

## "As Holy Week Approaches" a guide to Orthodox Holy Week.

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How beautiful; How deep; How rich in content, in scripture are the services assigned to Holy Week. Each of us needs to devote a significant portion of this week to immerse themselves in the meaning of the Cross. Sad indeed are we who overlook this final intense preparation to celebrate our Lord's Resurrection. We cheat ourselves of the opportunity to increase our joy...

As Holy Week Approaches

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(edited by Fr. Andrew)

Great and Holy Week is approaching. With the arrival of Lazarus Saturday and the Feast of the Lord Jesus Christ's Entry into Jerusalem, the intensity of Orthodox Christian life increases. The time is at hand to think about the arrest, the trial, the crucifixion, the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. The time is at hand to think about the Son of God voluntarily going to the Cross. Each person needs to savor the meaning of the Cross. Each person needs to meditate on the meaning of the Cross. Each person needs to attempt to fathom the degree of sacrifice, the degree of humility represented in Jesus Christ going to the Cross.

The Holy Apostle Paul told the Corinthians: "I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified,"(I Cor.2:2). Believers need to determine the amount of time they devote daily to Jesus Christ. Believers need to determine the amount of time they will devote to the Lord Jesus Christ during Holy Week. Many services are scheduled in Orthodox Churches during Holy Week. Each service is rich in content. Each service is rich in Scripture. Each service directs the mind and heart and soul to the Lord Jesus Christ. The soul of each person deserves attention throughout life. The soul deserves care throughout life. The point at which individuals become conscious of and begin to care for the soul can vary.

A small number of individuals are serious about Christ from an early age. A small number of individuals are active believers from an early age and remain active throughout life. Some individuals are active and conscious sinners but at a certain point in life turn to Christ in repentance. When the commitment to Christ is made, concern for the soul arises.

The battle for the soul is a daily battle. The battle for the soul is a moment-by-moment battle. Temptations, passions, diversions, distractions, outside influences and internal thoughts can create tension in the person and put the soul in peril. Believers must remain close to Christ. Believers must turn to Christ in the face of temptations and distractions, in face of contrary thoughts and inclinations. Only Christ gives the strength to battle for the soul. The First Epistle of St. John says: "You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world."(I Jn.4:4) The soul has greater value than the whole world (Mt.16:26).

Holy Week is the time to contemplate the condition of the soul. Holy Week is the time to contemplate Christ and the care of the soul. Holy Week is the time to contemplate what is valued most in life. Our

Lord Jesus Christ said: "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."(Mt. 6:21) Each believer determines the allocation of time and personal resources. Each believer applies personal time and resources to the pursuit of goals, to the living of daily life. Family and friends, work and community, church and personal interests are allocated a portion of a believer's time and resources. Time studies can show where waste exists. Time studies can show where a certain area or areas of life can receive greater emphasis and attention than others. During Holy Week believers will answer the question of the importance given to the Lord Jesus Christ. During Holy Week believers will answer the question of weight and importance given to the soul. The Lord God deserves expressions of appreciation. The Lord God deserves acknowledgement of His Glory. The Lord God deserves expressions of love. Holy Week affords the believer the opportunity to hear the complete Gospels of Sts. Matthew, Mark, Luke and most of the Gospel of St. John.

Holy Week affords the believer the opportunity to hear the accounts of Jesus' crucifixion. Holy Week affords the believer the opportunity to join with others in being attentive to the life of the Lord Jesus Christ. By coming to church during Holy Week, believers not only come to learn, believers by their presence witness to the importance assigned to the life in Christ. By attending church during Holy Week, believers declare by action that church services are an important part of life. The soul requires nourishment.

Holy Week provides nourishment for the soul. Opportunities exist for receiving the Precious Body and Blood of Christ. Opportunities exist for anointing at the Service of Holy Unction. Holy Week is a week of serious prayer. Holy Week is a week of serious concentration on Christ. Holy Week is a week of serious church services. Holy Week is a movement toward the joy of Pascha. Believers know going into Holy Week where Holy Week leads. Believers know of the Cross and the Tomb. Believers also know about the Resurrection. Believers immersed in Holy Week open their hearts and minds to the experience of Christ. Holy Week is an invitation to the full life in the Church. Holy Week is an invitation to share with Christ the experience of betrayal, arrest, trial, crucifixion, death and resurrection. Holy Week can transform the believer if he or she enters Holy Week seeking transformation.

Our Lord said: "All things are possible to him who believes."(Mk.9:23). The mind, heart and soul have much to deal with in Holy Week. The mind, heart and soul have much to absorb. The mind, heart and soul are of central importance during Holy Week. Christ upon the Cross has a view of each heart. Christ upon the Cross has a view of each mind. Christ upon the Cross knows the condition of our souls. The passing of centuries does not diminish the power of the Cross. The passage of centuries does not diminish the message of the Cross. What weight will each believer assign to the message of the Cross? Which believers will open minds and hearts to the message of the Cross? Christ was upon the Cross between two criminals. Believers going through Holy Week come face to face with Christ upon the Cross. How many will shed tears of repentance? How many will shed tears of love? How many will shed tears of thanksgiving? The forgiveness of sins takes on greater meaning during Holy Week. The ability to receive the Precious Body and Blood of Christ in each century takes on greater clarity during Holy Week.

Believers attending Divine services each day of Holy Week invest in the Kingdom of God. Believers attending the Divine services each day of Holy Week draw strength from the experience. Corporate prayer, corporate worship are strengthening experiences. The Divine services of the Holy Orthodox Church are not diluted. They are rich in content. Time is required to observe Holy Week. The time is well-invested time. The direction a life takes is determined by the choices made. A conscious choice, a conscious decision can turn a person toward the life in Christ. Holy Week is a concentrated focus on the life of Christ. Believers can hear about the Annunciation, about the Baptism in the Jordan, about the turning of the water into wine by attending services during Holy Week. The Church wants

believers to know the available details about the earthly life of the Lord Jesus Christ. Believers do well to recall the available details about the earthly life of the Lord Jesus Christ. Learning about the factual details of Jesus' life girds the believer for the daily battles for life. Being immersed in the life of Christ is an opening of the heart and mind to Christ.

Holy Week summons the hearts and minds of believers to concentrate on Christ completely. Holy Week summons the hearts and minds of believers to be open to the life of Christ in ways hitherto unknown. Holy Week gives focus for the believer. Holy Week is set apart as a special time of the year. Holy Week comes after a long period of preparation. Holy Week stands out from the other weeks of the year. The importance believers attach to Holy Week is directly proportionate to their faith. The importance believers attach to Holy Week is directly proportionate to their interest in growing as Christians. The importance believers attach to Holy Week is directly proportionate to their love and hunger for Christ. The importance believers attach to Holy Week is in direct ratio to the need to satisfy the longing of the soul for unity with God.

Believers somehow must find the proper balance of remaining true to the Faith while being renewed in the Faith. Believers must move beyond paths of sin to paths of renewal in Christ. Believers must cast aside hindrances that tie the believer to sin and detract the believer. Believers must embrace life in a way that brings greater unity with Christ. Increased knowledge about Christ and the Church is necessary for all believers. Increased prayer is necessary for all believers. A life strengthened by the Precious Body and Blood of Christ, a life renewed through Holy Confession, is a life directed toward Christ and united with Christ.

We never know how many Holy Weeks will be in our lives. Going to Divine services during Holy Week on successive years can have a cumulative effect on a person. The celebration of Divine services during Holy Week has a positive effect on the communities in which services are held. A ripple effect occurs which is often is not noticed. The more Divine services held in a parish, the greater the potential enrichment of parish life. Attentiveness is necessary at the service. Coming to the services with great faith and expectations are plusses. Believers benefit from thinking carefully about the Holy Week services attended during their lifetimes. Believers benefit from making a commitment each year to be in church during Holy Week.

Believers can bring their cares to church during Holy Week. Believers can come to God and prostrate before God and seek help from God. Believers can prostrate before God and seek forgiveness from God. Believers can prostrate before God and give thanks to God. Believers can come to church during Holy Week with open ears, open mind and open hearts. Believers can receive Divine instruction as communicated through the Divine services of the Church. Believers can draw strength from the witness of the clergy, the altar servers, and the singers. Believers can draw inspiration from the holy icons, the detailed frescoes, and the order and structure of the church. Believers arriving at Holy Week can think back to the first announcements of the coming of Great Lent. Believers arriving at Holy Week can think of the individuals identified with the arrest, trial, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. Believers arriving at Holy Week can examine their personal goals and determine if they are in harmony with the Crucified and Resurrected Christ. Believers coming to Holy Week can come with inquisitive minds seeking to learn more about the Crucifixion and Resurrection.

Fullness exists in each Divine service of Holy Week. Each Divine service in each location is part of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church identified in The Creed professed at Holy Baptism and recited at each Divine Liturgy. The Divine services of Holy Week are manifestations of the Church in given locations at given times in history. The Divine services of Holy Week are expressions of the Church in contemporary times in contemporary locations. The Divine services of Holy Week are in keeping with

the continuous history of the Church. Holy Week services are celebrated throughout the inhabited world.

Attendance at Holy Week services is completely voluntary. Individuals are not obligated to attend the Divine services of Holy Week. Individuals identified as believers are expected to attend as many Holy Week services as is possible. To make Holy Week an important part of life, believers must be ready to exclude other activities. Believers must be willing to forego activities that would normally occur during the time period of Holy Week. Families need to come to terms with Holy Week. Parents need to determine which services of Holy Week the children will be required to attend. Perhaps absence from school is necessary. Not all schools take the same view regarding excused absences for church services. Not all parents make the commitment to have children attend Divine services during school time.

The atmosphere in the home is something to think about as it relates to Holy Week. What kind of activities will be permissible in the home? Will children be permitted to engage in recreational, athletic or social activities on Great and Holy Thursday, Great and Holy Friday, Great and Holy Saturday? Will employed adults make an effort to be excused from work to attend Divine services during Holy Week? How many individuals will schedule available vacation periods to be in church during Holy Week? How many homes will silence their televisions during Holy Week? How many homes will take on an atmosphere of reverence during Holy Week? How many individuals will limit their activities during Holy Week? Will fasting and prayer dominate the lives of believers during Holy Week?

Believers control their hearts and minds to a degree. Believers determine the attitude and disposition they will have toward the arrival of Holy Week. Believers determine the approach they will maintain towards Holy Week. Parents set examples for their children in the way they approach Holy Week. Parents are in a position to determine what minor children will do or not do regarding the attending of services during Holy Week.

Employers can make their places of employment either "friendly" for employees to attend Divine services during Holy Week or make it extremely difficult. Community leaders are in positions of scheduling events. Sensitive community leaders will refrain from scheduling community events that conflict with Holy Week observances. Individuals involved with community athletics can exercise restraint regarding the scheduling of activities during Holy Week. Parents and other responsible adults can make known in their communities that it is unacceptable for schools and community recreational associations to schedule activities during Holy Week. Academicians should be sensitive to the religious beliefs of students and refrain from being adamant about the scheduling of exams that would fall on such days as Great and Holy Friday.

The atmosphere in parish churches should reflect the seriousness of Holy Week. Parish churches exist for the celebration of the Divine services of the Church, for the salvation of souls, for the advancement and proclamation of the Gospel. Parish churches exist for educational instruction, for bringing individuals to Christ and keeping individuals united with Christ. Parish churches do not exist for the promotion of activities that weaken the commitment to and life in Christ. Most individuals give a small percent of their time to Orthodox Christian Divine services and to parish life. Parishes must do everything possible to use the time devoted to parish life to strengthen the Christian commitment and nourish the souls of believers.

Holy Week by virtue of the name "Holy" sets the week aside as being special and in a category by itself. Of all the weeks of the year, only one week is called "Holy." Holy Week is a finite period of time

with a finite order of services. Certain flexibility exists in the scheduling of services in parishes. Certain flexibility in parish practices exists. All services are to be celebrated according to the canonical practices of the Holy Orthodox Church. All observances of Holy Week are to be within the Holy Tradition of the Orthodox Church. Each Holy Week sets a tone for parish life. Parish expectations and practices establish the tone.

Ideally, parish life is strengthened as a result of the observance of Holy Week. Ideally, individuals come to Holy Week services, observe Holy Week in their personal lives, and are improved Christians as a result. Indeed, the death of Christ on the Cross touches the inner most depths of serious believers. The death of Christ on the Cross reaches beyond human comprehension. The death of Christ on the Cross is all-consuming on Great and Holy Friday. The joy of the Resurrection is revealed after the darkness of the death on the Cross. The Divine Liturgy on Great and Holy Saturday takes the believer through Old Testament readings that stretch the mind and touch the heart and soul. The Divine Liturgy of Great and Holy Saturday brings peace and tranquility, a presence of God and confidence in the Resurrection.

Some believers during their lifetime are blessed to be present at The Office of the Divine and Sacred Washing.[1] The Lord Jesus Christ set the example for subsequent generations when He washed His disciples' feet. Jesus said: If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you."(Jn.13:13-14)

The Office of Holy Unction is often served on Holy Wednesday evening. Believers seeking the healing of soul and body come to this service. Believers seeking completeness in preparation for Pascha come to this service.

The reading of the Twelve Gospels during Matins for Holy Friday is of interest to many Orthodox believers. Many believers make a special effort to come to this service. The burial procession on Holy Friday and the presence of Christ's Tomb in the Church are riveting experiences for serious believers. Holy Week is not limited to Thursday, Friday and Saturday. Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of Holy Week enrich the faithful coming to church. Individuals taking time on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday to invest in Holy Week draw upon the treasures of the Church and benefit as a result.

From Lazarus Saturday to Pascha, believers are exposed to a continuous set of services that can change the constitution of a person. Believers going through the continuous experience and having invested fully in Great Lent will be different at Pascha.

With the arrival of Holy Week, believers have the opportunity to think about their lives and the degree of faithfulness to Christ. How many times has a believer denied Christ as did the Holy Apostle Peter? How many when asked "Are not you also one of this man's disciples?" answer by behavior as did Peter "I am not."(Jn.18:17) What form does denial of Christ take place in the present? Are believers even aware and conscious of denying Christ by actions of everyday life? When believers limit active love of Christ and worship to the most minute segments of time, is this not a certain sense of denial the divinity of Christ? How often do believers act like Judas and betray Jesus for a certain amount of silver? (Mt.26:14-15) How often do compromises in daily life draw a believer away from Christ and toward financial enrichment? How often are ethical decisions diluted in the name of practicality which represent betrayal of Christ? How often do believers look at personal behavior and determine when Christ is betrayed or denied by the daily actions?

Which believers will come to church during Holy Week to venerate the Tomb of Christ? Which

believers will be there for the burial procession? How many will come on Holy Saturday morning? How many adults have fond memories as children of having attended many Divine services of Holy Week? How many believers will come to the Divine Liturgy on Holy Thursday morning and partake of the Precious Body and Blood of Christ? How many believers look with great anticipation to the Divine services of Holy Week? How many believers treasure the experiences of each Holy Week as among the most meaningful times of life?

Knowing that the joy of the Resurrection is experienced at the conclusion of Great and Holy Week, how does this anticipation affect the believer in the observance of Holy Week? Each believer will determine the best way he or she will observe Holy Week. Each believer will determine the way Holy Week will be received and honored. The observing of Holy Week is a completely free and voluntary choice. The love for Christ is a complete and free choice of the believer. The recognition of Christ's love for the believer comes from opening the mind and heart to Christ.

Great and Holy Week is celebrated each year with full knowledge that previous celebrations have existed. Great and Holy Week is observed each year in a certain order and format derived through prior practices in the Holy Orthodox Church. Changes have occurred through time. Certainly there has been an accumulation of services and a development of services to arrive at the present structured Holy Week. To do all of the services possible during Holy Week requires a significant investment of time and also a number of different individuals. A certain amount of stamina, a certain amount of training, and a certain amount of understanding of service content are required. Preparation is necessary for the conducting of services. Preparation is necessary to have the proper mentality to participate in the services. Bodily preparation is necessary for the participation in Divine services. A specific place is needed for the holding of Divine services during Holy Week. A minimum amount of peace and order are necessary for the conducting of Divine services. The greatness of God is expressed in the Psalms. Psalm 104 begins with the words: "Bless the Lord, O my soul! O Lord my God, thou art very great!"(Ps.104:1)

Believers should seek the Spirit of God in Holy Week. Believers should seek the Holy Spirit, the Lord the Giver of Life. When Jesus voluntarily went to the Cross, what He did was unprecedented. When Jesus rose from the dead, what He did was unprecedented. Believers should invest fully in Holy Week with the anticipation of being renewed in Christ in ways hitherto unanticipated. Heed the words of the Holy Apostle Paul who said: Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God."(Col.3:16).

Holy St. Nikolai (Velimirovich) in Prayers by the Lakesaid: "Let my soul eat God and she will be crowned with everlasting life. Let my mind eat God and it will be crowned with everlasting wisdom. Let my heart eat God and it will be crowned with everlasting joy."[2] Holy Week is an opportunity for the mind, heart and soul to eat God. May the vision and understanding of God expand and God's love be embraced by each believer observing Holy Week. As Holy Week approaches, bear in mind these words attributed to the Holy Apostle Paul and look "to Jesus the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." (Heb.12:2).

God is more than the human mind can fully comprehend. The Son of God taking on human flesh and voluntarily going to the Cross for our salvation exceeds the ability of the finite mind to fully appreciate. Believers sin. Believers have a life-long road to follow from the baptismal font to the Kingdom of God. Holy Week is an annual intersection in the life of the believer that makes a difference in the way the world is seen and life is lived. The whole world is different because Holy

Week is observed each year. The observance of Holy Week is like a little leaven (I Cor. 5:6).

The observance of Holy Week alters the course of history. Believers travel to observe Holy Week. Believers are enriched by Holy Week. Believers are transformed by Holy Week. Holy Week reveals the presence of the Church centuries after the Death and Resurrection of Christ. Time is transcended by the observance of Holy Week. Christ's Death on the Cross is brought to the present. The joy of the Resurrection is anticipated as a current event. Individuals of different ages, different sexes, on different continents, of different ethnic backgrounds, share common ground and common observance of Holy Week. The Divine services of Holy Week celebrated in different languages in different locations carry the same message. The Holy Gospel is the same regardless of the language in which it is proclaimed.

Every Holy Week, the Sacrifice of Christ on the Cross comes to the fore. Centuries ago Jesus said: "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me". This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you."(Lk.22:19-20). We honor Christ when we observe Holy Week. We honor the saints and martyrs of God's Holy Church when we observe Holy Week. We remember the sacrifice and contributions of known and unknown believers through the centuries who maintained the observance of Holy Week. We have an obligation to present and future generations to observe Holy Week. We have an obligation to care for our souls by observing Holy Week.

#### Endnotes

1. The Great Book of Needs. Vol.II. St.Tikhon's Seminary Press, South Canaan, Pennsylvania, 1998, p.321.

Bishop Nikolai Velimirovich. Prayers by the Lake. Translated by Rt. Rev. Archimandrite Todor Mika and Very Rev. Dr. Stevan Scott. Free Serbian Orthodox Diocese of United States of America and Canada, Grayslake, Illinois, p.187.

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