

April 15, 2012

# Sunday Sermon

Fr Ambrose Young  
Entrance of the Theotokos Skete



Pascha, 2012

Christ is Risen!

*"This is the chosen and holy day, first of Sabbaths, king and lord of days, the feast of feasts, holy day of holy days. On this day we bless Christ forevermore."* (Irmos 8, Paschal Canon).

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It is not customary for a priest to give a sermon or homily at Pascha because the ancient Holy Fathers appointed the reading of the famous and great Paschal Homily of St. John Chrysostom to be read as part of the midnight Paschal services. And I, too, will not be giving a sermon or homily on Pascha. But I thought I would offer just a few words here, in place of a sermon, as I look back on my 42 years as an Orthodox Christian and my 33 years as an Orthodox priest, both in parish life and in monasticism.

My late wife and I converted to Orthodoxy in 1970, at the Russian Cathedral of Our Lady, Joy of All Who Sorrow, in San Francisco. But we had been approaching Orthodoxy, slowly and cautiously, as well as carefully, for some years, ever since we'd attended the incredible Pascha-like funeral of St. John Maximovitch at the same cathedral in 1966. (His incorrupt relics rest in a beautiful shrine on the right side of the nave, and may be venerated.) So our first Pascha was before we were even Orthodox.

What can I say? We came from a Roman Catholic background, where Easter services were certainly beautiful, reverent, and prayerful, but more somber and sober, as one would expect for Western Christians. Nothing, and I mean nothing, could have prepared us for our first Orthodox Pascha! To say that it was an "explosion of joy" would be an understatement. It is not for nothing that Pascha is called by the Orthodox "The Feast of Feasts". But it made sense to me:

Growing up a Western Christian the emphasis seemed to be always somehow on Christmas. Not that Easter was celebrated, but I didn't have the same cultural and emotional layers that Orthodox Pascha has. Suddenly, at my first Pascha, I understood at a deeper level St. Paul's words: "In His death and resurrection, Christ defeats the last enemy, death, and thereby fulfills the mandate of His Father to subject all things under His feet" (I Cor. 15:24-26). What could be more important, more joyous, than Christ's victory over death?!

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As I witnessed that first Pascha, with two choirs singing back and forth and the congregation making up a third choir in its loud and ecstatic exclamations, I had a visual image of what St. John was writing about in the Book of Revelation:

*"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. . . the holy city, new Jerusalem. And I heard a great voice from the throne saying 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people. . . He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away'." (Rev. 21:1-4).*

In the many years to come I participated in glorious and majestic Paschas at cathedrals, monasteries and sketes, and more modest but nonetheless excited and joyful celebrations in parishes. But the most memorable was my first Pascha at a monastic skete in a forest in northern California. The monastic brotherhood was small, only 6, and there were perhaps only another 6 lay folk, including myself and my family. But this very quiet Pascha was the sweetest of all as we processed around the church at the beginning of the Paschal Matins, and through the trees, and softly sang, "Christ is risen" in as many languages as we could muster.

For those born and raised in the Orthodox Faith, of course Pascha is most wonderful and special, too. But I think it must be difficult for them to fully realize how Pascha strikes us converts, for as long as we live we never get used to it, never take it for granted, and always, always, continue to see and experience Pascha night as the holiest night of the year on the holiest day of the year—a real glimpse into the Kingdom of Heaven and the eternal Supper of the Lamb:

*"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing." (Rev. 5: 12)*

Pascha alone is worth converting to Orthodoxy for!

Brothers and Sister: Christ is Risen! Truly He is Risen! And death is forevermore defeated!