

Hell Was Embittered: Trampling Down Death by Death:  
A Letter to my St. Seraphim friends and family

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

I have been thinking a lot lately of the song we will soon sing so joyously throughout the Paschal season, “Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life.” In particular, I have been reflecting how we, especially myself in particular, are to understand, or deepen our understanding, of the phrase, “trampling down death by death.” And in anticipation of Pascha itself, I have been thinking about the wonderful homily of St. John Chrysostom that we hear every Pascha, welcoming all to the Feast of Feasts, whether they have labored from the first hour or from the eleventh hour. For the past few years, it has been our beloved Father Michael Margitich, that tirelessly “retired” priest of God, who has read so effectively St. John’s homily at the end of the Paschal Matins; and I am remembering with some nostalgia, since I will not be with you to hear it this year, how his powerful voice, trembling with the passionate joy of the Resurrection, ringing out the words, “Hell was embittered” while the congregation shouts back, “it was embittered”, would always awaken in me a “cosmic” awareness so real that it would send shivers down my spine.

How do I make the truth of the Resurrection more real in my life? I ask myself. How do I prepare myself to participate in Pascha in a more real way than ever before? How do I make the joy of Pascha a permanent reality rather than a fleeting feeling grounded in a canonically required, seasonably appropriate expression of happiness? How do I make the realization of the Resurrection survive that initial post-fast feeling of joyful overindulgence in food and drink, which indulgence I know I am going to engage in, which, indeed, I am looking forward with great anticipation to doing? Well, the short answer to all these questions is, that’s what the Great Fast of Lent is for, and where have you been and what have you been doing the past 40 days, anyway? And the answer to that is, not always being in the right place, not always doing the right thing, not always fasting with joy, not always attending the services with compunction. Still, the homily of St. John expresses to the full the triumph of the Resurrection, and the infinite mercy of Christ, the overwhelming riches of which trump all human notions of justice by embracing all without distinction, disregarding merit, because he is “merciful to the last, and provides for the first,” giving to the one, and showing kindness to the other, receiving the works and welcoming the intention, honoring the act and commending the purpose. What a wonderful expression of the infinite blessing of the Resurrection!

Well, then there comes that little voice that insinuates, why bother to fast and pray with diligence if one is going to receive the Paschal blessing anyway? Ah, but Christ welcomes the eleventh hour laborers primarily because they at least preserved the right intention to begin. He even welcomes those who have not even begun to labor as long as they kept alive the intention. The triumphant and merciful resurrected Christ welcomes the intention and commends the purpose, because his Mercy takes account of and overcomes everything in the existential actuality of the fallen world that would prevent us from effectively succeeding in our spiritual labor: our

sinfulness, the difficult conditions of life in all their various aspects—everything without exception that in this fallen world prevents the enactment and realization of virtue. It is said with truth that the road to hell is paved with good intentions, but St. John’s homily announces the “good news” that the infinite mercy and generosity of Pascha miraculously changes heavenward even the ultimate direction of that road to hell if one has striven at least to have kept one’s intention directed toward heaven.

This infinite generosity of the Risen Christ must be one of the most bitter of the embitterments that Hell has to face because of Pascha. Hell is embittered because it believed it was within its rights to seize, incarcerate and torture sinful souls, and that this situation would continue to obtain as long as the world exists. C. S. Lewis expresses this very intuition in his remarkable description of the debate between Aslan and the White Witch over the life of Edmond in the book, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. By the law of cosmic justice, by the law of cause and effect, by the law of sin and death, the witch had the right to claim the life of Edmond because of his sin. She invoked the law of the deep magic from the dawn of time. But Aslan triumphed by invoking the deeper magic from before the dawn of time, which was empowered by the sacrifice of his own innocent life. The deep magic from the dawn of time symbolizes the law of cosmic justice that requires an effect for every cause, a commensurate result for every sin. The deeper magic from before the dawn of time points to the pre-fallen conditions of the life of Paradise, the eternal state of harmony with God’s being and will. Hell is embittered because its right to claim sinful souls by the implacable law of cosmic justice was set at naught by Christ’s death and resurrection, which unleashes the infinite Ocean of Divine Mercy.

It is by contemplating the embitterment of Hades that we are brought back to what “trampling down death by death” means. For, death, especially the fear of death, had been Hell’s ultimate weapon from the dawn of time, its WMD, the one and only cosmic “weapon of mass destruction,” the original doomsday weapon. Just as the first and ancestral sin brought separation from God and death, the consequence of that separation, so hidden in every sin, in all sinful passion, is the gnawing worm of the fear of death. Our very sense of individuated selfhood, our self-awareness of being a separate, individual being, our glorification of self (vain-glory and pride), our unquenchable egocentricity, is the motive force without exception of all sin, because every sin we commit is grounded in self-preservation, self-acquisition, self-centeredness, and self-love--and all self-centeredness is rooted in death and the fear of death. We exist as self-conscious, self-centered individuated beings at the price of separation from God. Death is the gate of hell itself, through which pass all those doomed to enter therein. (Yes, thoughtful reader, death is also the gateway to heaven, and we will be getting to that.) And death and the fear of death are the very gates of hell that Jesus was referring to when He told Peter that they shall not prevail against the Rock of the Church (Mt. 16:18). For Hell to be deprived of its ultimate weapon would be its ultimate embitterment.

It is a remarkable fact, which few scriptural commentators seem to have noticed, that a gate is actually a defensive weapon, not an offensive one. An army does not mount an attack with gates (imagine a mounted cavalry charge where the cavalry officers were armed not with sabers but

with gates—this laughable and unwieldy image at the very least would require one to rename the “light” brigade that made its fateful Crimean charge!); a fortress or redoubt, however, seeks by the use of great gates to prevent unwanted entrance. What Jesus is saying is that the Rock against which the gates of hell shall not prevail, the sudden and eternally valid experiential realization of Peter upon which the Church of Christ is built, the realization that Christ is the Son of the Living God, is destined to burst asunder the gates of hell—in other words, to embitter it.

And yet, as we all know, death still exists as an elemental and inescapable reality for everyone living. Pascha did not eliminate death. Even the most faithful and perfect believers in Christ, even holy and god-bearing elders like St. Seraphim of Sarov, for God’s sake, end up dead. What then is going on here? If Christ did not destroy death, if trampling down death by death does not mean the end or destruction of death, why are we celebrating? And why did we fast and pray and struggle throughout Lent? St Paul said once, that if Christ be not risen, our faith is vain. Can we not say, in the same Pauline spirit, that if death be not trampled down, our faith in the Resurrection is equally vain? If we face this question squarely, as we should, it is at this point that a subtle temptation for us Orthodox rears its head, and if we follow its suggestive lead, as many have, our Orthodox faith, in spite of the vast difference in the style of our worship from all others, is in danger of becoming Protestantized. For an essential difference between Orthodoxy and the Western confessions of faith (Protestants and Roman Catholics) is precisely in the concept of salvation, why God became man (Cur Deus homo? is how this theological question is classically put). Western Christianity sees salvation as the Son of God’s sacrifice of himself to propitiate the infinite demands of God’s justice, thereby enabling believing Christians to be reconciled with God and obtain the Kingdom, however they understand that reality. This is salvation understood from a moral perspective, salvation as the means by which we find moral righteousness before God and obtain His favor. In this conception, death is the experience that Christ needed to undergo willingly for our sakes in order to propitiate the infinite demands of Divine justice, so that we, depending on our belief in Him, might be saved when we die. Well, that sounds like an accurate description of Christian salvation to me, you might say. But if we accept such a conception of salvation, then our Orthodox faith, and the liturgical tradition that embodies it and sets it before us as an abundant festal table in the wilderness, will become merely a different *style* of worshipping God. In other words, to accept such a concept of salvation would negate the mystagogical (that which leads one actually to experience the mystery) effects of the Orthodox liturgy, denying its substance while retaining its style. Too many Orthodox already fall into that trap. Whatever it may be, whatever degree of truth it may contain, the justificatory concept of salvation, that is, the moral righteousness before God that is said to be accomplished for us by Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection, is not the Orthodox conception of salvation. In this Protestant conception of salvation, one is saved by faith, yes, but hell remains just as strong as ever, ready to gobble up the unbeliever. There is no embitterment of hell or trampling down death by death in this understanding. Orthodoxy, by contrast, as is shown by the entire mystagogical character of its liturgical tradition calling us to experience the mystery and be transformed, understands salvation precisely as the overcoming of all the consequences of the ancestral sin and the Fall, and of these consequences the central and chief consequence is death.

The Orthodox liturgy is profoundly realistic. It does not ask you to accept pie in the sky. But it does insist that you taste and see that the Lord is good. The Orthodox concept of salvation is grounded in the reality of our actual being and existence, aiming not as the Western confessions do, at some kind of moral righteousness, so that we are made “right” with God in such a way that we obtain by grace His favor while remaining the sinners that we actually are by nature—requiring, in other words, no change in our being, just a change in our morality. The Orthodox understanding of salvation aims directly at the transformation of our being, so that we become participants in the Divine nature, while remaining created beings. To be in God’s Presence and to participate in His nature are one and the same thing, looked at from two different aspects. The Paschal understanding of salvation is thus ontological, that is, being-oriented, concerned with the transfiguration of our being, not merely moralistic in the manner described above. It is precisely for this reason that the Orthodox liturgical tradition does not say that death is ended, but that death is overthrown, trampled down, overcome. What is destroyed is not death itself, but the effect of death, and even more profoundly, the meaning of death. What is trampled down is the hold or power that death has had over us from the beginning, the white witch’s deep magic from the dawn of time. This is the meaning of the triumphant Paschal shout that hell was embittered, and the people’s joyous response of confirmation, “it was embittered”.

Above all, Pascha is the celebration, not only of the fact that Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection accomplished the trampling down of death by death, the opening of the way to heaven, and the embittering of hell *for* us, that is, on our behalf; He also, more importantly, opened the way for each one of us as members of His Body, the Church, *to repeat the accomplishment* in imitation of Him. The key to understanding this is to understand that what was eliminated was not the existential fact of death itself in this created world, but the power of death. The reign of death, that is, the power of death over us, which has always been the basis for the reign of Hades in this world, has been overthrown, overcome, trampled down. The gates of hell have been transformed into Heaven’s Gate. Death still exists as an existential reality, but death has been transformed into God’s narrow gate, for strait is the way and narrow is the gate that leads to paradise, said Jesus. The remembrance of death, as the great teachers of the Philokalia affirm, is now an ascetic method of overcoming all sin and passion. Remember when we said earlier that all sin is rooted in our inveterate self-love, and self-love itself is rooted in the power of death and the fear of death. It is this power over us that has been overthrown. Sin’s power over us has been cast down by the despoiling and embittering of Hades. That recoil upon oneself at the expense of others, that self-centeredness, that insistent and seemingly unconquerable urge for self-preservation, has through Christ’s victory, forever lost its force (if we have faith), and the way is now entirely open to follow Christ completely in the way He said was the only way to follow Him, to “deny” oneself and take up one’s cross. To deny oneself and lose one’s life in order to find true life in Christ is to overcome the self-centeredness that is the source of each and every sin, and in so imitating Christ, to die to oneself in order to live in Christ. Our task now because of Pascha’s victory over death is to learn *to die before we die*--in short, to conquer death by death. We too are called to trample down death by death, to transform the insatiable capacity of sinfulness and

death for destroying life into the infinite life-transfiguring power of the Paschal death that leads to our resurrection in Christ.

By the victory of Pascha, Hell is cast down, mocked, fettered, set at naught, slain. These are all words from St. John's homily that describe how Hell was embittered. Note too that even to say it was embittered is to acknowledge that there is something or someone still around to feel embittered. As I said, the Orthodox liturgy is profoundly realistic. You are not asked to believe the unbelievable. But you are challenged to take the greatest possible risk that a life centered on your own personal survival can take: namely, to step off the cliff of your self-centered consciousness into the seemingly thin air of transfigured life, with faith in Christ's promise that the Breath of the Holy Spirit will uphold you. What Paschal joy is all about is not that one's miserable personal consciousness as we now know it is somehow preserved to be able to go on existing indefinitely, but that the human nature in which we participate is now and forever in hypostatic union with the Divine nature, that the power of that union has once and for all overcome and trampled down death and opened the way to eternal life, and that the reality of that union and the experience of that power is ours for the asking and the taking, but only as we die to ourselves and live in Christ.

Christ is risen, cries St. John, and there is none dead in the tomb. Let us remember these astonishing words as we rejoice in Christ's victory and stand in awe over Hell's embitterment on the morning of Pascha. I will shout them with you even in a different time zone:

"Hell was embittered ("It was embittered") when it met Thee below face to face. It was embittered ("It was embittered") because it was set at naught. It was embittered ("It was embittered") for it was mocked. It was embittered ("It was embittered") for it was slain. It was embittered ("It was embittered") for it was cast down. It was embittered ("It was embittered") for it was fettered. It received a body and encountered God. It received earth and came face to face with heaven. It received what is seen, and fell because of what is unseen. O death, where is thy sting? O Hell, where is thy victory? Christ is risen and thou art cast down. Christ has risen and the demons have fallen. Christ is risen and life is made free."

Christ is risen! Indeed, He is risen!

Your brother in Christ,

Vincent