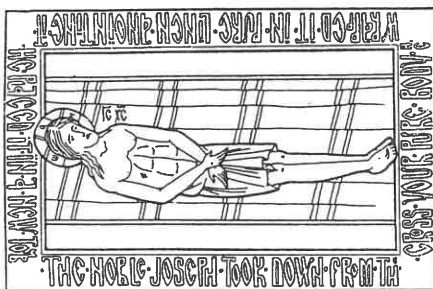
“Noble Joseph took down Your most pure body from the tree, wrapped it in a clean shroud, covered it with spices and laid it in a new tomb.”

From this aer or veil containing the icon of the entombed Christ, there developed slowly the use of the Epitaphion on Good Friday. The rite of the veneration of the Epitaphion was transferred from the Matins (Orthros) service of Great and Holy Saturday to the Vespers of Good Friday probably because the troparion “The noble Joseph . . .” was first sung during Passion Week in the Vespers of Holy Friday.

In addition to the figure of Christ in the tomb, there were slowly added to the icon of the Epitaphion the figures of Mary the Mother of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea and the pious women who took part in the burial of Christ. Around the border of the Epitaphion are inscribed the words of the troparion “The noble Joseph . . .”

During the Vesper Service of Holy Friday a procession is made around the church with the Epitaphion by four persons each holding one of its four corners. After the procession it is placed in the symbolic tomb beautifully decorated with flowers and candles, while the Troparion “The noble Joseph . . .” is sung. Behind the tomb stands the plain cross with no corpus on it. The Epitaphion itself remains exposed for veneration until the Matins of the Resurrection when it is carried into the sanctuary and placed on the holy table where it is kept for forty days until the Feast of the Ascension of Jesus, to symbolize the forty days Jesus spent with us following the Resurrection.

Is God Fair?



What happened on Good Friday provides the answer to a question we often ask about God’s fairness and justice. St. Isaac the Syrian answered this question perceptively long ago when he wrote:

“Do not presume to call God just: for what sort of justice is this—we sinned and He gave us His only begotten Son on the Cross? Never say that God is just.”

If He were just, you would be in hell. Rely only on His injustice which is mercy, love, forgiveness.'

The glorious message of Good Friday is that the greatest attribute of God is not justice but mercy. It is for this reason that we plead His mercy in every worship service with the prayer *Kyrie eleison*, Lord, have mercy.

The Orthodox Attitude Toward Crucifixion

As Expressed in the Hymns of the Day

Bishop Kallistos Ware writes in his book THE ORTHODOX CHURCH: "The Orthodox attitude to the Crucifixion is best seen in the hymns sung on Good Friday, such as the following:

*He who clothes himself with light as with a garment
Stood naked at the judgment.*

*On his cheeks he received blows
From the hands which he had formed.*

*The lawless multitude nailed to the Cross
The Lord of Glory.*

"The Orthodox Church on Good Friday thinks not simply of Christ's human pain and suffering by itself, but rather of the contrast between His outward humiliation and His inward glory. Orthodox see not just the suffering humanity of Christ, but a suffering God:

*Today is hanged upon the tree
He who hanged the earth in the midst of the
waters.*

*A crown of thorns crowns him
Who is the king of the angels.*

*He is wrapped about with the purple of mockery
Who wraps the heaven in clouds.*

"Behind the veil of Christ's bleeding and broken flesh, Orthodox still discern the Triune God. Even Golgotha is a theophany; even on Good Friday the Church sounds a note of Resurrection joy:

*We worship thy Passion, O Christ;
Show us also thy glorious Resurrection!
I magnify thy sufferings,
I praise thy burial and Resurrection.
Shouting, Lord, glory to thee!*

“The Crucifixion is not separated from the Resurrection, for both are but a single action. Calvary is seen always in the light of the empty tomb; the Cross is an emblem of victory. When Orthodox think of Christ Crucified, they think not only of His suffering and desolation; they think of Him as Christ the Victor, Christ the King, reigning in triumph from the Tree. . . . Christ is our victorious king, not in spite of the Crucifixion but because of it: ‘I call Him king because I see Him crucified’ (Chrysostom)”⁴³

The Orthodox Attitude Toward the Crucifixion
 _____ *As Expressed In the Icon* _____

Contrasting the Orthodox icon of the crucifixion with the stark reality of Western artists (broken bones, contorted face, bloody necks, etc.), iconographer Photios Kontoglou concludes that the latter begets despair whereas the icon breathes a message of hope. He writes:

“Here there is nothing from the world of corruption. The forms and colors do not impart the frigid breath of death, but the sweet hope of immortality. Christ is depicted as standing on the Cross, not hanging on it. His body is of flesh, but flesh of another nature, flesh whose nature has been changed through the grace of the Holy Spirit. The expression on His face is full of heavenly tranquility; the affliction which has befallen Him is full of gentleness and forgiveness, exempt from agonized contractions on the face. It is the suffering redeemer. He Who has undone the pangs of death. Who has granted the peace of the life to come. This crucified body is not that of just anyone, but it is the very body of the God-Man Himself. . . . It radiates the hope of the Resurrection. The Lord does not hang on the Cross like some miserable tatter, but it is He, rather, who appears to be supporting the Cross. His hands are not cramped, being nailed to the Wood; rather He spreads them out serenely in the attitude of supplication. . . . I repeat; the forms and colors of the liturgical icon do not express the brute horror of death, but have the nobility and gentleness of eternal life. It is illuminated by the light of hope in Christ. It is full of the grace of the Paraclete.”

In some icons of the crucifixion the sun and the moon are placed in such a manner as to make it appear that the outstretched arms of the Savior are supporting them.

— *The Service of the Descent From the Cross* —

On the morning of Holy Friday the service of the Royal Hours is held consisting of Old Testament prophecies relating to the passion and crucifixion of Christ and their fulfillment in the New Testament. The Vespers for Great and Holy Friday are celebrated in the afternoon. During this service the final events of the life of Christ are retold: the trial, the sentencing, the scourging, the mocking, the crucifixion, the death, the descent from the Cross, and the burial. As the Gospel account is read, the priest, representing Joseph of Arimathea, removes the Body of Christ from the Cross, wraps it in a shroud and carries it into the altar, representing the tomb.

Toward the end of this service the priest lifts a large embroidered icon representing Christ lying in the tomb, and carries it in a procession around the church. Finally he lays it in a specially prepared tomb in the center of the church. During the procession the following hymn is sung:

“The Noble Joseph, when he had taken down thy most pure body from the tree, wrapped it in fine linen and, anointing it with spices, placed it in a new tomb.”

It is around the symbolic tomb of Jesus, beautifully decorated with flowers, that the evening service takes place.

*The Service of The Lamentation
of Our Lord's Death*

In John 19:25 we read, “. . . standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother, and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleopas, and Mary Magdalene.” Mary the Theotokos stood by the cross and watched her Son die. In the Lamentations that we sing on the evening of Great and Holy Friday, Mary expresses her feelings about her Son's death. Sharing these feelings we sing with her the Lamentations. Following is a sample of some of these moving stichera:

“You, who clothe Yourself with light as with a garment, were taken down from the Cross by Joseph and Nicodemus. And seeing You dead, naked and unburied, he raised a heart-rending lament and said: ‘Alas, dearest Jesus! A short while ago the sun saw You hanging on the tree and covered itself with darkness. The earth trembled in fear, and the veil of the temple was torn asunder. But now I see You Who, willingly, underwent death for my sake. How can I bury You, my God? In what kind of shroud can I wrap You? With what kind of hands can I touch Your Incorruptible Body? What song shall I sing at Your departure, merciful Lord? I extol Your Passion, and with hymns I praise Your burial together with Your Resurrection,’ crying out: ‘O Lord, glory be to You!’”

The Procession

Good Friday in the Orthodox Church commemorates not only the death and burial of Jesus but also His descent into Hades where He preached His Gospel to all those who had died before His coming. In this descent Jesus Who is the Life encounters and destroys death. As the hymn says, “Thou hast come down to earth to save Adam, and having not found him on earth, Thou hast descended, searching him, even into Hades. . . .”

The solemn procession around the church with the embroidered icon of the entombed Christ following the Lamentations is not only a funeral procession; it is also the Son of God, the Immortal One, proceeding through the darkness of Hades pre-announcing the joy of the Resurrection. During this procession the choir sings the hymn, “Holy God . . .” The procession stops a number of times for the priest to address petitions to the Lord.

The Old Testament Prophecy

(Ezekiel 37:1-14)

The theme of the Resurrection is picked up immediately in the Old Testament reading from the Prophet Ezekiel. God speaks to the prophet who is looking into a huge valley filled with the dry bones of the dead. God announces to Ezekiel that the earth is not intended to be a universal graveyard. Not death but resurrection is

the ultimate destiny of man. The dry bones will hear the words of the Lord. The dead will live again. "Behold, my people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of the graves . . ."

The Epistle Lesson

_____ (*I Corinthians 5:6-8; Galatians 3:13-14*) _____

How will this universal resurrection come about? St. Paul provides the answer in the epistle lesson. "A little leaven leavens the whole lump." Christ, Who is the Resurrection and the Life, is our leaven. He is the One Who destroys death for each of us and allows us to share in His Resurrection through holy baptism.

_____ *The Gospel Lesson (St. Matthew 27:62-66)* _____

The Gospel reminds us that the prophecy of the resurrection of the dry bones is still a prophecy not yet fulfilled. There remains one more day—Holy Saturday—before we can hear the announcement of its glorious fulfillment. So the Gospel lesson reminds us once more of the Tomb—"which was made secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard."

At the conclusion of the service it is customary in some churches for the worshippers to receive a flower from the beautifully decorated symbolic tomb of Christ. This is taken home and preserved reverently before the family icon.

_____ *"Who Loved Me . . ."* _____

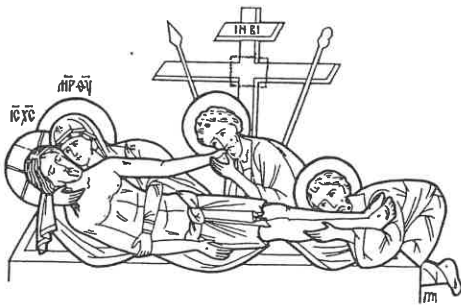
In the ancient world it was common that people should sacrifice to God. It is something completely new that God should sacrifice Himself for us. "It is only on a cross that a man dies with outstretched arms," said St. Athanasius. His arms were outstretched to demonstrate the unfathomable depth of His personal love for each one of us. All the world's embraces cannot compare in love with the outstretched arms of Christ on the Cross. He stands ready to embrace each one of us if we will yield our lives to Him in complete obedience and walk with Him daily. The response we are called to make to the Crucified Christ was best expressed by St. Paul when he wrote, "*I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ Who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me*" (*Galatians 2:20*). Make Good

Friday a part of your everyday life by repeating to yourself prayerfully every morning and evening the words, “. . . *who loved me and gave himself for me.*”

St. Eusebius on The Crucifixion

“If you do not listen to Him who has created you, then ask Him who has redeemed you, how much you are worth. What is the price which Christ has paid for you? Consider His sufferings, how He was mistreated and mocked; think of the scourging, the crown of thorns, the cross. To redeem you, to purchase you, He sacrificed His life—He, God’s eternal Son—He, true God like the Father. Look at the magnificence of the moon and the stars, look at the earth in all its beauty; what is it all compared to God? Hardly more than a speck of dust. Therefore, you are worth infinitely more than heaven and earth with all their splendor. The standard of your worth is the eternal God Himself, for He has purchased you with His own blood. You are worth as much as the blood of our Lord Jesus.”

St. Tikhon on The Crucifixion



Year after year the Church confronts us every Good Friday with the great love of God in Christ Jesus. Few saints have expressed this love better than that great saint of the Russian Orthodox Church, St. Tikhon:

You lived on earth, King of Heaven, to lead me to heaven—I who had been cast out of paradise.

You were born in the flesh of the Virgin to give me birth in the spirit.

You suffered insults to silence the mouths of my enemies who denounced me

You abased Yourself, You Who are higher than all

honors, in order to honor me, the dishonored.

You wept to wipe the tears from my eyes.

*You sighed, grieved, sorrowed to save me from
sighing, grieving, suffering pain through eternity,
to give me eternal joy and gladness.*

*You were sold and betrayed
that I might be freed, I who was enslaved.*

You were bound that my bonds might be broken.

You were submitted to an unjust trial—

*You Who are the Judge of all the earth—
that I might be freed from eternal judgment.*

*You were made naked in order to clothe me in the
robes of salvation, in the garments of gladness.*

*You were crowned with thorns,
that I might receive the crown of life.*

*You were called the king of mockery—You, the
King*

of all!—to open the kingdom of heaven for me.

*Your head was lashed with a reed
that my name should be written in the book of life.*

*You suffered outside the city gates in order to
lead me, one who had been cast out of paradise,
into the eternal Jerusalem.*

*You were put among evil men—You Who are the
only*

Just One—that I, the unjust, might be justified.

*You were cursed, the One Blessed
that I, the accursed, should be blessed.*

*You shed your blood
that my sins might be cleansed away.*

*You were given vinegar to drink
that I might eat and drink at the feast in Your King-
dom.*

*You died, You Who are the life of all—
in order to revive me, the dead.*

*You were laid in the tomb
that I might rise from the tomb.*

*You were brought to life again
that I might believe in my resurrection.’’*

A Good Friday Troparion

“Each part of your body suffered some outrage because of us:

Your head, the thorns;

Your face, spitting;

Your mouth, the taste of vinegar and gall;

Your ears, injurious blasphemies;

Your shoulders, the purple of derision;

Your back, flagellation;

Your hand, the reed;

Your entire body, the pangs of the cross;

Your members, the nails;

Your side, the lance.

You who have suffered for us, and who in suffering have freed us.

You who, through love of man, have lowered Yourself with us and who have lifted us up, Savior, have mercy on us.’

What Does It All Mean?

The Service of the Epitaphion is truly one of the most moving worship experiences of the Orthodox Church year. It confronts us each year by word and act with Christ crucified, dead, and buried for our salvation. But the real question is: What does all this mean? What should it mean practically to those present at this service? How ought it to affect our lives? What difference should it make in our lives today that Christ died for us?

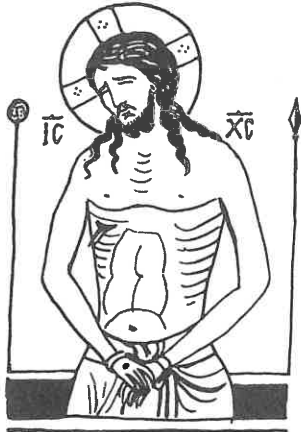
St. Paul answered these questions for us when he wrote to the Romans: “We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. . . . So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:4, 11).

The two key phrases on which we shall concentrate for the meaning of Christ’s death are: “DEAD to sin” and “ALIVE to God in Christ Jesus.” What does it mean to be “dead to sin” and “alive to God?”

Life Is What We Are Alive To

What does being alive mean to you? It means different things to different people at different times. For Pavarotti being alive means reaching his high C. For a child being alive means licking a chocolate ice cream cone. For Alexander Fleming being alive means discovering penicillin.

When have you felt alive, gloriously alive, so brimful of life that it almost hurt? When you skimmed over the lake on skis? When you downed a mug of Budweiser on a hot, humid day? When you closed a successful deal? When someone's eyes met yours in ecstatic love? When you first laid eyes on your newborn child? What makes you feel brimfully alive?



A woodsman from Wisconsin was walking on Park Avenue in New York City. Suddenly he stopped and said to a companion, "I hear a cricket."

"Nonsense," his city friend replied, "in this uproar how could you possibly hear a cricket?"

"But I do," insisted the woodsman. "Watch, I'll show you something." Taking a dime from his pocket, he dropped it on the pavement. Instantly every head within twenty feet turned around to see whose money dropped. "You see," said the woodsman, "people hear what their ears are tuned to. Mine happen to be tuned to crickets."

Life is what we are alive to. Life is that to which we have tuned the ears of our mind and heart. The student who flunks geometry because he cannot remember the theorem will remember every incident in the ball game and the batting averages of all the players. Life is what we are alive to. The man who can remember every fluctuation of the stock market for two years cannot remember the topic of last Sunday's sermon. Life is what we are alive to; what we have tuned our mental and spiritual ears to.

Alive To the Best in Life

What are we alive to? Are we alive to the highest and the best in life? Or are we alive to that which is something less, often

cheap, meaningless, and base? Are we alive to the eternal? Or are we alive only to the transient and the passing?

St. Paul says that since we have died with Christ through baptism and risen with Him to newness of life, we are to be “dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” To be truly alive, he says, is to be alive to God. No one can be truly alive if one is not alive to God in Christ Jesus. But we cannot be alive to God unless we are first “dead to sin.” What does it mean to be dead to sin?

Dead to Sin

A pastor was going over the church roster of members with some of his Board people. After many of the names were written the initials: FBPO. Asked to explain the meaning of these initials, he answered, “They mean ‘For Burial Purposes Only.’” There are many in every church membership directory who are there in name only. They are alive to many things in life but not to God or His Church.

Albert Schweitzer said once, “The tragedy is what dies inside a man while he lives.” What usually dies inside is our aliveness to God in Christ. The world exerts tremendous pressure on us each day to make us become dead to God and alive to sin. When we allow ourselves to succumb to this pressure, the result is spiritual death. Oh yes, we are physically alive but spiritually we are dead to God. The inner flame has flickered out. The most important thing within us—our aliveness to God—has died.

G. A. Studdert-Kennedy captured this state of being dead to God in a beautiful poem entitled “Christ Comes to Birmingham”:

*When Jesus came to Golgotha
 They hanged Him on a tree;
 They drove great nails through hands and feet
 And made a Calvary;
 They crowned Him with a crown of thorns—
 Red were His wounds and deep,
 For those were crude and cruel days
 And human flesh was cheap.*

*When Jesus came to Birmingham
 They simply passed Him by,
 They never hurt a hair of Him,
 They only let Him die.*

*For men have grown more tender
 And they could not give Him pain—
 They only just passed down the street
 And left Him in the rain.*

*Still Jesus cried, "Forgive them
 For they know not what they do."
 And still it rained the winter rain
 That drenched Him through and through.
 The crowds went home and left the streets
 Without a soul to see,
 And Jesus crouched against a wall
 And cried for Calvary.*

One of the subtle ways by which we kill the presence of Jesus in our lives today is through this sin of indifference. It is no wonder we hear God saying in Rev. 3:15-16, "I know your works; you are neither cold or hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth." A lukewarm Christian is a dead Christian, says God.

A person said once, "I wish I were dead!" And a voice from within answered, "You *are* dead. You wish you were *alive*." Does that not describe many of us?

Consider the aimlessness of so many people today who wander from the cradle to the grave with no sense of direction or goal. Oh yes, they are busy. They are forever busy, but busy about the wrong things. They keep rushing, restlessly preoccupied, pursuing now one prize, now another—and yet, in spite of it all, they are dissatisfied, bored, unfulfilled. Is this kind of living, life, or is it death?

Oswald Chambers, the great devotional writer, talks of two funerals for each person. One he calls the "white" funeral and the other the "black" funeral. The white funeral, he says must precede the black funeral. For, the white funeral prepares us for the black funeral. The white funeral is that in which through repentance we die to our sinful self before we go through the black funeral of physical death. The white funeral gives birth to the new resurrected life which enables us to pass through the black funeral as through a door that leads to eternal life with God.

Dead Before We Die

It is not the fact of death that makes life tragic, so much as that many of us allow death to creep unto us before we die—death in the form of hardening of the mental and spiritual arteries; death in the form of forgetfulness of God and His great love for us on the cross that should be the pivotal point of our life.

Someone said, “I’m not afraid of dying, but I’m very much afraid of not living enough. I don’t care how long I have, but I want to *live* all the life there is in me while I’m at it. I have only one prayer, but it’s constant—‘Keep me alive, Lord, while I live!’”

Keep me alive, Lord, to You, to the Cross, to Your forgiving love, to your Church, to the great privilege of being able to converse with You in prayer, to the great blessing of Your Presence which You seek to bestow upon me, to Your personal love letter to me: the Bible and the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist.

Keep me alive, Lord, to the needs of suffering humanity, and help me do something, however small, to alleviate those needs. As You did say, “As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren you did it to me.”

Keep me alive, Lord; for eternal life does not begin when I die; it begins right now whenever I give my heart to You. As Phillips Brooks said, “The great Easter truth is not that we are to live newly after death, but that we are to be new here and now by the power of the resurrection.” We are really raised from the dead and begin to really live the day we accept Jesus as King and Lord.

Keep me alive, Lord, *alive* to You and *dead* to sin.

Put to Death What is Earthly in You

We are to be “dead to sin,” says St. Paul. Exactly what does St. Paul mean by this? What is it we are called to die to?

St. Paul answers this question clearly when he writes, “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you once walked, when you lived in them. But now put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and foul talk from your mouth . . . seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the

new nature which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” (Col. 3:5-10).

We are called to die to anger which divides and destroys, and rise to forgiveness which unites and restores. We are called to die to greedy desires to possess what is not our own, and to rise to generosity which shares its blessings with the less fortunate. We are called to die to envy of the welfare and happiness of others and rise to love which seeks to enhance the welfare of others. We are called to die to lust which would use the bodies and lives of others for ignoble ends, and rise to purity which treats others as “temples of the Holy Spirit.” We are called to die to pride which places self in the place of God, and rise to humility which places God on the throne of life and makes us His joyful servants.

————— *Crucified With Christ — Dead to Sin* —————

St. Paul says, “I am crucified with Christ.” This means that Christ died and we died with Him. Therefore we have been crucified with Christ. Christ didn’t just die as a substitute for me. I am also involved in the crucifixion. The old nature in me has been crucified and put to death with all of its hopes, its ambitions, its plans, its priorities. It was nailed to the cross. We are then dead to self. “They that are Christ’s,” says God’s word, “have crucified the flesh with its affections and lusts.” In other words, the old nature, the sin nature, the self has been crucified with Christ.

St. Paul tells us that we are to reckon ourselves to be dead with Christ (see Romans 6). We are to realize that we died with Christ on the Cross, that our old nature is dead, that we are dead to the world and the world is crucified unto us, that we are dead to the flesh, that we are alive in Christ Jesus, that henceforth we are to live no more to self and sin but are to be alive unto God.

We have been dying to sin ever since our baptism. And that dying will never be ended. For, dying to sin is not something negative; it is turning to Christ which is a daily conversion. In dying to sin, we live to God.

Fr. Walter J. Burghardt explains the positive aspect of dying to sin as follows: “To the death that is sin we have been dying since our baptism. And the dying is never ended. For dying to sin is not something negative; dying to sin is turning to Christ, and turning to Christ is a constant conversion. If sin is rejection, dying to sin is openness: openness to God’s presence poured out on us

through every flower that opens its chalice petals to us, every breeze that caresses our skin, every man or woman whose eyes meet ours, the awesome presence of the Holy One Himself tabernacled within us. In dying to sin, we live to God.’’

Move On To Growth

If ever a man experienced death to sin in all its pain and glory, it was St. Paul. Yet he did not waste his life burying that dead man who died on the road to Damascus. He boldly turned his back on him once and for all, in order that the new Christ-self that had begun to evolve in him might have room for growth. If you have died with Christ—as you have through baptism—Paul tells us, then consider yourselves dead to sin and move on to become alive to God and to share in His glory.

More Dead Than Alive

A person can be famous and great and yet live a life that is dead to the highest and the best. In his autobiography written toward the end of his life, Charles Darwin deplored the fact that he had lost his taste for music, art, and for God, too. His mind had become simply “a machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts,” to use his own words. Whole segments of his mind had atrophied, and as a result he felt even his moral character had suffered. If he were to relive his life, he wrote, he would have set aside time at least once a week for some of the other things in life that he had neglected. To go through life being alive to the many species of life and their development but dead to the Creator of the species and the Author of all Life is to be more dead than alive. It is to miss life’s greatest opportunity and privilege: to meet the Creator and come to know Him intimately in the Person of Jesus; to spend time with Him and come to know His plan for my life; nay, to let Him come into my heart and sit on the throne.

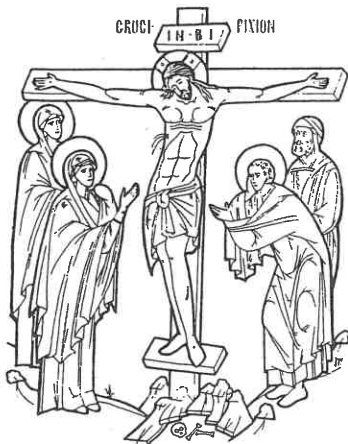
Dying to Self

A devout Christian, George Muller, writes in his “Autobiography,” “There was a day when I died; utterly died . . . died to George Muller, his opinions, preferences, tastes and will; died to the world, its approval or censure; died to the approval or blame even of my brethren and friends and, since then, I have studied only to show myself approved to God.”

Alive to God

Why must we die to sin? The answer is that we may be alive to God. St. Irenaeus said, "The glory of God is man become fully alive (to God) and the life of man consists in beholding God."

What does it mean to be fully "alive to God?" It means, for one thing, listening to the voice of God as Paul listened to that voice on the road to Damascus. It was by listening to the Voice that he came alive to God. God still speaks. His voice is beamed to us constantly. The problem is with us: we are not tuned in to Him.



We are tuned to other wavelengths. We miss the Voice that can resurrect us from the dead and give us life. Being alive to God means making an effort to be where God is: in the Church, in the Bible, in prayer, in the sacraments. Being alive to God means being present to Him, taking time to be silent in His presence, surrendering, putting one's spirit in tune with the Spirit of God, practicing the presence of God and deliberately seeking that Presence.

Being alive to God requires "a constant aliveness to God—an aliveness present when you talk, read, watch, or examine something" (Theophan). Being alive to God means purifying the heart, cleansing it of "the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" (I John 2:16) that we may see God within the heart and be alive to His Presence there. Being alive to God means seeking "the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ Who is our life appears, then you will also appear with Him in glory" (Col. 3:1-4). Being alive to God means to "put on . . . as God's chosen ones . . . compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you. . . . And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. . . . Let the words of God dwell in you richly. . . . And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord

Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him” (Col. 3:12-17).

God's Life In Us Now

Being alive to God means to have the life of God in us. Eternal life, which is the life of God, begins now, not after death. It is given to us by believing and by the living waters of baptism through which we are born anew. And this life of God or eternal life is nourished and fed by the Word of God and by the Body and Blood of Jesus in the Eucharist (John 6:51-58).

Because of our closeness to God, St. John says that Jesus is the vine, we are the branches that live from the vine (John 15:1). We are the dwelling place, the Father and the Son make their home in us (John 14:23). St. Paul says that we are a temple, and God's spirit dwells in us (I Cor. 3:16-17). So strong, so enduring, so everlasting is this life of God in us that death will never be able to destroy it. We will never cease to be branches of Christ's vine, dwelling places of God and temples of the Holy Spirit.

Powerfully Alive

Being alive to God's presence means to experience His love even in the midst of suffering. A son said to his father who had been on a bed of pain for years, “Father, I never loved you as I do now. Oh, if only I could bear your pain for you.” But the father replied, “No, my son, I have not one pain left to spare. He Who allows me to suffer, loves me more than you do and knows just what is best for me. I sometimes think this is the happiest period in my life. His mercies are so great.” That is to be powerfully alive to God's presence.

Dag Hammarskjold said it well: “God does not die on the day when we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illuminated by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason.”

Gilbert Chesterton said of Omar Khayyam: “The trouble with the Persian poet is that he spent his whole life in the cellar and thought it was the only room in the house.”

Up From the Cellar

For many people conversion to God has meant coming out of the cellar of life, awakening to a world to which previously they had been all but dead. One day they came alive to it. One day they turned a corner, perhaps the corner of sorrow, or suffering, or trouble, and some new insight broke through to them. God became real to them. They became alive to His love, presence and power. The result was that they became new persons. They came up from the cellar of life to enjoy the gloriously beautiful sunlight of God's presence. Indeed, they became "dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus."

If you are fully alive to God you will hear Jesus saying to you now through St. John Chrysostom:

"I am father and brother and husband; I am the house, the garment, the root, the foundation-stone. I am whatever you want. If you come to me you will never lack anything; I am even ready to be your servant, for I come to serve and not to be served. I am friend and member and head and brother and sister and mother. I am everything. I have become beggar for you and wanderer for you; I went up to the Cross for you and down into the tomb for you; for you in heaven I pray to the Father and for you I came down on earth as his ambassador. You are everything to me. Brother and co-inheritor and friend and member. What more do you wish? What more can I do for you, O my people?"

The Great Mystery

The great mystery is why some Christians who are supposedly dead to sin and alive to God, while not dead, are really not fully alive. They are only half alive. Jesus does not really thrill them. His death bothers them less than their favorite actor's death. They're merely existing. They're bored, like workers on an assembly line.

The trouble with these half-alive Christians must be a weak connection of faith in Jesus. They worship at the altars of other gods. They have not fully surrendered the sinful self to Jesus. For to really believe that the life of God flows within us, like another

bloodstream; to really believe that we are risen with Christ, that we are forgiven, that we can call God “our Father,” that we can feed often on the flesh and blood of our Savior, this is enough to make us leap for joy as we come alive—fully alive to the joy of God’s love and forgiveness.

This is what the tomb of Christ and the Epitaphion of Good Friday should signify to us: a new life, a resurrected life, brought on by a new aliveness to God and a deadness or abhorrence to sin—the sin that crucified Jesus.