

# The First Pascha in the Reborn Optina Hermitage

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EDITOR'S NOTE: *Hieromonk Basil wrote this article on the occasion of the first Paschal celebration in the newly reopened monastery in 1989. He had been clothed as a novice on the preceding day. It was found in his journal and published for the first time only after his repose.*

**S**PEAKING TODAY about Optina Hermitage, it is impossible to avoid the word *rebirth*.

Whether one relates the monastery's glorious past, considers its present activities, or prophesies about its future—in everything and everywhere, secretly or openly, that word is present. It is a symbol, a sign that indicates the direction of the current time. In the most precise way it defines the essence of today's strivings, in which the temporal and eternal merge, in which human plans and God's judgments come into contact.

Truly, Optina Hermitage is being "born from above" (cf. John 3:3), is being born by the mercy of God and the bold prayers of the venerable Fathers of Optina. However, it is finding life not as a speechless infant but as Lazarus the Four-Days Dead, embodying that single idea which places rebirth side by side with resurrection.

Christ's Resurrection has been accomplished, and therefore our faith is true, says the Apostle Paul (cf. I Cor. 15:14). Correlating his words with the destiny of Optina Hermitage, one may say that the greatness

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and glory of Optina are true, inasmuch as a beginning has been placed to its rebirth.

Those who find life anew sense its fullness.

It is probably for this reason that Optina Hermitage perceived the events of the Holy Fast and Passion Week in a special way. This is probably why meeting Christ's Resurrection was an extraordinary joy for it.

With the burden of construction, the monastery proceeded along the path marked out by the Church calendar, grasping its spiritual mysteries, and as if in gratitude, the commemorated days enlivened the monastery's workdays, dissipating temporal sorrows and confirming ever-abiding hope.

Unnoticeably the *Lenten Triodion*<sup>1</sup> receded, spring asserted its rights and, through the wide-open doors of Palm Sunday, Passion Week entered into the life of the monastery. Each step on the way to meet Pascha became tangible. The path bringing us closer to the holy Feast was precisely measured off and sanctified by Church hymns. *I see Thy bridal chamber adorned, O my Savior ...* A little further, and then *Of Thy Mystical Supper, O Son of God ...*

Now the church is full of partakers of the Holy Supper; now the Thursday flame<sup>2</sup> spreads across the earth; now a sepulchral quiet fetters the earth, all comes to a standstill, and only the voice of the Savior ruptures the stillness of Great Friday: *Weep not for Me, O Mother, ... I shall rise and shall be glorified ...*

The Catholicon of the Entry of the Theotokos has prepared to meet the Savior with a new iconostasis for the St. Nicholas altar. Just yesterday, the church was shaken by loud conversations and the banging of hammers, as if recalling the hours of Christ's crucifixion with its whole being, while now the shining cross on the iconostasis triumphantly heralds the victory of life over death.

<sup>1</sup> *Lenten Triodion*: the book containing the services of Great Lent.

<sup>2</sup> A reference to the reading of the Twelve Passion Gospels on Great Thursday, after which the faithful disperse to their homes bearing lit candles with which they mark the lintels of their doors (cf. Exod. 12:21–24).

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The final preparations, the final precautions.

Without rushing, the people flow into the church in a timely fashion, toward evening. A mixed crowd fills the monastery. Here there are residents of Kozelsk and Moscow, regular parishioners and strangers, children, elderly, and noisy young people.

An hour before midnight the bell summons us to the service. In the church it is noisy and a bit cramped: a crowd is at the candle box, there are lines in front of the hieromonks who are hearing confessions, and groups of newcomers to the Church are inspecting the icons with curiosity. Everywhere there is impatience. At last the exclamation of the priest proclaims the beginning of the Midnight Service. The excited voice of the reader, unobtrusively calling all to quiet, is still being drowned out by loud conversations, but now the choir begins the canon of Great Saturday, and the first canticle flows over the idle talkers like an ocean wave and covers them with its melody, depriving them of their last bit of rudeness and force. Everyone, in a single impulse, concentrates on greeting Paschal Matins. A slight fuss arises when the icon and cross are brought out of the altar for the procession, but even this bustling quickly changes to the concentrated lighting of candles. Expectation and the presentiment of joy binds the people's limbs and only their eyes remain moveable, and direct themselves to the royal doors. Now it is as if the soft singing in the altar, by an incredible effort, moves aside the curtain; the doors are flung open, and a flood of light and sound rushes from the altar into the church, and from the church into the dark of night, and powerfully spills out across the whole earth. The superior and the clergy, increasing the Paschal brilliance with their shining festal vestments, exit the church, following the laid-out path. And it seems as though a sparkling train stretches out behind this procession as if behind a comet. The procession girds the church in a fiery ring and stands still only before its closed doors. And the exclamation as it were breaks loose: *Let God arise, and let His enemies be scattered!* What great and mystical words! How one's soul trembles and exults upon hearing them! With what fiery grace they are filled on the Paschal night! They are as unbounded as the sky and as close as one's breath. In

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them the long wait is transformed in the instant of the encounter; life's misfortunes are swallowed up by the eternity of life; the age-old languor of the infirm human soul disappears in the joy of the possession of the Truth. Night parts before the light of these words, and time flees from the face of them. It seems as though the church were shaken and its doors open of themselves, unable to hold back the mighty flood of man's exultation surging over them. The echo of the empty church takes up the Paschal troparion, but soon, making way before the throng, it takes refuge in the church's dome and disappears into its white vaults. The church becomes like unto an overfilled cup. *Come, let us drink a new beverage ...* The wedding feast is prepared by Christ Himself; the invitation sounds forth from the mouth of God Himself. It is no longer a Paschal service taking place in the church, but a Paschal feast. "Christ is risen! ... In truth He is risen!"—the exclamations ring out, and the wine of joy and gladness gushes over the edge, renewing souls for eternal life.

One's heart remembers, like never before, that everything received from God is received freely. Our imperfect offerings are eclipsed by the generosity of God and become invisible, just as a flame becomes invisible before the blinding brilliance of the sun.

How can one describe the Paschal night? How can one express its grandeur, glory, and beauty in words? Only by copying out the rite of the Paschal service from beginning to end is it possible to do this. No other words are fit for this. How can one convey the Paschal moment on paper? What can one say, that it might become comprehensible and tangible? One can only spread one's hands in bewilderment and point to the festally adorned church: Come and take delight ...

Bright Week passes as if it were one day. *And the evening and the morning were the first day* (Gen. 1:5). He who has lived through that day requires no proof of the existence of eternal life; he requires no explanation of the Holy Scripture: *that there should be time no longer* (Apoc. 10:6). Time returns only on Bright Saturday, when at the festal dinner the superior, congratulating the brethren with Christ's Resurrection, hopes that everyone will preserve the Paschal joy in their hearts.

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Hieromonk Basil at the graves of the Optina Elders.

Today Optina Hermitage is being reborn and is taking its former precedence: here everything is being accomplished anew for the first time. The first Great Lent, the first Pascha. But close by the altar lie the graves of the Elders, and so often one can see their fatherly wisdom and care, even in the now-dilapidated monastery buildings. Therefore one must say, “for the first time”—and add, “after a long interruption.”

The bonds of time are being restored, Optina Hermitage is being restored, truth is being restored. But the main thing of all is that Christ is risen from the tomb. *I shall rise and shall be glorified!*