

May 2016

St. Demetrius Orthodox Church

Christ Is Risen!
Indeed He Is Risen!

Our Response To The Resurrection

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As it is every year, Holy Week was again a joyful time for me. I'd almost call it a vacation. Some complain about the long services—I rather enjoy them. Some are glad when the week has come and gone. Oftentimes, I am sad. Holy Week is supposed to be a time of self-examination, reflection and renewal. For many people, it is a time of obligation—we have to trudge to church more than usual. For those who don't attend often, it's maybe the one time a year they make the journey down to church and when the week is over, many breathe a sigh of relief—"Now I can eat meat again! I got my life back!" And for those who come out of the woodwork for Pascha, they recede back into it, not to be heard from or seen again until Christmas or perhaps a wedding or funeral.

Imagine someone giving you ten million dollars, just because. That would demand a response, wouldn't it? Having received ten million dollars, it wouldn't just be business as usual, would it? Of course not! Life would change. Perhaps you wouldn't quit your job, but there would certainly be new found freedoms that you didn't have before.

And there would CERTAINLY be GRATITUDE towards your benefactor. And as you looked at your new found riches, which later, you'd still be grateful and you'd still be thinking about the day you received such a great gift. I have a hard time believing that even one day would go by that you didn't think about your benefactor or the gift you received.

What is of more value, \$10 million, or the Resurrection of Christ? The answer is the Resurrection, because the \$10 million will do you no good when you are dead. Faith in the Resurrection certainly will. But compare the two events—a benefactor giving you ten million dollars, and THE BENEFACTOR, Christ, giving you a path to Paradise and hope for salvation. Having beheld the Resurrection of Christ, if we truly believe in God, does that demand a response? The week after Holy Week, is it back to business as usual? Does life change at all because we go through Holy Week each year? Just like the person who receives the \$ 10 million, you don't quit your job because you witness Holy Week, but for the person who truly believes in God, there are certainly newfound freedoms that others do not have—freedom to hope, freedom from fear, freedom from sin and guilt through confession and repentance.

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And there CERTAINLY should be GRATITUDE towards our BENEFACTOR. Just like the new found material riches would affect a life on a daily basis, spiritual treasures should also affect our lives on a daily basis, and one would think that there would be gratitude towards our Benefactor, the Lord, on a daily basis. I would think that gratitude, that recognition of His awesome Gift to us during Holy Week, would last a lifetime. I would think that at any age, be it 25 or 55 or 95, you'd still be grateful and you'd still think about the great gifts we have received from our Lord—on the cross 2,000 years ago; our adoption as His children at our baptisms; the beautiful world we enjoy each and every day; and the change for renewal that we receive at the Resurrection.

At the Matins of Pascha, we hear a hymn which states, "Let all things begin anew in the Resurrection of Christ." It doesn't say "Continue business as usual tomorrow." The Resurrection demands a response, not because we are obligated to do so, but because this event is so big in the history of humanity and in each individual human life.

During Lent, the suggested book for my parish was "The Way of a Pilgrim." If you've never read this book, it is a very easy read and I highly recommend it. The story is about a wanderer in 19th Century Russia who seeks the meaning of the phrase "Pray without ceasing." (I Thessalonians 5:17) He learns the Jesus Prayer ("Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.") which is also called "The Prayer of the Heart."

It is called the prayer of the heart because when one prays this prayer, invoking the name of Jesus Christ over and over again, hundreds of times a day, the prayer moves from the mouth, to the mind and eventually into the heart, which it literally takes up residence, and transforms the heart, the mind, the mouth and the entire human being into a vessel of God's grace.

You might ask, "how can I be a successful professional, or an accomplished businessman, a dedicated teacher, or be raising three kids—with all the associated challenges and stresses and still maintain a prayerful life?" The answer is easy. I'm convinced that all of us have A LOT of mental free time, more than we think we do—standing in the line at the grocery store, sitting in traffic, folding the laundry, mowing the lawn, getting dressed in the morning. And here's where the Prayer of the Heart comes in. Start saying "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner" during your mental free time. Start prayer for people in your life during your mental free time. And the prayer you offer with your lips will become a praying that enters your mind and takes residence in your heart and then you also will be transformed into a Godly person, full of God's grace and goodness.

We need more soft hearts in our world. We need more people who look out for others rather than looking out for themselves. Walk down a busy sidewalk in the downtown area of your city and everyone is talking on a cell phone or listening to an I-pod. They aren't praying. And they are walking almost unaware that they are surrounded by other people. It seems that society's response to the Resurrection is not one of joyful expectation or prayer of the heart, but indifference and self-centeredness at best. And this is where the church comes in. The church is supposed to encourage us and support us, as well as teach us how to transform our hearts into vessels of Christ. We don't celebrate the Holy Week services because they are Tradition, but because they teach us, inspire us, and heal us when we celebrate them in the proper spirit. In setting up churches, the intention is not to set up an organization that is supported with dues and with activities, but rather to set up a heaven on earth, that is part classroom (where we learn), part hospital (where we find healing), and part heaven (where we leave our earthly cares so that we may receive the King of All.)

In the 21st Century, sadly, we do not find our churches as bastions of faith, or safe havens for those seeking spiritual renewal and inspiration. We find them more as clubs. I remember a children's book in the bookstore at the Seminary which was entitled "The World, My Church." Indeed, that is supposed to be the focus of the world, making it like what the church is supposed be—a place where we commune with God through prayer constantly. A more proper title might be "The Church, my Club."

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