



Simple Catechism from the experience of the Orthodox Church



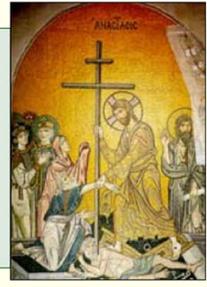
Journey to Pascha

FOR EDIFICATION AND
CONSOLATION



Great Lent

A spiritual journey
towards the End of the *old*
and the Beginning of the *new*



Journey to Pascha

From Great Lent to Pascha

When someone leaves on a journey, he must know where he is going. Thus it is with Lent.

Above all, **Lent is a spiritual journey and its destination is Pascha**, "the Feast of Feasts." It is the preparation for the "fulfillment of Pascha, the true Revelation."

We must begin, therefore, by trying to understand this connection between Lent and Pascha, for it reveals something very essential, very crucial about our Christian faith and life.

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IS IT necessary to explain that Pascha is much more than one of the feasts, more than a yearly commemoration of a past event?

Anyone who has, be it only once, taken part in that night which is "brighter than the day," who has tasted of that unique joy, knows it.

But what is that joy about? Why can we sing, as we do during the Paschal liturgy: "Today are all things filled with light, Heaven and earth and places under the earth"? In what sense do we celebrate, as we claim we do, "the death of Death, the annihilation of Hell, the beginning of a new and everlasting life..."?

To all these questions, the answer is: the *new life*, which almost two thousand years ago shone forth from the grave, has been given to us, to all those who believe in Christ.

It was given to us on the day of our Baptism, in which, as St. Paul says, we "were buried with Christ... unto death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead we also may walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4).

Thus, on Pascha, we celebrate Christ's Resurrection as something that happened and still happens to us. For each one of us received the gift of that new life and the power to accept it and live by it.

It is a gift which radically alters our attitude toward everything in this world, including death. It makes it possible for us to joyfully affirm: "Death is no more!"

Oh, death is still there, to be sure, and we still face it and someday it will come and take us. But it is our whole faith that by His own death Christ changed the very nature of death, made it a passage—a "passover," a "Pascha"—into the Kingdom of God, transforming the tragedy of tragedies into the ultimate victory. "Trampling down death by death," He made us partakers of His Resurrection.

This is why at the end of the Paschal Matins we say: "Christ is risen and life reigneth! Christ is risen and not one dead remains in the grave!"

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SUCH is that faith of the Church, affirmed and made evident by her countless Saints.

Is it not our daily experience, however, that this faith is very seldom ours, that all the time we lose and betray the



“new life” which we received as a gift, and that in fact we live as if Christ did not rise from the dead, as if that unique event had no meaning whatsoever for us?

All this because of our weakness, because of the impossibility for us to live constantly by "faith, hope, and love" on that level to which Christ raised us when He said: "Seek ye, first of all, the Kingdom of God and His righteousness."



We simply forget all this—so busy are we, so immersed in our daily preoccupations—and because we forget, we fail.

And through this forgetfulness, failure, and sin, our life becomes “old” again—petty, dark, and ultimately meaningless—a meaningless journey toward a meaningless end.

We manage to forget even death and then, all of a sudden, in the midst of our "enjoying life" it comes to us: horrible, inescapable, senseless.

We may from time to time acknowledge and confess our various “sins,” yet we cease to refer our life to that *new life* which Christ revealed and gave to us.

Indeed, we live as if He never came. **This is the only real sin, the sin of all sins,** the bottomless sadness and tragedy of our nominal Christianity.

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If we realize this, then we may understand what Pascha is and why it needs and presupposes Lent.

For we may then understand that **the liturgical traditions of the Church, all its cycles and services, exist, first**

of all, in order to help us recover the vision and the taste of that *new life* which we so easily lose and betray, so that we may repent and return to it.

How can we love and desire something that we do not know? How can we put above everything else in our life something which we have not seen and enjoyed?

In short: how can we seek a Kingdom of which we have no idea?

It is the worship of the Church that was from the very beginning and still is **our entrance into, our communion with, the new life of the Kingdom.**

It is through her liturgical life that the Church reveals to us something of that which "the ear has not heard, the eye has not seen, and what has not yet entered the heart of man, but which God has prepared for those who love Him." (I Corinthians 2:9).

And in the center of that liturgical life, as its heart and climax, as the sun whose rays penetrate everywhere, stands *Pascha*.

Pascha is the **door** opened every year into the splendor of Christ's Kingdom, the **foretaste** of the eternal joy that awaits us, the **glory** of the victory which already, although invisibly, fills the whole creation: "death is no more!"

The entire worship of the Church is organized around Pascha, and therefore the liturgical year, i.e., the sequence of seasons and feasts, becomes a *journey*, a **pilgrimage towards Pascha**, the **End**, which at the same time is the



Beginning: the end of all that which is "old"; the beginning of the new life, a constant "passage" from "this world" into the Kingdom already revealed in Christ.

And yet the "old" life, that of sin and pettiness, is not easily overcome and changed. The Gospel expects and requires from man an effort of *which, in his present state, he is virtually incapable.*

We are challenged with a vision, a goal, a way of life that is so much above our possibilities!

For even the Apostles, when they heard their Master's teaching, asked Him in despair: "but how is this possible?" (cf. St. Matthew 19:26).

It is not easy, indeed, to reject a petty *ideal of life* made up of daily cares, of search for material goods, security, and pleasure, for an *ideal of life* in which nothing short of perfection is the goal: "be ye perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect" (St. Matthew 5:48).

This world through all its "media" says: be happy, take it easy, follow the broad way.



Christ in the Gospel says: *choose the narrow way, fight and suffer, for this is the road to the only genuine happiness.*

And unless the Church helps, how can we make that awful choice; **how can we repent and return to the glorious promise given us each year at Pascha?**

This is where Great Lent comes in. This is the help extended to us by the Church.

It is the *school of repentance* which alone will make it possible to receive Pascha not as mere permission to eat,

to drink, and to relax, but indeed as **the end of the "old" in us, as our entrance into the "new."**

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IN THE early Church, the main purpose of Lent was to prepare the "catechumen," i.e., the newly converted Christian, for Baptism, which at that time was performed during the Paschal Liturgy.

But even when the Church rarely baptized adults and the institution of the catechumenate disappeared, **the basic meaning of Lent remained the same.** For even though we are baptized, what we constantly lose and betray is precisely that which we received at Baptism.

Therefore Pascha is our return every year to our own Baptism, whereas Lent is our preparation for that return—the slow and sustained effort to perform, at the end, or own "passage" or "Pascha" into the new life in Christ.

If lenten worship preserves even today its catechetical and baptismal character, it is not as "archeological" remains of the past, but as something valid and essential for us.

For each year Lent and Pascha are, once again, the **rediscovery and the recovery by us of what we were made through our own baptismal death and resurrection.**

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A journey, a pilgrimage! Yet, as we begin it, as we make the first step into the "bright sadness" of Lent, we see—far, far away—the **destination. It is the joy of Pascha, it is the entrance into the glory of the Kingdom.**



And it is this vision, the foretaste of Pascha, that makes Lent's sadness bright and our lenten effort a "spiritual spring."

The night may be dark and long, but all along the way a **mysterious and radiant dawn seems to shine on the horizon.**

"Do not deprive us of our expectation,
O Lover of man!"



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