

Paschal Pastoral Letter: Christ is life

By Bishop Milan Lach, SJ, of Parma

Dear brothers and sisters,

Christ is risen! By this greeting on this Sunday of Resurrection, I would like to share with all of you present here in this church, but also with all of you who do not go to church anymore, the most joyous news that people in this world could ever hear: “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures; that he was buried; that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3-4).

We, Byzantine Catholics, further understand these words of the Apostle Paul through the Paschal Troparion: “Christ is risen from the dead! By death, he trampled Death; and to those in the tombs he granted life.”

The first time we hear this troparion is when the priest sings it during Paschal Matins, outside the closed doors of the church, and then we sing it during the 40 days of the Paschal season almost incessantly.

“By death he trampled Death.” We need to repeat these words often to ourselves, so as not to forget them and so as not to fall into believing this secular world, which tries to tell us that everything ends in death, that death is final and that there is nothing after it.

The world ignores and does not accept the truth about the risen Lord who, overpowering Death by his death, gives us life eternal.

This world, unequipped to deal with the finality of death that it preaches, does all it can to soften the experience of death, to make it less painful, tragic and stark, both for the dying and for the loved ones they leave behind.

A good example is a funeral home, where the body of the deceased is laid for the viewing. I recall entering a funeral home for the first time in the United States, and I was taken aback. I thought I had entered someone’s living room by mistake. There was a great effort to push away the mourning and to transform the funeral services into a pleasant experience. The face of the deceased had heavy make-up, in order to hide the real likeness of death. The secular world has made up its own religion, its own faith, its own eschatology and its own ethics as regards death and substantiates it all by saying that it is “helpful” when dealing with death.

However, for Christianity, “helpfulness” is not the criterion; the criterion is Truth. The goal of Christianity is not to help people to reconcile with death, but to reveal the truth about death and life. Christ is that Truth and Life.

Unfortunately, many of our Byzantine Catholic brothers and sisters have believed the lie of this world. They have stopped believing that Christ has given them new and eternal life, and they have stopped coming to church.

The Truth, however, is that Christ provides the answer to the long-asked question of death by giving his own life, by dying on the cross and destroying the power of death. The tomb remains empty. God reveals his might in full and leaves the lie of the world definitively shattered.

Christ, by his own death, changed the nature of death and made it a transition — Pascha — into God’s kingdom, transforming the biggest tragedy into definite victory.

Today, we celebrate his Resurrection and we celebrate that he has made us participants in his Resurrection. Today, we celebrate our freedom, which we received for free. Today, we celebrate our transition from death to life, which took place at our baptism.

We, too, at baptism, by being immersed into the baptismal waters, died to this world, and every day we are being called to die to our own ego, sins and desires.

I encourage you, my dear brothers and sisters, especially during this 50th anniversary of the establishment of our Eparchy of Parma, to be the witnesses of the risen Christ in this society, here in the United States. May the light of Christ shine in us.

Let us pray for each other during these challenging times and live our lives with Christ, so that we may say with St. Paul the Apostle: “For to me life is Christ, and death is gain” (Phil 1:21)

To him is the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.

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