

DIOCESE OF BUENOS AIRES AND SOUTH AMERICA: May 1, 2005

Paschal Epistle of Bishop Alexander of Buenos Aires and South America Christ is risen!

"Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death . . ."

I greet you, my dear ones, with the joyous feast of the Resurrection of Christ!

The heavy time of the triumph of evil and darkness is ended; the Sun of the Resurrection blazes forth. And the disciples of Christ, having run away in fright on that terrible day of the Crucifixion, hear with embarrassment and trembling the first news that the Lord has risen from the grave.

And torments and persecutions and martyric death still lie ahead for the Apostles. But there will never again be that sorrow and that horror that seized their spirit on the night of the Crucifixion. For it is that every grief, every torment, and death itself is illuminated and defeated by the light of the Resurrection of Christ.

And in our time, amidst the worries and all possible fears, in like manner brightly shines the light of Christ. "Christ reigns forever!" cried the Christian martyrs going to their torments and death. We sing, together with the church choir: "Arise, O God, judge the earth, for Thou shalt have an inheritance among all the nations!"

From a spiritual point of view, the history of humanity is nothing other than a war between good and evil, between God and the devil. This war is focused in human hearts, in which the kind beginnings placed there by their Creator fight with the sinful poison of the serpent-tempter. The victories just as the defeats in this war are not long-lived, as each of us knows well by his own personal experience: today I am illuminated by bright desires; I feel like a son of God and want to love everyone, but tomorrow — I am full of bitterness and evils, a pitiful toy of any little passion.

This intense war, knowing no truce, arising in every human personality, pours over into society, taking hold of families, social strata, and even whole governments and nationalities.

In the form of a stark example of the elemental scale of the war between good and evil, one can introduce two historically distant but spiritually similar occurrences, staggering at their beginning—of the ancient Jewish and, quite recently, of the Russian peoples. I have in view the Babylonian Captivity, which happened six hundred years before the birth of Christ, and the enslavement of the Russian people by the God-fighting Communist regime.

A great value of the holy books of the Old Testament is that in them is clearly revealed the direct connection between the prosperity of the nation and its devotion to God. While the Israelite nation fulfilled God's commandments and tried to live righteously, God blessed it with the fruitfulness of the earth and protected it from enemies; when it fell away from its Creator, God turned away from it. Then all possible calamities fell down upon the Jews; the earth ceased to bring forth its fruits; their neighboring enemies seized and cruelly enslaved them. Oppressed by the enemy heathen tribes, the Jews, by the call to them of their prophets, repented and turned to God, and then He of many mercies sent to them an unexpected salvation. The whole two-thousand-year Old-Testament history represents an alternating series of spiritual falls and risings of Israel.

The most significant in this series of falls and risings was, without doubt, the Babylonian Captivity, beginning 580 years before the birth of Christ and continuing more than seventy years.

The four most important prophets of the Old Testament—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel—focused nearly all their calls to repentance, their promises of salvation and predictions of coming

events, on exactly the Babylonian Captivity. And this, it is thought, was because this harsh imprisonment deeply changed to the better the religious character of the Jewish nation. After this, the following great event in the life of this people was the coming to earth of the Messiah—the Savior of humanity.

It is interesting to note that the salvation from imprisonment came from a most unexpected direction. The Persian king, Artaxerxes, who had been not at all interested in the restoration of this restless and always-rebellious Jewish state, made a decree in 453 B.C. commanding the Jews to return to their country and restore Jerusalem (Nehemiah, chapter 2. From this year begins the calculation of the prophecies of Daniel about the coming of the Messiah; Daniel, chapter 9).

In the New Testament era, the ruling of Russia by the God-fighting regime carries in itself many signs that go with the Babylonian Captivity. First, both the coming of Communism and then its fall occurred not through the strength of some kind of serious political reasons but through purely spiritual ones: in the beginning—the departure from the Orthodox faith and the fascination with materialistic ideas, and then—the repentant return to God. Moreover, the fall of Communism came not through the bloody revolution of an exhausted people but "from above," from the side of President Gorbachev, who by the establishment of "Glasnost" (openness) assisted "Perestroika" (restructuring) and the fall of that system that he himself headed. That fact, that the enslavement by the God-fighting state continued, as at Babylon, about seventy years, encourages us to search for the spiritual parallels between these two catastrophes. And there exist an abundance of these parallels.

In reality, as in the time of the Old Testament the Lord sent prophets to save the Jewish people from the coming disaster, God also sent to the Russian people His perspicacious monastic elders who warned of the falling away from God as so destructive for the country. They also showed the Russian nation the path to salvation from the "claws" of Satan through a return to faith, repentance, and moral renewal. The majority of these prophecies were fulfilled.

These facts pour light on the wider picture of world events and help to correctly evaluate what is happening in front of our eyes. Observing the swift departure from Christianity of modern society, the fall of moral foundations, the strengthening of all kinds of occult teachings, the fascination with cruelty and vulgarity and demonism and every disfigurement becomes terrible for the coming world in which we live. Foretelling the fall of the Communist regime in Russia and the rebirth of faith in the nation worn out with suffering, the Russian elders at one time explained that this will happen in the times near to the Second Coming of Christ.

How can one properly comprehend that which occurred with Russia in the last hundred years or more?

I permit myself to make a small digression. My family, sharing the difficult lot of many Russian emigrants, searched out in different spiritual publications all that was written by the Russian saints about the fate of Russia. We deeply believed that Communism would fall sooner or later and that in Russia the Orthodox faith would be reborn. Expecting this, we lived, as the expression goes, "out of our suitcases," hoping that we would be able to return to our motherland at a time just around the corner. Now I understand that some of our hopes were naive. For example, we expected the rapid restoration of the monarchy and that, thanks to religious liberty, the whole Russian nation, as if with one spirit, would pour into the churches. In this we were like those Jews, returning from the Babylonian Captivity, who still remembered the previous greatness of Jerusalem and Solomon's temple. But seeing how slowly and with what difficulty is moved forward the creation of one and of the other, they bitterly bewailed the misery of their country. It oppressed them also that the young Jews, having returned from the Captivity, were already quite different—made alien to their nationality and spiritually savage. It lay ahead to rebuild not so many stones as much as to re-educate human spirits, which is much more difficult.

Do we not hear similar negative references to what is happening in Russia from the direction of our compatriots abroad? However, for the ancient Jews there remained one undoubted achievement: the idols that had earlier captured the hearts of their fathers had forever and irreversibly become an

abomination for those who returned from the Captivity. Grant, O Lord, that also the Russian people fully recognizes the emptiness of the materialistic and theosophic idols that had earlier so fascinated our high society!

I am clearly reminded of a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1973 with Russian youth. The then abbess of the monastery at Gethsemane, Mother Barbara (Tsvetkova), in a conversation with us told us the prophecy of the elder **Aristocleus of Athos** (1838-1918), who was living then in Moscow. The elder told the abbess, then a young student, that **"regeneration in Russia will begin after a most powerful explosion on the bank of a big river."** Neither the aged abbess nor I understood how to understand this prediction. But, when in 1986 the horrible atomic catastrophe occurred at Chernobyl and Perestroika began, I remembered this prophecy of elder Aristocleus and rejoiced.

A few years later I became acquainted with the following prophecy of the same elder: "Russia will be saved. There will be many sufferings and torments. Everyone must suffer through more and more, and deeply repent. Only repentance through suffering will save Russia. All Russia will be made a prison, and it will be necessary to pray much to the Lord for forgiveness. To repent of sins and to fear to do even the smallest sins, but to try to do good, even the smallest good. But even the wing of a fly has weight, and the scales of God are exact. And when the smallest good in the bowl outweighs [the other side of the scale], then God will show His Mercy to Russia . . ."

About the fall of Communism and the rebirth of the Russian Church, elder Seraphim Vyritsky (1865-1949) spoke in more detail than others.

In the years of bloody persecution, when it seemed that the Church was doomed to a quick and full destruction, Fr. Seraphim spoke of her approaching rebirth: about the renewal of then forbidden bell ringing, about the opening of ruined temples of God and of holy monasteries. Father constantly reminded his many visitors about the promise of God about the invincibility of the Church to the gates of hell. Father Seraphim talked about the rebirth of particular monasteries: the Lavra of the Holy Trinity of St. Sergius, of Diveevo and of others. It is notable that, foretelling of the rebuilding of the Alexander Nevsky Lavra, the elder talked about how in the beginning the government would return to the Church, as a parish temple, Holy Trinity Cathedral, and then later, after many years, also the whole Lavra will be given to the monastics. Father also foretold that with time, a monastery will be founded also in Vyritsky, and Leningrad will be renamed Saint Petersburg anew...

To the question of his spiritual son about the future of Russia, elder Seraphim suggested he look out of the window facing the Gulf of Finland. There he saw many ships sailing under different flags. "How is this to be understood?" he asked the elder. Father answered: "Such a time will come when there will be a spiritual blossoming in Russia. Many temples and monasteries will be opened; even those of other faiths will come to us on such ships to be baptized. **But this will not be for long—about fifteen years... And then will come the Antichrist.**"

The elder spoke further with sadness: "The time will come when not persecution but money and the deception of this world will turn people from God, and more souls will be lost to these than in the times of open fighting against God. From one side, they will raise up crosses and guild cupolas with gold, and from the other — will rise up the kingdom of deceit and of evil. The true Church will always be persecuted, and it will be possible to be saved only through griefs and illnesses. The persecutions will take on a most sharpened, unpredictable character. It will be terrible to live to these times. We, glory be to God, will not attain that age, but then from the Kazan Cathedral will go out a procession of the cross to the Alexander Nevsky Lavra."

One wants to introduce here a comforting poem of elder Seraphim's about the changes in Russia:

The storm above the Russian Land does pass.
The Lord forgives the Russian people's sins.
And as a beauty, the holy Cross Divine
Upon God's temples sparkles forth anew.

Anew the monasteries everywhere will open be,
And faith in God does all unite.
And the ringing of the bells our Holy Rus'
From sinful sleep awakens to salvation.
The terrible adversities subside;
Her enemies does Russia conquer.
And the name of this great, Russian people,
Like thunder, does resound across the world.

But what relation does what has been said here by me have to the Feast of all feasts being celebrated now? The closest and most direct relation: the inexhaustible source of spiritual strengths in the fight with the prince of darkness and in the victory over him, which the Russian people recently gained, always was and will be namely THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST. It is the Victory of all victories!

The Resurrection of Christ contains within itself something unique and unrepeatable, because it is a victory of the absolutely impossible (in human understanding); "dust" conquered strength and power! In battles, even the most difficult and desperate, while a brilliant commander lives, his officers and troops are inspired by hope. They know how many times in the past he has converted obvious defeats into dizzying victories. But, kill the commander and all is finished; this is an irreversible catastrophe.

In a similar way, when Christ gave up His Spirit on the Cross, all the hopes of His disciples crashed down. His body without breath helplessly hung down from the Cross. His evil enemies dispersed, satisfied. No one of His contemporaries could compare even nearly with Christ the miracle-worker, before Whom even nature had earlier trembled. But now, His disciples thought, even God, clearly, had turned away from Him, and Christ could not cope with His enemies. Why? Perhaps Christ had appeared to be unsatisfactory to Him. Although the disciples continued to love their Teacher for His love and tenderness, they probably, however, in the depth of the soul felt deceived. But they, having left everything, selflessly followed Him, being prepared even to give themselves as a sacrifice to assist the success of His mission. But, alas, all this seemed naive dreams! Physical strength and power — here is what decides the fate of the world. Gathering with their thoughts, they began to make plans, how to return to their families and to try to mend what was possible. It was not in their power to dispel the shock of the tragedy that had taken place.

When Christ, despite every logic, rose on the third day, alive, as the Victor over hell and death, no one was able to believe it. Only personal and frequent contact with the Risen One gradually dispersed their doubts. They began to understand the foretellings by Christ about this and the prophecies of the ancient prophets, in order, in the end, to be convinced of the reality of what had happened. So, the apparent defeat in fact turned into an incredible victory.

Now, as the head of the Church, the Lord Jesus Christ invests His disciples with Strength from above and instructs them to continue His mission among all peoples. All the history in the New Testament, most pertinent, illustrates the strength of the Risen One, the greatest. Having heard only His name, the demons in panic run away; their prince, the ancient dragon, is helpless to stop the preaching of the Gospel. Carrying within itself a great blessed strength, it penetrates into human hearts and makes previously desperate sinners righteous. The Kingdom of God swiftly grows, and no one is able to stop it. But this is not a mechanical victory; in it must act the heart of each of us. Temporary successes of the forces of evil that they at times achieve depend on our sinfulness and instability. The spiritually weaker a man is, the stronger against him are the demons, and the reverse. Here is why it is so important to them to morally corrupt society. For this goal all the forces of evil are united, penetrating the laws of a country, the scholastic programs, the contents of books, journals, movies, and television programs... Slowly, but single-mindedly and stubbornly, they labor at the preparation of the coming of the Antichrist. But these very efforts bring them closer to the edge of fiery Gehenna, in which they will burn day and night unto ages of ages. After the Resurrection of Christ, their war against Christ the Savior is pure madness!

Observing that spiritual transfiguration that is now going on in Russia, one is convinced with all obviousness that the strength of the Resurrected One has not diminished at all in our time. And in our

days there are many deep believers and righteously living Russian people; there is an abundance of sacrificial pastors and wise archpastors of the Church. Of course, one can always search out the shadowy sides, but nevertheless, in the Church of Christ the light of the Resurrected One predominates.

Russian elders foretold of the post-Communist spiritual renewal not of only individual Russian people, but exactly of the whole Church, consisting of a believing nation, headed by ecclesiastical hierarchs. The principal of "Sobornost" (the catholicity of the Church, her unity in diversity) does not permit the division of her elements into independent parts. Therefore, we are extremely grieved by the attacks of those ecclesiastical intriguers who dare to abuse the whole Russian Church, pointing at obvious or imaginary shortcomings of some or other of her pastors. There are also found such libelers who dare to call the Church in Russia things too terrible to repeat. These blind ones are not even aware that by this censure they are pronouncing a slander on the Holy Spirit Itself! But in this Church there now pours a stream of miracles; new miracle-working icons are appearing continually. Running to the mysteries of the Church, believing people are spiritually renewed and grow. And who produces these miracles?...

Because of the lack of space, we leave out here predictions about Russia by other Russian holy ones, as, for example, St. Seraphim of Sarov, St. John of Kronstadt, elder Laurence of Chernigov, elder Anatole of Optina ("the Younger"), Archbishop Theophan of Poltava, and others.

Let us remember at least in closing that all these testified that the spiritual regeneration in Russia will occur for a relatively short time. For example, the Optina elder Nektary said in 1917 that "Russia will spring up and will be materially not rich but spiritually rich, and in Optina there will be yet seven lamps, seven pillars." St. Laurence of Chernigov said: "In Russia there will be a blossoming of faith and the previous rejoicing—but for a short time, for there will come a Terrible Judge to judge the living and the dead..." Archbishop Theophan of Poltava wrote (c. 1930): You ask me about the near future and about the approaching last times. I do not speak about this from myself but about that which was revealed to me by elders. The arrival of the Antichrist comes nearer and is already very near. The time separating us from his arrival can be measured in years; at the most, decades. But before his coming, Russia must be revived, although also for a short time..."

This is important to study in connection with the ongoing talks being carried out toward the rapprochement of the Russian Church Abroad with the Russian Church in the motherland. Of course the process of coming closer should not be forced, and, glory to God, the talks are being conducted in peaceful conditions with a taking into account of all the most important questions. Our main difficulty, and I ask forgiveness that I repeat myself, is that we have complicated the task of coming closer. Having explained that between us there are no dogmatic divergences and that the conflicts of canonical order can be eliminated by a brotherly discussion of them, it would follow first to restore liturgical communion—if only in part on a "case by case" basis, when the circumstances favor it. But further on, life itself would prompt that it follows that more be done in this direction.

But I have been distracted from the main theme. The Pascha of Christ perceptibly immerses us in the life-giving light of the Resurrected One. This light illuminates our thoughts, showing us the right way, and warms our hearts with love toward God and those near us. In a word, we receive all that is good exactly from the life-giving light of the Resurrected Christ. And we will walk in the Light, living in gentleness, tenderness, in concerns one for another, in love, so that He sees in us His beloved children, for the sake of whom He died and resurrected. Lo, let it be!

I greet you all, my dear ones, with the joyous day of the Resurrection of Christ!

+ Bishop Alexander

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