

Orthopraxis

By Archpriest Basil Rhodes

FASTING DURING HOLY WEEK

On Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of Holy Week we follow the normal fasting rules which applied during Great Lent; i.e. we abstain from meat, fish, dairy, wine, and olive oil. On Holy Thursday evening the meal is ideally the last full, formal meal taken until Pascha. At this meal, wine and oil are permitted. The Fast of Great and Holy Friday is the strictest fast day of the year: even those who have not kept a strict Lenten fast are strongly urged not to eat at all on this day. Some may take a little bread and tea following the Vespers service, if blessed by their spiritual father. After St. Basil's Liturgy on Holy Saturday, wine, bread and fruit are blessed in the church, signifying that these may be taken for sustenance. No food or drink should be taken for at least six hours before the Holy Eucharist at the Paschal Liturgy.

Though these rules may appear quite strict to those who have not seen them before, they were developed with all of the faithful, not only monks, in mind. Though many may have difficulty keeping the rule in its fullness, it seems best to present it mostly without judgment of what level is "appropriate," since this is a matter best worked out in each Christian's own setting, under the guidance of his or her spiritual father. Naturally, the rule does not ordinarily apply to the elderly, the ill or infirm, children, pregnant women or nursing mothers.

Focus on the Faith

Holy Week in the Orthodox Church

By Archpriest Basil Rhodes

The eight days that compromise Holy Week in the Orthodox Church express the spiritual summit of the Church's liturgical life. The focus on

the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ proceeds in a physically, psychologically and spiritually moving series of services that defy the limitations of space and time to bring the Orthodox Christian into the moment of the events commemorated. The elegant beauty of the services so move the faithful that it is not uncommon to see tears flow as people feel mystically participating in the events of the last week of Jesus' earthly ministry.

Lazarus Saturday (the day before Palm Sunday) recalls the last public miracle of Jesus in raising Lazarus from the dead. This act serves as a reassurance that the Passion Jesus Himself will face in the week ahead will not end in death and corruption. The hymnody emphasizes that Christ is fully human and Divine. Palm Sunday is a celebration of the Lord's triumphant entry into Jerusalem. The Vigil Service includes a blessing of palm branches, which are held by the faithful for the remainder of the Vigil and throughout the Divine Liturgy. The hymnody reflects both the raising of Lazarus and the humility of the King who enters Jerusalem on the foal of an ass.

The evenings of Sunday, Monday and Tuesday feature the Bridegroom Matins. (Essentially, all the services for the following week are pushed forward twelve hours to allow more active participation of the faithful. Thus the morning service for Monday is celebrated Sunday evening, etc.) These services focus on the End Times. There is urgency in the tone of the services as, successively, the innocent suffering of the Patriarch Joseph in the Old Testament, the parable of the Ten Virgins, and the anointing by the sinful woman (traditionally identified as Kassiani) is brought to mind in anticipation of the events to follow. Of particular beauty is the "Hymn of Kassiani" on Tuesday night, in which the faithful identify themselves with the sinful woman, both repentant and grieving at the suffering Jesus will endure for our salvation.

Wednesday Evening is the occasion for the Sacrament of Holy Unction. More than a blessing of Holy Oil for the sick, the service functions as a transition from the expectation of the Passion to a spiritual participation in the last days of Christ. The focus is on repentance and the assurance

for healing (spiritual as well as physical) through the Person of Jesus Christ.

On Holy Thursday morning the Vespereal Liturgy of the Last Supper is celebrated (moved from the evening to the morning as noted above). The Gospel Reading is a masterful combination of readings that recount the Last Supper, institution of the Holy Eucharist, and betrayal, arrest, and condemnation of Jesus. The hymnody centers on betrayal of Judas with allusions to the three Old Testament readings which each focus on the innocence of Jesus as a lamb led to the slaughter.

The Matins of the 12 Passion Gospels follows on Thursday evening. The complete Passion narratives of each of the Gospels are read to dramatically tell the story of the Passion and Death of Jesus. During the service, the faithful are spiritually transported into the events being described by the carrying of the Cross. A priest exits the Sanctuary with a large cross, which he carries in procession through the Church. The Cross is placed in the center of the Solea. An icon of "The Crucified One" corpus is suspended upon the cross. The sense of terror and despair becomes palpable, and it is not uncommon for people to weep at this point. The service continues with a growing sense of dread and grief as the Gospels recount the Death of Jesus.

From the Fathers

An Extract From The Poem "On Pascha" By St. Venantius Fortunatus (A.D. 530-609)

O power benign! The third day has returned; arise, my buried One; it is not becoming that Your limbs should lie in the lowly sepulchre, nor that worthless stones should press that which is the ransom of the world. It is unworthy that a stone should shut in with a confining rock, and cover Him in whose fist all things are enclosed. Take away the linen clothes, I pray; leave the napkins in the tomb: You are sufficient for us, and without You there is nothing. Release the chained shades of the infernal prison, and recall to the upper regions whatever sinks to the

lowest depths. Give back Your face that the world may see the light; give back the day which flees from us at Your death. But returning, O holy conqueror! You altogether filled the heaven!
Tartarus lies depressed, nor retains its rights. The ruler of the lower regions, insatiably opening his hollow jaws, who has always been a spoiler, becomes a prey to You. You rescue an innumerable people from the prison of death, and they follow in freedom to the place whither their leader approaches. The fierce monster in alarm vomits forth the multitude whom he had swallowed up, and the Lamb withdraws the sheep from the jaw of the wolf. Hence re-seeking the tomb from the lower regions, having resumed Your flesh, as a warrior You carry back ample trophies to the heavens. Those whom chaos held in punishment he has now restored; and those whom death might seek, a new life holds. Oh, sacred King, behold a great part of Your triumph shines forth, when the sacred laver blesses pure souls! A host, clad in white, come forth from the bright waves, and cleanse their old fault in a new stream. The white garment also designates bright souls, and the shepherd has enjoyments from the snow-white flock.

Matushka's Corner

The Theotokos on Holy and Great Friday

Translated by Mat. Ioanna Callinicos Rhodes
Edited by Fr. Basil Rhodes

The most Holy Virgin descends
From Golgotha that dark night,
With slow steps, filled with immeasurable pain
 Only John is by her side
The nearby rocks shudder
 At her quiet lamentation,
Everything around her grows silent
 Unable to speak,
The road is hushed, pensive
 The world is numbed by great pain
And as they walk in this unseemly place

Like shadows passing in the darkness,
The Virgin quietly sings her funeral dirge
As beautifully as she is able to do so

The mountains and hillsides echo her singing
Each tender flow withers and fades
The Virgin sings her lament on what has become
The darkest of days, her soft tears, streaming
Christ is truly both God and Man, but she,
The All-Holy One, is a Mother.
Now in the distance she hears a voice
That pierces the calm of this desolate place,
Oh, What sadness in that voice
Who can she be?
What causes her groaning?
“What other poor woman must share this pain?”
“What other poor woman must mourn and sings her dirge
at the loss of another child,
Another mother weeps.
Yes, A mother sitting alone cast out
A mother, shedding dark tears without consolation
She, like the Virgin, has lost her son
She, this unfortunate one, cannot forget him
for a moment
The All-Holy One saw Christ nailed to the cross
The other, her son, also hanging from a tree
Oh, how she weeps! Oh how she cries!
And no one seems to be moved by her tears
But, the All-Holy One knows her pain
The All-Holy One hears her dirge
and goes to meet her
To offer her words of love and comfort
With the sweetest of smiles
The Mother of Christ says
“Mother, What is your distress?”
“Why have you cast yourself down
in this dark, deserted place

You are not the only one
To lose the light of your eyes this day
I have also lost my son
Now cease your cries and tell me about your son
The other mother who is guilt ridden
Lowers her eyes to the ground
This request wounds her to the core of her being
She bows weakly replies,
“My sister, Judas is his name,
My unfortunate son
And only one mother in the world
Can know the knife wound that pierces my soul
I caste myself to the streets, as if a beggar-woman
My God! I should never have aspired,
To the dignity of motherhood.”

But the All-Holy One understands
She knows her son
But the Mother of Christ, does not groan
She does not leave
In that moment she leaves her pain behind
And for the mother of the traitor
She sheds Her own precious tears
She bends and kisses her and strokes her hair,
And She holds her tenderly and firmly in a warm embrace
She speaks to her with tender words
And sweetly calms her soul
She gives her courage
She gives her strength
She raises her from the ground
“Come,” she says, “Unfortunate one.”
“You must have some rest”
“Let us go together.”
“Let us go to my home”
“You will spend the night with me.”
“There together, we’ll share our motherly pain.”
“We’ll mingle our tears and pray.”

How compassionate is the All-Holy One ?
And they go forth together,
Leaning on each other, lost in their pensive thoughts,
Two mothers, walking in sisterly embrace.
Yes! Because Christ, Who is hung
On Golgotha this day
Gives us the greatest commandment
“That we should love one another.”