

THE PASCHAL ENCYCLICAL
of
His Eminence, Ephraim, Metropolitan of Boston

My beloved Christians:

One of the outstanding religious figures of Greece during the dark years of the Ottoman oppression was Saint Athanasius of Paros (+1813). An eminent theologian, educator and hymnographer, a staunch defender of the Church's Holy Tradition, he was the second leader of the famous Kollyvades Fathers. He espoused the monastic life on the Holy Mountain in 1752, and reposed at the age of ninety in 1813 in his monastery on Paros.

This is what St. Athanasius has to say about the book, *A Treasury of Orthodoxy*, by the eighteenth century bishop, Theophilus of Ioannina:

I found hidden in this book the gold of the Faith, the silver of the Holy Mysteries, the pearls of the virtues, the precious stones of the apostolic and ecclesiastical traditions.

On page 236 in this remarkable book, so highly praised by Saint Athanasius of Paros, we find the following:

But you have learned that, since Hades has been trampled down by the almighty power of Christ's soul (I Peter 3:18-20), it always remains open, and, according to Christ's general decree, has not been shut yet.

Contrary to how some misinterpret this teaching, this destruction of Hades' dominion mentioned above in no way implies that Christ returns again and again to preach to the souls held in bondage there. Rather, by His omnipotent and everlasting grace, He is ever present there and everywhere, making Himself known as the eternally triumphant Vanquisher of death and true God of all. He is, after all, "everywhere present and fills all things!"

Elsewhere in the same book, *A Treasury of Orthodoxy*, (page 172), we find this text:

"Wondrous is God in His saints", and the most wonderful thing, as we are persuaded by the histories of the Divine Fathers, is that the supplications of the saints seized from Hades the souls of the impious. For Saint Basil of Seleucia says that St. Thecla, the first-martyr and equal to the apostles, on praying to God, freed from

punishment Falconilla, an unbaptized pagan, when Tryphena, her mother, besought the saint.*

In His desire to save mankind, my beloved, our Saviour has given such great power to the intercessions of the Saints!

And why is this?

The New Testament itself provides the answer:

God wills that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.

I Timothy 2:4

He uses all means to accomplish this goal: His angels, His prophets, His apostles, His saints, His ministers in the holy priesthood, His Church.

By His crucifixion and death on the Cross, His descent into Hades, and His Resurrection, our Saviour has given an opportunity to those who believe in Him to inherit life everlasting in the joy of Paradise. Indeed, He wills that all men be saved.

But since, according to God's will, opportunity to believe in Christ and to be saved is given to all mankind, *are* all saved?

Saint Epiphanius of Cyprus answers this question:

What then? Did God save absolutely all when He appeared in Hades? In no wise. But there also *He saved them that believed.*
(*Homily on Christ's Descent into Hades*)

So even in Hades, man has the ability to believe, or disbelieve in our Saviour. Even in Hades, man can say "Yes" or "No" to the mercy of God. Even in Hades, man can come to the knowledge of the truth, or reject it. Such is the great mystery of mankind's free will. Man has the ability to love God or to wage war against Him, to embrace Him or to reject Him. Man is a truly free creature, but he can enslave himself to sin, to the degree that he comes to hate even his Creator!

* In the Orthodox Christian understanding, Hades and Hell are not the same thing. The King James Version, for instance, has "and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against" the Church (Matt. 16:18), whereas the Greek text of the Gospel says, "and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against" the Church (*i.e.* the assembly of those who rightly believe in the True God). Properly speaking, in the Christian sense, Hell is a spiritual state or condition that will come to be only *after* the Final Judgment at the end of time.

This is why Saint Isaac of Syria says, "O God, teach me to love Thee as much as I have loved sin."

Therefore, for those who knew the Orthodox Faith in their lifetimes, but did not follow Christ or live according to His commandments, there is no other opportunity, there is no repentance in Hades. As for the others who never truly knew of Christ in their lifetimes, they will be judged according to their conscience, as the Apostle Paul teaches (Rom. 2:14-15). And, as the writings of the Saints and the Lives of the Saints instruct us, those souls who never knew of Christ will have the occasion to either accept or reject His Gospel (I Peter 3:18-20).

With these sobering thoughts, my beloved, knowing that we have a God Whose will it is to save us, let us apply ourselves with even greater diligence to the tenets of our Christian faith. Let us strive earnestly for the everlasting and incorruptible crown set before us, that we may be able to stand at the right hand of Christ in the fearful Judgment on the last day.

In these efforts and struggles, we have as our mediator before God the Father, Christ our Saviour, the Author and Finisher of our Faith, the Conqueror of the Kingdom of death; to Him together with the All-holy Spirit, is due all honor, worship and glory, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

My beloved Orthodox Christians: Christ is risen!

Truly He is risen!

Your fervent intercessor with Christ,

✠Ephraim, Metropolitan of Boston

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