

Christ: The Conqueror of 'Hells'

By Benjamin Franks

Every year for the last decade, I have been in the same place at 6:00 p.m. on the evening of Palm Sunday – Bridegroom Matins. The service begins with the proclamation that “the Bridegroom comes at midnight,” while the priest processes out of the altar with the icon of Christ the Bridegroom arrayed in mocking purple and adorned with a crown of thorns.

Eighty years ago at 6:00 p.m. on the evening of Palm Sunday, the prisoners at Dachau experienced a unique and unrepeatable icon of the arrival of Christ the Bridegroom. It was the “first glimpse of a GI, a Polish-American carrying only a pistol.”¹ These GIs were greeted with an enthusiasm to rival that which greeted Jesus on the first Palm Sunday, though their entrance into the camp had more in common with the Harrowing of Hell. On that April 29 eighty years ago, a modern kingdom of death had its gates breached, and its prisoners were set free into a world where they would ever stand as living monuments of man’s inhumanity to man. For eight decades now, the world has grappled with the legacy of these survivors.

A small subset of these survivors defined their legacy without reference to the world. They defined the legacy of their experience through the Divine Liturgy and Thanksgiving Offering of the Eucharist. With the help of their brother prisoners from the Latin clergy they spent Holy Week making arrangements for Pascha. On Pascha they celebrated the Divine Liturgy before an icon of Our Lady of Częstochowa borrowed from Polish Catholic priests. They wore vestments sewn from towels and adorned with red fabric crosses taken from the medical equipment of their SS guards. Imagine the emotion which must have filled the room during the first litany, when the deacon commanded the survivors to commend themselves, each other, and their whole life to Christ their God. In that moment the legacy of faith in the Resurrection which these men established was made forever secure – for they had commended their whole life to Christ who had broken the power of the kingdom of death which Dachau imitated.

¹ Jason Dawsey. “The Last Days of the Dachau Concentration Camp”

<<https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/last-days-dachau-concentration-camp>>, July 15, 2022

In that Paschal Divine Liturgy they made Christ's victory real in a way that the Nazi camp's attempt to revive the defeated Hell could only hope to mimic, as they proclaimed "in Jesus the resurrection from the dead."²

Despite the emotional power of that moment, it was but an icon of the great events which it commemorated. Those events of Christ's Passion and Resurrection are the great hinge of history. All human events, from the greatest movements of nations to the most obscure parts of each person's life can only be understood in the light of the Paschal victory over Hell. The Liturgy gives us the words to understand these patterns and meet them when they come to us. It was the calendar which gave the Orthodox prisoners a framework to tie these events to Pascha, and it was the Liturgy which gave them the words to thank God. The Liturgy, celebrated from memory, also gave the Church words to comfort her children. One eyewitness remembers how as a young monk recited the paschal homily "Saint John Chrysostomos himself seemed to speak through him to us and to the rest of the world as well!"³

It is because these patterns can be repeated in history and in each Christian's life that I can compare my experiences to that Paschal Liturgy. Like many Orthodox Christians, I have had several Holy and Bright weeks where death broke into and sullied my celebrations. I always find comfort in the same line of the Paschal Stichera: "The Myrrhbearing women, at the break of dawn, drew near the tomb of the Life-giver. There they found an angel sitting upon the stone who greeted them with these words, 'Why seek ye the living among the dead?'" Just as the Church gave her sons at Dachau the words to interpret their experience and to worship in the midst of it, this prayer has allowed me to enter into the despair of the Myrrhbearers at not finding the Lord in the tomb, and to realize with them that the Living One is not among the dead. He is not conquered by my encounters with death, but in conquering Hell He conquers

² Acts 4.2

³ Gleb. A. Rahr, "Christ is Risen... 1945 in Dachau!"

<<https://holytrinityphx.org/blogs/f/1945-pascha-at-dachau>>, April 18, 2020

each iteration of it. The Church's Liturgy makes this victory concrete and present, and it is why I cherish and will always cherish the Paschal Stichera.