



PASTORAL LETTER 2006

## THE RESURRECTION OF OUR LORD AND GOD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST

**To our beloved clergy, monastics and right-believing faithful of our God-protected Episcopate,  
Grace, Mercy and Peace from Christ the Lord who is Risen,  
and from us, fatherly love and hierarchal blessings.**

***“There will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and of the unjust.”***  
*(Acts of the Apostles 24:15)*

Dearly Beloved,

**Christ is Risen! Truly, He is Risen!**

*“There is no need for alarm. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified: he has risen, he is not here. See, here is the place where they laid him. But you must go and tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going before you to Galilee; it is there you will see him, just as he told you’” (Mark 16:6-7).*

These are the words addressed to the three women by the “young man in a white robe” who stood at the entrance of empty tomb of our Lord Jesus Christ. The women disciples had come there to complete the anointing of the Lord's crucified body. Since that time, believers have exchanged with one another this amazing and unique announcement: Christ is Risen! Truly, he is Risen! From Saint Matthew's Gospel we know that the disciples did meet Jesus in Galilee where he spoke to them and remained with them for 40 days. At his ascension, he told them, and through them, us, “...know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time” (Matthew 28:20).

As Christians, we believe and state that “*Jesus ascended and sits at the right of the Father*” (Creed), interceding for us in his resurrected state. Saint Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch (circa 35-107), a disciple of Saint John the Evangelist, along the journey to his martyrdom in Rome under the Emperor Trajan, wrote several letters which emphasize his faith in the resurrection of Jesus and of all mankind. “*For I know and believe that after the resurrection he (Jesus) was in the flesh. And when he came to the people around Peter, he said to them, ‘Take, handle me and see, that I am not a bodiless phantom.’ And at once they touched him and believed, being mixed together with both his flesh and his spirit. For this reason they scorned even death, and were found to be above death. And after his resurrection he ate with them and drank as a fleshly being, even though he was spiritually united to the father*” (Letter to the Smyrnaens 3:1-3).

Today, we are celebrating this great Sunday of Sundays, the “*feast of feasts and festival of festivals on which we praise God forever*” (Canon of Pascha) because of the restoration of life and the annihilation of death! Saint Ignatius also reminds us that the reason why Christians do not keep the Hebrew Sabbath but keep the Lord's day in commemoration of his resurrection from the dead (Sunday) is that new life sprang up through Jesus and this through his death.

There are some who, even today as through the centuries, try to explain away the resurrection of Jesus Christ as being an event simply imagined by later followers of the Lord. We find, however, that belief in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus was the basis for Christianity. The “young man in white” at

the tomb, an angel of the Lord, and the apostles and disciples bore witness to what they saw. They taught the next generation, and they the next and the next. The resurrection of Christ from the tomb will be taught without ceasing to the ages of ages.

Let us review the experience of the Pharisee Saul who became Saint Paul, the same one who turned from persecuting the disciples of Jesus into the great Apostle of Christ for the pagans. *“There will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and of the unjust”* (Acts 24:15) Paul stated before the Roman governor, Felix. Saul was accused of “stirring up trouble among the Jews, the world over...” (Acts 24:5). To this charge Paul responded: *“I worship the God of my ancestors...and I hold the same hope in God as they do that there will be a resurrection of good men and bad men alike”* (Acts 24:14-15). To the governor, Paul repeated what he had said before the Sanhedrin: *“I stood up among them and called out: ‘It is about the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today’”* (Acts 24:21).

Later, in front of Festus, another governor, Paul states: *“Why does it seem incredible to you that God should raise the dead?”* (Acts 26:8). After he described his own conversion to believe in Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul stated: *“...and so I have stood firm to this day, testifying to great and small alike, saying nothing more than what the prophets and Moses himself said would happen: that the Christ was to suffer and that, as the first to rise from the dead, he was to proclaim that light now shone for our people and for the pagans too”* (Acts 26:22-23). King Agrippa, who was present, said to Paul, *“A little more, and your arguments would make a Christian of me”* (Acts 24:28). Thanks be to the merciful God that we are baptized into Christ and as Christians we do hold firm to the faith of the apostles, and we do offer the same worship as our fathers offered to God.

Dearly Beloved, that section of Sacred Scripture which we call the Old Testament, testifies to the great works which God performed for his chosen people and “the promises he made to Abraham and to his descendants forever.” It also contains the godly-inspired statements of prophets and holy people in whose wisdom sayings are kernels of the promise of a Savior to come, Immanuel, “God-with-us.” This savior or messiah would be born of a virgin, and for the salvation of mankind he would suffer death, but he would not suffer bodily corruption. Through his death and resurrection there would be a resurrection from the dead of all peoples. About this Suffering Servant of God, the great Prophet Isaiah clearly states: *“And yet ours were the sufferings he bore, ours the sorrows he carried...Yet he was pierced through for our faults, crushed for our sins. On him lies a punishment that brings us peace, and through his wounds we are healed”* and further, *“...God burdened him with the sins of all of us”* (Isaiah 53: 4-6).

Let us recall what another inspired prophet, Ezekiel, spoke in prophecy about the dry bones strewn on a battlefield: *“The Lord God says this to these bones: ‘I am now going to make the breath enter you, and you will live’,”* and further, *“I prophesied as he had ordered me, and the breath entered them; they came to life again and stood on their feet...”* (Ezekiel 37:5, 10). From these two Old Testament texts, we understand that a belief in a resurrection of the dead predates the coming of Jesus Christ.

In Saint Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians (modern day Salonika), he reminds the converted pagans: *“...you broke with idolatry when you were converted to God and became servants of the real, living God; and how you are now waiting for Jesus, his Son, whom he raised from the dead, to come from heaven to save us from the retribution which is coming”* (I Thessalonians 1:9-10). By the word, “living,” he means that they turned from stone and clay and metal pagan images to belief in the

Immaterial Creator, the One whom Jonah described to the sailors who cast him overboard as “*the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land*” (Jonah 1:9). Dearly beloved, we too must be on guard not to make for ourselves new idols to replace the true and living God of our fathers, not images of idols but idols of materialism, secularism, and hedonism.

This very letter to the Thessalonians was written about the year 49 of our Lord, perhaps some ten years or so after his crucifixion and resurrection! So, we see that this is what the Church has always and everywhere taught from the very beginning: that Jesus is alive and will return to earth. This is what Christians have believed and held fast through centuries of persecution. Let us not fall into the error to think that our age demands a “modern message,” a different Gospel. This would be the error to think that our generation is not in need of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ because we, today, are more intelligent or have made some kind of cumulative “progress” beyond previous generations. Human nature is wounded from Adam's fall, and we are all descendants of Adam. There is no “progressive” bettering of mankind through the ages. Everyone born stands in need of God's grace to overcome personal human weaknesses. There is no “collective” amelioration of humanity. Each generation, each person must respond to the same call of life and the same call to death. That is why being born of the flesh, we must be born of the Spirit in Holy Baptism and live a new life in Christ our hope.

We have the lives of those who have lived before us to encourage us. They recognized their human limitations, accepting God's grace to lead good lives in the hope of the eternal and blessed life to come. They lived the profound truth of the resurrection of the dead. We, too, must live our lives based on this faith in Christ Jesus, in the resurrection and the judgment to come; and in turn, we must pass it on to our own children through our example.

During the funeral service held over every Orthodox Christian, over you and over me, these words of Saint Paul to the Thessalonians are chanted: “*We want you to be quite certain, brethren, about those who have died to make sure that you do not grieve about them, like most other people who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and that it will be the same for those who have died in Jesus: God will bring them with him*” (I Thessalonians 4:13-14). Is this not the most comforting statement to hear? These words of great hope and trust in God should shape our lives. Certainly, we Orthodox Christians do have this hope, and our hope shall be fulfilled as promised by God himself; but, we must live out our hope, hour to hour, day to day and year to year, and not waver.

There is a price-tag on resurrection, Paul warns us: “*Don't delude yourself into thinking God can be cheated: where a man sows, there he reaps; if he sows in the field of self-indulgence, he will get a harvest of corruption out of it; if he sows in the field of the Spirit, he will get from it an harvest of eternal life. We must never get tired of doing good, because if we don't give up the struggle, we shall get our harvest at the proper time. While we have the chance, we must do good to all and especially to our brothers in the faith*” (Galatians 6:7-10).

We live in this age but are encouraged to remember that “*For us, our homeland is in heaven, and from heaven comes the Savior we are waiting for, the Lord Jesus Christ, and he will transfigure these wretched bodies of ours to be like his glorious body. He will do that by the same power with which he can subdue the whole universe*” (Philippians 3:20-21). Here is the basis for our statement in the Creed that we await the Lord to come again from the heavens to transfigure us and give us “*...the inheritance*

*that can never be spoiled or soiled and never fade away, because it is kept for you in the heavens”* (I Peter 1:4).

The continuity of the teachings of the apostles was assured through their own disciples. Shortly after Saint Paul wrote his letters, Saint Clement, disciple of Saint Peter and later Pope of Rome (+99) also martyred under the Emperor Trajan, states: *“Those who were made perfect in love by God's grace have a place among the godly, and they will be made manifest in the visitation of the kingdom of the Messiah. For it is written, ‘Enter into your chambers for a very little while, until my anger and wrath have gone away, and I will remember you on a good day, and I will raise you from your graves’”* (I Clement 50:3-4). Thus, we know that from the apostles and through their disciples, the Church has always taught and believed in the real resurrection of our Lord Christ from among the dead.

Followers of Jesus Christ have died witnessing to their beliefs in the resurrection. So died all the Apostles except John the Evangelist, the youngest. After the apostolic age there were multitudes of martyrs through the ages including our own day. The patron of our first hierarch, Bishop Policarp Morusca, was Saint Policarp, Bishop of Smyrna (circa 69-155), disciple of Saint John the Evangelist and great martyr under Emperor Marcus Aurelius. In his own letter to the Philippians, he exhorts: *“For if we pleased him (Jesus) in the present age, we shall receive also the age to come, just as he promised us, that he would raise us from the dead, and that if we conduct ourselves worthily with him, we shall also reign with him, if we have faith”* (Philippians 5:2).

In the “Prayer of the Third Antiphon” of the Divine Liturgy, we pray: *“Give us in this present age the knowledge of your truth and bestow on us in the future age, everlasting life.”* Although we could bring forward more and more witnesses to the truth, there is no need for us to go on. We call on you to read the lives of the saints, the wonderful, great and humble teachers of the Church. What we have presented in our Pastoral Letter is sufficient, we think, to rally us to strengthen our hope, straighten our life and share with others this reason for our joyous celebration this Pascha Day.

Let us, on this great day of Christian celebration, together cry out to the All-holy Trinity: *“I give you thanks...that I have a part...in the resurrection of eternal life, both of soul and body”* (Martyrdom of Policarp 1.42), because as Christians we know that: *“There will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and of the unjust”* (Acts 24:15). Thus, it is in the heights of joy that we greet one another, *“Christ is Risen. Truly, he is Risen!”*

**+ NATHANIEL**  
**By the Grace of God,**  
**Archbishop of Detroit and The Romanian Orthodox Episcopate of America**