

THE EPITAPH SERVICE AT THE PATRIARCHATE

On Holy Friday evening, April 1/14, 2023, the magnificent and contrite Epitaph Service was held at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. In this service, the Church commemorates the Deposition from the Cross of the immaculate body of the Lord, by Joseph from Arimathaea, and the Lord's burial at the Tomb near Golgotha.

The service began at the Catholicon with the Canon of Holy Saturday Matins, while the officiating of the service, His Beatitude the Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos and the High Priests with the Priests got dressed.

Then the procession around the shrined followed, and at the Horrendous Golgotha, the Gospel narrative of the crucifixion was read, before the silk corporal was lifted up from the Holy Altar.

The High Priests carried the silk corporal at the Deposition slate, where the Gospel narrative of the Lord's deposition from the Cross by Joseph and Nicodemus was read.

This was followed by a litany three times around the Holy Sepulchre, as the silk corporal was being carried by the High Priests.

The lamentations followed, with the incense offering at each stasis.

Before praises, His Eminence Geronda Secretary-General, Archbishop Aristarchos of Constantina delivered the following sermon:

“Your Beatitude, Father and Master,

Reverend Chorea of Hierarchs,

Mr Consul General of Greece,

Reverend Fathers,

Reverend pilgrims,

Indeed great, wondrous and beneficial are God's works for man. "For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen" according to Saint Paul (Rom. 1,20). With His creatures, God also gave man the knowledge of His eternal power and perfection. And these, "God, hath spoken unto us by his Son" (Hebrews 1:2), since the beginning of the creation of the universe. God came down to earth from heaven. Having reconciled with men, "God was manifest in the flesh" (1 Tim. 3,16). He appeared among men, incarnate, in human flesh. The Only-Begotten Son of God also became the son of man, son of the Virgin, through the Holy Spirit. He was made known as God-man in one hypostasis, with two natures, wills and actions. In Christ Who appeared and was seen on earth, "God was manifesting all things".

Having come to earth, Christ revealed the Father to us, while all things that He did, were done by the goodwill of His Father. He said that "I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me" (John 5,30). Christ's actions are His Father's, for He said, "I and my Father are one" (John 10,30). Being the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets, Christ our God fulfilled all providence of the Father, He did not abolish but completed the Law of Moses. He set us free in liberty (cf. Gal 5,1) from the ordinances of the Law. Instead of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" (Exodus 21,24), he taught and applied love, not only for our fellow men but also for the enemies. By His divine power, He cured the sick, gave sight to the blind, mobility to the paralyzed, He raised the dead. He inaugurated the time of the kingdom of God, the time of the Gospel, the Law of Grace, "to preach the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4,19). He called unto Himself "all that labour and are heavy laden, to

give them rest" (cf. Matt. 11,28). Those who are hungry and thirsty and foreigners and prisoners, He named "His brothers", "the least of these" (cf. Matt. 25, 31-46). He did not allow the adulterous woman to be stoned to death but sent her forth to live a new life. He did not condemn the thief on the cross next to Him but made him the first to enter paradise, setting repentance as the key to enter therein. To what cause all these? For man to be saved, especially since He said, "the sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath" (Mark 2,27). The supreme value for the Most High is man, so that his soul may not be lost.

And because, as the Church sings these days, "He becomes everything in order to save man", he even willingly suffered the Cross. "For scarcely for a righteous man will one die", according to Saint Paul, "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:7-8). Through His Cross, Christ went down to Hades and sought the led astray Forefather and all his descendants. His descent into Hades is also His resurrection, as the Orthodox icon of the resurrection denotes. This mystery of the Cross, according to Saint John of Damascus is the greatest and most wondrous of Christ's miracles. "The preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness" (1 Cor. 1,18), as Saint Paul says, for those who by their own free will walk in the path of their demise, it is foolishness. The Cross of Christ is "unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness" (1 Cor. 1,23), because, the crucified Christ is a stumbling block for the Jews who are waiting for Christ as the Messiah, as an earthly king, a stumbling block upon which they stop and do not believe, while for the idolater Greeks, the crucified God who did not win over His enemies is presented as a foolish idea. However, for the Jews and the Greeks who believe, the crucified Christ is "the power of God, and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1,24) and the salvation.

This Cross of the Crucified and Resurrected Christ does His

body, the Church carry. The Resurrected Christ for the Church is the Crucified Christ, "Ye seek Jesus of Nazareth, which was crucified" (Mark 16,6), said the Angel to the Myrrh-bearing women. Christ is always projected by the Church behind the Holy Altar, as its Crucified Bridegroom. Just as the Lord's earthly life was crucified and resurrected, likewise, the life of the Church on earth is crucified and resurrected. The Church is not praising itself, it does not boast, but suffers, co-suffers with the suffering man, the man who suffers from his passions, from the lack of a direction in life, from the exploitation by the "leaders of this world", and by the bloodshed, at times among brothers, in the battlefields, where the human life is not being considered important.

Co-suffering with all who suffer around the world, especially with the children of its local flock, among whom and the large crowds of the reverend pilgrims, the Church of Jerusalem, the Holy Zion, "the mother of Churches, who was the first to receive the remission of sins through the resurrection", has the privilege the blessing, to testify and preach Christ Crucified and Resurrected to all the places where the Lord appeared in the flesh, and at this hour, during this modest contrite service, of the Holy Epitaph, in remembrance of the Lord's burial and the descent into Hades, which is presided over by the Holy Primate of Jerusalem, His Beatitude the Patriarch Theophilos, it prays for the peace and good state of the whole world, and for the peace and the unity in Christ of the Orthodox Churches, for the praise of our blessed nation and the glory of our Triune God. Amen."

The rest of the service continued before the Holy Sepulchre and finally, the silk corporal was placed on the Holy Altar. Finally, bells tolling, the Patriarchal Entourage returned to the Patriarchate.

From Secretariat-General