

## The Meaning of Pascha

### On Easter and the Resurrection

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*Fr. Alexander Schmemann (1921-1983) was a founder and the first Secretary of SYNDESMOS. Educated in France before moving to the United States in 1951, where he quickly gained recognition as a dynamic and articulate spokesman for orthodoxy. He was for many years Dean and Professor of Liturgical Theology at St. Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary in New York. Through his lectures on college campuses, his regular radio broadcasts to Eastern Europe, and his books, now translated into eleven languages, he brought the message of orthodoxy to an ever-growing audience.*

It is necessary to explain that Easter is much more than one of the feasts, more than a yearly commemoration of a past event? Anyone who has, be it only once, taken part in that night which is “brighter than the day,” who has tasted of that unique joy knows it. But what is that joy about? Why we can sing, as we do, during the Paschal liturgy: “today are all things filled with light, heaven and earth and places under the earth”? In what sense do we celebrate, as we claim we do, “the death of Death, the annihilation of Hell, the beginning of a new life and everlasting....”? To all these questions, the answer is: the new life which almost two thousand years ago shone forth from the grave, has been given to us, to all those who believe in Christ. And it was given to us on the day of our Baptism, in which, as St. Paul says, we “were buried with Christ...unto death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead we also may walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4). Thus, on Easter we celebrate Christ's Resurrection as something that happened and still happens to us. (...) That is why, at the end of the Paschal Matins, we say: “Christ is risen and not one dead remains in the grave!” (...)

It is not our daily experience, however, that this faith is very seldom ours, that all the time we lose and betray the “new life” which we received as a gift, and that, in fact, we live as if Christ did not rise from the dead, as if that unique event had no meaning whatsoever for us? (...) We manage to forget even the death and them, all of a sudden, in the midst of our “enjoying life” it comes to us: horrible, inescapable, senseless. We may from time to time acknowledge and confess our various “sins”, yet we cease to refer our life to that new life which Christ revealed and gave to us; Indeed, we live as if he never came. This is the only sin, the sin of all sins, the bottomless sadness and tragedy of our nominal Christianity.

If we realize this, then we may understand what Easter is (...) and understand that the liturgical traditions of the Church, all its cycles and services, exist, first of all, in order to help us recover the vision and the taste of that new life which we so easily lose and betray, so that we may repent and return to it. (...) It is the worship of the Church that was from the very beginning and still is our entrance into, our communion with, the new life of the Kingdom. It is through her liturgical life that the Church reveals to us something of that which “the ear has not heard, the eye has not

seen and what has not yet entered the heart of man but what God has prepared for those who love Him.” And in the center of that liturgical life, as its heart and climax, as the sun whose rays penetrate everywhere, stands Pascha. It is the door opened every year into the splendour of Christ’s Kingdom, the foretaste of the eternal joy that awaits us, the glory of the victory which already, although invisibly, fills the whole creation: “death is no more!”

*Extracts from Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, Great Lent, New York, 1969*