

Great and Holy Friday: The Epitaphion and the Tomb of Jesus

The Cross: Early Focal Point of Holy Friday Worship

It is noteworthy that the use of the Epitaphion in the Holy Friday service is hardly a few hundred years old. The early Christians in the Church of Jerusalem used as the focal point of their Good Friday worship not the Epitaphion but the wood of the cross which was discovered in Jerusalem by St. Helena at the beginning of the fourth century. An early pilgrim to Jerusalem, Silvia of Aquitaine (4th century), describes this rite in her *Diary of a Pilgrimage*. On Holy Friday the bishop of Jerusalem, attended by priests and deacons, made a procession to Golgotha where a throne was set up for him on the exact spot where Jesus was crucified. Before him was placed a table covered with a white cloth on which was placed the sacred wood of the cross with its inscription. As the bishop held the ends of the cross with his hands, the faithful approached one by one, bowed profoundly before the sacred relic of the cross and kissed it.

Custom Retained

This beautiful custom of venerating the Cross on Holy Friday later spread from Jerusalem to the Orthodox Church in general where today after the reading of the fifth- Passion Gospel on Holy Thursday evening, the priest takes the cross from behind the altar, carries it in a procession through the sanctuary and plants it in the middle of the soleas. During this procession, the beautiful hymn "Today He hangs on the Cross" is sung. As the following words of this hymn are sung, "We worship Thy passion, O Christ . the priest, followed by the congregation, bows to the ground three times and then kisses the Precious Cross.

Origin of the Epitaphion

The origin of the Epitaphion as it is used on Holy Friday is intriguing. During the Divine Liturgy, the Orthodox Church covers the sacred gifts during the proskomidi with a large veil called the "aer." The veil, also known as the "aer," began to be used in the liturgy in Jerusalem at the time of St. Savas (+532). According to Simeon of Thessalonica, the "aer" represents the naked and dead body of Jesus as it was placed in the tomb. It is for this reason, he states, that the picture of the placing of the body of Christ in the tomb is often depicted on the aer. At the Great Entrance the deacon carries the aer in a procession immediately before the Holy Gifts. When the procession reaches the holy table, the priest covers the chalice and paten with the aer as he prays silently: "Noble Joseph took down Your most pure body from the tree, wrapped it in a clean shroud, covered it with spices and laid it in a new tomb."

From this aer or veil containing the icon of the entombed Christ, there developed slowly the use of the Epitaphion on Holy Friday. The rite of the veneration of the Epitaphion was transferred from the Matins (Orthros) service of Great and Holy Saturday to the Vespers of Holy Friday probably because the troparion "The noble Joseph was first sung during Passion Week in the Vespers of Holy Friday.

In addition to the figure of Christ in the tomb, there were slowly added to the icon of the Epitaphion the figures of Mary the Mother of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea and the pious women who took part in the burial of Christ. Around the border of the Epitaphion are inscribed the words of the troparion "The noble Joseph

During the Vesper Service of Holy Friday a procession is made around the church with the Epitaphion by four persons each holding one of its four corners. After the procession it is placed in the symbolic tomb beautifully decorated with flowers and candles, while the Troparion "The noble Joseph". is sung. Behind the tomb stands the plain cross with no corpus on it. The Epitaphion itself remains exposed for veneration until the Matins of the Resurrection when it is carried into the sanctuary and placed on the holy table where it is kept for forty days until the Feast of the Ascension of Jesus, to symbolize the forty days Jesus spent with us following the Resurrection.

The Orthodox Attitude Toward Crucifixion

As Expressed in the Hymns of the Day

Bishop Kallistos Ware writes in his book "The Orthodox Church": The Orthodox attitude to the Crucifixion is best seen in the hymns sung on Great Friday, such as the following:

*He who clothes himself with light as with a garment
Stood naked at the judgment.
On His cheeks he received blows
From the hands which he had formed.
The lawless multitude nailed to the Cross
The Lord of Glory.*

"The Orthodox Church on Great Friday thinks not simply of Christ's human pain and suffering by itself, but rather of the contrast between His outward humiliation and His inward glory. Orthodox see not just the suffering humanity of Christ, but a suffering God:

*Today is hanged upon the tree
He who hanged the earth in the midst of the waters.
A crown of thorns crowns him
Who is the king of the angels.
He is wrapped about with the purple of mockery
Who wraps the heaven in clouds.*

"Behind the veil of Christ's bleeding and broken flesh, Orthodox still discern the Triune God. Even Golgotha is a theophany; even on Great Friday the Church sounds a note of Resurrection joy:

*We worship thy Passion, O Christ;
Show us also thy glorious Resurrection!
I magnify thy sufferings,
I praise thy burial and Resurrection.
Shouting, Lord, glory to thee!*

'The Crucifixion is not separated from the Resurrection, for both are but a single action. Calvary is seen always in the light of the empty tomb; the Cross is an emblem of victory.

When Orthodox think of Christ Crucified, they think not only of His suffering and desolation; they think of Him as Christ the Victor, Christ the King, reigning in triumph from the Tree. . . . Christ is our victorious king, not in spite of the Crucifixion but because of it: "I call Him king because I see Him crucified" (Chrysostom).

Taken from "Sacred Symbols That Speak" Vol. I by Fr. Anthony Coniaris, pg. 103-107

From the Paschal Synaxarion

"On this glorious and most holy day, the whole Church celebrates with joy the final victory and life-giving resurrection of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ. After the long period of darkness brought about by man's sin, after the seemingly endless expectation of the prophets, after the glad tidings of the birth of Christ that came to pass when the proper time had come, after the thirty hidden years and the three years of Christ's public life, after the frightful passion which had seemed to be the end of all hope, after the two days in the depth of the tomb, behold: Christ is Risen! Indeed, indeed, He is risen, and all is true, every promise of God has been fulfilled, the Savior has come, the Lamb of God has been sacrificed to take away the sins of the world, and totally triumphant in His apparent defeat, He has crushed death through His death and restored everlasting life through His resurrection.

The time of weeping is over; now is the time of joy. Now that we have been cleansed through the passion of Christ, now that we have repented and atoned for our sins during the penitential season of Lent, let us rejoice; let us give one another a Christ-like kiss of peace, confirming our love towards all."

Taken from "Sacred Symbols That Speak" Vol. II by Fr. Anthony Coniaris, pg. 121-122

Christ is Risen! Indeed, He is Risen!