

# The Tension Between Anticipatory Grief and Joy for Orthodox Christians

“And a sword shall pierce your soul.”

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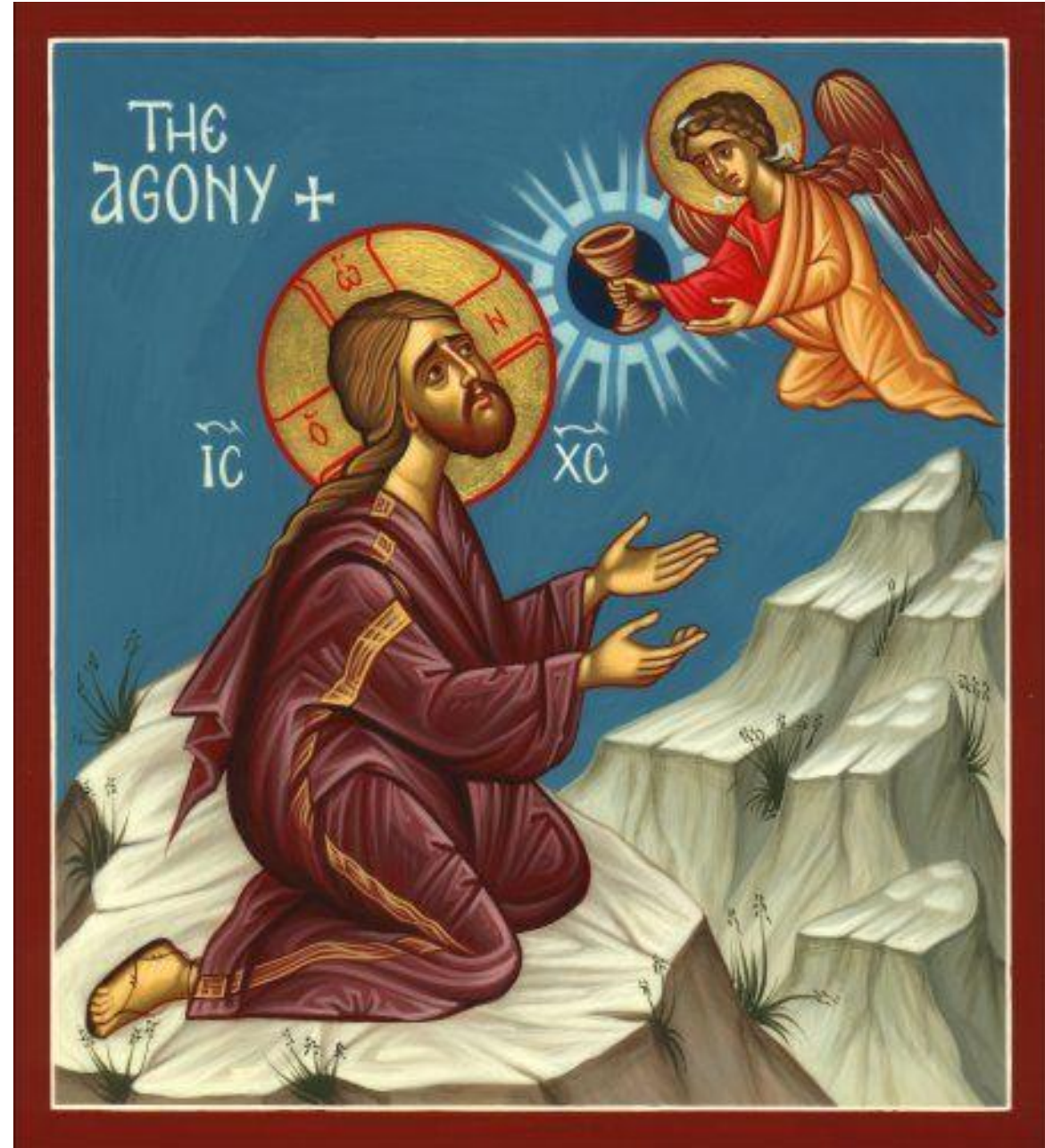
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# A Hard Saying

“He who does not hold to his own will always has what he will; for externally he does not get his own way but whatever happens, *no matter what it is*, gives him quiet satisfaction and he discovers for himself that he has what he will. For he does not want things to happen as he wishes; he wants things to have happened as they happen.”

St. Dorotheos of Gaza 6<sup>th</sup> Century



# Some Definitions . . .

- **Bereavement**—the experience of loss by death of a person to whom one is attached
- **Mourning** (Grieving)—the process of adapting to or coping with such a loss
- **Grief**—the thoughts, feelings (emotions), and behaviors that one experiences after the loss

Worden, JW. Bereavement care. In: Berger, AM, Portenoy, RK, Weissman, DE, editors. Principles and practice of palliative care and supportive oncology. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Philadelphia: Lippincott, Williams, and Wilkins; 2002. p. 813-8.

## . . . Some Definitions

- Loss and bereavement happen to us—they are experienced as passive or ‘choiceless’ events
- To bereave is to deprive
- Grief is an emotion in response to bereavement
- Grieving is an *active* response to bereavement in which effort is invested and tasks are addressed
- “Bereavement is ‘choiceless,’ but grieving is not.”

Attig, T. *How We Grieve: Relearning the World*, p.32; Oxford University Press, NY, NY. 1996

# Suffering (*Pathos*)

- When something bad happens to a person, suffering occurs
- Loss or bereavement may thus be the quintessential form of suffering which is common to all human experience
- Bereavement takes many forms

# Loss and Grief . . .

- Various types of loss are common reasons for consultation in medical practice; ~ 1/4 of consultations to GPs in UK.
- Types of loss, in order of frequency, include separations from loved ones, incapacitation (loss of function), bereavement, migration, relocation, job losses, birth of a baby, retirement, and professional loss.

Parkes, CM. Bereavement in adult life. *BMJ* 1998; 316: 856-859.

## . . . Loss and Grief

- A common cause of illness; approximately one third of those experiencing major loss (death of a spouse or child)
- Increased risk of death from cardiac disease and suicide in the bereaved
- Approximately one quarter of widows and widowers will have clinical depression and anxiety during the first year of bereavement

# Anticipatory or Preparatory Grief

The mourning of the terminally ill for the losses implicit in death:

- \* Anticipated separation from loved ones
- \* Loss of position, independence, role in family, even simple pleasures of life
- \* Missed opportunities and regrets

Periyakoil, VS and Hallenbeck, J. Identifying and managing preparatory grief and depression at the end of life. *Am Fam Physician* 2002; 65:883-90.

Anticipatory grief is also reciprocal, affecting those who will be bereaved.



Already, at the Nativity, the Virgin contemplates the death of her Son.

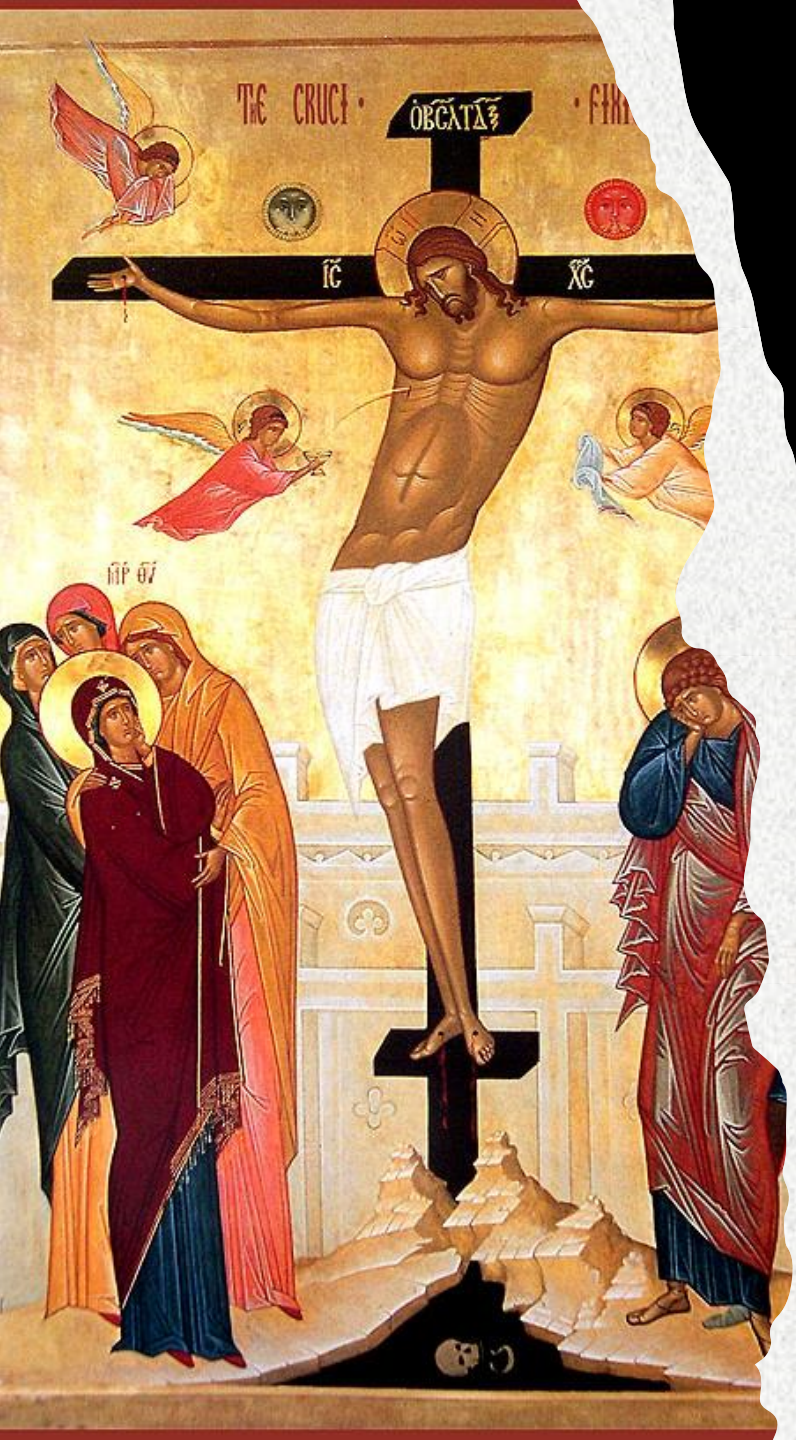
His swaddling clothes look very much like a funeral shroud as He lies in a manger that has a distinct resemblance to a sarcophagus.



# Reality for Orthodox Christians

“In the Church calendar, history and eschatology meet, exactly as in Christ human and divine nature meet. Time acquires meaning only in relation to salvation; otherwise, it remains an illogical flow of events. . . . During the feasts, we do not commemorate; we *reactualize* the event. For example. . . at the Nativity we sing, “Today Christ was born in Bethlehem of a Virgin . . . ” There is no prayer, no Orthodox hymn that tells us that . . . today we are gathered in Church to commemorate the anniversary of this event. If such hymnography does exist somewhere, it has nothing in common with the Orthodox Church. *We relive, we do not commemorate.*”

Archimandrite Roman Braga 1922-2015



In the Feast of the Nativity, we witness the tension between the joy of a mother holding her Child and the shadow of what is to come.



# Mortality, Loss, and Kenosis

- A theological term adapted from traditional Christianity—*kenosis*—may come closest to fully capturing how both the positive and negative aspects of loss and death define the life of mortal creatures.
- In classical Greek, *kenosis* meant emptying or depletion and was appropriated by Christian theology in describing the Incarnation of Christ.

# Kenosis

“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied (Greek – εκένωσε) himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.”

Philippians 2:5-8



# Kenosis and the Human Being

*Four Ages in Life*, Edvard Munch 1902

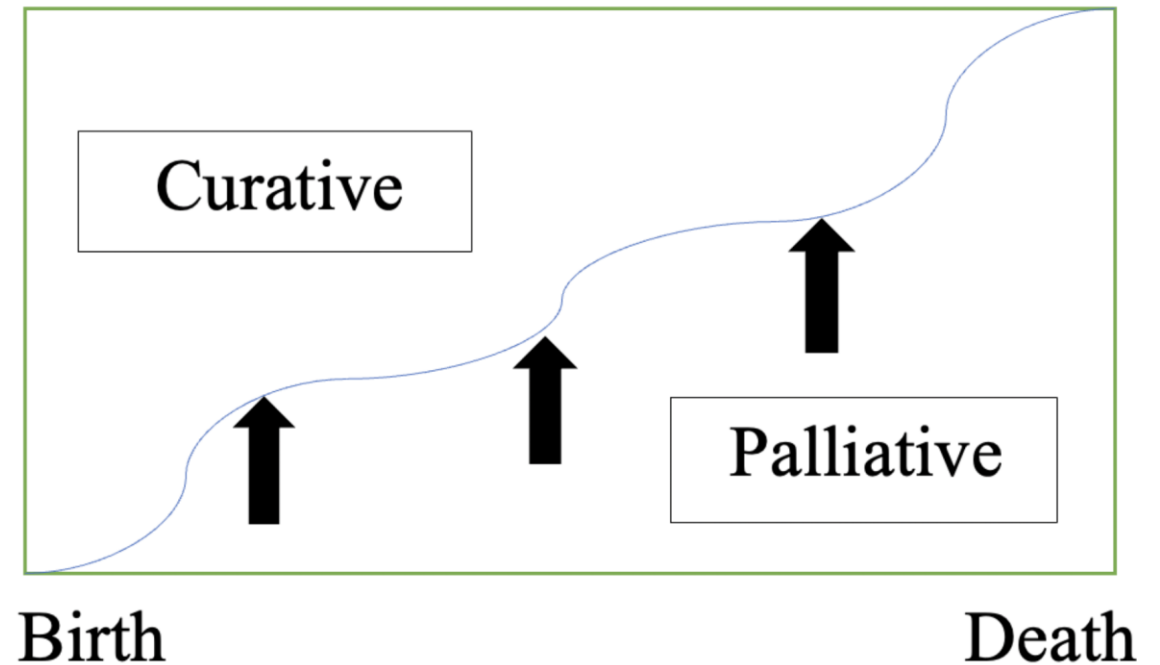
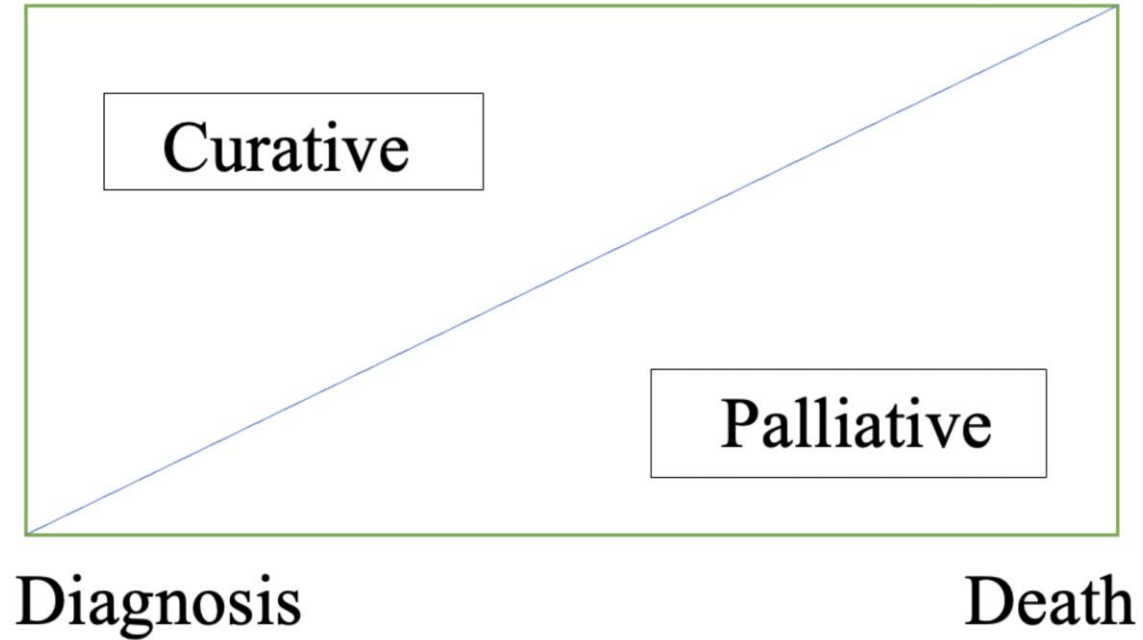
- Whereas the kenosis of Christ, his self-emptying, was completely voluntary, human beings in their mortality experience an *involuntary* form of kenosis as they age which begins at the biological or physical level.
- It is a stripping away, depletion, emptying or impoverishment of those elements which support function and independence. *It is an evolving encounter with losses and the limits they impose, both internal and external to the person over time.*
- Just as *suffering* embraces all aspects of the person, so also the involuntary kenosis of the dying spreads from the physical to the psychological, social, and ultimately spiritual aspects of the person.



# Kenosis and Suffering

- Suffering (Greek—*pathos*) in the broadest sense includes the many bad things that may happen to human beings during their lives.
- *Kenosis* is more descriptive of the *process* and *outcomes* of suffering that develop over the course of human existence.
- Where *pathos* is experienced largely in a passive manner, kenosis has both passive (involuntary) and active (voluntary) aspects.
- Kenosis in its totality as the combination of its involuntary and voluntary forms is more descriptive of the *arc* or *trajectory* of suffering that plays itself out over the course of individual lives.
- To use a theatrical metaphor, kenosis is the *choreographer* of the suffering that is manifested through common as well as unique elements in each human life.

# Kenosis: Choreographer of Suffering





# Blessed Poverty

## Kenosis as Opportunity

“For we know, O Lord, that the extent to which something once was, but no longer is, is the measure of its death; *and the extent to which something once was not, but now is, is the measure of its beginning.*”

St. Augustine Bishop of Hippo, North Africa (354-430 AD), Book XI (7), *Confessions*

# Blessed Poverty

## Kenosis in the Life of Orthodox Christians

Mutability is a central defining feature of human mortality. The losses of kenosis may be the most obvious (and painful) manifestations of that mutability overshadowing any potential gains, and yet, St. Augustine speaks not of an end but of a *beginning*. Death impoverishes while opening a path to enrichment.

# Blessed Poverty

## Kenosis as Opportunity

- Within the life of Orthodox Christians each kenotic loss is a small death preparing us for and reminding us of our physical death and departure from this life.
- Sometimes the losses whisper, and at other times, they shout the Orthodox admonition which is so fundamental to our spiritual journey of *theosis* toward union with God: “Remember your death!”

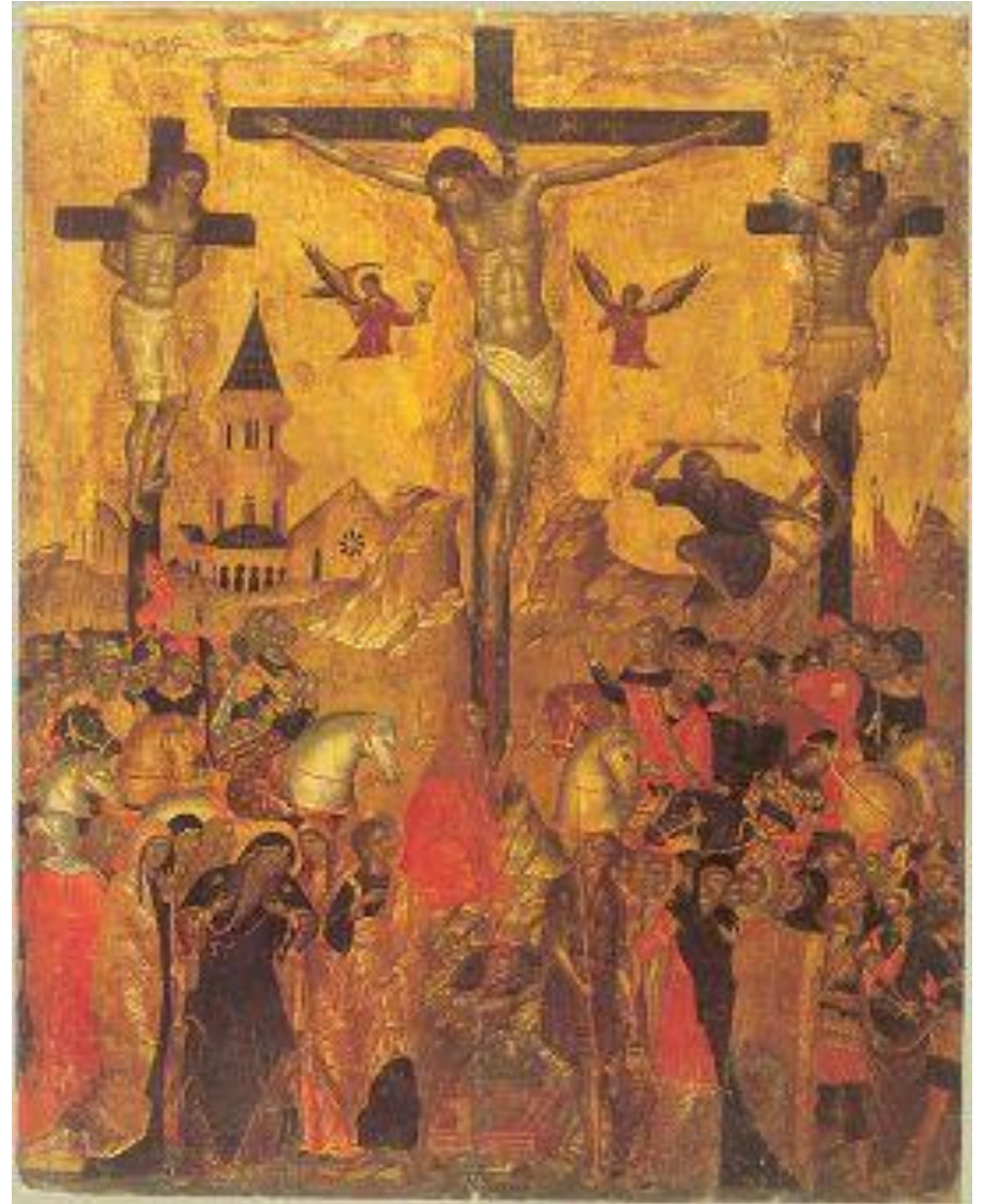
# Blessed Poverty

## Kenosis in the Life of Orthodox Christians

In saying “Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God,” Christ may not only be pronouncing a blessing on the destitute, but in a larger sense he is blessing all those who, having been eventually stripped by kenosis of every distraction (both material and immaterial), are now on the threshold of an encounter with ultimate reality.

# Sorrowful Joy

“Today, you will be with me  
in Paradise.”



# Grief and Nostalgia for Paradise

“There is nostalgia in our soul for God; we are looking for God. Because we lost paradise, there is nostalgia for paradise. God is like the magnet that attracts us. God reflects himself in the heart of each individual in a specific way, and we have to embrace that specific way. We are not robots of the state created to move to the right or to the left on demand. God is the prototype, and we are the icon, the image. The image wants to reach the prototype. This growing in God and in knowledge of God will be infinite.”

Archimandrite Roman Braga, 1922-2015

