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WOUNDS OF CHRIST: WOUNDS OF THE WORLD. THE CRUCIFIED AND RESURRECTED CHRIST AND CHRISTIANS TOWARDS A SUFFERING HUMANITY

Abstract: The article discusses the spectacle of Christ's wounds after His resurrection based on the account from the Gospel of John within the context of the dogmatic meaning of the resurrection from the dead and what it entails for humans. It mainly addresses the reasons why Christ was eager to show the scars of His Passion although His human nature had indeed transformed into an incorruptible, perfected and deified one. This gesture was proof that the person who had suffered was the same person who had defeated death, sacrificed His life and had risen from the dead out of His limitless love for the human race. The author then draws the link between this dogmatic truth and the ethos of the ecclesiastical life, as he contends that the members of the Church should lead a Christ-like life by being compassionate and affectionate towards other peoples' suffering, i.e. the suffering of the entire world. ► *Key words:* dogma, ethos, Resurrection, Christ's wounds, incorruption, Passion, compassion.

1. DOGMA AND ETHOS OF THE CHURCH. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth”.¹ This passage from the Gospel of John recapitulates the core dogma of the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God, which is the foundation of the living Christian Church. The fact that the Son of God became human and lived among humans, that was truly the outcome of the limitless love of God the Father for the world,² and primarily the

¹ Jn 1, 14.

² See Jn 3, 16: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life”.

faith in Christ's Resurrection from the dead, the victory over the ultimate enemy of the humankind are doctrines, without which Christian faith becomes unsubstantial and meaningless.³ This new proximity between God and humans that Christ brought about and the redemption from corruption and death, which His believers have the chance to experience, signify a new era in the relationship of God with His people, i.e. the entire world and, simultaneously, the whole of Creation.

Christians as individuals, but also modern theology, as the expression of the Church as a living and transforming community of various charismas, ought to look back at the mystery of Incarnation in their search for inspiration, encouragement and guidance. The Incarnated Son of God, His life and work, His actions and revelations should always remain at the centre of every theological endeavour. By saying this, I do not simply mean the reading and reciting of biblical passages which refer to the doctrines I have just outlined, but rather the embracement of and the reliance on the entirety of the ecclesiastical tradition. Nonetheless, this tradition is not only scriptural or textual but it includes the liturgical life of the Church and every other form of Church life, including monasticism, ecclesiastical art and modern academic theology.

In light of the above my article explores the meaning of the wounds of the Resurrected Christ, and the importance that those may have for Christians in this world of suffering. On the other hand I will elaborate on the fact that any Christian may have to bear her/his own wounds, while experiencing and confronting a wounded world and having to face up to the suffering of other people compassionately — just as Christ did. Thus, my intention is to go beyond a textual approach of Christ's actions and suggest a con-textual comprehension,⁴ which discusses the effects that those may have on the lives of the faithful in our era, in the life of ecclesiastical communities of the present time. I will particularly discuss the dogmatic importance of why He demonstrated his wounds to Thomas (and indeed the other disciples) and what that incident signifies about how we should perceive the mystery of Incarnation and the utmost outcome of it, i.e. the victory over death. Furthermore, I will attempt to draw a link between the spectacle of the Resurrected, yet wounded

³ See 1Cor 15, 14: "And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty". See also 1Cor 15, 17: "And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile". The following comment of Fr Alexander Schmemmann is expanding on this biblical tradition and faith: "[...] In this way the acceptance or non-acceptance of Christ and Christianity is essentially the acceptance or non-acceptance of belief in His Resurrection, and in the language of religious representations that means belief in the union in Him of body and soul, of which the dissolution and ruination is *death*". A. Schmemmann (protopresb.), "The Christian Concept of Death", <http://www.schmemmann.org/byhim/thechristianconceptofdeath.html> (retrieved on 10 August 2017).

⁴ For the concept of contextual theology and some examples of how it perceives the connection between theology and modern reality, See D. Trakatellis (Bishop), *Theology in encounters: risks and visions*, The Greek Orthodox Theological Review 32:1 (1987), 31–37. See also M. J. Leddy, *Radical Gratitude*, Orbis Books: New York 2005, 144; Digby Hannah, *Experience Of Place In Australian Identity And Theology*, Pacifica 17 (2004), 297–310.

Godman and the way of life that Christians ought to lead if they truly wish to follow the example that the Son of God set for them. In other words, my purpose is to show the connection between the doctrine/dogma of the Church and the ethos of ecclesiastical life. This ethos or *modus vivendi* should derive, inescapably, from the ontological truth that the very presence of Christ in the world embodied. Needless to say, that a true dogmatic approach to Christ's life or the mystery of the Church, is nothing but a description of the life of Christ and the life of/in the Church, i.e. the way of life, and consequently the ethos that characterizes the connectedness between God and His people, God's people to one another and God.⁵ Therefore, one cannot really distinguish faith and dogma from action or mindset/consciousness from practice,⁶ although actions and practices are not to be found only in activism. In order to give an example of what I mean, I would point out that we should never forsake that a praying Christian is (also) an active one.

At this point let me briefly elaborate on how I personally view the use of different resources in our discussion of theological matters and their significance in the

⁵ If Life and Love are the primary qualities of God, as the Scripture clearly suggests (See 1Jn 4, 5; Jn 14, 6) then in these very qualities and the way they are manifested in human history and the Creation, one may see how Christian beliefs about God can never be separated from God's actions. They are not inert qualities. On the contrary, the Love of God for his creations leads to action/movement which brings more Life, as this is evident in the Incarnation of Logos *par excellence*. This is a pattern that Christians ought to follow, for it will prove their true faith which produces an analogous ethos, i.e. a daily attitude that is a testament to their faith in the Trinitarian God.

⁶ In this regard Chrysostomos Stamoulis provides us with a holistic approach to how faith connects to love (and the practice of love) and simultaneously the ascetic and, at the same time, Eucharistic nature of the ecclesiastical life, as well as to how true theology reflects all the previous: "The relationship between faith and love is liturgical. The existence of the one presupposes the existence of the other. With the isolation of one the other disappears. We are talking here, of course, of faith and love pleasing to God which makes for real love among human beings. [...] 'Life's beginning and end. Its beginning is faith, its end, love. The two form a unity which is God. Here there is no isolation or separation of one from the other, just a liturgical distinction. Furthermore, according to Cyril, when love walks correctly alongside faith it is apparent from adherence to the dogma of the Gospel and the observance of the divine commandments. This is also the reason that in the Orthodox Church it is the faith, the sowing of the seed or the exercise of the talents (των χαρισμάτων) which expresses the potentialities of the person, and not the plowing, that provides the context for the preparation of the Divine Eucharist. Ecclesiology for the Orthodox Church is eucharistic because it is ascetic and it is ascetic because it is eucharistic. Any isolation or overemphasis leads to forms of paganism, idolatry, and delusion. The Eucharist presupposes the daily practice of repentance, the journey with the ship of repentance according to St. Isaac the Syrian, and ascetic striving is the way into the Eucharist. Nothing is singled out and isolated, nothing is an end in itself. Moreover, in the Orthodox Church theology is ascetic, that is to say experiential, as it runs through the entire existence of those who pray, through all the facets of temporal reality. According to Philotheos Kokkinos theology is practiced 'in our whole life' and in this way it is ascetic. The practice of faith leads to purification, brings love to fruition, or reveals the summit of human love; at the same time the degree of love reveals the measure of faith and leads to mystical union. In this way the theology and works of the theologian relate to the magnitude of his love for God and for his fellow human beings". C. A. Stamoulis, "The 'theater' of a dialogue in three acts", <https://antidosis.wordpress.com/2012/03/12/chrysostomos-%CE%B1-stamoulis-the-theater-of-a-dialogue-in-three-acts/> (retrieved on 10 August 2017).

modern-day era. As I have previously stressed I am of the opinion that we should examine Christ's acts and the truth that they may reveal within the wider possible context. By this I mean the ecclesiastical literature as a whole (Bible and Church Fathers), but since the Church is alive, a living mystery in the ages, I strongly believe, that this same ecclesiastical tradition should not preclude more recent theological texts as well as (secular) cultural works which resonate with the aforementioned tradition. This is not of course simply a matter of pluralism in the resources one chooses to utilize, but as I have just implied, one of great theological importance, since it may testify to the fact that the Spirit of God — that which has enlightened and guided theological endeavours — is alive and active in the world. In this regard we should always remind ourselves that the Spirit and the effects of Its presence may often be observed in surprising places.⁷ Therefore, in the article at hand I will quote texts of Fathers such as Saint John Damascus and Saint John Chrysostom, (continue to) refer to the works of modern theologians such as Alexander Schmemmann and also to a novel by Wendell Berry. Finally, I will briefly comment on the film *Beyond and Gates* (2005), directed by Michael Caton-Jones, which rightfully, in my opinion, deserves to be mentioned in the discussion of the aforementioned theological issues.

2. CHRIST DISPLAYS HIS WOUNDS TO THOMAS AND THE OTHER DISCIPLES.

DOGMATIC CONTEXT AND EXPLANATION

According to the gospel of John in one of Christ's encounters with his disciples, which took place after He had gloriously risen from the dead, the Son of God displayed His wounds to Thomas, who had requested to see the print of the nails and put his finger into them and also into His side, which was pierced by the Roman soldiers. Only then he would truly believe that the crucified God was also the resurrected one. Christ provided His disciple, who seemed to have the weakest faith among His followers, with the chance to do so and this, as we are told, turned Thomas' unfaithfulness or doubt into a glorifying faith. He invited him to look at His wounded hands and put his hand into His side. Thomas' immediate reaction was a pure declaration of faith in the divinity of Christ and the reality of His miraculous Resurrection.⁸

What we are talking about is a bodily Resurrection, the Resurrection of the human nature of Christ, which was perfected and immortalized. The materiality of the God-man's Resurrection is what allows Thomas and the other disciples to obtain a tangible, palpable proof of his rising from the grave. Saint John Damascus is enlightening on the matter and, as always, very accurate in expressing the orthodox

⁷ See Jn 3, 8: "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit".

⁸ See Jn 20, 24–28.

dogma and the way it connects to the redemption and salvation of humanity: all humans will experience a bodily resurrection.⁹ As the Saint puts it:

Moreover, that the resurrection of the Lord was the union of uncorrupted body and soul (for it was these that had been divided) is manifest: for He said, *Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up* (Jn 2, 19). And the holy Gospel is a trustworthy witness that He spoke of His own body. *Handle Me and see*, the Lord said to His own disciples when they were thinking that they saw a spirit, *that it is I Myself, and that I am not changed* (Lk 24, 37): *for a spirit has not flesh or bones, as you see Me have*. And when He had said this He showed them His hands and His side, and stretched them forward for Thomas to touch. (Jn 20, 27) Is not this sufficient to establish belief in the resurrection of bodies?¹⁰

The Resurrected Christ had no limitations as He was no longer constrained by the laws which apply to material reality, but, at the same time, the Gospel leaves us no room to perceive Him as non-material, in other words as a ghost.¹¹ This was made very clear by John Damascus in the above quoted passage, but the Saint elaborates on the matter even further by creatively referring to the Gospel and again making sure that his readers comprehend the connection between Christ's Resurrection and the nature of the salvation which awaits them. So he continues:

⁹ A. Schmemmann, "The Christian Concept of Death", Ibid: "Religious consciousness assumes that the Resurrection of Christ is first of all a *miracle*, which of course it is. But for the average religious consciousness this miracle is even greater: the miracle of all miracles remains "unique" so to speak, pertaining to Christ. And since we acknowledge that Christ is God, this miracle ceases to be a miracle in a certain sense. God is almighty, God is God, God can do anything! Whatever the death of Christ signifies, His divine power and might did not allow Him to remain in the grave. Yet the fact of the matter is that all this comprises only half of the age-old Christian interpretation of the Resurrection of Christ. The joy of early Christianity, which still lives in the Church, in her services, in her hymns and prayers, and especially in the incomparable feast of Pascha, does not separate the Resurrection of Christ from the "universal resurrection," which originates and begins in the Resurrection of Christ".

¹⁰ John of Damascus, "Concerning the Resurrection", *An Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/33044.htm> (retrieved on 12 August 2017). Cf. Ιωάννης Δαμασκηνός, «Περί Αναστάσεως», *Ἐκδοσις Ἀκριβῆς τῆς Ὀρθοδόξου Πίστεως*, PGXCIV, 1224D.

¹¹ Schmemmann elaborates on the matter in a brilliant and utterly theological manner, while opposing the false notion — which exists even among Christians — that salvation entails simply the survival of the immortal soul and stressing the materiality of the Resurrected, putting, at the same time, his interpretation in the context of the liturgical life of the living Church and its ultimate expression, i.e. the Eucharist: "It must be frankly stated that the classical belief in the immortality of the soul excludes faith in the resurrection, because the *resurrection* (and this is the root of the matter) includes in itself not only the soul, but also the body. Simply reading the Gospel leaves no doubt about it. When they saw the risen Christ, the Apostles, as the Gospel says, thought that they were seeing a ghost or a vision. The first task of the risen Christ was to allow them to sense the reality of His body. He takes food and eats in front of them. He commands the doubting Thomas to touch His body, to be convinced of the Resurrection through his fingers. And when the Apostles came to believe, it is precisely the proclamation of the Resurrection, its reality, its "bodiliness" that becomes the chief content, power and joy of their preaching, and the main sacrament of the Church becomes the Communion of bread and wine as the *Body and Blood* of the risen Christ. And in this act, says the Apostle Paul, "proclaiming the death of the Lord, they confess His Resurrection". A. Schmemmann, "The Christian Concept of Death", Ibid.

Again the divine apostle says, *For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.* (1 Cor 15, 35) And again: *It is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption: it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power: it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory: it is sown a natural body* (that is to say, crass and mortal), *it is raised a spiritual body* (1 Cor 15, 42, 44), such as was our Lord's body after the resurrection which passed through closed doors, was unwearying, had no need of food, or sleep, or drink. *For they will be,* says the Lord, *as the angels of God* (Mk 12, 25): there will no longer be marriage nor procreation of children. The divine apostle, in truth, says, *For our conversation is in heaven, from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus, Who shall change our vile body that it may be fashioned like His glorious body* (Phil 3, 20-21): not meaning change into another form (God forbid!), but rather the change from corruption into incorruption.¹²

Nevertheless, when pondering over the mystery of Christ's Resurrection, one may be rightfully tempted to wonder about His willingness to display the wounds of the Passion, which preceded His glorious Resurrection, to the Disciples. This is not due to the fact that —according to its dogmatic explanation — this gesture confirmed the realness of His humanity, but because — as mentioned above — after His Resurrection, Christ's human nature was transformed into incorruptible, perfected and deified.¹³ How, in other words, can one reconcile the idea that the scars of the Body which was damaged, as it is fitting for any perishable and corruptible body that is tortured, with the fact that those same scars were visible on

¹² J. Damascus, "Concerning the Resurrection", Ibid. Cf. I. Δαμασκηνός, «Περί Αναστάσεως», Ibid, PGXCIV, 1225A. The Holy Father is of course talking about the "renovated" human nature, which all humans who truly believe in Christ will attain, when the promise of the common resurrection of the dead will be fulfilled. Christ's bodily resurrection revealed the characteristics of the eschatological resurrection of humanity.

¹³ In the human nature that Christ received we already see the deification of humanity: "For the Word Himself became flesh, having been in truth conceived of the Virgin, but coming forth as God with the assumed nature which, as soon as He was brought forth into being, was deified by Him, so that these three things took place simultaneously, the assumption of our nature, the coming into being, and the deification of the assumed nature by the Word". J. Damascus, "That the Virgin Mary is the Mother of God: an argument directed against Nestorians", *An exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/33043.htm> (retrieved on 13 September 2017). Cf. I. Δαμασκηνός, «Ότι Θεοτόκος η αγία Παρθένος κατά Νεστοριανών», Ibid, PGXCIV, 1032B. Nevertheless, we can definitely assert, that His resurrection is the fulfilment, the culmination or utmost expression of sanctity that the Son of God granted humans. Had He not defeated death through His own death, the sinless and perfect nature which He received through His Incarnation and truly united to His divine nature, would have been admirable, but humans would still remain helpless towards death, their "last enemy to be destroyed". As Fr Alexander Schmemmann puts it: "The last enemy to be destroyed is death...". And that destruction, that extermination of death began when the Son of God Himself in His immortal love for us voluntarily descended into death and its darkness, filling its despair and horror with His light and love. And this is why we sing on Pascha not only "Christ is risen from the dead," but also "trampling down death by death...". Christ's human nature died and mysteriously became the remedy for human mortality. As Fr Alexander again eloquently contends: "[...] The absolute, all-encompassing law of dying and death, which tolerated no exceptions, was somehow blown apart and overcome from within". A. Schmemmann, "The Christian Concept of Death", Ibid.

the immortalized, transformed and perfected nature of the Resurrected? Saint John Chrysostom addresses this scandalous question in the following passage. In doing so, he surely puts his interpretation in the same dogmatic context, by highlighting the mysterious connection (or oneness) between the two, true natures of Christ both before and after His Resurrection, even though in this case his main purpose is to emphasize the trueness of the human nature of Christ after the Resurrection:

It is worth enquiring, how an incorruptible body showed the prints of the nails, and was tangible by a mortal hand. But be not thou disturbed; what took place was a matter of condescension. For that which was so subtle and light as to enter in when the doors were shut, was free from all density; but this marvel was shown, that the Resurrection might be believed, and that men might know that it was the Crucified One Himself, and that another rose not in His stead. On this account He arose bearing the signs of the Cross, and on this account He eats. At least the Apostles everywhere made this a sign of the Resurrection, saying, *We, who ate and drank with Him*. (Acts 10, 41) As therefore when we see Him walking on the waves before the Crucifixion, we do not say, that that body is of a different nature, but of our own; so after the Resurrection, when we see Him with the prints of the nails, we will no more say, that he is therefore corruptible. For He exhibited these appearances on account of the disciple.¹⁴

Based on Saint John's words we could argue, that just as He gave His disciples an abundance of indications that He was not just human, but also the omnipotent, Only Begotten Son of the Father, when He presented them with extraordinary acts — such as the rising of Lazarus or His Holy Transfiguration — Christ now reminds them, that although He fulfilled His mission and surpassed death, He has not abandoned or forsaken His humanity. It was a matter of condescension or (divine) economy, as the Saint emphasizes in the above lines, a way to make the mystery of the coexistence of humanity and divinity in Him more approachable in its magnitude, more palpable in its transcendence. In other words, Christ wanted to demonstrate these things for the sake of his disciples; He was not forced to do it, due to His inability to avoid it, while His purpose was to reassure them that He was indeed the Resurrected.¹⁵ To one who is familiar with the patristic perception of how humanity and human habits or physical/natural passions were embraced by Christ even before His rising from the dead, the above conclusion is not, in any way, surprising. As Saint John Damascus clarifies:

¹⁴ John Chrysostom, *Homily 87 On the Gospel of John*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/240187.htm> (retrieved on 13 September 2017). Cf. Ιωάννης Χρυσόστομος, «Ομιλία ΠΖ'», *Υπόμνημα Εἰς τὸν Ἅγιον Ἰωάννην τὸν Ἀπόστολον καὶ Εὐαγγελιστὴν*, PGLIX, 474α.

¹⁵ See J. Damascus, "Concerning what followed the Resurrection", *Ibid*: "After Christ was risen from the dead He laid aside all His passions, I mean His corruption or hunger or thirst or sleep or weariness or such like. For, although He did taste food after the resurrection, yet He did not do so because it was a law of His nature (for He felt no hunger), but in the way of economy, in order that He might convince us of the reality of the resurrection, and that it was one and the same flesh which suffered and rose again". Cf. I. Δαμασκηνός, «Περὶ τῶν μετὰ τὴν Ἀνάστασιν», *Ibid*, PGXCIV, 1101D-1104A.

Of a truth our natural passions were in harmony with nature and above nature in Christ. For they were stirred in Him after a natural manner when He permitted the flesh to suffer what was proper to it: but they were above nature because that which was natural did not in the Lord assume command over the will. For no compulsion is contemplated in Him but all is voluntary. For it was with His will that He hungered and thirsted and feared and died.¹⁶

As of the dogmatic explanation of the wounds of Christ, the focal point of this article, I believe it has now become clear that we should see them as the visible sign that the Resurrected one was the same person who suffered and died on the cross (death, of course applies only to His human nature), but we ought not to forget that those were the wounds of love, the unconditional love of God for humanity, for the sake of which He was sacrificed. In this regard Saint Cyril of Alexandria offers us an interpretation, which is highly remarkable, as it further broadens the exegetic context. This is because it presents us with the encounter of the Son of God with His angels when His Holy Ascension takes place, in order to teach us that even in this final stage of this Divine Economia, in the heavenly sphere, He did not conceal His wounds, but instead, revealed them as the utmost expression of the Love that led Him to Martyrdom:

For even when He ascended into heaven itself, and made known the meaning of the mystery concerning Himself to the rulers, principalities, and powers above, and to those who commanded the legions of angels, He appeared also unto them in this same guise that they might believe that in very truth the Word That was of the Father, and in the Father, became Man for our sake, and that they might know that such was His care for His creatures that He died for our salvation. [...] They who raise this shout, I mean the cry: *Who is This That cometh from Edom?* that is, from the earth, are angels and rational powers, for they are marvelling at the Lord ascending into heaven. And, seeing Him almost, as it were, dyed in His own Blood, they say unto Him, not yet apprehending the mystery: *Why is Thy apparel red, and why are Thy garments like him that treadeth in the wine-vats?* For they compare the colour of the blood to new wine, lately trodden in the press. And what saith Christ unto them? First, in order that He may be known to be the living God, He saith: *I speak righteousness;* using the word *speak*, instead of “teach.” [...] Then say the angels unto Him, as Christ showeth them the marks of the nails: *What are these wounds in Thy Hands?* and the Lord answereth: *Those with which I was wounded in the house of My beloved.* For Israel was the house that the Lord loved, and Israel smote Him with nails and spear. For the outrages of the soldiers may justly be ascribed unto the Jews, for they brought the Lord to His death. Therefore, when He wished to satisfy the holy angels that He was, in fact, a Man, and that He had undergone the Cross for us, and that He was risen again to life from the dead, Christ was not content with mere words, but showed unto them the marks of His suffering.¹⁷

¹⁶ J. Damascus, “Concerning the natural and innocent passions”, Ibid. Cf. I. Δαμασκηνός, «Περὶ τῶν φυσικῶν καὶ ἀδιαβλήτων παθῶν», Ibid, PGXCIV, 1084A.

¹⁷ Cyril Alexandria, *On the Gospel according to John* (T. Randell), book XII, http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/cyрил_on_john_12_book12.htm (retrieved on 11 September 2017) Cf. Κύριλλος Ἀλεξανδρείας,

There is no better way to recapitulate the meaning of the life-giving wounds of the Passion than through the hymn that follows. The God-man's torture led to life, as His bleeding side granted humans their own resurrection and He glorifies those who thankfully glorify Him as their Saviour:

Your pierced side, O Giver of life, poured streams of remission, life, and salvation upon us all. By accepting death in the flesh, you have granted us immortality; by taking up your abode in the tomb, you have set us all free, and as God you have raised us up with you in glory. Therefore, we cry aloud; Glory to you, Lord and loving God.¹⁸

Therefore the Church commemorates the truth that Christ's wounds convey, the same way He did not hesitate to demonstrate them after His Resurrection, reminding us of the way He attained the ultimate glory in order to share it with His faithful people. Along with what I have just pointed out, the hymn that follows stresses that Christ's faithful see no shame in the fact that their God, in His human nature, suffered a disgraceful, humiliating death, for this was a death out of which eternal life miraculously sprung:

Though you, O Christ, have been taken captive by evil men, you are my God and I am not ashamed. I do not deny that your back was scourged, nor will I hide that you were nailed to the cross. I boast of your resurrection, for your death is my life. Almighty and loving God, glory to you.¹⁹

3. CHRIST'S PASSION AND HUMANITY; CHRISTIANS AND THE SUFFERING OF THE WORLD

As long as Christians are living in this world; still in this phase of the Church's life, thus taking part in the tribulations and tragedies of human history; as long as the eschatological fulfilment and the universal resurrection, which was initiated by Christ's own resurrection, has not arrived, a faithful person's life should constantly relate to the crucified God-man. A believer is truly a believer to the extent that she/he tries to embrace the self-emptying, self-denying, and humbled crucified Son of God.²⁰ Only then they will foretaste the glory of the Resurrected who is the same

«Ότι κατά φύσιν Θεός εστιν ο Υιός, καν ευρίσκειται δι' ημάς Θεόν εαυτού τον Πατέρα καλών», *Ερμηνεία ή Υπόμνημα εις το Κατά Ιωάννην Ευαγγέλιον*, PGLXXIV, 729 A-729C.

¹⁸ "Resurrection Apostichon", Sunday Vespers, Plagal of the First Tone, *Liturgical Texts of the Orthodox Church*, <https://www.goarch.org/-/sunday-vespers> (retrieved on 14 September 2017).

¹⁹ "Resurrection Sticheron", Sunday Vespers, Grave Tone, *Ibid*. This hymn gives us the opportunity to stress that orthodox consciousness does not focus on the glory and overlooks the passion. The path that led to glory is as significant as the glory itself and a discontinuity between the two is not in any way consistent with the nature of the Christian Church.

²⁰ See Gal 4, 27: "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ". Saint Paul's assertion that baptized people have clothed themselves with Christ reveals the great gift that the mystery of a believer's baptism bestows on the participant. It should be taken for granted but only on the premise that he/she also has to also see it as something they should aspire to, by cultivating a day by day relationship

person who walked the path of Passion. This is why Apostle Paul claims: “But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world”.²¹ All necessary knowledge of what is to be a follower of Christ stems from the attainment of His redeeming sacrifice, therefore the Saint also contends: “For I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified”.²²

Wendell Berry, the great Kentuckian poet and novelist, provides us with a theological explanation of God’s presence in the world, which relates in many ways to the issue at hand, i.e. community life (we could be talking about an ecclesiastical community) and peoples’ connectedness to one another and God in the face of tragic loss and consequently suffering. The barber the fictional Port William, a highly theological figure, argues:

And so, I thought, He must forebear to reveal His power and glory by presenting Himself as Himself, and must be present only in the ordinary miracle of the existence of His creatures. Those who wish to see him must see Him in the poor, the hungry, the hurt, the wordless creatures, the groaning and travailing beautiful world. I would sometimes be horrified [...] I could see no escape. We are too tightly tangled together to be able to separate ourselves from one another either by good or evil. We all are involved in all and any good, and in all any evil. For any sin, we all suffer. That is why our suffering is endless. It is why God grieves and Christ’s wounds are still bleeding.²³

In the first of the above paragraphs, Berry’s remarks echo Christ’s words by which He identified Himself with the suffering people, the people in need of help and support; their pain is His own pain and this is what He asks of His followers: to find Him in their fellow humans who suffer.²⁴ But the second paragraph deserves even more attention for the vivid ecclesiological background that one may point out in the author’s words: the members of a true, living community cannot separate themselves from the good things that happen in their community and the world, but also the bad things.²⁵ This is a sheer manifestation of a vision of community life that highlights compassion, sympathy and affection as the bond that sustains the relationship between the brethren of the community. By truly partaking in the

with Christ in the Church through their active belonging to it. Besides, the attainment of adoption by God through Christ entails a continuous, infinite revelation of what is to be personally connected to God and, therefore God’s beloved people. Given the above, we could contend, that to be a conscious participant in the Body of Christ is to experience death-with-Christ and in this lies the possibility of experiencing a new, metamorphosed life in this world, which will be full of the light of Christ’s resurrection as Paul also reassures us: “Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life”. Rom 6, 4.

²¹ Gal 6, 14.

²² 1Cor 2, 2.

²³ W. Berry, *Jaber Crow*, Counterpoint: Washington D.C. 2000, 295.

²⁴ See Mt 25, 31-46.

²⁵ See 1Cor 12, 26: “And if one member suffers, all the members suffer together; or if one member is honoured, all the members rejoice together”.

suffering of the world those members, who belong to one another and to God, sense the unceasing grief of Christ and see the constant bleeding of His wounds, for He still identifies with every human in pain. Besides, it is His sympathy, compassion and love that His faithful (should) embody, and, as the patristic tradition allowed me to point out in the previous part of my article, the wounds of the Crucified, were nothing but wounds of Love. This is of course the Love that defeated death, therefore the anticipation of the eschatological redemption should always remain alive in the hearts of the faithful. However, this is not to suggest that Christians should put their hopes exclusively in a future, individual salvation in order to escape this suffering world. They should, instead wholeheartedly embrace every human being, an attitude in which the graceful and redeeming presence of the Crucified and resurrected God may be felt.

In this regard it is not surprising that the following words of Saint Isaac the Syrian have been and should continue to be a constant point of reference, whenever one wishes to point out the characteristics of a true ascetic and indeed any true Christian in terms of how they warmly embrace all humans, all creatures, i.e. the entire Creation, even the so-called enemies of faith. We are talking about the all-inclusive love of a truly merciful heart that makes the wounds of the world its own wounds, thus reflecting and embodying the compassionate Love of the Logos, who bore and healed the wounds of the world, filling them with His light and offering salvation:

And what is a merciful heart? It is the heart's burning for the sake of the entire creation, for men, for birds, for animals, for demons, and for every created thing; and by the recollection of them the eyes of a merciful man pour forth abundant tears. From the strong and vehement mercy which grips his heart and from his great compassion, his heart is humbled and he cannot bear to hear or to see any injury or slight sorrow in creation. For this reason he offers up tearful prayer continually even for irrational beasts, for the enemies of the truth, and for those who harm him, that they be protected and receive mercy. And in like manner he even prays for the family of reptiles because of the great compassion that burns without measure in his heart in the likeness of God.²⁶

I believe that, based on words like the above, we can definitely claim that ascetic love is an active love, for a constantly praying heart is, in its own way, active. This, of course, entails the embracement in one's heart of the Crucified's sacrifice. Therefore, asceticism (monastic or not) has nothing to do with keeping a distance from what is happening in the world; on the contrary it exists to turn everything into a burning prayer for all humans.

If we had to give an example of how this same kind of love could lead to an actual sacrifice of one's own life, in the image and likeness of what Christ did, by sacrificing His human life for the many, the film *Beyond the Gates (Shooting Dogs)* would be appropriate for this purpose. This is because of Father Christopher, one of the film's

²⁶ Isaac Syrian, *The Ascetical Homilies* (D. Miller), Boston, Massachusetts 1984, 344-345.

main characters, a Christian priest who served for decades in Rwanda. His overall stance stands out and becomes exemplary in the end. At the time in which the story takes place, this country was experiencing the horror of civil war which resulted in genocide; one of the many unspeakable tragedies that the world has seen in the twentieth century. Father Christopher chooses to stay with the poor Rwandans and die with them; he really had the right to abandon them, as he was not a Rwandan himself and he was given the chance to do so. The angry and relentless Hutus were standing outside the gates ready to invade the school's premises and slay each and every Tutsi who found refuge in the school's campus; the Hutus were actually waiting for the moment the United Nations squad would completely withdraw from the area in order to start hacking their own flesh and blood, i.e. their fellow Rwandans. Nevertheless, Father Christopher, who was an Englishman, by identifying himself with the forsaken Tutsi, became one of them — a suffering Rwandan, and in this, the sacrifice he made proved his authentic Christian faith, that which expresses compassion for every/any human being, regardless of tribe, colour, race, ethnicity, language or other attributes. Through his sacrifice (he is eventually murdered by the Hutus during his effort to save some of the younger Tutsis) Father Christopher clearly imitates Christ, he becomes Christ-like. Last but not least, the crisis of faith that the good priest went through in one of the previous scenes, due to the brutality of the violence he was witnessing during the genocide, did not lead him to an escape from that place in which God was supposedly absent, but to the decision to sacrifice his own life, through which he delightfully rediscovered God. His words are simple, strong and redeeming, such a great example of genuine Christian love for which the wounds of the Other, any Other human being, become one's-own-wounds; in this Passion lies an undeniable foretaste of Resurrection:

I have to stay. [...] That's how it should be. Really. [...] You asked me Joe where is God in everything that is happening here, in all this suffering. I know where exactly where He is. He is right here, with these people, suffering. His love is here, more intense and profound than I've ever felt. And my heart is here Joe, my soul. If I leave, I think, I may not find it again... Find fulfilment in everything Joe!

4. CONCLUSION-AFTERWORD

Our world is facing enormous challenges, as racism that fosters hatred, nationalism that entails exclusivity and an absurd isolation of countries and people, along with terrorism which is strengthened by dangerous religious views, seem to rise and prevail. War has never stopped and as a result Europe and other countries are also called to face up to the problem of refugees, our fellow human beings who are homeless, helpless and abandoned, for they are forced to flee their homelands. These are not mere or questionable facts, but sad realities which remind us every day that the wounds of the world, for which the Son of Man gave His life, are still open and bleeding. Christians

of each and every ecclesiastical community need to extend their prayers for those who suffer, regardless of their faith or origin. This would be a Christ-like attitude, but it might not be enough. Christian communities also need to raise their voice and convey the message of love, understanding and inclusiveness, but also, when possible, actively join any other group that embraces these same gracious principles. For as long as the world is wounded and human beings, wherever they may be, are still suffering, the Church is also wounded and also suffers. The Church cannot conceal the Cross of Christ and therefore omit the ascetic struggle, aiming at receiving and accepting the world as it is, flawed and injured, with the hope of transforming it here and now into the realm of the hope-giving glory of the Resurrected.

Every human being is one “for whom Christ died”,²⁷ for that reason everyone deserves our tears of love, our active sympathy, which will reflect and embody the life and work of the Compassionate Son of God, the Head of the Church. Only then, the following words of St Paul will make sense in today’s world: “For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living”.²⁸

ХРИСТОВЕ РАНЕ: РАНЕ СВЕТА. РАСПЕТИ И ВАСКРСЛИ ХРИСТОС И ХРИШЋАНСКИ СТАВ КА СТРАДАЈУЋЕМ ЧОВЕЧАНСТВУ

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Сажетак: Чланак говори о показивању Христових рана након Његовог васкрсења, на основу сведочења Јеванђеља по Јовану, у контексту догматског значења васкрсења из мртвих и онога шта то подразумева за људе. Текст се углавном бави разлозима Христове жеље да покаже ране свога страдања премда је Његова људска природа била преобразена у нетрулежну, савршену и обожену. Овај Његов поступак био је доказ да је особа која је страдала, такође иста особа која је победила смрт, жртвовала свој живот и васкрсла из мртвих у својој неограниченој љубави за људски род. Аутор успоставља везу између догматске истине и етоса црквеног живота, тврдећи да би чланови Цркве требало да воде христолит живот бивајући самилосни и наклоњени према страдањима других људи, тј. страдању света. ► *Кључне речи:* догма, етос, Васкрсење, Христове ране, нетрулежност, страдање, саосећање.

²⁷ Rom 14, 15.

²⁸ Rom 14, 7-9.