

# Why The Vigil Service is ESSENTIAL

**It prepares us for the most important medicine for our Salvation: Holy Communion!**

*The following is the text of a talk given by Father George Johnson on Saturday, November 8th 2003, at the Annual Southern Missions Conference hosted by the parish of Saint Mary of Egypt (ROCOR) in Norcross, Georgia, a suburb of Atlanta. Minor changes have been made for the sake of clarity, but the substance and purpose are unchanged.*

Dear Vladika Gabriel, Father John, brother clergy and brothers and sisters,

I have been asked to talk to you today about the vigil service. In this talk, I would like to focus on the service as it is held on Saturday nights in our parishes, because that is the form with which we are most familiar. We all know the proverb about what familiarity breeds, and, while as devoted Christians, we perhaps never lose our appreciation, we can all use all the help we can get to keep our understanding and appreciation bright. Therefore, this talk will be just that: an appreciation. As with any part of our tradition with centuries of usage behind it, there is an ample field for an appreciation. Every view of it, every layer of meaning in the Saturday evening vigil service is of practical significance for our spiritual life. Precisely because there is so much of significance in the vigil, it is impossible in

the time allotted to encompass or even describe it all. This appreciation is therefore neither comprehensive nor all-inclusive. The purpose is that, through emphasis on the recurring theme, a broad light will be cast over the whole that will enable growth of understanding and love for the service, the Church and our Lord.

### **Sanctifying Time**

First, let us put the Saturday evening vigil service in context. Our God, from outside of time, created time and us who live in it. Through the guidance of God's Holy Spirit, our Church tradition has provided us means of making time holy, of sanctifying time, so that we might have a way to use our time in the service of prayer and remembrance and praise of Him. The times of prayer that we use are modeled on the cycle that is used in monastic settings. The ordered prayer life in monasteries and convents puts into practical form the admonition of the Holy Apostle Paul to be constant and unceasing in prayer. Our parish prayer life represents a portion of this life. Thus, inasmuch as we participate in this representative portion, we are in a common spiritual striving with our monastic brothers and sisters. We proclaim in this unity in prayer the unity that we share in the Body of Christ.

### **The Lord's Day, Resurrection and Salvation**

Our Saturday evening vigil service anticipates Sunday, defining the liturgical day just as a day is defined in the creation account in the book of Genesis, wherein God's major creative acts are set off by the phrase, "there was evening and there was morning," making one day. As we can learn from a perusal of our prayer book, in the Orthodox prayer life, each day of the week is assigned a commemoration. We recognize, even the world recognizes, that Sunday is both the beginning and the culmination of the week. This common understanding comes straight from the Gospel which records that the Lord's resurrection was discovered by the women coming to anoint His body with myrrh and spices "early on the first day of the week." From the time of the myrrh-bearing women until today, Sunday is recognized as the "Lord's Day" because of His triumph over death and the consequent raising to life of all who would follow Him. Our regular Saturday vigil service is therefore devoted to the proclamation of the Lord's resurrection. Because this "mighty act" is the fountain and fulfillment of our salvation, it has thus in a sense created Sunday as we know it, and has pushed into general awareness this sense of fountain and fulfillment, of celebration, even if the world is only barely or dimly aware and keeps the day only as an opportunity to "go to the park" or to a museum.

Since the regular Saturday vigil service is devoted to the act that fulfills our salvation, it is fitting that all parts of the service are held up to the light of the full story of our salvation.

## **The Beginning: Creation**

The service opens with our glorification through the mouth of the celebrant of our Holy, consubstantial and undivided Triune God, the Author of everything, including our salvation. This point is made clear by the immediate intonation of the oft-said phrases that recognize Christ our Savior as the incarnate God when we are called to worship Him as "Christ, our King and God." We continue the service with the introductory Psalm 103, which recalls the original creation of the world and the placing of mankind within it, pure and sinless. We are reminded that Christ our God, the Son, was already co-eternal with the Father at the beginning, was God at the beginning, as St. John the Theologian emphasizes at the beginning of his Gospel. Just as the Royal Gates open and the priest moves about the whole church with incense, just so the Holy Spirit of God moved over the original creation. The full text of the Psalm is not heard in the vigil, but we recall that the original state did not include sin. The last verse emphasizes our desire that sinners perish. The obvious implication, since we all are sinners, is that sin itself would be taken from us, and, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, we might be re-created and made again "living souls" as our first parents were at the beginning.

The Royal Gates are then closed, reminding us that the time in the paradise of the Garden of Eden was short and creation did not retain its original state; but, because of man's failing, sin

entered into the world, separating us from God and His light. In this knowledge, we stand outside the gates, beseeching God in the petitions of the Great Litany for His mercy in the peace that he gives us and for all that comes to us for our health and salvation.

### **Exile and the Path of Returning**

If we would return to God from our exile, we attend carefully to the psalms that follow, showing us the path back to Him, the path of the Blessed Man, the type of Christ who is our Blessed Man and our way, and, so as to goad us further from either complacency or resignation, we are reminded of the path of the ungodly, that is really no path, but rather is like the scattered and chaotic motions of dust before the wind. From this course, or rather, drift, toward destruction, we ask God to "Arise and save us," knowing that it is in His arising from the dead that His salvation of us is created and His blessing is coming upon us who would be His people. In response to this, we can but say, "Alleluia," Praise Him that is! For His dominion, kingdom, power and glory.

We continue in exile but we are on the path to repentance, and in that path, realizing at greater or lesser length our deep need of repentance, we cry, "Lord, I have cried unto Thee; I call Thee, hear me; hear me, O Lord!...Let my prayer come before Thee as incense...." The incense here thus stands for our prayer rising, as from all corners of the church, so from all the hearts of the

repentant faithful. Since there is this connection between the office of the Holy Spirit and incense in our worship, even so we hope that this incense represents for us that which the Holy Apostle Paul refers to when he says that the Spirit intercedes for us in "groanings that cannot be uttered;" and thus we pray, "bring my soul out of prison, that I may confess Thy name." The last few verses of the psalms, while we are coming from "out of the depths," are interspersed with hymns pointing the way to our hope in His resurrection, and seeing the fruits of that mighty act that have accumulated in the lives of His faithful who have returned and have come to perfection in the righteous way. This prophetic prelude to our salvation story is not complete without remembering that the Lord had to be born as a human being, to be one of us, to become incarnate to accomplish our salvation. The Dogmatic Theotokion relates this part of our salvation story and the place of the Mother of God in that story. I will quote one of them in its entirety to show both the inspired fullness of prophetic reference and at the same time the concentration of thought employed by the Church's hymnographers. "The shadow of the law passed away when grace arrived. For as the bush wrapped in flame did not burn, so did the Virgin give birth, and yet remain a virgin. In the place of the pillar of fire, the Sun of Righteousness hath shown forth. Instead of Moses, Christ is come, the salvation of our souls." (The Dogmatic Theotokion in the 2nd tone) Each one of these eight texts is a jewel in our spiritual treasury. We should memorize them so that they are

part of our spiritual armor to withstand the "evil days" that we live in.

### **The Entrance of our Lord into the World**

Concurrent with the singing of the Dogmatic Theotokion, the humility of the Lord's coming into the world is represented at the entrance at Vespers, wherein the clergy with censer come out not through the Royal Gates, but through the north door. The incense again reminds us that at the Incarnation, the Holy Spirit overshadowed the Mother of God, just as the Archangel Gabriel told her as shown in the icon of the Annunciation normally present on the Royal Gates. The clergy emphasize this during the last part of the Dogmatic by censuring her large icon on the iconostasis.

Our Lord thus comes into the world and enters upon His sacrificial life by the Gates reserved for Him, the Royal Gates, as we sing the hymn of His entrance in His praise. Whichever translation, the light of Christ described is altogether gentle, quiet, joyous and gladsome, because He is bringing to us the light of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and with this light He does not blind us or destroy us, but gives us life thereby, and therefore we glorify Him.

We continue to glorify Him in the prokeimenon for Saturday evening; "The Lord is King, He is clothed with majesty," recalling His glory, majesty and power, which is done

throughout the service, as if the entire vigil is one hymn to God with refrains of praise.

The litanies that follow continue our iteration of petitions both for ourselves and for all those things in our Church life and all our life to be continually committed to Christ our God. While our Savior came from outside time, he did make an existence within time, thus creating the "fullness of time, and we are reminded that we are in the business in the vigil of making the time we are in holy and so, we say, "Let us complete our evening prayer unto the Lord," during the completion of which, we ask particularly that all be done toward the end of salvation for us and for all for whom we pray. In between these litanies, we say the prayer that we may keep on the path of repentance and toward salvation, the while praising and glorifying him.

Continuing the praise, we next sing the sticheri na stichovni, the stichera aposticha, the verses on the verses. What are the verses? The same as those of the prokeimenon: "The Lord is King," because in our regular Saturday vigil, the Verses that we surround the verses with are about the Lord's Resurrection.

Approaching the end of the Vespers portion of the vigil, we conclude with the plea for rest of Saint Simeon the God-Receiver who held in his arms the Incarnate God. Like him, the eyes of our mind are trained on our salvation in the person of Christ. In the hymn, "O Theotokos and Virgin," we remind



ourselves once again of the place of the Theotokos in the history of our salvation. Encapsulated in this hymn are references to the Annunciation, to the salutation of St. Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist and the phrase of the faithful in the Church in gratitude to her for having born within her the "Savior of our souls."

The priest places the seal of the Lord's blessing upon us by the grace and love shown toward us in the redemptive acts prophesied.

### **The Six Psalms: Repentance and Hope**

During the recitation of the six psalms, the church is darkened so that we might in peace and quietness contemplate their meaning. In these psalms, the greatness of the sin is exposed for which the Lord suffered, died and was buried to relieve us of its burden. Three of the psalms emphasize our repentance and the need for it, and the other three psalms reveal our hope in God's mercy and salvation. The darkness also reminds us of the darkness of death from which the Lord has saved us and which he underwent in his saving acts.

### **God is the Lord**

Following the Great Litany in which we again offer our petitions for spiritual and bodily mercies, we sing the phrases from psalm 117/118 in amazement and gratitude for God's love and favor in sending His Son to save us: "God is the Lord and hath appeared

unto us. Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord." We then sing the appointed troparion of the Resurrection in celebration of the triumph we are to witness, and, some fruit of God's mercy in the life of one of His saints in another troparion, culminating as do all sets of hymns with a hymn to the Mother of God, the Theotokion.

As with the Dogmatic Theotokia, we should take on as an act of devotion the memorization of these other major Theotokia that contain a wealth of benefits for our spiritual life. They encapsulate so much in a small space that they are like diamonds. Let us use as an example the one in the 4th tone:

"The mystery hidden from before the ages, and unknown even to the angels, through thee, O Theotokos, hath been revealed to those on earth: God Incarnate in unconfused union, who willingly accepted the Cross for our sake, and thereby raising up the first-formed man, hath saved our souls from death." Again, the great hymnographers, themselves saints, show a wonderful concentration of prophecy and fulfillment.

After our recitation of the appointed portions of the psalms and the accompanying litanies, we resume our progress toward the climax of the vigil service and the climax of the history of our salvation in the sedalens on the Resurrection, and toward the conclusion of their reading, for the first time, the whole church is brightly lit up in token of the glory of His rising from the dead.

Whether we recite the blessedness of the blameless man, of whom Christ is the example, or if we sing with triumphant "alleluias" of God's many mercies in the Polyeleos, the end is the same: Together with the "assembly of angels," we are amazed at Christ's being numbered among the dead, yet in this action destroying death's might, and, in the consummation of his rising from the dead, raising up all the righteous dead of ages past, together with us who persevere to the end.

As we sing the antiphons of the hymns of ascent, we are reminded of the connection through verbal references of the psalms of ascent used in the worship of the ancient Hebrews in their ascent up the mountain of the temple of God. So we ascend in mind to the spiritual height of worship of the Lord's saving acts.

### **The Gospel of the Resurrection**

In the dialogue of the prokeimenon, we are arrived at the high plateau. The texts of these verses proclaim in the blaze of light the Resurrection triumph from the mouth of the Lord Himself, or from the mouth of the faithful, or they call for its revelation and fulfillment. For example, in the week of the 4th tone we sing, "Arise, O Lord, help us and redeem us for Thy name's sake."

The triumph and its fulfillment are then revealed in the

appointed Gospel Resurrection account. No longer through the glass of prophecy, no longer the promise, but the reality shines in front of us. The Incarnate Word, inasmuch as the adorned Gospel Book represents Him, comes through the Royal Gates, which at this opening stand for the stone that has been rolled away from the door of the tomb, and we shout out our joy at having "beheld the Resurrection of Christ," and we worship Him.

Then is intoned the massive petition calling for the manifestation of God's salvation and the fruits of it in us, beseeching God to give us yet His great mercy because of the fruits of it shown in the lives of those in that marvelous catalogue of his holy ones who precede us and yet pray for us.

With the Gospel of the Incarnate Word laid before us, we make our personal gesture of worship of Him who has saved us, and venerate it with reverence.

### **The Old Testament Odes in Light of the Resurrection**

Now we come to a most amazing aspect of the vigil. We now, once again return to the Law and the Prophets as represented in the Biblical Odes. We have witnessed all that they are striving for and pointing toward, but because we have seen the Resurrection in its actuality as revealed by the Gospels, the Church in her wisdom reinforces for us that it is not just us who rise, but all the righteous in all the ages, and we rejoice in song

with their words.

We rejoice with Moses and Miriam in triumph at the God's opening of the Red Sea, just as He opens for us the gate of eternal life by His resurrection.

We sing with Hanna, the mother of the prophet Samuel, and our hearts are exalted together with hers whose barrenness is changed to great fruitfulness, just as our own barren spiritual being is brought to life in His risen life.

With Habbakuk, we see the blazing sun of righteousness rise behind the forested mountain.

With Isaiah, we see the light of our salvation rising early in the morning.

Just as Jonah is released on the third day from his imprisonment in the belly of the beast, so we are released from death's imprisonment when Christ broke the bars and bonds of death.

With the three holy children, we are delivered from the fiery furnace of wickedness by the dew from the new morning of the Lord, and we call on all those from all times to praise and exalt Him above all unto all ages, past, present, future.

The immediate agent in the event in our Lord's earthly life is

held up again for our rejoicing as we take part in the fulfillment of the prophecy concerning the Mother of God, that she is ever deserving of our blessing and is indeed "More honorable than the Cherubim."

In the odes we cast the light of the Resurrection on all that has gone before and continues until now. At the same time, in the words of the canon that complements the odes, we explicitly proclaim the Resurrection's meaning, both in the event itself and in the lives of those made saints in following the risen Lord.

### **Let Every Breath Praise the Lord**

What can we then do but, if possible, intensify our praises in the words of praise by the Holy Psalmist that close the Psalter "Let every breath praise the Lord," and reflect yet once more in this context on the events of the Resurrection and the lives of the saints.

The light that was subdued in our reflections on prophecy is again made bright when we illumine the church and see the ultimate triumph of the kingdom that the praise psalms crescendo toward, and we say with angels, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace good will among men. We praise thee we bless thee we worship thee." We put a period to this with yet one more troparion in praise of the Resurrection.

Having sanctified our time in the great paeon of praise that is our

Saturday evening vigil, we return to a focus on our present context of time and yet again hold up before God ourselves and each other as we "complete our morning prayer unto the Lord."

Truly, we can close the service in full realization the "He that is," the great "I-am" come among us, "Christ our God" is to be blessed, always, now and ever and unto the ages of ages."