

Epistle on the Ascension of the Lord by His Eminence Metropolitan Laurus, First Hierarch of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia

Eminent brother Archpastors, beloved-in-the-Lord Reverend Pastors, dear brothers, sisters and children!

Celebrating the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Holy Church beckons all hearts children, all those who were born on earth, to rejoice, singing “Clap your hands, all nations, for Christ has ascended to where He was before!” (sticheron on “Lord I call”). From the Church song it is clear that even the Holy Apostles rejoiced, for in the troparion, we sing: “You ascended in glory, O Christ our God, granting joy to Your Disciples...”



One sometimes hears from those who do not wish to part with the celebration of the Pascha of Christ words similar to this regarding this holiday: What is there to rejoice over? It would seem more fitting to grieve, since the Lord left His disciples and the world in His visible presence and ascended to the heavens and took His place at the right hand of God, and He will only return again for the terrible and just Judgment of the living and the dead.

But in fact there are many reasons to rejoice over the Ascension! The Apostles rejoiced because Christ said to them: “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world” and He promised to send down His equal, the Holy Spirit, the Divine Comforter, saying: “Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you” (John 16:7). Christ ascended physically, and thereby elevated human flesh and our nature to Heaven, to the Divine Altar, that is, He thereby brought us into His eternal glory. And now, when we gaze upon the Divine Throne, we see not a terrible punishing God, but a Loving, Merciful and Understanding God who possesses the experience of human existence and endured all the temptations you and I experience every day. We see at the Divine Throne both a Man shining in undying Light and Divine Glory, co-reigning and abiding in full unity with Him, and interceding for us, as John the Theologian witnessed: “My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: and he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:1-2). Thanks to this holy event, and the matter of our very salvation, achieved by Christ, we have become divine humans by potential. That is why the Apostles rejoiced, as today our Church rejoices together with her children, in Which they, through the Mysteries, commune with Divinity and the holy, sinless humanity of the Ascended Lord. This holiday reveals to our spiritual eyes the new relationship which exists between God and mankind, thanks to the act of our Savior.

On this holiday, we restore canonical unity and the fullness of church communion in one Local Russian Orthodox Church. Today, the path approved by the IV All-Diaspora Council and the Council of Bishops that followed, has reached its conclusion.

The dogma of the unity of the Church is expressed in the Creed, confirmed by the Ecumenical Councils on the basis of the Gospel of Christ. The Lord Jesus Christ, the Chief and Creator of our faith and salvation, established only one Church on earth, entrusted to Her alone the true faith, made her alone the treasury of His blessed Gifts. He desired this and especially prayed to the Heavenly Father, that all those who follow Him, that is, all Orthodox Christians, would be “one flock” under His guidance, the “One Shepherd” (John 10:16). The following words spoken by the Savior confirm the unity and indivisibility of the Church: “Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand... He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad” (Matthew 12:25, 30). Apostle Paul provides significant foundations for the unity of the Church by likening it to the members of a human body: “For as the body is one,” said the Apostle, “and hath many members and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ... Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular” (I Corinthians 12:12, 27).

But what actual duty emerges for us, dear brothers and sisters in the Resurrected Lord, from the concept of the unity of the Church? In the words of Apostle Paul, all believers, forming together within the Church one body, must “keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:4), without refusing communion in the Mysteries and not separating themselves from universal accord through disobedience to the Divinely-confirmed ecclesiastical Hierarchy. “Do not be tempted, brethren,” said Holy Martyr Ignatius, “he who follows the teacher of schism shall not inherit the Kingdom of God, he who holds to an alien teaching shares not in the suffering of Christ.” Holy Bishop-Martyr Cyprian of Carthage witnesses that people who turn away from communion in the Church “even if they die in witness of the name of Christ, their sin shall not be cleansed with their blood; indelible and grievous is the sin of division, which is not washed away even through suffering” (*On the Unity of the Church*). Moving also are the words of the same Father: “Who hearkens not to the Church is not a son of the Church, and he for whom the Church is not a mother, to him God is not a father.”

So, my beloved ones, let us rejoice in these festive days of the Paschal Triodion, because through these events, which saved the world, the Lord made our natures divine, freed us and delivered us from death and corruption, and, completing the task of our salvation by establishing the Holy Church, He, as the first sticheron after the elevation of the cross says: “elevates us to the prime blessedness,” that is, restores the direct contact with God that was lost through the sinful fall of our ancestors, which we now obtain thanks to the special mercy and providence towards us, within the salvific Mysteries of the Church.

Stand firmly in the faith, my dear ones, make bold, be staunch in the unshakable foundation of the Church, which is “the pillar and the ground of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15). Amen.

With love in the Lord and my plea for your holy prayers,

+ Metropolitan Laurus

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