

The Saturday of Souls, the Lessons of the Church, and the Miracle of the *Kollyva*

A Day to Remember Our Departed Loved Ones

One of the great Traditions in the Greek Orthodox Church is the Saturday of Souls. Traditionally, we remember and honor our beloved brothers and sisters in Christ on the fortieth day and the one year anniversary of their passing unto the Lord at memorial services, but the Church, in its compassion and wisdom, also offers other opportunities as well. In particular, we have the Saturday of the Souls.

In Christ, Not Dead, Merely Sleeping

In the Orthodox Christian Tradition, Saturdays commemorate those Faithful in Christ who have fallen asleep. In Christ, we do not believe that they are dead, but rather they are asleep until they are awakened to be united with Christ at His Second Coming in Glory. In His First Coming in Humility, we sleep and rest; in His Second Coming in Glory, we will awaken and arise.

A Day of Rest after the First Creation

Saturday is the day on which God rested after His six days of creation. It is the Sabbath Day and considered holy. It is the Seventh Day, the day of completion. For Orthodox Christians, Sunday, is the Eighth Day, the Day of Resurrection, the First Day of a New Creation and an Eternal Beginning in our Resurrected Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Saturday is the day, Jesus Christ, who voluntarily suffered and died for us, was buried, and laid to rest in the Tomb for you and me. Having accomplished the Second Creation, the Divine Plan of the Father, He took His rest.

Again, a Day of Rest after Our Redemption. ("It is finished."--Jn. 19:30)

After His first creation, God rested on the Sabbath. After completing the Divine Plan for a New Creation, He again rested on the Sabbath Day. In His recreation through the New, Second, and Last Adam, the Son of God Who became the Son of Man, God redeemed His creation. His Son, as both God and Man, died so that through His Divinity He might share His Life with our humanity. He was buried, so that through Him we may resurrect. He descended into Hades, so that in Him we may ascend into Heaven. As He said on the Cross, having "finished" the Divine Plan of the Father for His creation, Jesus Christ rested on the Sabbath Day before His Resurrection from the Dead.

The Symbolism of White

Being a day of rest, and dedicated to the repose of the souls in Christ, we commemorate the souls on Saturday, and as Lazarus and Christ wore white as their burial garments, so too is white the color we utilize liturgically on Saturdays and at funerals, for Jesus Christ is our Resurrection, our Life, our Light, and our Repose. He is the One Who brought Light into the darkness, even into the depths of Hades, and the darkness did not

overcome It. He is the One Who wears Light as a garment. His white funeral garment as a Man in the Tomb, prefigured by His white swaddling clothes as a Child in the Manger, has become a garment of Transfiguring Light. At our baptisms, having come out of the font (our sepulchers out of which we spiritually resurrect with Christ), we put on the garment of white and then chant the moving hymn: "Grant me a garment of Light, Most Merciful Christ our God, Thou Who dost array Himself with White as a Garment."

The Church Offers Us Four Saturday of Souls throughout the Liturgical Year.

There are four Saturday of Souls throughout the Ecclesiastical Year in which we can honor our beloved who have fallen asleep in the Lord. The first two Saturday of Souls fall just before Great and Holy Lent leading to the Great Feast of *Pascha*. The third Saturday of Souls falls in the first week during the Great and Holy Lent of *Pascha*; and the fourth Saturday of Souls falls just before the Great Feast of Pentecost, fifty days after *Pascha* (the Resurrection of our Lord from the Dead).

These Saturday of Souls remind us that we are not alone and that death itself does not, and cannot, ever sever the bond of love that unites us with our departed loved ones; for as God, Jesus Christ is Love, and Love is uncreated, unconquerable, and forever. To those who do not believe and have no hope, Love is foolishness, but to those who believe, Love is the Wisdom, Power, and Glory of God, made ever present, real, and accessible in the Son.

Victory over Death in Christ is Inexorable and Assured.

Christ died for us so that, through Him, death is destroyed and no longer holds us captive. Christ has liberated us once and for all. He has fought the last enemy ("Death") any of us will ever have to face, and He has defeated him once and for all. We need not face this enemy or fight this battle. We have a Champion--Jesus Christ. Thus, the victory is assured, and unlike any other victory, His Victory is an Eternal Victory with universal and eternal consequences.

***Kollyva* as Fellowship with Those Who Are in Asleep in Christ**

Christ our God is the God of the Living and the Dead. With Christ, Death has no dominion over us. In Christ, all live. In Christ, we, the living, are united with one another. In Christ, we, the living, are even united with those who have fallen asleep. Heaven and earth, invisible and visible, past and future, living and dead, and God and Man are united in Christ. In Christ, those things above commune with those things below. This is why we have the *Kollyva* (the Traditional boiled wheat) for the General Memorial of the Souls after the Divine Liturgy. It presupposes Communion. In other words, we have fellowship with our departed loved ones in the Holy Communion offered during the Divine Liturgy.

We Are United, Living and Dead, in Holy Communion

On the Paten, the Oblation Disk, the Priest commemorates all the Saints, the Saints Triumphant in heaven above, the Saints Militant struggling on earth below, and all those asleep in the Lord. Transferred from the offering disk into the Blood of Christ in the Chalice, we are all united as One Church, One Body of Christ of Which we are all living members. In the Holy Communion, we are One with Christ (living and dead), and in Him (His Body and Blood), we are mysteriously and inexplicably One with one another.

Thus, it is both imperative and necessary that we not just bring, or send, or fax, or e mail the names of our departed loved ones to Church; we must not absolve ourselves of our responsibility and commitment, and we must not deprive our loved ones, and one another, of our sacramental presence. Rather, we must prepare, pray, fast, make our offering, and come to receive Holy Communion, and, therefore, through Christ's Body and Blood, have fellowship with our loved ones.

The kollyva after the Divine Liturgy presupposes Fellowship with the Risen Christ and all the Faithful before we partake of the fellowship of the kollyva. In this way, we experience the miracle of being united with our departed loved ones. They and we are not alone. As we taste the sweetness of the eternal hope and promise together, the lonely feeling of separation and alienation is obliterated, just as death has been, by our Risen, Triumphant, and Living God Who offers Himself to us at Holy Communion.

There Is a Different Theme for Each of the Saturday of Souls

As mentioned above, in the Orthodox Christian Church, every Saturday is committed to the dead. It is the Sabbath, the day of rest, the day in which Jesus rested in the Tomb before He arose from His Sleep to His Glorious Three Day Resurrection. (Indeed, parenthetically and instructively, our English word for "cemetery" comes from the Greek word meaning "to sleep.") However, each of the Saturday of Souls leading to Great and Holy Lent has its own theme.

The First Saturday of Souls

We Remember All Who Have Passed in Christ before Us: We Are Not Alone.

On the Saturday before Meat Fare Sunday (the Sunday of the Last Judgment), we hold a universal commemoration of the dead from all ages back to the very First Man, Adam. Just before recalling the Second Coming (the *Parousia*) of Christ in Glory and His Righteous impending Judgment on Judgment Sunday, we remember all those who have passed before us and now await His Judgment. We remind ourselves of the mutual bond of love that exists between us and with Christ in His Church. The memory, sorrow, and pain we may still feel is a living, tangible reminder of the love we share with one another, a love that is real, yet not created, and, therefore, indestructible.

They Abide in the Prevailing and Embracing Love of Christ.

This is the Love that God has granted us, the Love He shares, and the Love within Which we abide. In Him, in this Love, we are One. We are reminded that we still have this spiritual connection with our beloved in the Lord, for they live in our hearts, our memories, and in the collective consciousness and memory of the Church. Indeed, we give them immortality here below through our prayers, memories, memorials, donations, and deeds which keep them alive in our enduring and abiding Love.

Our Passover is the Passover of the Lord, Presaged and Revealed.

In Christ, Who is our True Passover, death has become a passage from this life below to the eternal life above. He has left behind this eternal, infinite, uncreated bridge for us to crossover, a bridge made possible by His Cross Which bridges the infinite chasm between God and Man, Creator and created. Moreover, this bridge has a name, and its name is "Love": the Love that created, spans, permeates, embraces, and redeems the universe created for fellowship with God and Man (the microcosm of the universe).

The Second Saturday of Souls

The Ascetic Saints, The Spiritual Athletes of God

On the Saturday in the week before Great Lent (Cheese fare week), we hold a General Commemoration for the souls of the ascetic Saints, those who struggled and emerged victorious in Christ from the spiritual warfare in the arena of this fallen and hostile world. They were spiritual athletes who trained their minds, bodies, and souls through focus, discipline, and perseverance. They courageously entered the arena, competed according to the rules, finished the race, and received the imperishable crown of the victor--an eternal crown, one not made by human hands that grants eternal renown to the Triumphant Saints of God.

**The Saints Cheer Us on in Our Struggle to Complete the Race.
(More a Marathon or Steeplechase than a Sprint)**

At the beginning of our long and arduous Lenten Journey together, we have these great Saints, as members of the Church Triumphant, cheering and inspiring us, the members of the Church Militant who struggle below to complete the course according to the rules. By remembering them and recalling their deeds, and through their intercessions as members of the Family of Christ, we are given encouragement, inspiration, and momentum as we embark on our Lenten Journey.

The Third Saturday of Souls

The Miracle of Saint Theodore and the *Kollyva*

On the Saturday of Souls in the First Week of Great and Holy Lent, we commemorate the Great Warrior Martyr †Saint Theodore the Recruit (or *Tyro*). Saint

Theodore was a Roman Soldier in Asian Minor (modern day Turkey) martyred in the fourth century under the Emperor Maximian. The name *Theodore*, from the Greek, means literally "Gift of God," and he was, and is, the Gift of God to His People. Specifically, we commemorate Saint Theodore on the Saturday of the First Week of Great Lent due to a miracle ascribed to him briefly recounted below as follows.

In one of the bitter ironies of history, a fellow student at the Athenian Academy with Saint Basil the Great, The Emperor Julian the Apostate (361-3 A.D.), was an inveterate enemy of Christians. In one of his vicious and mocking campaigns against Christians, Julian sought to defile the First Week of the Holy Fast by having all the food at market in Constantinople defiled by sprinkling them with the blood of animals sacrificed to the pagan gods. In this way, he tried to force the Faithful to break their fast or starve (a veritable Hobson's Choice).

The Archbishop of Constantinople, †Evdoxios, was greatly dismayed and dedicated himself to fervent prayer, when Saint Theodore appeared to him and told him not to fear. Saint Theodore instructed him to forbid his flock from buying anything at market, and instead, to boil wheat, which would not perish, and eat this alone, and this would sustain them, they would endure, and they would eventually prevail. The Archbishop obediently did as instructed, the Fast was preserved, the People of God prevailed, and the Emperor perished before the Parthian host. Divine Justice is captured fittingly in the words of the Psalmist: "God will not be mocked."

Aside from the historical account, the spiritual lessons thereby derived are quite fitting, for Great Lent is a time of spiritual warfare. We will be assailed, tempted, and tested. We need to have faith in life that, no matter what, God will provide, and that as long as we keep our faith, we will, in the end, prevail. For no matter what the threats may be (whatever hue, shape, or form they may take), no power (be it Emperor, Government, or Philosophy), can take away our faith. We may in weakness, hopelessness, or despair give it up, but no one can take it away.

This is why we remind ourselves of the countless Saints, Martyrs, Confessors, and Faithful who have gone before us, and have bravely endured, sacrificed, and prevailed in Christ. In the words of Saint Paul, read at our funeral service, we are not alone; we are not like those who have no hope. We have the fellowship of Faith, Hope, and Love. We have Christ our God, we have the Saints, we have the Sacraments of the Church, and we have one another. This is a beautiful message at the beginning of our Lenten Journey which is a metaphor for the struggles in the long odyssey and the harsh wilderness of this life.

With the fervent and humble prayer that your Lenten Journey will be a blessed, transforming, and glorious one, imbued with spiritual growth and enlightenment in the Lord, I remain,

Yours in Christ our True Passover, to Whom all others have pointed, and in Whom all are fulfilled,

†*Father Jim*

"I tell you the Truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." John 12:24

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