

The Pascha No One Wants

By Priest John Parsells

True leadership brings people where they need to be but don't want to go.

No Christian worth their salt believes Christ went to His crucifixion subservient to the Jewish leaders and Roman state. Even though the Jewish high priest, Caiaphas, gave voice to the common plot to put Jesus to death when he said “it would be better that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perishes” (John 11:50), it was Christ, the true High Priest, who said, “No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.” In fact, it was Jesus’s filial obedience even unto death which most profoundly made manifest His divinity and union with His Father. Jesus said to them, ‘When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you shall know that I AM, and that I do nothing of Myself, but as My Father has taught Me.’” (Joh 8:28)

Today our Church hierarchs call us to take up this same Cross, not in capitulation to the State as conspiracy theorists “theologize” but as imitation and participation in the self-sacrificing life of Christ. We are called to experience in some small way what Christ went through “suffering outside the camp”, outside the Temple, outside the holy city of Jerusalem – in isolation. He entered an inconceivable quarantine. His “social distancing” was so complete that He even experienced divine “abandonment”, crying out from the Cross, “My God, my God, why has Thou forsaken Me?”. The sinless One became sin on our behalf (2 Corinthians 5:20) and the One who said, “I and My Father are One” (John 10:30) experienced “separation” from His Father.

St. Paul tells us, “Therefore let us go to Him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace He bore” (Hebrews 13:13). Here the Apostle links suffering with disgrace, yoking union with Christ together with being an outsider. The early Christians knew this disgrace well, being persecuted as godless by their Jewish brothers, yet paradoxically at the same time experiencing deeper communion with God in Christ outside the Jewish Temple where they had formerly become accustomed to worship.

As centuries passed, things have certainly changed, the Church has become the new Camp, the new City, the new Temple, built upon Jesus Christ. “The stone which the builders rejected, has become the chief cornerstone; this is the Lord’s doing and it is marvelous in our eyes” (Psalm 118:22). A whole Christian world has developed “outside the camp”, so much so that in our contemporary times, things are reversed, we experience disgrace and shame from “not going” to church, because it is “inside” that we commune with Christ.

Yet, in this time of pandemic, God who is always providing opportunities for us to more fully experience the life of Christ, who is always guiding His Church, allows us in this Great Lent, Passion Week, and Pascha to participate in a very deep way in the foolish wisdom and salvific power of the Cross. By instructing us through our hierarchs to temporarily and selflessly stay outside the church for the benefit of others, so that not one may perish, He gives us a unique opportunity, an otherwise impossible chance, to sacrifice our normal church life, and the best of it in Great Lent and Pascha. We are challenged to once again go “outside the camp”, to experience even for a short time “isolation” from God Himself, and to do so in obedience, even unto death, the death of our own will.

St. John of the Ladder tells us that "Obedience is the tomb of the will and the resurrection of humility." Now we know well that obedience by definition is only possible when we have to do something that we don't want to do or when we have to give up something we don't want to give up; otherwise it is just meeting of the minds. This is why the measure of one's obedience can be properly gauged only by the extent of one's desire to resist what is commanded.

For Orthodox Christians our greatest desire is to worship God in His Church and we would rather be martyred than give that up. Yet, we know that there is a world of difference not only between martyrdom and suicide, but also between martyrdom and murder. Our bishops instruct us to stay home, not because we should be afraid of martyrdom, for they tell us to fearlessly minister to the sick and dying, even at our own personal risk. Rather they wisely counsel us in this way to protect us from false bravado and recklessness lest we needlessly, and perhaps pridefully, harm ourselves or others.

Some, perhaps unaware or unwilling to acknowledge what our bishops are actually teaching, will accuse us of faithlessness for temporarily and strategically practicing social distancing in order to minimize the impact of COVID-19 on the least of the brethren (elderly, immunocompromised, etc). We will be slandered as capitulating to the State when we are voluntarily obedient to the Church. Yet we mustn't be discouraged by this because in this too we have a share in the life of Christ, bearing the reproach even of brothers so as to be faithful to the Father's command to love and sacrifice, doing what is best for them and all, even if it means "bearing the disgrace" (Hebrews 13:13) and "despising the shame" (Hebrews 12:2).

What we go through now can feel very isolating for faithful Christians, yet we are resolutely encouraged remembering that the Cross of Christ reveals isolation as the door to communion. In obedience even unto death, we find the life that can never be put to death. Amidst our distress and anguish, we find the "man of sorrows, acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3), Christ Himself who says to us what He promised His disciples in their own time of tribulation: "I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy!" (John 16:22).