

Sermon for Holy Thursday

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

“Take, eat, this is My Body, which is broken for you for the remission of sins. Drink ye all of it, this is My Blood of the new testament which is shed for you for the remission of sins.” Thus do we hear the Master’s voice in the Holy Gospel today. It was on this very day, the Holy and Great Thursday of the week of the Passion, that these words were first spoken and continue to be spoken through the mouth of the Saviour and the Holy Church. Therefore it is a great day for all of Christianity. On this day was instituted the great Mystery of the Holy Eucharist—the thanksgiving and means of unity and communion which we have with the Godhead. What a great mystery it is, that we that are clay, that are made of the earth, can now be communicants of the Divine Nature—that God would become man and that He would become food and drink for us that we might have life everlasting and that most abundantly.

We should rejoice, therefore, as Christians that we have this holy gift, that we have this great love and compassion of our Saviour incarnate in the holy Mystery of the Eucharist, in this ineffable communion of the very Flesh and the very Blood of the God-man. He has loved us, yea He has loved us. And therefore He has come unto us, so meek and so humble, so kind and so sweet, to heal us. And He heals us in such a sweet way. When clay vessels are cracked, they have to be broken to be remade again. And behold, our Saviour heals us and restores us without destroying us. When we come to holy Baptism, it is without pain that we are baptized. When we come to the Holy Mysteries, it is also without pain that we receive healing; we receive the antidote of death—the very medicine of immortality as our holy Father St. Ignatius the Godbearer calls it. Sweet is our Saviour, and sweet is His gift. And most sweet is that grace which is given to us and which is communicated to us through the Holy Mysteries of the Church. Yet men do not want this sweetness; they do not want this great gift. They are deceived, and they follow after the false gifts of the world, the false joys and the false hopes, those counterfeit things which the demons have invented to distract men, to cause people to fall away and not to believe in the holy Faith and not to receive the true gifts which are of God.

According to the Synaxarion, four great things are commemorated on this Holy and Great Thursday: The first is the washing of the feet; the second the Mystical Supper; the third that ineffable prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane when there was the agony of our Saviour; and the fourth is the betrayal. It was at the banquet, at the Mystical Supper, that the Saviour washed the feet of the disciples. And He that washeth, and the water and the basin, and the whole of the washing is our Saviour Himself; for thus He told that woman at the well in Samaria, “I have water and I am that water of which if one drinks he shall never thirst again.” Again, in the midst of the feast He cried unto the people and said, “If anyone thirst, let him come unto Me and drink, and he shall not thirst again unto the ages.” He gives us that living water in the baptismal waters. And He gives us that living water in the Holy Mysteries. So we have the new drink which is from His very own side. We have that royal cup, and we have that portion of the living. Should we not rejoice as Christians? Should we not rejoice and offer up thanksgiving for this great gift, for this great communion, for this great love that is shown unto us? Yea, and then whom should we love, whom should we abide with, whom should we be found with? Is it not with Him Who loves us? Yet most men do not wish to abide with the Saviour. They abide with the enemy, with him who poisons, with him who brings death and destruction.

And having completed the Mystical Supper, having given the disciples this ineffable Mystery, our Saviour got up, and together they chanted a psalm and went out from the holy city of Jerusalem to the Garden of Gethsemane. There our Saviour asked the Apostles to tarry with Him a little while He prayed. And He prayed earnestly and drenched the earth there in that garden with His sweat, with His sighs and tears, with His compunction, and with His prayers. The disciples were tired, and they slept. He woke them once, He woke them twice, but they were not able to keep vigil. Before the physical suffering upon the Cross, the excruciating suffering of the Crucifixion, our Saviour suffered greatly, noetically. He suffered greatly, body and soul, in Gethsemane. Therefore the sweat that came out of Him was as drops of blood that drenched the earth. In that garden we were healed; in that garden we were restored through that love, through that compassion, through those tears, through that sweating of our Saviour.

It was in another garden that the enemy beguiled our mother Eve, and she beguiled Adam, and there was the disobedience, and there was wrought that which came upon the sons of men. Now in this second garden we have the weeping of our Saviour, we have the prayer of our Saviour, we have the love and compassion of our Saviour. So, we find again the Garden of Eden; we find again the garden of delight through the love and sacrifice of our Saviour. For all the acts of His compassion are one and are not separated. We have no Resurrection without the Crucifixion; we have no Crucifixion without the agony; and we have not the agony without the Mystical Supper. All are one. Therefore we worship throughout the week all the things of His Passion. And we bring to mind and we commemorate, and we celebrate these things.

Then, in the midst of the night, when our Saviour had completed his prayer, Judas came with a great crowd from the high priest with swords and with clubs, with torches and with lamps, as if they were coming to catch a criminal, a thief or a murderer. And the betrayal took place in that garden. Our Saviour went meekly and surrendered Himself voluntarily to His Passion. He, Who is the judge of the living and the dead, is taken to be judged from Annas to Caiaphas and from Pilate to Herod. And He accepts all this voluntarily that we might have life and that most abundantly. No greater love hath man than to lay down his life for his friend, and as many as believe in Him, He calls us friends. He laid down His life for us. And He became food and drink for us that we might have life. Should we not love, therefore, our Benefactor? Should we not love the Lifegiver? Should we not love Him that heals us, the Physician of our souls and bodies? It is joyous to love such a Master. No relative is able to love us more than our Saviour and our Creator loves us. He has become a brother unto us; and He is father and mother for us; and He is sister for us. He is our family. And we are very bone of very bone, very flesh of very flesh, and very blood of very blood with Him, being united through that ineffable Mystery which He has given us on this Holy and Great Thursday.

Let us therefore continue in the bond and unity of love. And let us always remember and love the Holy Eucharist which is given to us. When we hear that the Liturgy is celebrated, we should rejoice greatly wherever we are. When we hear that there is a feast of the Church, and the holy Anaphora is offered, we should rejoice, we should skip. As a thirsty deer pants after the waters, so we should pant after this Living Water. Like a deer, we should run to come to church, to be found in the assembly of the faithful, to take our place in the ranks of the believers, to mystically portray the Seraphim and the Cherubim at the communion of the Divine Nature. Whereas most people seek after the fleeting things of this earth, we have that which abides unto all ages. We have the Creator become man, giving Himself as food and drink for us. Should we not, therefore, run and skip for joy to be at table with the King?

Let us always keep the confession of our Holy Faith. And let us be numbered among the faithful. Woe to the world that believes not. Woe to them that run in the paths which lead to destruction. There is no banquet, no entertainment, no gathering of people which can possibly offer that which is offered in the Holy and Divine Liturgy. No president, no government, or country or civilization is able to give that which is given in the Liturgy of the Church, in the Liturgy of the Orthodox. For nowhere else is there heard the voice of the Saviour, that divine, that beloved voice saying, "Take, eat; this is my Body. Drink ye all of it; this is My Blood." Nowhere do we have the descent of the Holy Spirit and the sanctification of the Holy Gifts offered at the Holy Anaphora. And nowhere else is this miracle of miracles worked, the changing of the bread and the wine into the very Flesh and Blood of our Saviour.

Our hope is great; there is no hope like the hope of the Christians. All other hopes are false, and they are despair. They are no hope at all. And therefore people are destroyed, destroyed in sin, destroyed in egoism, destroyed in all the vices. They commit suicide, and they destroy one another. But as many as have this hope and communicate in this hope, they are deified and receive consolation. The ancients had myths; they filled the whole earth with idolatry, with fables that are nothing but stories and cobwebs. But we have reality, not fables. We have the living God Who has come unto us, and not the stories of the Egyptians and the Phoenicians and the ancient Greeks and the far eastern religions and all those other demon-filled religions. We have the true religion. We have the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and of the Holy Fathers. And behold, that which was unbelievable to men is now reality. God has visited us and has become man. And we have communion with Him.

There is a legend that in the sixteenth century, Ponce de Leon traveled to what is now Florida looking for the fountain of youth, which the natives in their idolatry had invented. For they told him, "There is a fountain, and whoever washes in that fountain, and whoever drinks from that fountain, becomes youthful forever." So he and his men went searching. But they did not find this fountain, for it was a fable. But we have that fountain; we have that source of life, the living source, the wellspring of Israel. It is our Saviour Himself; it is the Divine Eucharist, this ineffable Communion which we have in the Holy Church. We have the living God. We have life and resurrection. Let no one mourn, let no one be left unconsolated, but let us pick up the eyes of our heart and our mind and look upon our Saviour, the meek and humble One, Who cries at the Mystical Supper; the meek and humble One, Who prays in the Garden of Gethsemane; Who weeps for us, Who sweats for us, Who is delivered now and betrayed; Who voluntarily gives Himself up to the Passion, and Whom, on the Holy and Great day that is dawning, on the Holy and Great Friday, we shall see crucified. We shall see our Salvation opposite us hanging upon the Tree.

Great is the long-suffering, great is the love, great is the compassion of our great God. Great, therefore, should be our devotion and our earnestness. Great should be the love which we return. May He deem us worthy throughout our life to partake of this Holy Communion which He gives to us. May we be found always at His Mystical Supper partaking. For then we do that which the Holy Apostle tells us so eloquently in the Epistle. We declare to all creation, as often as we eat of this bread and drink of this cup, we declare His Passion, His three-day burial, His Resurrection, and His Ascension. Then we declare to the whole of humanity, the whole of creation, the great mystery of salvation, the great love of God, that He has come unto us and united Himself unto us that we may be resurrected and that we may ascend with Him in glory. Amen.

