

PASTORAL MESSAGE

By Fr. John Tomasi

May 3, 2010

Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. [John 8:31-32]

Christ is Risen!

Jesus Christ, Who is the fullness of truth, offers us the gift of spiritual freedom. Yet, so many of us in today's world are caught up in the manmade celebrations of our popular culture that we fail to open our hearts and minds to receive this unique blessing from our Lord. Far too often, instead of seeking God, we prefer to saturate our senses through endless forms of entertainment. St. Theophan the Recluse writes in his book, The Path to Salvation, that when we turn away from God, we begin to *fall*, and consequently grab onto the experiences and pleasures of the world rather than striving to obey the commandments of God. We lose sight of the fact that the fruits of this world, where moth and dust corrupt, are fleeting; and we forget that life in this world is very short in terms of eternity.

When Christ teaches that we are to abide in His word, He is telling us to follow Him. St. John 3:16 states: *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.* Since Christ is the fullness of truth, and we know that God the Father sent Him into the world to save the world, how is it that we find ourselves not believing what He says? Indeed, the worldly temptations that surround us are in deep contrast to the spiritual striving and disposition of the saints and holy fathers who have gone before us.

When we make the choice to follow Christ, to become His disciples and offer ourselves as His servants, we embark upon a path that leads to fulfillment and freedom from the talons of this world. Once we realize our growing dissatisfaction with the superficial world around us, we find peace and enjoyment in helping others discover the love and salvation of Christ.

Recently, I heard a story about an American man who converted to Orthodox Christianity back in the 1980's, after a trip to communist Russia. His decision was the result of what he experienced that year during the 40 days after Pascha. Everywhere he traveled, he heard people greeting him with the words, "Christ is Risen! In Truth He is Risen!" This man marveled at the joy he perceived in the lives of the people, even in such a bleak time of social upheaval. He could see that at their core, it was their love for Christ and their hope in Him that carried them through each day. This was enough proof for this American to realize that Orthodox Christianity has within it the fullness of truth. There are numerous such conversion stories to be told in the Orthodox Church, many of which have resulted in baptisms and Chrismations on Holy Saturday and throughout the year.

The annual celebration of Pascha invites us into the intimate experience of our Lord's Kingdom and of His promise of eternal life. Our souls rejoice in this gift. Everywhere throughout Christendom, the bells ring, the doors are opened, and Christians shout in every language, "Christ is Risen! In Truth, He is Risen!"

According to St. Cyril of Alexandria, the teachings conveyed on the Sundays following Pascha are particularly important for the newly illumined ones. The first Sunday after Pascha focuses on St. Thomas and his insistence on seeing the print of the nails and spear in the body of Christ before accepting Christ's resurrection. The entire week following St. Thomas Sunday continues with the theme of faith and the promise of Christ. The second Sunday after Pascha presents the story of the myrrh-bearing women, who come to Christ's tomb to anoint His body, and soon discover that He has risen from dead. The third Sunday has to do with the miraculous healing of a paralytic, who for many years has waited to be relieved of his paralysis. In this account, the Lord comes to him directly and restores him to health; yet Christ is condemned for this healing because it has taken place on the Sabbath.

The fourth Sunday presents the Samaritan woman, Photini, who is promised the waters of eternal life and told plainly by Christ Himself that He is the Messiah: *Jesus answered and said to her, "Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life," [John 4:13-14] — and: The woman said to*

Him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When He comes, He will tell us all things." Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am He." [John 4:25-26]

The fifth Sunday, which leads into to the celebration of Ascension, conveys the miraculous account of Christ healing a man who has been blind from birth. The Sunday following Ascension, which is the sixth Sunday after Pascha, uses for the Divine Liturgy the Biblical account of St. John 17:1-13 to proclaim the following event:

Jesus spoke these words, lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said: "Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You, as You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him. And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do. And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was. I have manifested Your name to the men whom You have given Me out of the world. They were Yours, You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word. Now they have known that all things which You have given Me are from You. For I have given to them the words which You have given Me; and they have received them, and have known surely that I came forth from You; and they have believed that You sent Me. I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours. And all Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine, and I am glorified in them. Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are. While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Your name. Those whom You gave Me I have kept; and none of them is lost except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. But now I come to You, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves. [John 17:1-13]

The seventh Sunday following Pascha is Pentecost, wherein we commemorate the twelve apostles and other of Christ's disciples as they gather together with a large crowd in Jerusalem. Following a visual display of the Holy Spirit and a fiery sermon by the Apostle Peter, the Acts of the Apostles records that 3,000 souls are added to the Church on this day (see Acts, Chapter 2). Pentecost, in fact, is considered the birthday of the Church, and the inauguration of Christ's fulfillment in the hearts of the faithful.

With certainty, we can proclaim that *the Truth shall make us free*. Let us embrace our Lord and embark upon the path of servitude to Him. Let us trust in His promise of truth, and rejoice in the freedom that will allow our souls to take flight into His heavenly realms.

Christ is Risen! In Truth, He is Risen!

Amen.