



Holy and Great Friday

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Yesterday, in the reading of the Ninth Gospel concerning the suffering of the Savior, and this morning, when the Gospel of Saint John was read during the Ninth Hour, we heard the exclamation made from the Cross, the exclamation of the Conqueror of Hades, death and the devil, "It is finished" (John 19:30).

What is finished? That was finished which was known to the Lord Omnipotent at the time of the creation of the world. Finished was that which the whole world was awaiting; finished was that which was prophesied even in Paradise to the forefathers who had sinned; finished was that which was foretold to the Prophets, that to which the Old Testament prefigurations pointed; finished was the redemption of the human race, its salvation from sin, death and condemnation. Christ the Saviour made this exclamation, I repeat, already a Conqueror who had fulfilled the purpose for which He had been sent.

Before this there was heard from the Cross an exclamation of an entirely different nature: "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" (Matt. 27:46). This exclamation was still that of a sufferer and not a conqueror. This exclamation tells of boundless torment and suffering, and indicates to us with what terrible sufferings the act of our redemption was accomplished. But, as the God-inspired Holy Fathers of the Church tell us, and as our great Father of the Church Abroad and renowned theologian, His Beatitude Metropolitan Antony, express with particular precision, our redemption consisted of two parts, so to speak: first, the Lord Saviour accepted upon Himself all the weight of our sins, then He nailed them to the wood of the Cross on Golgotha.

When He walked with the apostles in the Garden of Gethsemane, they who were accustomed to seeing Him immovably calm, the Master of all creation, the King and Conqueror of the elements and the Master of life and death, heard with horror words unheard from Him before: "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death." The Saviour then asks His disciples, His beloved spiritual children, during those unbearably difficult and decisive moments of the Passion, "Tarry ye here, and watch with Me" (Matt. 26:38).

Here the prayer in Gethsemane begins. In this prayer we see that the Lamb, Which was ordained at the time of the creation of the world for the salvation of mankind, steps back as if terrified before what is approaching Him and what He has to accept and suffer. Is He so much afraid of the physical suffering? Is it that which makes Him step back? No!

From the narration of His suffering we see how calmly, how majestically and with what wonderful, and of a truth Divine, patience He endured the terrible physical, bodily torments. One has to keep in mind that He was pure and sinless. Suffering is characteristic of sinful nature. He did not have to suffer because there was no sin in Him. Therefore, suffering was for Him unnatural, and consequently, incomparably more sharp and difficult than for us. And yet, how did He endure the physical torments?

Let us consider one moment of those torments: He is laid on the Cross, His most pure hands and feet are pierced by terrible nails. What a dread moment! But He does not think of Himself. The Saviour of sinners, Who came into the world to save sinners, thinks of them even here and prays to His Father for His slayers,



“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). At that moment, He does not think of Himself; He forgets His own suffering; He only prays that the Father would be merciful, would forgive the sin of His own crucifiers. This is the way in which He knew how to fulfill His act of serving and saving sinners. Later on, a few hours will pass and He will lead yet another soul to salvation: the soul of the wise thief.

But here we see that He is so struck with awe at the horror, that He prays to His Father, “Father, if Thou be willing, remove this cup from Me” (Luke 22:42), and even more sharply according to Saint Mark, “Abba, Father, all things are possible unto Thee” (Mark 14:36). All things are possible unto Thee; Thou mightest find yet another way. Let this cup pass from Me. So terrible was it, He prays that it will pass from Him.

The Church tells us that Christ the Saviour is the Lamb of God Who takes upon Himself the sins of the whole world. Yes, He took upon Himself, He accepted as His own, all our sins. And please remember that this is not simply a phrase written on paper, this is not a vibration of the air which we term a sound; this is very truth.

In the Garden of Gethsemane during this terrible struggle, He received into His soul the whole of humanity. As the All-knowing God for Whom there is no future and no past but only one act of the Divine omniscience and understanding, He knew each one of us, He saw each one of us, and every one of us did He receive into His soul, with all our sins, our cold unwillingness to repent, with all our weaknesses and moral defilement. And what does He see? In order to save us, whom He loved so much and whom He received into His soul, He has to take upon Himself all our sins as if He Himself had committed them. And in His holy, sinless and pure soul every sin burned worse than fire. It is we who have become so accustomed to sin that we sin without hesitation. As the prophet said, man drinks unrighteousness as a drink (Job 15:16), and does not count his sins. But in His holy soul every sin burned with the unbearable fire of Hades, and here He takes upon Himself the sins of the entire human race.

What a torment, what a searing torment it was for His all – holy soul! But on the other hand, He sees that if He does not accomplish it, if He will not receive upon Himself this weight of human sins, then humanity will perish for all ages, forever, for endless eternity. Here His human nature, stricken with horror, steps back before this fathomless abyss of suffering, but His endless, His boundless, His inexpressibly compassionate love will not consent that humanity should perish; within Him there occurs a terrible struggle.

Finally, exhausted from this struggle, He goes to those from whom He was seeking compassion and whom He asked to tarry and watch with Him, but instead of commiseration, He finds them sleeping. He addressed them-according to one of the Evangelists, he addressed Simon directly-*Thou sleepest, thou who but a short while ago swore that thou wouldst follow Me everywhere, even unto death; thou sleepest, thou couldst not watch with Me even one hour?* “Watch and pray,” He tells them, for “the spirit truly is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mark 14:38). He steps away and again begins His lonely prayer. And at the last His boundless love prevails and He takes upon Himself the sins of all humanity.

But we see how much this struggle cost Him. The Heavenly Father sent an angel from Heaven to support Him because His human strength had reached its limit, and we see that He is exhausted and covered with a terrible bloody sweat which, as medicine states, occurs as a result of inner spiritual struggles which shake



the whole being of a man.

Saint Demetrius of Rostov, meditating on the sufferings of the Saviour says, “Lord Saviour: why art Thou all in blood? There is yet no terrible Golgotha, no crown of thorns, no scourging, no Cross, nothing like unto this as yet, yet Thou art all stained with blood. Who dared to wound Thee?” And the saintly bishop himself answers his question: “Love has wounded Thee.” Love brought Hun to torment and suffering; from this struggle He is covered with blood but comes forth as Conqueror. And in His redeeming, heroic deed, He took upon Himself our sins and carried them on the Cross to Golgotha, falling under its weight. And there began that other, central part of our redemption, when He suffered all those sins which He took upon Himself in Gethsemane, in the terrible torments on the Cross.

The Holy Gospel lifts up a little of the veil covering His suffering on the Cross by the exclamation concerning which I spoke before, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?” (Matt. 27:46). For this was the principal terror for Him. probably from this He stepped back terrified in the Garden of Gethsemane in that He realized what was awaiting Him: He knew that the Father would forsake Him, all covered with the stains of human sins. Through this exclamation uttered from His lips, the abyss of this measureless suffering is partly revealed to us. If we were able to look into this abyss, not one of us would remain alive, because from this measureless suprahuman suffering our soul would melt, perish.

But lo! at last through His suffering He achieved everything for which He came. As the new Adam, He becomes the forefather of the new, renewed, spirit-filled humanity, and then as Conqueror He exclaims, “It is finished.” The suffering is ended for Him now and He surrenders His spirit unto His Heavenly Father.

During the suffering on the Cross, He called unto Him as the least of sinners who is immersed in his sins, saying, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?” and now He again calls Him Father: “Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit” (Luke 23:46).

As one of our great Russian preachers said, “The suffering is finished, let the wounds be healed, let the blood stop flowing; approach now ye Josephs of Arimathea and ye Nicodemuses, and also ye reverent Magdalenes, come to the Deceased in order to show Him the last honours.”

Let us remember well, beloved brethren, the subjects I lightly touched upon in my sermon.

Blessed is that man who knows how to read the Holy Gospel, who understands it and meditates upon what it tells us.

And now, while worshipping the Saviour entombed, let us remember that the Lord suffered for our sins, that all these wounds were inflicted by us; and reverently kissing the wounds of the Crucified with repentance and gratefulness, let us pray to Him that by His grace He will teach us to be faithful to Him in all the paths of our lives. Amen.

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