

Catechism & Theology Course
Session IV, Class V
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(From Eugen J. Pentiu, *Hearing the Scriptures: Liturgical Exegesis of the Old Testament in Byzantine Orthodox Hymnography*)

Suffering: The Slaughtered Lamb & the Distraught Ewe- Good Friday

“On this day, Holy and Great Friday, we observe/perform the holy, saving, and frightening passion of our Lord and God and Savior, Jesus Christ: the spitting, the blows, the buffeting, the mockery, the reviling, the purple robe, the reed, the sponge, the vinegar, the nails, the spear, and before all, the cross and death, which he accepted to endure readily for us; again, also the saving confession of the kind-hearted thief, who was crucified with him.”

- *The Synaxarion on Holy Friday*

Holy Friday Theme:

- Theologically, this is the day when sin has reached its climax (i.e. humans killing their Creator) and of the day when God through Jesus has reached extreme humility, (i.e. God, accepting to die for humans).
- On Holy Friday, the sacrificial lamb is slaughtered under the very eyes of a distraught, devastated ewe, and a whole cortege of pain and suffering, unstopably unfolds, from spitting and mockery to blows, nails, spear, Cross, and death of the Lamb of God.
- Two figures dominate the liturgical day in its original setting (i.e. at the House of Caiaphas - John 18:13-24, the Sanhedrin hall, Pilate’s Praetorium, King Herod’s palace, and the Rocky Golgotha - John 18:28-19:17, Mark 15:25): Jesus and Mary, the slaughtered lamb, and the distraught ewe.
- Good Friday hymnography is a zooming in on the suffering, as experienced by Jesus and his mother, Mary.

Holy Friday Structure:

Holy Friday Orthros (Matins)

- There are three services held on Holy Friday: Orthros (Matins), Royal Hours, and Great Vespers
- The Orthros of Holy Friday, the longest among the liturgical services of the Orthodox church, is celebrated by anticipation on Holy Thursday evening. It is a special Orthros with a number of extra features, such as the Twelve Passion

Gospel readings, hence the popular name for this Orthros service, the “Service of the Twelve Gospels” (Gk. Ακολουθία των Δώδεκα Ευαγγέλιον).

- The first and the longest reading is from John 13:31–18:1 and is about Jesus’ discourse at the Last Supper. The following ten pericopes deal with Jesus’ sufferings and crucifixion, while the last reading covers His burial with His sealing of the tomb and assigning a guard to keep watch over it.
- After each gospel reading the choirs response is the same, “Glory to Your Long-Suffering, Lord, Glory to You,” reminding the worshipers that Holy Friday is the sacred time of extreme humility, long-suffering, and perfect obedience, the Jesus showed to His Heavenly Father, and fallen humanity.
- Another hallmark of this special Orthros is the procession of a massive cross, taken out from the altar by the serving priest, who installs it in the middle of the church. The symbolic action is known as the “Service of the Crucified One” (Gk. Ακολουθία του Εσταυρωμένου); according to older/Antiochian traditions, the image of the crucified Christ was painted directly on the wood of the cross that was taken out in procession. This happens following the fifth gospel lection.
- Another feature of this Orthros is that during the procession with the cross, the last of 15 hymns (known as antiphons) is sung: “Today is hanged on a tree, the One who hanged the earth in the waters”- which heightens the emotional register of this dramatic representation of Jesus, is crucifixion by placing it within, or the very beginning of God’s creation

Holy Friday Royal Hours

- The Royal or Great Hours read on Holy Friday morning are four in number: the first hour (6 AM), the third hour (9 AM), the sixth hour (Noon), and the ninth hour (3 PM); each hour has its distinct, theological theme, covering the day’s most important moments, namely, Jesus’ crucifixion, death, and entombment.
- Characteristic of the hours of Holy Friday, are the three lections read at each of the hours: prophecy, epistle, and gospel, along with selected psalms pertaining to the central theme of Good Friday: Jesus’ Passion

Great Vespers of Holy Friday

- Great Vespers, held currently on Holy Friday afternoon, is called in Greek Αποκαθήλωσις (lit. the “un-nailing”), known also as the “Service of the Deposition” or “Taking Down From the Cross,” and refers to the time, shortly after the ninth hour (3 PM), when Jesus’ lifeless body was taken down from the cross, wrapped in a linen shroud, and hastily buried in a new tomb provided by Joseph of Arimathea.
- Besides un-nailing Jesus’s image from the cross and its deposition on the altar table symbolizing the tomb, hewn in the rock, this special vespers features a small “burial procession” of Jesus depicted lifeless on the Επιτάφιος (Epitaphios)

carried by the priest, from the altar, in procession throughout the church, and set on a table in the center of the nave symbolizing the tomb of Christ.

- The other, greater procession takes place in the evening, at the Orthros service of Holy Saturday. Three Old Testament readings are followed by the epistle and gospel readings.
- The officiating priest carries the Epitaphios over his head, and arriving in the center of the church, places it in the Κουβουκλίον (“bed-chamber,” Lat. *cubiculum*, a euphemism for “tomb”), a wooden structure, symbolizing Jesus’s body being laid in the tomb.

Overcoming: Jonah & the Never-Setting Light- Holy Saturday

“On Great and Holy Saturday, we celebrate the divine-bodily Tomb and the descent into Hades of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, through which he recalled our very family from corruption and carried it into life eternal.”

- *The Synaxarion on Holy Saturday*

Holy Saturday Theme:

- Holy Saturday services zoom in on the time of transition between Jesus’s death and resurrection. It is a time of sheer silence, troubling, mystery, intense, expectation, when sadness, coexists paradoxically with joy; it is a *joyful-sadness*
- Great Saturday is the Christian liturgized version of the biblical Sabbath, “cessation of work, rest.” Similarly to the Creator-God who marked the end of His creative work by instituting the Sabbath, Jesus indicates the end of His salvific work through “sabbatizing” in the tomb.
- The same with Jesus: His death on the Cross means the end, the completion, an accomplishment of His salvific work.
- This seeming end, or Sabbath “observed” in the tomb, coincides, with the beginning of another work, the defeating the source of evil and the power of death through Jesus’ descent into Hades
- The main theme of Holy Saturday is conveyed by the stark contrast between the motionlessness of Jesus’ dead body in the tomb, and Jesus simultaneously disarming and liberating journey to Hades. It is noteworthy that Jesus is not besieging Hades by strategizing, or putting up a good fight- not at all. The mere presence of a dignifyingly humble Jesus, the “deified, mortal being,” lifeless in the tomb, yet descending at the same time into Hades, is enough to disorient and paralyze death.
- The humble presence of the Crucified One is enough to liberate all the hopeless captives of Hades, even those lingering in the far most corners of that vast domain. Jesus’

effortless, silent, yet real victory over Hades, matches his unique endurance of suffering, humility, and faithfulness on Good Friday.

- Holy Saturday remind the worshipers that in spite of death, Jesus has defeated the source of all evil, and overcomes the power of Hades
- The understanding of Jesus' resurrection would be incomplete without Holy Saturday. This "Sabbath of Sabbath" – the Sabbath, par excellence, understood as the end/beginning process of Jesus's death and defeat of evil, the unseen "sign of the prophet Jonah" (Matt 12:39) gives Jesus's resurrection, meaningful content and clear direction.
- In the icon of the resurrection (Gk. Ανάσταση), depicts Jesus, coming out of Hades, grasping Adam and Eve and other Old Testament persons out of the underworld prison. Hades' broken gates and bolts are spread everywhere over the dark deep, where a chained figure represents Hades, lies beneath Jesus' feet. This icon, so representative of the Orthodox view on resurrection, speaks volumes on Holy Saturday's deep and complex theological meaning.

Holy Saturday Structure:

Holy Saturday Orthros (Matins)

- Among the best known of the Holy Week services of the Orthodox is the Orthros of Holy Saturday, held in anticipation on Holy Friday evening. The central theme of this popular and beautiful service is a reflection on Jesus' hidden "journey" from death to resurrection. As Robert Taft rightly notes, this is the "most dogmatic of the present Byzantine services"
- The Orthros is celebrated by anticipation on Holy Friday evening, and contains a special service, the Encomium or Encomia (Gk. "Praises"). This service is better known as the "Lamentations" (Gk. Επιτάφιος θρήνος, lit. "funeral song, lament over a tomb") divided into three sections and commemorating Jesus's passion, death, and entombment. The priest(s) while standing in front of the Κουβουκλίων or tomb, during the encomia chants the first verse of each of the three sections, sensing crosswise each time, the Kouboukleion and Epitaphios.
- The chanting of encomia is followed by a procession with the epitaphios outside around the church. During the procession, the priest may make four stops for a brief litany each time. The popular practice is to then have the faithful pass under the epitaphios that is raised over the heads while reentering the church. This represents symbolically the passage along with Christ from death to life.
- Inside the church, the priest takes the epitaphios and kouboukleion and brings it back into the altar, placing it on the altar table, symbolize in the entombment. The epitaphios will remain there for 40 days until the Feast of the Ascension.
- Beginning with the Orthros of Holy Saturday, the priest(s) wears bright vestments, showing that the transition from death to life has just begun.

Holy Pascha (By Anticipation) Vesperal Liturgy - Vigil

- Today, the Vespereal Liturgy of Saint Basil is celebrated on Holy Saturday morning, but in the past, this liturgy was officiated on Holy Saturday evening, and marked the beginning of the Holy Paschal Vigil. As a matter fact, Holy Saturday used to be the only day, when faithful did not gather at the church for the Eucharistic service, but observed a strict fast at home.
- This service consist of two parts, the Vespers of Pascha and Saint Basil's Liturgy, whose readings and hymns abound in baptismal and resurrection of motifs, a memento of the past when catechumen's were baptized on the Paschal Vigil
- At the Vespers, out of 15 Old Testament readings prescribed by the Triodion, only three are now usually read, from Genesis, Jonah, and Daniel, ending up with the chanting of the "Hymn of the Three Youths." Among these readings, the reading of the full book of Jonah points to the "Sign of Jonah "in Jesus' descent into Hades.
- Prior to the gospel reading, the priest chants the refrain "Arise, O God, and judge the earth..." while the choir sings Psalm 82 (81):8. During the singing, the priest spreads laurel leaves throughout the church, pointing to Jesus is victory over death and the lords, bodily resurrection