



**THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH**

Department for External Church Relations

## **“The Feast and the Eucharist” – the paper read by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk at the Assumption Readings (29 September 2010, Kiev)**

Your Beatitude, Your Eminences, Fathers, Brothers and Sisters:

The day which followed the six days of the creation was the first feast to be celebrated as a day free from work, a day of rest and quiet (this is how the modern man understands any feast): *By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy* (Gen. 2:2-3).

The life of the primordial couple in Eden went in the context of the Sabbath rest. Man was not yet to work by the sweat of his brow to earn livelihood. He was in continued communion with God, and the world around him was in the state of harmony.

The fall however put an end to this condition of paradise. Man had to give most of his time to work necessary to meet his vital needs. For communion with God, which consisted mostly in thanksgiving (eucharist in Greek), special days were assigned, which is confirmed by the biblical description of Cain's and Abel's sacrifices. It means that already at that time there was a ritual of feast-sacrifice fixed for a certain season and there were certain obligations of man before God expressed in thanksgiving through sacrifice.

The Bible repeatedly speaks of sacrifices made by people in gratitude to the Creator for His mercy. These included the sacrifices made by Noah at the end of the Flood (see, 8:20-22), and Abraham near Bethel (see, Gen. 12:8) and the sacrifices near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron (see, Gen. 13:18), and in Beersheba (see, Gen. 26:23-25). Jacob set up an altar in Shechem (see, Gen. 33:18-20). The Lord ordered Jacob to build an altar in Bethel where He had appeared to him earlier when he was fleeing from Esau (see, Gen. 35:1), etc.

However, the establishment of feasts and related worship and sacrifice and a detailed procedure for the behaviour of the people of God on these days dates from the time of their exodus from Egypt.

Thus, the commandment on the Sabbath in the Decalogue given to the chosen people in Chapter 2 of the Book of Genesis specifies: *Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not*

*do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy (Ex. 20:8-11).*

Therefore, the first feast to be observed in human history was based on a divine instruction, while being natural as it was needed for labourers' rest.

The fact that the festive calendar was established by the Lord Himself speaks of the importance of feasts in our life. Indeed, celebrating a feast, the people of God not only remember a particular event in their history but also testify that they remember God's deeds, live by this memory and actualize it in their time. But a feast is not only an appeal to people's memory. It is also an appeal to the 'memory' of God, 'reminding' Him of His love for His people. It is a call to preserve and renew the mercies He showed to their forefathers. It is noteworthy that the commandment on the Sabbath, just as other ones on later feasts, has two aspects: service of God and withdrawal from earthly chores and tasks.

The most important Old Testament feasts were Passover and Pentecost, and a common meal was the most important part of any celebration.

The first Eucharist celebrated by Christ Himself was a continuation and development of the Passover's festive repast which was sacred because it was dominated by religious emotions, and the traditional festive meals were subjected to a religious idea. Put in the frame of the Old Testament Passover supper filled with remembrances of Israel's exodus from Egypt, the New Passover was essentially centered on the crucifixion and resurrection of the Son of God. And the Saviour commanded His disciples that they should celebrate the Passover not in the remembrance of the exodus from Egypt but in remembrance of Him, His exodus from death to life. The Paschal lamb was at the same time a sacrifice of thanksgiving for the deliverance from the Egyptian captivity and a sacrifice of supplication for mercy to be shown for people's sins and the main part of the festive repast. All these three elements – thanksgiving, supplication and repast – are present in the Eucharist.

In the early Christian Church, the annual liturgical cycle was also based on Passover and Pentecost. Inherited from the Jewish tradition, these feasts acquired a new content, as Passover from the beginning was a celebration devoted to the Resurrection of Christ, while Pentecost a remembrance of the descent of the Holy Spirit on the apostles and the establishment of a New Covenant between God and the New Israel – the Christians.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century the Church begins to venerate martyrs, assigning calendar days for their remembrance in prayer. The oldest testimony to this is 'The Martyrdom of St. Polycarpus of Smyrna'

dating from the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century. Characteristically, the veneration of martyrs is not separated in this manuscript from the worship of Christ: 'We worship Him as the Son of God and we give due love to martyrs as the disciples and imitators of the Lord for their invincible commitment to their King and Teacher. May God give us to be their fellow workers and disciples?' ('The Martyrdom of Polycarpus of Smyrna', 17). And though originally the worship of every martyr was fixed for the day of his death, the church remembrance of this event has always been of a festive nature. In the end of the story about the death of St. Polycarpus, the authors say, 'We then took his bones, which are more precious than precious stones and nobler than gold, and put them to a proper place. There the Lord will possibly give us too, who have gathered in merriment and joy, to celebrate the birthday of His martyr in the memory of those who were before us and in the instruction and preparation for the future (ascetics)' (The Martyrdom..., 18).

During the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the liturgical cycle of Christian Churches was considerably broadened through introduction of new feasts, review of old ones, addition of new saints and 'exchange of feasts' between local Churches. And certainly, each celebration was centred on liturgy, namely, the Eucharist.

Each of the Holy Fathers of that period left us sermons on particular feasts. At the same time, there were attempts to comprehend the phenomenon of the Christian feast. An outstanding role in these efforts belongs to St. Gregory the Theologian. In his sermon of the Nativity of Christ, he speaks of the annual cycle of church feasts and of how the whole life of Jesus goes before a believer's eye during the liturgical year.

'Indeed, a little later on [this points to the Epiphany Day, Feast of Lights, the nearest to the Nativity Day] you will see Jesus submitting to be purified in the River Jordan for my Purification, or rather, sanctifying the waters by His Purification (for indeed He had no need of purification Who takes away the **sin** of the world) and the heavens cleft asunder, and **witness** borne to him by the Spirit That is of one nature with Him; you shall see Him tempted and conquering and served by Angels, and healing every sickness and every disease, and giving life to the dead (O that He would give life to you who are dead because of your **heresy**), and driving out **demons**, sometimes Himself, sometimes by his **disciples**; and feeding vast multitudes with a few loaves; and walking dryshod upon seas; and being betrayed and crucified, and crucifying with Himself my **sin**; offered as a Lamb, and offering as a Priest; as a Man buried in the grave, and as God rising again; and then ascending, and to come again in His own **glory**. Why what a multitude of high festivals there are in each of the **mysteries** of the Christ; all of which have one completion, namely, my perfection and return to the first condition of Adam' (Gregory the Theologian, Oration 38).

St. Gregory teaches that every church feast should be for a believer a new step on the way to perfection, a new insight into the life and redemptive feat of Jesus.

In the same oration, the saint stresses that a Christian feast does not consist in arranging banquets, eating plenty of sumptuous food and drinking costly wines. For a believer, a feast is to come to church and enjoy the word of God in it.

It is in the church, according to another great saint, John Chrysostom, that the festive repast, the feast of faith, is celebrated. Here, participating in the Eucharist, we not only meet with the Saviour dwelling really with us in the Holy Gifts but also partake of His Holy Body and Blood, becoming participants in a truly festive repast.

'Enter all of you, therefore, into the joy of our Lord, and, whether first or last, receive your reward. O rich and poor, one with another, dance for joy! O you ascetics and you negligent, celebrate the day! You that have fasted and you that have disregarded the fast, rejoice today! The table is rich-laden; feast royally, all of you! The calf is fatted; let no one go forth hungry! Let all partake of the feast of faith. Let all receive the riches of goodness', the teacher of the Church calls upon Christians in his famous catechetical homily on Holy Pascha.

While the Eucharist is the center and meaning of a Christian feast, the participation in the celebrations is unthinkable without participation in the Eucharist. This is what Sts Nicodemus of the Holy Mount and Macarius of Corinth say about it: 'Those who, though fasting before Pascha, do not communicate on Pascha do not celebrate Pascha. Those who are not prepared to partake of the Lord's Body and Blood on each feast cannot really celebrate Sundays and other holidays because these people have no reason or cause for the feast which is Sweet Jesus Christ and do not have the spiritual joy which is born from the divine communion' (Macarius of Corinth, Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain, 'On Continued Communion', p. 54).

Each day, according to Sts Nicodemus and Macarius, can become a feast: 'You want to celebrate every day? You want to celebrate holy Pascha when you wish to enjoy an ineffable joy in this sorrowful life? Always resort to the Sacrament and communicate with appropriate preparation, and then you will enjoy whatever you wish. Indeed, true Pascha and the true feast of the soul is Christ who is sacrificed in the Sacrament' (Ibid., 2, pp. 52-53).

Here they almost literally reproduce the teaching of Simeon the New Theologian on life as a continued feast of communion with God. St. Simeon writes, 'The way you celebrate is the way you take the Holy Mysteries; let all your life be one feast, but not even a feast but a beginning of the feast and one Pascha, a move and resettlement from things visible to things contemplative' (Moral Homily 14, 54).

In a reflection on Christian feasts, it is impossible to avoid the theme of interaction between the temporal

and the eternal in our life. The Son of God born by the Father outside time and before time, combines in His incarnation the temporal and the eternal, the earthly and the heavenly. Both the feast and the Eucharist overcome time and reveal eternity to those who participate in them.

The Eucharist is not just a devotional remembrance of the Last Supper celebrated by the Church on certain days, nor is it its didactic enactment, but its continued repetition.

The celebrant of the Sacrament is Jesus Christ Himself, and every liturgy is not just a symbolical remembrance of that event but its continuation and actualization. Though the Eucharist is celebrated at various times and in various places, it remains one, overcoming the border of time and space. This is what St. John Chrysostom says to us, 'Believe, therefore, that even now it is that supper, at which He Himself sat down. For this is in no respect different from that. For neither does man make this and Himself the other; but both this and that is His own work. When therefore you see the priest delivering it unto you, account not that it is the priest that does so, but that it is Christ's hand that is stretched out' (John Chrysostom, Homilies on Mt. (50, 30)).

According to the saint, 'We always offer the same Lamb, not one today and another tomorrow, but always the same one. For this reason the sacrifice is always only one. Though it is offered in many places, is there a multiplicity of Christ? No, Christ is one everywhere, complete here and complete there, one Body. And just as he is one body and not many though offered everywhere, so too is there one sacrifice. He is our High Priest who offered up a sacrifice which purifies us. Even now we offer that victim who was once offered and who will never be consumed... We are ever offering not another sacrifice, as the high priest then did, but always the same...' (John Chrysostom. Homilies on the Hebrews (17, 3)).

Chrysostom emphasizes elsewhere, 'It is not man that causes the things offered to become the Body and Blood of Christ, but he who was crucified for us, Christ himself. The priest, in the role of Christ, pronounces these words, but their power and grace are God's' (John Chrysostom. On the Treachery of Judas 1, 6).

The Eucharist is not just a remembrance of the Golgotha sacrifice but its continued reproduction, as evidenced by the texts of the Eucharistic prayers. These prayers are filled with the theme of sacrifice which is offered 'for each and all', which again brings the Eucharist together with the old temple worship centered on sacrifice.

In the prayer after the holy gifts are brought out in the Liturgy of Basil the Great, the presiding priest asks God to accept the service of the participants in the liturgy just as He accepted 'the gifts of Abel' (see, Gen. 4,4), 'the sacrifices of Noah' after the Flood (see, Gen. 8:2-22), 'the burnt offerings of Abraham'

when Abraham offered his son Isaac (see, Gen. 22:10-14), 'the priestly offices of Moses and Aaron' (see, Ps. 98:5), and 'the peace offerings of Samuel' (see, 1 Sam. 11:14-15). Mentioned here are five stories from the sacred history seen in the Christian tradition as prototypes of the Eucharist. Since the Last Supper the Eucharist has been the only sacrifice which is necessary for salvation and which replaces all the Old Testament sacrifices and burnt offerings.

The prototype of a Christian feast, says St. Gregory the Theologian, is the Old Testament 'Jubilee' – the Year of Release. According to Mosaic Law, every seventh year is one of rest when it was forbidden to scatter fields with seeds and to pick grapes. Every fiftieth year was declared a jubilee, a year of feast, when people came back to their domains, debtors were forgiven their debts, and slaves were set free. The purpose of a jubilee year devoted to God in a special way was not only to give people rest but also to rectify as far as possible inequalities and injustices in human society. A jubilee was a year of summing up when people gave accounts to God and one another about how they built their life and rebuilt it to be in more conformance to God's commandments. A jubilee thus became the prototype of people's life in the future where there was no social inequality, slavery and masters, lenders and debtors.

'The children of the Hebrews do honour to the number Seven, according to the legislation of Moses... This honour which they pay to it is not confined to days alone, but also extends to years. That belonging to days the Sabbath proves... and that belonging to years is shown by the seventh year, the year of Release; and it consists not only of Hebdomads, but of Hebdomads of Hebdomads, alike in days and years. The Hebdomads of days give birth to Pentecost, a day called holy among them; and those of years to what they call the Jubilee, which also has a release of land, and a manumission of slaves, and a release of possessions bought. For this nation consecrates to God, not only the firstfruits of offspring, or of firstborn, but also those of days and years. Thus the veneration paid to the number Seven gave rise also to the veneration of Pentecost. For seven being multiplied by seven generates fifty all but one day, which we borrow from the world to come, at once the Eighth and the first, or rather one and indestructible' (Gregory the Theologian, Homily 21, 2, 4-35)

Pentecost in the Christian tradition is the feast of the Holy Spirit the Comforter Who has come to replace Christ Who ascended to heaven. The deeds of Christ on earth are over, and for Christ as man the Sabbath of rest has come since His burial, while for Christians an era of jubilee has come after His Resurrection as an endless fiftieth year beginning on the earth and going into eternity. The era of jubilee is characterized first of all by the intensive renewing work of the Holy Spirit. Under the influence of the Spirit's grace, people are radically changing to turn from shepherds into prophets, from fishermen into apostles. St. Gregory believed that the Christian feast should never end. He states it in conclusion of his homily on Pentecost:

'Now it is our duty to dissolve this Assembly, for enough has been said. But the Festival is never to be

put an end to; but kept now indeed with our bodies; but a little later on altogether spiritually there, where we shall see the reasons of these things more purely and clearly, in the Word Himself, and God, and our Lord Jesus Christ, the True Festival and Rejoicing of the Saved...' (Gregory the Theologian, Oration 41).

The whole life of a Christian should become a continued feast, an uninterrupted Pentecost, a jubilee year beginning at the moment of baptism and having no end. The life of a Christian on earth may become for a Christian an endless feast of communion with God through the Church and the Eucharist. The annual cycle of church feasts and the sacraments of the Church helps a person to move gradually from time to eternity, to the gradual dismissal from things earthly and participation in things heavenly. But the real feast and the real sacrament will come only there where, beyond time, one will meet God face to face. The true feast is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself who is contemplated in continued exaltation by the faithful in the Kingdom of God, and the sons of the Kingdom will no longer partake of the Body and Blood of Christ in the appearance of bread and wine but will more fully partake of Christ Himself as the Source of life and immortality.

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