

The Journey Of The Fifty Holy Days

By His Grace Bishop Serapion

Many regard the period of the Fifty Holy Days to be a time to lax spiritually, especially that it comes after the asceticism of Great Lent, with its daily Divine Liturgies, and Holy Pascha Week, with its long prayers and comforting hymns. What further strengthens this belief in the mind of many is the fact that the Fifty Holy Days is a period that is unique for being devoid of any fasting days, something that is quite unusual in our Coptic Church, which is known for Her many fasts. During this season, there are no prostrations (metanoias). Many also notice during this period that even the Church activities are geared more towards trips, conventions, and celebrations.

Indeed, the period of the Fifty Holy Days is different than the rest of the ecclesiastical calendar. It is unique in that we pray with the festal tune, even in funerals. There is no fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays, and private fasts are allowed. Even if a new priest is ordained during this period, he doesn't fast the customary 40 days following ordination.

However, the Fifty Holy Days have beautiful spiritual depth, which makes a person not lax spiritually, but rather grow and rejoice spiritually after the asceticism of Great Lent and Holy Pascha Week.

It is a period of rejoicing in the Resurrection of our Lord and our resurrection with Him. It is the time to experience the new life in our Lord Jesus Christ. It is the period in which a person, who has practiced self-control over material things during the 55 days of Great Lent, rises to live joyfully in the spirit and worship God in spirit and truth. If a person plants with effort, toil, and tears during Great Lent, then the Fifty Holy Days is the time of harvest, accompanied by joy and gladness.

While Great Lent represents the struggle of the Israelites in the Wilderness of Sinai, the Fifty Holy Days represent the entry of the Israelites into Canaan, the Promised Land.

As inspired by the Holy Spirit, the Holy Church arranged so that the readings and hymns of the Fifty Holy Days would help us experience the life of joy and victory of the new life in our Lord Jesus Christ. The person, who spiritually lives the prayers, hymns, and readings of this period, will experience spiritual depth and will benefit. For him, the Fifty Holy Days will no longer be regarded as a time to just eat, drink, and lax spiritually, and thus he will not waste all the beautiful spiritual fruits he collected during Great Lent and Holy Pascha Week.

Together, let us meditate on the prayers of the Church, as well as Her hymns, and readings during this blessed period.

1. The Prayers and Hymns of the Church During the Fifty Holy Days:

The festal tune is used for all the prayers during this time, whether it is the Divine Liturgy, Vespers,

the liturgical prayers of the sacraments, and even the funerals. The goal is to make the person feel the joy of the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Divine Liturgy is actually the celebration of Christ's death and resurrection, and even before the Church set a specific day for the celebration of the Feast of the Resurrection, the Divine Liturgy on Sunday morning was and is still considered the weekly celebration of the Resurrection. In baptism, we celebrate the resurrection of Christ, since baptism is dying and rising with Christ. What would be the meaning of baptism without the Resurrection? That is why the Church chose the reading of the Catholic Epistle in the Divine Liturgy of the Feast of the Resurrection to be from the First Epistle of St. Peter in order to confirm the power of the baptism, based on the resurrection of Christ, ***“There is also an antitype which now saves us – baptism (not the removal of filth of the flesh, but the answer of good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”*** (1 Pet. 3:21)

During the Fifty Holy Days, as we rejoice in the victory of Christ over death, we joyfully sing the Resurrection Hymn, “Christ is Risen”: “Christ is risen from the dead. By death He has trampled upon death, and to those in the tombs, He bestowed eternal life.” We find that when one of our beloved departs, the true comfort we find is in the resurrection of Christ. In the Litany of the Departed, we pray “for there is no death to your servants, but a departure”; its meaning is clearly seen during the Fifty Holy Days, the period of joy because of the victory of Christ over death through His life-giving death and resurrection, “by death He has trampled upon death.” This is why the Litany of the Departed is prayed with a festal tune during this period.

One of the specific prayers during this period is the Procession of the Resurrection, which starts during the Divine Liturgy of the Feast of the Resurrection. It is also done on the eve of Sunday of the Resurrection, commemorating the appearance of Christ to His disciples. It continues daily during the Divine Liturgy until the Feast of the Ascension. Then it is done on the Sunday between the Feasts of the Ascension and Pentecost and in Matins on the Feast of Pentecost.

The Procession of the Resurrection is preceded by this hymn: “All you heavenly hosts, sing to our Lord a song of praise. Rejoice with us today because our Lord Christ is risen from the dead.” Clearly the Resurrection of Christ is the cause of joy of the heavenly and the earthly. That is why we call on the heavenly hosts to rejoice with us. This beautiful hymn reminds us of our freedom from bondage to Satan, and how the door of paradise has been opened, “He broke the strong brass doors of Hades, and shattered its mighty iron bars. He changed punishment to salvation.”

Then we start the procession, saying, “Christ is risen from the dead” (Ekhristos Anecti). We say this hymn during every Divine Liturgy, not only in the procession, but also in the other liturgical prayers. The Church receives the father the Patriarch or the Father the Bishop with this hymn. Also, in the weddings, the bridegroom and bride enter with this same hymn, and in funerals the casket of the departed is received in the same manner. Thus, the Church helps us to see all our daily events through the joy of the Resurrection of Christ, as our Lord told His disciples, ***“I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you.”*** (Jn. 16:22) This was fulfilled when Christ appeared to His disciples on the eve of the Sunday of the Resurrection and told them, ***“Peace be with you.’ When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.”*** (Jn. 20:20)

The Procession of the Resurrection helps us experience the joy of Christ's resurrection and His victory over death. It also grants us peace, since we feel Christ's presence in our midst as the

procession goes around the altar and the narthex of the church, symbolizing Christ's apparitions and His presence amongst His people, "***I am with you always even to the end of the age.***" (Matt. 28:20).

In talking about the prayers and hymns of the Fifty Holy Days, we can go on and on and never feel that enough was said, but because of time constraint, I would like to remind my dear reader that during the Fifty Holy Days, the father the priest ends the liturgical prayers with a special blessing appropriate for this period. From the Feast of the Resurrection to the Feast of the Ascension, the father the priest at the end of all the liturgical prayers, says the following, "O True Lamb of God the Father, Who arose from the dead on the third day, straighten our feet to the way of peace, guard us from all evil all the days of our life, and grant us the forgiveness of our sins through the prayers, which are raised by the Lady and Queen of us all, the Theotokos, Holy Virgin Mary..."

1. **The Readings of the Sundays of the Fifty Holy Days:**

The Church arranged for special readings appropriate for the Fifty Holy Days and has a lectionary for this period. But we must note that all the readings revolve around the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of the joy of Christ's Resurrection, the Church presents to us Christ, so we may come to know Him by experience and not only intellectually. That way we rejoice in Christ and no one can take that joy away from us. It is a time when the soul rejoices in her Heavenly Bridegroom and can say with the Shulamite of the Song of Solomon, "***I am my beloved's and my beloved's mine... When I found the one I love, I held him and would not let him go, until I had brought him to the house of my mother and into the chamber of her who conceived me*** (the Church)" (Song of Sol. 6:3, 3:4)

1. **First Sunday**, also known as Thomas Sunday (Jn. 20:19-31). The Church presents to us the Resurrected Christ as the source of our joy, as it is written, "***Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.***" (Jn. 20:20) The gospel confirms the reality of the Resurrection, since it is written that Christ, "***showed them His hands and His side.***" (Jn. 20:20) On the following Sunday after the Resurrection when Christ appeared to them again, He said to Thomas, who wanted a physical proof of the Resurrection, "***Reach your finger here, and look at My hands, and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing.***" (Jn. 20:27) Then Christ blessed all those who believe without seeing, "***Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.***" (Jn. 20:29) The reading of the first Sunday confirms the reality of the Resurrection and gives importance to the belief in the Resurrection of Christ, while experiencing continuous joy, because our Christ is a Living Christ.
2. **Second Sunday** (Jn. 6:35-45) presents to us Christ as the Bread of Life, which came down from heaven.
3. **Third Sunday** (Jn. 4:1-42) talks about the meeting of Christ with the Samaritan Woman, and the Church presents Christ to us as the Living Water, because, "***Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst.***" (Jn. 4:13-14)

4. **Fourth Sunday** (Jn. 12:35-50) talks about Christ as the Light of the World, *“I have come as a light into the world, that whoever believes in Me should not abide in darkness.”* (Jn. 12:46)
5. **Fifth Sunday** (Jn. 14:1-11) presents Christ as the Way, the Truth, and Life, *“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”* (Jn. 14:6)
6. **Sixth Sunday** (Jn. 16:23-33) presents Christ as the source of our peace. Our Lord forewarns of tribulations, *“Indeed the hour is coming, yes, has now come, that you will be scattered, each to his own, and will leave Me alone...These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”* (Jn. 16:32-33)
7. **Seventh Sunday** is the Feast of Pentecost (Jn. 15:26-16:15). Christ sends us the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, *“It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you.”* (Jn. 16:7)

As we hear and live through the prayers, hymns, and readings of the Holy Church, may our Lord help us to enjoy the journey of the Fifty Holy Days.