

Great and Holy Friday



Introduction

On Great and Holy Friday the Orthodox Church commemorates the death of Christ on the Cross. This is the culmination of the observance of His Passion by which our Lord suffered and died for our sins. This commemoration begins on Thursday evening with the Matins of Holy Friday and concludes with a Vespers on Friday afternoon that observes the unnauling of Christ from the Cross and the placement of His body in the tomb.

Commemoration of Great and Holy Friday

On this day we commemorate the sufferings of Christ: the mockery, the crown of thorns, the scourging, the nails, the thirst, the vinegar and gall, the cry of desolation, and all the Savior endured on the Cross.

The day of Christ's death is the day of sin. The sin which polluted God's creation from the breaking dawn of time reached its frightful climax on the hill of Golgotha. There, sin and evil, destruction and death came into their own. Ungodly men had Him nailed to the Cross, in order to destroy Him. However, His death condemned irrevocably the fallen world by revealing its true and abnormal nature.

In Christ, who is the New Adam, there is no sin. And, therefore, there is no death. He accepted death because He assumed the whole tragedy of our life. He chose to pour His life into death, in order to destroy it; and in order to break the hold of evil. His death is the final and ultimate revelation of His perfect obedience and love. He suffered for us the excruciating pain of absolute solitude and alienation - "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me!" (Mark 15:34). Then, He accepted the ultimate horror of death with the agonizing cry, "It is finished" (John 19:30). His cry was at one and the same time an indication that He was in control of His death and that His work of redemption was accomplished, finished, fulfilled. How strange! While our death is radical unfulfillment, His is total fulfillment.

The day of Christ's death has become our true birthday. "Within the mystery of Christ dead and resurrected, death acquires positive value. Even if physical, biological death still appears to reign, it is no longer the final stage in a long destructive process. It has become the indispensable doorway, as well as the sure sign of our ultimate Pascha, our passage from death to life, rather than from life to death.



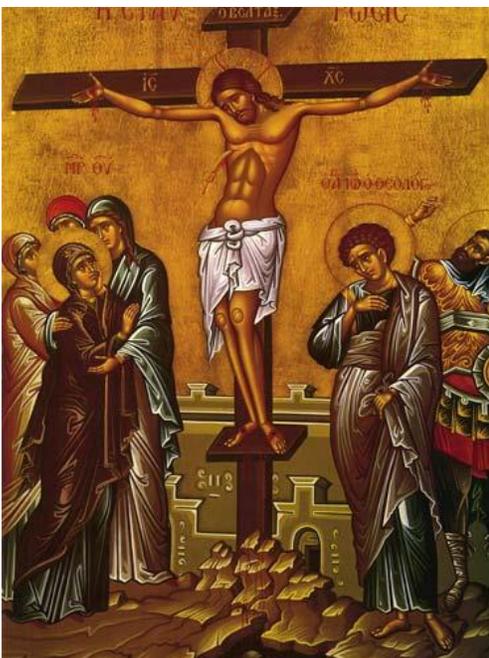
From the beginning the Church observed an annual commemoration of the decisive and crucial three days of sacred history, i.e., Great Friday, Great Saturday and Pascha. Great Friday and Saturday have been observed as days of deep sorrow and strict fast from Christian antiquity.

Great Friday and Saturday direct our attention to the trial, crucifixion, death and burial of Christ. We are placed within the awesome mystery of the extreme humility of our

suffering God. Therefore, these days are at once days of deep gloom as well as watchful expectation. The Author of life is at work transforming death into life: "Come, let us see our Life lying in the tomb, that he may give life to those that in their tombs lie dead" (Sticheron of Great Saturday Orthros).

Liturgically, the profound and awesome event of the death and burial of God in the flesh is marked by a particular kind of silence, i.e. by the absence of a eucharistic celebration. Great Friday and Great Saturday are the only two days of the year when no eucharistic assembly is held. However, before the twelfth century it was the custom to celebrate the Liturgy of the Pre-Sanctified Gifts on Great Friday.

The divine services of Great Friday with the richness of their ample Scripture lessons, superb hymnography and vivid liturgical actions bring the passion of Christ and its cosmic significance into sharp focus. The hymns of the services on this day help us to see how the Church understands and celebrates the awesome mystery of Christ's passion and death.



Icon of the Commemoration of Great and Holy Friday

On Great and Holy Friday, Orthodox churches display the icon known as the "Axra Tapeinosis - The Extreme Humility." This icon depicts the crucified dead body of Christ upright in the Tomb with the Cross in the background. It combines the two awesome events of Great Friday - the crucifixion and burial of Christ.

The Church also has an icon of the Crucifixion of Christ. He is shown nailed to the Cross. His right side is pierced and from the wound flows blood and water. At the foot of the Cross is a skull. (Golgotha, the Mount of the Crucifixion, means "the place of the skull.") Tradition related that the Cross of Christ stood directly over the grave of our Forefather Adam. On the top bar of the Cross is the inscription "I.N.B.I.", the initials for the Greek words meaning "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." To the left of Christ, the Theotokos and St. Mary Magdalene are often pictured

as well; the youthful St. John the Beloved Disciple and St. Longinus the Centurion (Mark 15:39) are shown to the right if they are depicted.



Another icon that depicts the events of Holy Friday is known as the Epitaphios Thrinos. In this icon, Christ has been taken off of the Cross, and His body is being prepared for burial. Shown around the body and mourning His death are His mother, the Theotokos and Virgin Mary, John the beloved disciple, Joseph of Arimathea, and Mary Magdelene.

In addition to these icons, Orthodox churches process with and display a large wooden

Crucifix with an image of Christ attached. At the Vespers on Friday, the image of Christ is removed from the Cross and wrapped in a white cloth. Another icon, one that depicts the body of Christ removed from the Cross, appears on the Epitaphios that is carried and placed in the Tomb during this service.

Orthodox Celebration of Great and Holy Friday

The commemorations of Holy Friday begin with the Matins service of the day which is conducted on Thursday evening. The service is a very unique Matins service with twelve Gospel readings that begin with Christ's discourse at the Last Supper and end with the account of His burial:

John 13:31-18:1, John 18:1-29, Matthew 26:57-75, John 18:28-19:16, Matthew 27:3-32, Mark 15:16-32, Matthew 27:33-54, Luke 23:32-49, John 19:38-42, Mark 15:43-47, John 19:38-42, Matthew 27:62-66

These readings relate the last instructions of Christ to His disciples, the prophecy of the drama of the Cross, the dramatic prayer of Christ and His new commandment. After the reading of the fifth Gospel comes the procession with the Crucifix around the church, while the priest chants the Fifteenth Antiphon:

"Today is hung upon the Tree, He Who did hang the land in the midst of the waters. A Crown of thorns crowns Him Who is King of Angels. He is wrapped about with the purple of mockery Who wrapped the Heavens with clouds. He received buffetings Who freed Adam in Jordan. He was transfixed with nails Who is the Bridegroom of the Church. He was pierced with a spear Who is the Son of the Virgin. We worship Thy Passion, O Christ. Show also unto us thy glorious Resurrection."



During the Procession, Orthodox Christians kneel and venerate the Cross and pray for their spiritual well-being, imitating the thief on the Cross who confessed his faith and devotion to Christ. The faithful then approach and reverently kiss the Crucifix which has been placed at the front of the church.

On Friday morning, the services of the Royal Hours are observed. These services are primarily readings of prayers, hymns, and passages from the Old Testament, Epistles, and Gospels. The Scripture readings for these services are: First Hour: Zechariah 11:10-13, Galatians 6:14-18, Matthew 27:1-56; Third Hour: Isaiah 50:4-11, Romans 5:6-10, Mark 15:6-41; Sixth Hour: Isaiah 52:13-54:1, Hebrews 2:11-18, Luke 23:32-49; Ninth Hour: Jeremiah 11:18-23, 12:1-5, 9-11, 14-15, Hebrews 10:19-31, John 18:28-19:37.

The Vespers of Friday afternoon are a continuation of the Royal Hours. During this service, the removal of the Body of Christ from the Cross is commemorated with a sense of mourning. Once more, excerpts from the Old Testament are read together with hymns, and again the entire story is related, followed by the removal of Christ from the Cross and the wrapping of His body with a white sheet as did Joseph of Arimathea.



As the priest reads the Gospel, "and taking the body, Joseph wrapped it in a white cloth," he removes the Body of Christ from the Cross, wraps it in a white cloth and takes it to the altar. The priest then chants a mourning hymn: "When Joseph of Arimathea took Thee, the life of all, down from the Tree dead, he buried Thee with myrrh and fine linen . . . rejoicing. Glory to Thy humiliation, O Master, who clothest Thyself with light as it were with a garment." The priest then carries the cloth on which the Body of Christ is

painted or embroidered around the church before placing it inside the Sepulcher, a carved bier which symbolizes the Tomb of Christ. We are reminded that during Christ's entombment He descends into Hades to free the dead of the ages before His Resurrection. The Scripture readings for the Vespers are: Exodus 33:11-23; Job 42:12-17; Isaiah 52:13-54:1; I Corinthians 1:18-2:2; and from the Gospels Matthew 27:1-38; Luke 23:39-43; Matthew 27:39-54; John 19:31-37; and Matthew 27:55-61.

Hymns and Prayers for Great and Holy Friday

Fifteenth Antiphon of the Matins (Plagal of the Second Tone)

Today He who hung the earth upon the waters is hung upon the Cross. He who is King of the angels is arrayed in a crown of thorns. He who wraps the heavens in clouds is wrapped in the purple of mockery. He who in Jordan set Adam free receives blows upon His face. The Bridegroom of the Church is transfixed with nails. The Son of the Virgin is pierced with a spear. We venerate Thy Passion, O Christ. Show us also Thy glorious Resurrection.

Exapostelation

On the same day, O Lord, You granted the Robber Paradise. Now by the wood of the Cross, illumine me and save me.