

## Upholding the Pascal Tradition By Pseudo Athanasius<sup>1</sup>

We are approaching a new Paschal season that includes Great Lent, Holy Week, Pascha, Bright week and the period of Pentecost. It is a time when we celebrate with “heavenly joy” according to the Tradition of the Church. This special time has been given to us by the Apostles and the saints that followed who proclaimed this season and celebration, establishing the elements of the Tradition we now enjoy for our spiritual enrichment. It was Saint Paul who said, “*I urge you, imitate me.*”(1Cor 4:16) in his letter to the Corinthians. The Saints are our teachers and they are so honored because they were able to follow the commandments of God. We too have a duty, especially in this special season of the Church, to also be doers of the commandments of our Savior and to follow them.

Those who mock the Traditions of the Paschal season deprive themselves of the teachings of the Saints. Those who proclaim a different tradition are easily recognized because they do not demonstrate the teachings of the Saints. They project some other image that is not Orthodox teaching. They are often those those who do not have the right understanding of the nature of man and how God created him as a rational being in the image of God. Instead, they see all things like creatures, soulless, as earthly beings motivated by pleasures, acting like lustful beasts. Luke used harsh words and called them “*a generation of vipers*”(Luke 3:7). Such people don’t waste their time with thoughts of things unseen, assuming them to be nothing and of no reality,. They only think about what they can see, feel and touch, rejoicing in the material things of this world, but not serving God. Instead they only serve their own desires instead of the desires of the unseen God.

Christ, who loves mankind and is fully human and divine, came to correct this condition. It is what mankind lost in the Fall of Adam and Eve and Christ came to retrain such peoples from such folly. He said, “*Be ye not as the horse and the mule which have no understanding, whose cheeks ye hold in with a bit and bridle.*”(Ps 32:9) He saw that mankind needed to be restrained like a horse with its bit and bridle. Christ saw them as wealthy merchants whose only interests were their material well being. He says, “*Ye are to me like merchant-men of Phoenicia.*” (Is 23:2 LXX ver.) To Him they were like foolish people because they were so far from knowing the spiritual realities. Their own mind and reasoning was the source of their notion of divine truth. They see their own thoughts as supreme. And what was good was their own works. Paul says, “*Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. Where fore, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting.*” (Rom 1:22-23, 28)

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<sup>1</sup> The following is the type of letter that Athanasius the Great, one of the Holy Fathers of our Church, the author of our creed, who lived in the fourth century, wrote to his parishes as their patriarch. The thoughts in this essay are taken from his Pascal Letters II - V.

There are many who do not observe the Pascha season according to the tradition of the Orthodox church and therefore cannot possibly enjoy the feast in a heavenly way. They make up their own rules for honoring their God. They do not make it a season of repentance. They do not partake of the sacraments of Confession, do not try to constrain their bodily desires through fasting, do not work at unceasing prayer, nor do they participate regularly in the community worship services.

Those who are truly the wise servants of the Lord are those who have listened to the Gospel words and the teachings of the Saints. Timothy commands, "*Be thou an example to the believers in word, in conversation, in love, in faith, in purity.*" (1Tim 4:12) They keep the Tradition of the paschal season so that even the non-believers and those who appear as foolish people will say, seeing their discipline and dedication, "*God is with them of a truth.*" (1Cor 14:25) For those who follow the teachings of the Apostles and the Saints make Christ their end and goal. They are like Paul who says, "*Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.*" (1 Cor 11:1)

Our Savior in the height of His divinity humbly told His disciples, "*learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*" (Mat 11:29) Also when he poured water in the basin and girded himself with a towel and washed His disciples feet he said to them, "*you call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you.*" (John 13:13-15) Such loving kindness does our Lord show for us. His actions only give us power if we imitate them. Not only should we take on His image but we should use Him as a pattern of heavenly teaching. We should act as he acted. In suffering we should not threaten, being criticized we should not criticize back but bless those who criticize us. In everything we do we should commit ourselves to God who judges righteously. To those of us who are able to discipline themselves to act according to the Gospel, they will be partakers of Christ and imitations of the apostolic teachings. This is the purpose of the Paschal season to help us move closer to imitating Christ.

Christ, when He saw those who used His words, but only obeyed them according to their personal desires said, "*keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you.*" (1 Cor 11:2) Those who twist what has been taught to us and incorporated into the Tradition of the Church by Christ and the Saints, are those who are wolves in sheep's clothing. They take the divine words and use them to serve their own purposes distorting the Tradition. The serpent that deceived Adam and Eve was among the first of these deceivers. It presented the forbidden fruit as something that was beautiful and had a wonderful taste that God surely wanted them to have. Our society is filled with such deceivers and there may be some in our parish as well. The serpent was no different than those who tell us that we no longer have to follow the fasts, or that the fast ends at 6:00 just before the feast is served. He is no different than those who say that private confession is good enough and we don't have to go to Confession, or that it's not necessary to partake of the Eucharist regularly but only occasionally, and so forth. They are the ones who are distorting the Tradition given to us by Christ Himself and passed on to through the Apostles and Holy Fathers of the Church. Such people are in danger of

changing the commandments that were given to us by God to suit their own desires and pleasures derived from earthly experiences. Paul warned his followers about those who were deceptive in their teachings, "*if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.*"(Gal 1:9)

There are many in our culture today who even deny the teachings of the Resurrection and eternal life. To them these are unbelievable because they defy physical principles. Many such people even call themselves Christians. They see God not as the Apostles taught but as a superhuman nice guy who is our friend, a great person who lived a virtuous life--they deny His divinity. They do not consider what happens after death, but are fearful of death. In fact these people tend to deny anything that is not grounded in the reality of this earthly world. The Pascha season is the time to fully appreciate and experience the main teaching of Christ. He was the one who saved us and gave us eternal life. Through His Resurrection he conquered death and opened the path to eternal life and the gates of paradise for us. Because of His coming to earth, death is no longer something to be feared, but something to be embraced. Pascha is the point of the greatest joy and we need to rejoice as Paul commanded, "*Praying without ceasing; in everything giving thanks.*" (1Thes 5:17) We cannot fail to carry on the Traditions handed down to us from the Fathers.

During the Great Fast and Holy Week, we keep the fast and attend the services together. In this way it is with one common mouth that we give thanks to the Lord for what He has given to us through His sacrifice. It should be as the psalmist says, "*We shall make our praise in the Lord all the day.*"(Ps 35:28) In this way, as we keep the Traditions of the Great Fast, Holy Week and the period of Pentecost, we will be seen as worthy of that joy which is in heaven.

Saint Athanasius teaches us that the Pascal season Tradition is that we begin with a forty day fast. And once we have been purified and prepared by those days, we begin the Holy Week. During this week we participate in more prolonged prayers, stricter fasting, and watchings, that we may be transformed, crucified, and then resurrected as a new improved Christian ready for the Pascal celebration.

We are not to celebrate the days of the Great Fast as mourners. What we are doing is refreshing ourselves with spiritual food and imposing silence on our bodily and earthly desires. It is by these means that we can develop the strength to overcome our adversaries (the demons that constantly hound us) and lead away from imitating Christ. It is just like Judith, when first having occupied herself with fasting and prayers, she overcame the enemies and killed Olophornes (Judith 13:8). Or like Esther when destruction was about to come on all her race, and the nation of Israel was ready to perish, defeated the fury of the tyrant by no other means than by fasting and prayer to God, and changed the ruin of the people into safety.(Esther 4:16) When we purify ourselves we approach the feast not with filthy clothes, but with our consciences covered with pure garments. We become clothed with Christ when we love virtue and live it.

Let us engage in the holy fasts as having been prescribed by Him and proclaimed by the Apostles and the Holy Fathers, and by means of which we attain the way to union with God.