

## ARCHIEPISCOPAL ENCYCLICAL FOR PASCHA 2009

Protocol 40/09

April 19, 2009

### **Holy Pascha The Feast of Feasts**

*Faith is the substance of things hoped for,  
The evidence of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1)*

*To the Most Reverend Hierarchs, the Reverend Priests and Deacons, the Monks and Nuns, the Presidents and Members of the Parish Councils of the Greek Orthodox Communities, the Distinguished Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Day, Afternoon, and Church Schools, the Philoptochos Sisterhoods, the Youth, the Hellenic Organizations, and the entire Greek Orthodox Family in America*

Beloved Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Christ is Risen! Χριστός Ανέστη!

On this great and glorious Feast of our Holy Orthodox Church, I greet you in the abundant joy of our Risen Lord and in the peace of His unchanging promise of salvation and true life. As we gather at night anticipating the dawning of the new day, our churches, our homes, and most certainly our souls are filled with the radiance of the Resurrection and the illuminating Truth of our faith in Christ.

The Biblical record is replete with several accounts of the appearances of Christ to His disciples after His triumphant Resurrection from the dead. The Gospel of John (20:19-29) presents us with two such appearances of the Risen Christ to His apostles in the upper room, where they frequently gathered. In the first of these appearances, the Risen Christ showed His apostles His hands and His side, the scars of the physical agony which He endured on the Cross unto death. His presence before them was a visible sign of His Resurrection from the dead. At this first appearance of the Risen Christ in the upper room, however, the Apostle Thomas was not present. Hearing of this encounter from the other apostles, Thomas had clearly stated that he would not believe that Christ had risen from the dead unless he saw Christ and touched His wounds. Eight days later, Christ made a second appearance to His apostles in the upper

room. This time, Thomas was present, and he was able to see the prints of the nails and spear in the flesh of the body of the Risen Christ. Thomas recognized the Risen Christ with the following, unique exclamation of his belief: My Lord and my God! (John 20:28). To this, Christ replied to Thomas, Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe (John 20:29).

Thomas needed to see in order to believe, and Thomas' struggle with his doubt and his faith is a very human one indeed. Today, we profess our belief in the Risen Christ nearly 2,000 years after the appearances of the Risen Christ to His apostles. We do this within a society that is removed historically by the passage of time since these Divine appearances. For this reason, we can rejoice in our belief in the Risen Christ because we know the beatitude pronounced by Christ which tells us that we are blessed because we are among those who have not seen and yet believe (v.29).

On this day of Pascha, we gather to celebrate this continued and real presence of Christ in our midst, Whose Resurrection from the dead is at the very core of our Christian faith. Christ's authentic presence is experienced by each and every one of us in many ways, such as when we gather together in His name for prayer, or when we hear His Holy Gospel. However, His presence is made manifest in the most superb way when we partake of His very real body and blood in the most blessed sacrament of Holy Communion, through the physical elements of bread and wine. This is why we give thanks to the Lord when we partake of the Holy Communion by acknowledging that we have "received the divine, holy, pure, immortal, life-giving and awesome Mysteries of Christ," to quote the words of the Divine Liturgy. Thus, paradoxically, while we did not "see" the Risen Christ in the same way in which His apostles did, we nonetheless do "see" Him and experience Him in a total and complete way, just as His apostles. It is here where we are presented with the element of Divine Mystery that is a distinguishing characteristic of our Orthodox Christian faith. It is in this most blessed experience of our receiving the Holy Communion that we are given the ability to see and experience that which Thomas needed to see 2,000 years ago in order for him to believe. It is in this Divine Mystery of Holy Communion that we experience the Risen Christ, that we receive the Son of God physically into our bodies and spiritually within our lives, and that we are continuously renewed by His healing power.

My beloved Christians,

On this Holy Feast of Pascha, as we fill our churches and our hearts with the light and joy of the Resurrection, let us joyfully profess our belief in the Risen Lord, Who is in our midst. Through faith and our partaking of His body and blood in the Divine Mystery of Holy Communion, let us receive His love and affirm the assurance of His blessings upon us. Let us proclaim to a world in need that we are people of the Resurrection, that we are people of hope and salvation, and that we are people of faith. And let us invite all to come into the loving embrace of the living Lord Who is Risen and to see Him, experience Him, and find everlasting joy and peace in Him, Who has vanquished the power of death so that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).

Once again we joyfully proclaim: Christ is Risen! Χριστός Ανέστη! Truly He is Risen! Αληθώς Ανέστη!

With paternal blessings in the Risen Christ,

† DEMETRIOS

Archbishop of America