



Melkite Catholic Eparchy of Australia and New Zealand

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The Most Reverend
ROBERT RABBAT
by the Mercy of God

Melkite Greek-Catholic Eparchy of Australia and New Zealand
to the Priests and Deacons, my Fellow Ministers at the Altar,
to the Religious and to All the Faithful of our Holy Eparchy,
which is most beloved of Christ,
a Pastoral Letter for Easter, Holy and Glorious Pascha, 2018.

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In a recent radio programme, the commentator, who is also an Anglican minister, read out a list of the graves or tombs of famous historical individuals. As each burial place was noted, the comment was “occupied.” When he came to the tomb of Jesus Christ, the response was simply “empty.” It is ironic that those who deny the fullness of the Gospel cannot see that at the very heart of the Christian Faith, there is indeed an emptiness; however, this is not a philosophical or existential emptiness but a literal one. The central element of our faith experience is an empty tomb.

In our sacred art, Byzantine iconography, there has always been a strong reluctance to portray the moment of the Resurrection. Icons, or more correctly holy pictures, showing the Risen Lord stepping out of a sarcophagus, semi-clothed and carrying a cross-banner are from a late period, and obviously influenced by the art of the Italian Renaissance.

Although the gospel accounts provide intriguing details, such as the reference to the holy shroud or the appearance of the angel at the tomb, the sacred texts are ever sober and restrained; and are primarily concerned with the fact that the Tomb, the Holy Sepulchre, was empty.

Our Christian Faith is grounded in that reality of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. As St Paul writes to the Corinthians, “If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.” (1Cor 15:4) There could be no more direct statement. The Apostle insists on the historical reality of the Resurrection. Everything else flows from the objective truth of that statement that is the foundation of the apostolic preaching, “We have seen the Lord.” (Jn 20:25)

That those who followed him might have difficulty in grasping the fact of his resurrection is appreciated by Jesus. Following the Resurrection, Mary Magdalene, Equal-to-the-Apostles, does not even recognise the Risen Jesus until she hears his voice. At his appearance to Thomas in the Upper Room, the Risen Lord shows the doubting apostle the wounds of the crucifixion. (Jn 20:26-29) He eats with the eleven apostles, assuring them that “a spirit does not have flesh and bones as I have.” (Lk 24:36-43) And again, on the road to Emmaus, the two disciples do not know with whom they are speaking until Jesus reveals himself in the breaking of the bread. (Lk 24:13-35)

The denial of the certainty of the resurrection was one of the more bizarre phenomena of the 19th century. Several of the sects that arose during the frenzied religious milieu of the “Great Awakenings”, and which are still actively proselytising in Australia, deny the objective truth of the Resurrection. They are thus led into a labyrinth of curious doctrines, until finally their “Christian faith” is unrecognisable. When confronted with the empty tomb, the sectarians have attempted to fill the void with every fantasy and fable imaginable. As St John Chrysostom observes, “Poor human reason, when it trusts in itself, substitutes the strangest absurdities for the highest divine concepts.”

In his *Physics* (Book 1V), Aristotle proposed that in nature there are no vacuums, ie. the theory of *plenism*. This is often expressed as "Nature abhors a vacuum." We might say much the same of religious belief and practice. As the Christ-less Easter becomes increasingly the only Easter many people know, the folk accretions are now central. As with Christmas, Easter is now often described as a time for family gatherings and festive, feel good contentment. It will not be long before we hear that Easter is for the children.

Let us imagine for a moment that there is a community so isolated that its members have never made contact with the outside world. One day, at this time of the year, some are transported to an Australian shopping centre. They could be forgiven for thinking that the local inhabitants worship gods in the form of chickens and rabbits; and that the totemic symbol of this faith is a chocolate egg. We might find this amusing; however, it is symptomatic of an unfortunate development. Religious practice indeed abhors a vacuum.

It is perplexing that symbols taken from our pre-Christian past, and which were given a new meaning by the Household of the Faith, should now confront us as the signs of a new "Easter" without the Cross, without the Resurrection and without the Risen and Glorified Lord. As the external signs of the Paschal celebration are dismantled or abolished, what remains is given a new meaning which is but a shadow of the truth once symbolized. Just as Saint Nicholas was banished by the phony Santa Claus, the mnemonics of our religious life are replaced by the products of corporate confectioners.

It is painfully obvious that the Christian Faith in Australia is under considerable pressure. Secularism, the new atheism, some non-Christian religions, and even non-aggressive indifferentism, all contribute to a slow but sure whittling down of the place Christianity has in the public forum.

It is time for those who bear the name Christian, who carry the Name of Christ, to reclaim Easter as the central Feast of our spiritual life. Throughout the ages, countless martyrs have gone rejoicing to their deaths. They did not sacrifice everything, even life itself, for the sake of a corpse decomposing in a grave. They had encountered the Lord, Jesus Christ, risen in glory from the dead.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

"Let your door stand open to receive Him, unlock your soul to Him, offer Him a welcome in your mind, and then you will see the riches of simplicity, the treasures of peace, the joy of grace. Throw wide the gate of your heart, stand before the Sun of the Everlasting Light..." (St Ambrose of Milan, c.340-397)

May this Feast of Feasts be for each of you, your families and all those dear to you, a time of countless blessings.

Christ is Risen! المسيح قام! Χριστός ἀνέστη!

With my paternal blessing and with prayers assured,

✠ Robert Rabbat, DD
Eparch

From our Eparchy at Greenacre, New South Wales
Holy and Glorious Pascha, 2018.