

Easter message, 2014

An abundant spring of Resurrection is calling upon us!

Do we listen, understand, and believe?

Shall we come forward to take abundantly and not sparingly?

The abundant well of resurrection is truly calling upon us!

Readings

'Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, and let your soul delight itself in abundance. Incline your ear, and come to Me. Hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you –the sure mercies of David' (Isaiah 55: 1 – 3).

'Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up—if in fact the dead do not rise. For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming' (1Corinthians 15: 12 – 23)

Introduction

According to the biblical revelation and the teaching of the fathers of the Church, the gifts and works of resurrection granted to God's people through grace are numerous; they are the unsearchable riches of Christ!

To be able to understand, let us specify some aspects of this divine gift of resurrection:

- Inner divine enlightenment
- A stream of eternal life
- True and steadfast victory

This is just a background to help us enter into the manifold divine mysteries.

The *'divine light'* works in man's darkness; it is a darkness which man does not really know or perceive its extent. There is much inner darkness which makes God as if absent. Hence, at times man finds himself without rest, hope, or a goal; at other times, he can be confused, staggering, or spiritually fluctuating upwards and downwards.

Resurrection also grants *'continuous overflow of the stream of eternal life, the life of God'* which unceasingly works in man's dryness and restriction; in his withering and spiritual ageing; and in his inner hidden death. One may not be aware of this death; yet, he may sometimes feel that he is imprisoned in his own grave.

These divine gifts of resurrection ultimately lead to *'true and steadfast victory'* over the world, the flesh, and sin. They also grant man victory over his inner struggles and outer fears. As a result, man is restored to his 'first rank', as the Holy Fathers put it; in other words, he is restored to his original state before the fall and even better!

The above was only an introduction which gives us an idea of the greatness of the well of Resurrection.

The question now is:

How can we have true access to this open spring and how can we keep it constantly open and overflowing?

This spring is always available: now, before, and after; yet we need to understand its mysteries. This is God's gift for us this feast according to His economy of salvation for our life as He knows how much we need it at this time. Yet, we have to be watchful because our enemy is always watching trying to push us away from the wells of salvation and the manifold gifts of God which He reveals to us by the Holy Spirit, especially during these divine seasons. Remember that history tells us that many wells of salvation were revealed to God's people at different times and places; yet, neglecting them has caused them to be closed, buried, and their gifts were lost. This had a negative impact on the people of God, Christian peoples, in some places.

There are two important things that can help keep this well open:

1. Realising my need for this spring
2. Realising my responsibility towards this spring

Realising my need for this spring

This realisation should not be through words only. We are good at talking and repeating words; yet, our words are often empty and void of any real content. This is a feature of the fallen nature which treats spiritual matters superficially, especially in this generation. Therefore, realising my need means: to be aware of what I say and to be committed to what I decide.

Realising my responsibility towards this spring

I have a responsibility towards this spring because it is a precious and costly divine gift: *'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'* (John 3: 16). The spring of resurrection is granted and opened not to take from it only for myself, lest it dries up and its work in me is hindered. Instead, I should live out what I receive of the work of this well; bear it as a divine gift; and offer it to others based on what I have experienced and what was manifested in me. As a result, I would be entrusted on more of God's rich gifts as it is written: *'For to everyone who has, more will be given'* (Matthew 25: 29).

We will come back to these two points about *my need* and *my responsibility* and explain them in more details. But, I would like first to mention an important comment which will help us understand our need and responsibility and that is: *discerning the age we live in and God's economy and plan for it*. This remains the responsibility of God's people who have awareness and who are enlightened by the Spirit of God. The more we discern God's matters and plan for our generation, the more we realise the richness of the well and its gifts increase and overflow for us. We would also realise our deep need for it, not in words but through an inner spiritual revelation. Consequently, we would realise our responsibility towards our world at such critical times. Thus, we truly become a holy people of God who discern their calling and responsibility!

And now, let us discuss this required discernment

The liturgical prayers and readings of the Passion Week in the Orthodox Church can help us understand 'the required discernment'. This is especially clear in the biblical readings of the first 3 days (Monday – Wednesday) of this week –since the days that follow are about the preparation for crucifixion and the crucifixion itself.

The readings of these 3 days focus on the end times and our attitude towards the Bridegroom who has lovingly and sacrificially given Himself to the point of death in order to save us. In other words, the readings focus on the bridal dimension and the eschatological dimension. Also, during these days some Orthodox churches place one main icon and that is of the '*Khatan*', the Bridegroom; yet in His image as someone prepared for crucifixion: His hands bound; humiliated; prepared as a sacrifice.

The liturgical prayers¹ tell us that the Bridegroom who, out of great love, has offered Himself for our salvation expects us to have mutual love for Him. This highlights that salvation welled out of the divine love and was essentially completed as an act of love!

We also need to pay attention to the reality of the world because the biblical readings and the commentaries of the fathers of the Church present a specific view on this matter and that is: the world will sadly go in the path of evil and this will increase until the

¹ Liturgical prayers may become a barren worship, which bears no fruit and even hinders, if we do not understand the message behind them.

world reaches the 'Last Judgement'. Therefore, year after the other, these days of the Passion Week remind us of two important things:

- Our love for the Bridegroom and the importance of renewing and kindling this love
- Our awareness that the world is drawing to the end of the end and our responsibility towards this

Let us look at some examples of the biblical readings of these days:

- All Orthodox Churches read the chapters about the end times which Jesus highlighted in His final talks with His disciples (Matthew 24, Mark 13, & Luke 21).
- They also read the biblical stories that reveal the bridal love of some souls at that time which must have brought joy to the suffering heart of the Bridegroom like: the story of Mary, the sister of Lazarus, who poured the fragrant oil on Jesus and was criticized by the disciples especially Judas but the Lord defended her.
- They also read the gospel of the ten virgins and how only the five wise ones entered the wedding while the others, despite being virgins, lost the chance because their lamps had no oil. The world had deceived them and they gradually lost their oil; at the appointed time, they were unprepared. What a regret they must have felt! What a warning for us to wake up, watch, and keep our lamps filled with renewed oil which is constantly topped up!
- The parable of the 'talents' is also read. We read about the talents that were distributed according to the ability of each one. Then the Bridegroom came to ask each one to give account of what has been entrusted to him. Those who traded well were granted a place in the wedding while the others lost the opportunity. Isn't this another call upon us to pay more attention to our responsibility towards the world and use our talents so that they do not get buried and we are found fruitless and hence have no place in the wedding of the Lamb?!

Therefore, before talking about 'our need and our responsibility towards the spring of resurrection', we will talk about our love, watchfulness, and discernment of the times of our generation and *how the "spiritual walk" looks like in our generation* so that we may not be found 'blind' void of insight or 'a bride' void of love and oil.

The *light of resurrection* searches us deeply and reveals our inner souls. Resurrection is a great light that dawned from the empty tomb proclaiming the victory of life over death (1Corinthians 15: 55). Death is sheer darkness while life is bursting light!

Let us pay attention to this, my brothers and sisters:

Our time is a time of testing by fire

Everything is being tested now and it will be tested by fire:

- Our love for Jesus;
- The chastity and purity of our souls and her steadfastness before the flames of uncleanness of the world;
- Our faith amid the temptations of the enemy who wants to drain our faith telling us that God neither hears us or cares about us;
- Our hope and whether it is only related to temporary earthly things or has the power to go beyond this imprisoning barrier of time to eternity –as though we see the other side of the shore shinning before us and reassuring us every time we come across the turmoil and troubles of our world that are numerous. It is written: *'If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable'* (1Corinthians 15: 19). It is also written: *'tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint'* (Romans 5: 3 – 5). We also read: *'has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead'* (1Peter 1: 3).

All these points are so important. Let us not forget that according to the biblical revelation these matters are the bases of the Christian life: love, faith, and hope.

What about 'prayer'?

Prayer is fellowship with God. Through prayer, we communicate and get in touch with every living well of salvation which is granted to us. Is it sufficient to simply say that prayer is sometimes difficult and at other times easy and supported?! This truly happens, but don't we realise that as the days and years go by it is becoming clear that true prayer requires increased strength and power?! Why is that? Don't we realise that we are surrounded by a world which is like ice; it does not know prayer; it does not like prayer; and it does not pray. This is because the world does not love God; it does not know God; and it does not seek Him.

Do we understand this and are we paying attention to it? We need to pay greater attention because this is one of the plans of the enemy to weaken our prayer and hinder it when prayer is our only genuine means to communicate with God and His wells of salvation: *'Therefore with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation'* (Isaiah 12: 3). If we lose prayer or if it becomes difficult, the water of joy granted to us from the wells of salvation dries up. According to Saint Anthony, this joy is a power that drives us forward in our spiritual walk. When this water dries up, the wells themselves dry up or become closed for us.

How can we deal with this? What is granted to us to counteract all this?

The Lord said: *'I came to send fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled'* (Luke 12: 49). We should kindle this fire which is our portion in Christ; our inheritance in Him; and His gift for us. He knows our world and what will become of it from generation to the other and that is why He has given us this divine fire, the fire of the Holy Spirit inside us. When coldness and ice increase around us, the temperature and blaze of the fire of God increase for us. Yet, let us seek it constantly; let us kindle it constantly –lest our souls become darkened and the current of life in us is cut off. Let us remind ourselves with the teaching of Saint Anthony the Great (4th century) and the teaching of Seraphim of Sarov (19th century) on this.

What else, in addition to prayer, at a time when everything is tested by fire?!

It is not only prayer and spiritual matters, but also human matters: the way people are being evaluated in this world. Why doesn't humanity have value in itself anymore? Man is valued based on superficial temporary things and sometimes even trivial things. His value is measured by the talents he has; the money or authority he possesses; his relationships with important people; or even fake things that he possesses which deceive those who have a dark mind or seek the vain glory of the world.

Let us remember that the wells of salvation grant us supreme spiritual gifts and talents; they restore man –who is lost and estranged from the true reality of his being –to his true humanity, to his first rank as the Church says in her prayers. In other words, they restore Man to Adam before the fall and to the riches of God which he had. They restore him to his authority, the beauty of his creation, and his supreme wisdom. They restore him to the light of his mind to be able to discern the precious from the fake and to seek the reality of his existence which is in God alone.

Let the world evaluate us as it wishes; or rather reject us, despise us, push us aside as though we are hindering its reversed and upside-down walk –since we are walking in a contradictory path and hence it bumps into us. Let the world do as it wishes. We are in Christ; our true value is to be in Him and to have unity with Him. We need to be keen on this and pray with the Psalmist: *'Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting'* (Psalm 139: 23, 24).

Everything will be tested by fire: our love, faith, hope, and even our identity! Are we going to be approved or not?!

There is another important point and that is discerning the form of the “spiritual walk” in our generation and the reason behind it.

We start with great spiritual desires, purity, chastity, innocence, light, joy, spiritual fire and holy zeal. Then things gradually change. Temptations come and they are followed by sorrow, withering, and death. The human vessel becomes confused and unclear; disturbed and sometimes even disfigured; the thoughts are confused and perplexed;

and man seems to lose control over his life and as if unable to restore his first spiritual desires.

Why is that?

Again, it is because we fail to discern our generation, its spiritual signs, and economy.

On the one hand, the war of the enemy is getting fiercer according to what's written in the Scriptures: *'for the devil has come having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time'* (Revelation 12: 21).

On the other hand, the world with its increasing corruption and evil surrounds us; it possesses the media which surrounds us in every way. It seems as though we are unaware of the impact of this. Even if we keep ourselves away from any direct contact with these evils, their unseen effect still surrounds us and makes a siege around us.

Added to this, is the scarcity of grace in our generation due to: the absence of the original rich wells of the Fathers of the Church; the presence of multiple spiritual schools; divisions of thoughts and fluctuations; and the absence of 'living examples' that are pillars, lights, and living signs in the path of salvation.

We mentioned earlier that the more we discern the above discussed matters, the more we realise of our need for and responsibility towards the spring of resurrection.

Now, we go back to these two main points of our talk to discuss them in details:

First: Realising our need for the well of resurrection

Second: Realising our responsibility towards the well of resurrection

- **First: Realising our need for the well of resurrection**

This need is expressed in two forms, both actively and passively.

Passively, there is:

- Spiritual ageing (an outer form)
- Death and corruption (an inner state)

Actively, we suffer from:

- Limited knowledge of the true Person of God
- Restriction and limitation of God's spiritual gifts in our lives

This is our state in comparison to the life of the men of God in the bible or the history of the Church.

In order not to get lost in describing these needs and lose the source that fills them, we can say that there are two sources to fill this increased need and these are:

- *The open side* of Christ on the cross
- *The open bosom* of God, the Father

The more we draw near the open side to find satisfaction for our constant and manifold needs, the *open well* of resurrection flows for us more and more. This leads us to and draws us toward the open bosom, the bosom of the Father where we find increased knowledge of God, the Father; and hence the gifts of God in our lives do not remain restricted or limited but increase and become abundant.

Therefore, we can sum this up as follows. Our need has two aspects and there are two available sources to satisfy them:

- *The spiritual ageing and the inner corruption are transformed at the open side of Christ*
- *The limited knowledge of God and the restricted gifts are transformed at the open bosom of the Father.*

Now, let us explain more:

Do we suffer from spiritual ageing? Yes. Didn't the prophet Hosea say the following words about Israel? *'Aliens have devoured his strength, but he does not know it; yes, grey hairs are here and there on him, yet he does not know it'* (Hosea 7: 9).

Notice the repetition of the words *'he does not know it'*; the prophetic words have deep significance. Israel is God's people who bear the light of His Law and His presence; they have the prophets; and the voice of God is constantly with them and reminding them and entreating them. Despite this, they grow old without knowing.

Spiritual ageing creeps slowly and we do not notice it. It is usually accompanied by loss and looting of our spiritual riches. This also happens slowly and we do not notice it.

Let us look at the divine words one more time: *'Aliens have devoured* (referring to the spiritual enemies) *his strength* (riches or wealth -in another translation), *but he does not know it; yes, grey hairs are here and there on him, yet he does not know it'*.

The problem of spiritual ageing is that it causes us to lose the spiritual sensitivity and so the spirit of the world enters into us and we lose the essence of our Christianity as 'the way, the truth and the life'.

Ageing envelops our spirits while we are unaware. As a result, the spiritual wells are closed and the inner spiritual stirring stops, that is, everything that would help us grow and be constantly transformed into the image of God stops.

In this state of spiritual ageing, reading the bible turns to be merely repeated words that are well-known; prayer becomes a repetitive routine; tears dry up; the first love is lost; anger is near and one is quick to anger; one's dignity becomes so sensitive; the soul is easily hurt and the healing is slow; hurts fade away only from the surface but remain in one's memory to be recalled with every new hurt; forgiveness as a biblical commandment becomes difficult or only superficial with many reservations.

Why does all this happen?! It's because the well of resurrection, the well of life, which alone is capable of overcoming death and healing our ageing, is closed or is very narrow in our lives. Therefore, over time, the heart is hardened; the flesh becomes heavy; the mind is darkened; the soul is slow in having faith; and the cocoon of death surrounds everything. The cry of our heart is to get out of this cocoon; yet, there is no ability to do so. Painfully, we remember the words of the Scriptures: *'the children have come to birth, but there is no strength to bring them forth'* (Isaiah 37: 3).

Isn't this the story of Christianity in history? Christianity was very strong in some parts of the world and then it was completely eradicated, like in North West Africa for example. Why? It is because spiritual ageing crept and so everything became only an outer form; things got confused and ideologies from other religions entered. Christianity lost its essence as the way and the life; it became no more the light that attracts others; instead, the world surrounded it and deadened it because it was cut off the source of life and resurrection. Isn't this a lesson for us and for our countries and churches?

However, ageing is an outer symptom that hides behind it an inner state. So, what about this inner state?

This leads us to search ourselves deeply in the light of resurrection. Without this light that comes from above, man cannot perceive or get convinced of the reality of his inner hidden corruption and would only be satisfied by seeing the superficial things.

What is the reality of the inner state of man in the light of resurrection?

When one desires to know the reality of his inner state and leaves the outside noise to be in quietness to see what is inside him and confront it, the deep hidden things in the human nature that resulted from the fall are revealed to him.

Deep down, I shall see darkness, sorrow and loneliness. I shall see the reality of the fallen man: unending hunger, restlessness, darkness that does not come to light, loss in the wildernesses of life, a cry that does not stop or quieten; tears that stop for a while in the eyes to start and continue in the hearts. Oh, from the emptiness that is not satisfied; the sorrow that does not go away; the loneliness despite being with people.

What is all this?! It is the misery of man after the fall; it is the hidden inner death. It is the death that caused Apostle Paul to cry out: *'O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?'* (Romans 7: 24)

It is the death that took place when man (Adam) ate from the forbidden tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It is not the clinical death, but the spiritual death; it is estrangement from God, people and everything; it is estrangement from my true self as was created by God and as He wanted it to be. As a result man is lost, lonely and a

prisoner of his own soul –as if he is in a dark prison cell with no hope of coming out. At that time, one experiences the greatness of Christ’s salvation as never before!

What great truths! Anyone who desires to enter into the depth and prepare a dwelling place for the Lord needs to discover these truths.

Not only do I need to understand the truths about my inner soul, but also about my responses to people, circumstances and even to myself:

People: I often clash with them or stumble in them! Is this because I misunderstand them or maybe I have a melancholic temperament or am self-centred?! Maybe all these reasons are true; yet, the real truth is that *there is inner death*.

Circumstances: how changeable and unstable they are causing me to have constant hidden fears! Is this because I am pessimistic or that I have no faith or hope?! This may be true, but again the truth remains: *it is the inner death*.

So, it is neither people nor circumstances, but my own soul: I have a moody nature that takes me up and down; my fancies; my thoughts about my achievements and talents; the plans I have for myself. I seek self-glory and so I get estranged from the glory of God to which I was called. Then, at some other point, I get so imprisoned in my failures, sins, sense of guilt, and frustrations; and so I condemn myself and reject it. Neither of these two facets helps.

What is all this about? Is this a psychological condition that requires treatment?! It is actually the inner death.

If I go deeper inside myself, I will be astonished to find that my soul is tied to many things: people, material things and even trivial matters. This is not what we refer to –in our limited spiritual knowledge –as ‘earthy bonds’ or ‘emotional ties’; they are the prisons of the soul. They are ties that the soul did not choose and she is even unaware of them and may not know them and is taken by surprise when she discovers them. This means that she has not chosen them as is the case with emotional ties. Again, they are manifestations of the inner death.

This has confused philosophers when they tried to describe the inner reality of man. Some said 'this is a whimsical desire'; others said 'no, it is a purposeful desire'.

The truth is that when man is estranged from God, there is nothing to be said except the words of the prophet: *'Be astonished, O heavens, at this, and be horribly afraid; be very desolate,' says the Lord. "For My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and hewn themselves cisterns—broken cisterns that can hold no water'* (Jeremiah 12: 12, 13).

Therefore, Saint Athanasius said: *'He did not come to us as sick people but as dead people; and so He did not heal us but has raised us from the dead; we were swallowed up by death and He has loosened us from its bonds.'*

Let us hasten to the open side of Jesus to discover renewed mysteries and reviving works of salvation in order to get rid of our spiritual ageing or rather our inner death. The open side is Christ's salvation offered on the cross where His side was open to be a deep and complete spring of salvation: *'work out your own salvation with fear and trembling'* (Philippians 2: 12).

This requires from us 'seriousness/commitment' and 'diligence/effort' that are strengthened by grace or rather grace initiates them and continues to strengthen and support them till the end.

I need to learn that whenever I have an inner groaning as a result of what we mentioned above, I should not be swallowed or imprisoned in it so that the darkness of death would not dominate me and push me back into the inner graves which I have ignorantly made for myself. Instead, I should transform this groaning into a source of energy that constantly drives me towards this open side so that I may start to gradually come out of the imprisonment of my inner graves!

The words of the prophet encourage us by what God has promised us:

"Behold, O My people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up from your graves. I will put My

Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken it and performed it," says the Lord (Ezekiel 37: 12 – 14).

Here, I would like to clarify the meaning of 'seriousness/commitment' and 'diligence/effort' or what some theologians refer to as 'the bright sadness'!

Why were the worshipers diligent in various ways?!

Why did they leave the world and go into the deserts? Some viewed them as being passive and running away from the world. However, they have actually realised the glory of the life in Christ and the richness of His grace and salvation; and so they 'entered into the state of transfiguration'. Then, the grace of salvation overflowed from them to others in various ways; and so they kept their generations, countries, and churches from the destructive attacks of the evil one. They were spiritual watchmen (Isaiah 62: 6) and they even kindled the desire of people to perceive the mysteries and glories of salvation!

We live in spiritual poverty and superficiality by accepting 'the first level of grace', so to speak. Jesus said: *'I have come that they may have life and that they may have it more abundantly'* (John 10: 10). We stop at the first level of life. This level is in itself truly great; yet, it is not sufficient for the challenges of faith in our generation and the challenges due to the increased evil. We do not want to be fluctuating between grace and sin, between righteousness and iniquity.

Apostle Paul wrote:

For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness...Therefore "Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you...Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God (2Corinthians 6: 14 – 7: 1).

Are we going to stop at the first limit? We receive some light in our mind and consider ourselves having spiritual insight! We receive a glimpse of life in our inner man and are happy with this new life! This is truly joyful, but it does not glorify God who calls us for abundance, for the unsearchable riches of Christ (Ephesians 3), for the fellowship of the

Father and the Son (1John 1), and for receiving the gift of glory that the Son offered us in His intercession (John 17: 22).

Why don't we face the reality of the hidden corruption inside us? Why do we ignore it and merely focus on some theoretical theological expressions and hence lose the prize of richness that transforms us into 'God's icon' for our generation and so He is glorified?!

This is granted to us in the open side which is one of the gifts of the spring of resurrection.

There are still other mysteries related to this open side.

There is a true need for deep purification. The wounds of sin inside us are purulent. The prophet described these wounds in God's people saying: *'From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but wounds and bruises and putrefying sores; they have not been closed or bound up, or soothed with ointment'* (Isaiah 1: 6).

However, not only does the open side grant us this deep purification, but it also **restores what was lost**. This is not about material and human losses this time, but about the restoration of the precious spiritual things which we have lost.

Do we remember the 'beginnings of our life in Christ'? We experienced sweetness; innocence; chastity; a simple heart; fervent love for God; the joy of Christ; and holy zeal in ministering to others. We sacrificed limitlessly and with joy; we worshiped with unending satisfaction; we ministered sacrificially with constantly renewed energy. This is the mystery of the abundant life in Christ!

Where is all this now? Why was it lost and looted? And, how can we restore it?

The journey of the years, the temptations of the enemy and the stumbling blocks in the path have caused us to lose a lot.

Let us come to the open side not for purifying the surface only but also deep inside.

Let us come to the open side not only for the healing of the wounds of sin but also for the removal of its scars and its impact.

Let us come to restore what we had and even receive more!

St. Mary of Egypt, the worshipper who all the churches of the world know and celebrate her feast day, was not satisfied with temporary superficial freedom that allowed her to overcome the power which had prevented her from entering the church with the worshippers in Jerusalem. She wanted more and so she went to the wilderness as a worshipper; she was restored to the fullness of her humanity according to God's purpose and the richness of Christ's redemption. She became a living example of serious and committed diligence. She went through the years of sorrow. Yes, they were sorrows; yet, they were bright sorrows. They were not like the sorrows of sin and inner death, but sorrows full of the living hope. She became a temple for the Holy Spirit. She was able to walk on the water. She nourished on the mystical food that never ran out. She knew the books of the Scripture without reading them. She was filled with divine mysteries.

Beloved, let us come to the open side!

Let us learn from the holy men of God the bright diligence that is constantly strengthened by grace.

Let us not run away from tribulations that come upon us or from the constraints we put for ourselves like fasting, vigil nights and prostrating because all these things bring us to the open side. As a result, the soul is constantly renewed and revived; it becomes enlisted; it stops fluctuating and being sluggish; its dominion is broken; and hence it submits to the spirit and God is glorified in us.

Another mystery of the open side

The crucified Christ calls us to ***the liberating fellowship of His suffering***.

We are usually terrified of suffering because we do not know how to transform it into fellowship of Christ's suffering: *'that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings'* (Philippians 3: 10). We do not understand the mystery of this transformation of suffering which Christ Himself has made in His crucifixion and resurrection. Since we do not know this transformation, any suffering that comes upon us becomes truly difficult and terrifying.

The fellowship of Christ's suffering transforms any kind of suffering that comes upon us from any source and at any time whether we are the reason behind it or not. This is the mystery of His love and salvation. Suffering became necessary for the inner spiritual growth. This is because as the spirit grows, it faces its inner prison –this refers to the soul that surrounds the spirit and the mind that wants to dominate it. This confrontation or conflict take place because the soul and the mind want to live according to their fancies and desires that are endless, are never satisfied, and even cause the inner death to increase. This happens while man is unaware and undiscerning.

The fellowship of Christ's suffering makes this confrontation between the soul and the spirit fruitful. The soul that surrounds the spirit splits and opens up allowing the spirit to come out of the cocoon that imprisons it. As the spirit continues to grow, the conflicts and confrontations are repeated and so the cocoon opens up more and more until the complete freedom and the true release of the spirit are reached. At this point, the spirit settles in God and the person starts to taste *'the glorious liberty of the children of God'* (Romans 8: 21).

Therefore, the important mystery is:

All suffering and brokenness of the soul liberate her from the authority of sin that dwells in it (Romans 7: 20, 21). It is thus freed from the love of the self, its slavery and moodiness. As a result, the door is opened for the pouring of the life of Christ in us, the life of resurrection!

We then realise the true nature of the spiritual walk. It is a *descent* to the valley of the shadow of death and then an *ascent* to the mountain of transfiguration! There is always descent and ascent! With every descent that we face, Christ is there to lift us up; with every ascent, He makes us enter into the mystery of His resurrection and His eternal life.

The Holy Spirit may lead us to some wildernesses as He has led Jesus to the wilderness of Jordan. We enter this 'state of the wilderness' to find our Saviour waiting for us there to guide us in the wilderness and transform it for us! *'Therefore, behold, I will allure her, will bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfort to her. I will give her her vineyards from there, and the Valley of Achor as a door of hope; she shall sing there,*

as in the days of her youth, as in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt' (Hosea 2: 14, 15).

At other times, the Holy Spirit leads us to an experience that seems like 'hades'; yet, He also appears to us there with His arms stretched on the cross and helps us go through our 'hades'; and so we see one side of it dark and terrifying while the other side is shining and full of glory!

Gradually we realise that death and resurrection are our *daily pattern* in Christ! We descend with Him to hades where there is sorrow and suffering and then we ascend with Him to the fellowship of His resurrection and eternal comfort. *'He ascended—what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things'* (Ephesians 4: 9, 10).

This was the pattern of the life of the holy fathers and all the men of God in all generations who longed for going deep in their relationship with God and have therefore experienced a foretaste of the glory of the age to come!

The above was a discussion of our need for the well of resurrection to deal with our spiritual ageing and inner death. Below we shall talk about our need for the well of resurrection to deal with our limited knowledge of God and of His gifts for us in comparison to the men of God who knew the way to the richness of God's grace.

Limitation in the knowledge of God and His gifts for us

We will start by talking about the limitation in the gifts. Let us look at some biblical examples both from the Old and New Testaments.

In the Old Testament

+ Abraham and Sarah overcame the weakness of the human nature and they bypassed it and so they had a child when they were past the age.

+ Despite the journey of suffering, being a stranger, and the long years of the wilderness, Moses was not satisfied by seeing the glory of God. He saw and received but

then he asked again saying: *'please, show me Your glory'* (Exodus 33: 18). He was granted more until his face shone (Exodus 34: 29).

+ Elisha the prophet asked for a double portion of the spirit of his father, Elijah, to be upon him. The first response of Elijah was *'you have asked a hard thing'*, but he could not refuse his request and Elisha was granted double portion! We see how the story of Elisha's ministry testifies to this double fold.

In the New Testament

+ The Canaanite woman (Matthew 15: 21 – 28) came to Jesus asking for the healing of her daughter. At first, Jesus refused her request. She continued to ask until she changed the first decision of refusal and received more than she had asked for. Not only did she receive healing for her daughter, but He also told her *'let it be to you as you desire'* (Matthew 15: 28).

+ The holy fathers of the Church were gigantic in worship, fasting, prostrating, night vigils, asceticism, etc. It seems as though they had different bodies from ours! Indeed not; it is the rich grace; they knew how to be filled with this grace anew; it was like an open spring where they had the liberty to lower their buckets and drew it out full. What a great mystery!

St. Mary of Egypt learned spiritual diligence though she had never read about it or meet an ascetic in her life.

The martyrs overcame pain and suffering; they even became witnesses amid their suffering. Thus, they have attracted many of their torturers to the Christian faith; and even some of the tortures became martyrs with those they were torturing!

Why are we not able to find this same well and fill our vessels from it? Why do we live in scarcity and limitation? We quickly lose every gift we receive. What happens to it? Do we take it and sleep and so the enemies come and steal it? Do we fail to watch over it and hence we lose it because we did not treat it like a precious pearl?

This leads us to the source behind this limitation in God's gifts and that is: *'limitation in our knowledge of God Himself'*, the Person of God as revealed in the divine Scriptures.

Let us look one more time at the biblical examples to understand this point.

Moses

He received a revelation about God: 'I AM WHO I AM' (Exodus 3: 14; Exodus 6: 2, 3). By the power of this revelation, Moses led the people out of Egypt, into the wilderness, and until the borders of the Land of Promise. He bore suffering and faith challenges because this knowledge of God was a driving power forward despite the difficulties. He accomplished what was requested of him: bringing the people out of the slavery of Egypt and taking them toward the Land of Promise. Yet, he never stopped asking to know God anew. He understood that this knowledge has no end because it is not an intellectual knowledge. Thus, he says: *'Now therefore, I pray, if I have found grace in Your sight, show me now Your way, **that I may know You** and that I may find grace in Your sight... Please, show me Your glory'* (Exodus 33: 13, 18).

The knowledge of God is granted progressively; yet, it requires those who long for it and continue to ask for it. This knowledge has specific features: it renews my love to God; it renews my dedication and consecration for Him; it renews my faith; it renews my spiritual energy; and it takes away the grey hair that creeps with the challenges of the days: *'your youth is renewed like the eagle's'* (Psalm 103: 5).

'But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint' (Isaiah 40: 31).

Apostle Paul

If we follow his life and ministry in the book of Acts and the epistles, we realise that as the days pass his knowledge of God and the revelations increase. This is clear in his epistles where we read about his ministry which was never void of suffering that increased from one journey to the other.

He writes: *'But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord'* (2Corinthians 3: 18).

Then we read about the abundance of the revelations and the words he said about the thorn that God has allowed in order to keep him in humility: *'And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure'* (2Corinthians 12: 7).

The above examples cause us to pause and ponder:

In our relationship with God, we are usually keen on asking for a new grace or for hearing His voice regarding a decision that we need to take. This is great. Yet, why are we not preoccupied by knowing Him in Person so that He would reveal Himself to us in a personal way?

I need to learn to repeatedly tell Him: Who are You? I want to know You more and continue to know You progressively; I am created on Your image; and so the more I know You, my image changes! It is written: *'to be conformed to the image of His Son'* (Romans 8: 29).

When we receive renewed purification from the open side, we are prepared to receive this 'light' that makes us know Him. 'God' is not a general abstract word; Christianity was negatively affected by the surrounding religions that talk about God in a general way and make Him distant and a terrifying Judge. Our God drew near us so much when He was incarnated in the Person of Jesus Christ. Jesus became a close companion and the beloved to all who experience Him. He reveals to us about God, His Father and our Father. In Christ, we received the grace of adoption so that God would be our Father (John 1: 18; 1John 1: 3; Romans 8: 15 – 17; Galatians 4: 5 – 7; Ephesians 1: 5, 6).

Christ opened for us the way to the bosom of the Father in order to restore our true humanity. In His bosom, we find restoration of a wholesome humanity: restoration of the absent manhood; restoration of the marred womanhood; restoration to the true image of man as was created by God and as He wanted it in His good will.

Therefore, worshippers, from every place and generation, gave great importance to repeating the Name of Jesus because He is the way, the truth and the life: *'No one comes to the Father except through Me'* (John 14: 6). When we persevere in praying the Name

of Jesus, we enter into the experience of *'the indwelling of Christ'* in us; and hence man becomes a holy temple for the Lord bearing the true God, Christ!

'Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved' (Acts 4: 12).

'In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him' (1John 4: 9).

'...that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith...' (Ephesians 3: 17).

'If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him' (John 14: 23).

- **Secondly: Realising our responsibility towards the spring of resurrection**

When one's knowledge of God grows more and more and one gradually experiences Christ's indwelling, as explained above, one comes out of his self-centeredness and selfishness to look at and ponder on the suffering and the needs of the world around him. *'Now it came to pass in those days, when Moses was grown, that he went out to his brethren and looked at their burdens'* (Exodus 2: 11). As a result, a prayer of a distinct nature is generated inside us. This kind of prayer enlarges our spirits and enlightens our minds leading us to an understanding that is different from all the traditional ways that we know about ministry to the world. For example, on Good Friday, we prostrate 100 times in each direction (east, west, north, & south) asking for God's mercy on the world.

We obviously still need to minister to the world the way we knew and learned, that is, through our talents and human abilities and to persevere in this.

Our perseverance and suffering are accounted both for us and for the world. This includes all suffering, tears, groaning, injustice, rejection, and humiliations. It also includes all daily confrontations with the evil one or evil people; all daily experiences of death and resurrection (the descent and ascent –as explained above); all the things we face as people who are set apart for the Kingdom of God and His ministry and who live together in the fellowship of this walk that the Lord has led us in, a walk of suffering,

faith and glory! This should encourage us; heal our wounds and transform them into a new sacrifice of love for our Saviour and our Bridegroom.

Thus, suffering also is transformed into a different concept; and so we no longer dread it because it becomes the path of the fellowship of glory. It is written: *'but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you'* (1Peter 4: 13, 14).

We only need to change our thoughts regarding the concept of suffering and to keep our lives in unity and fellowship with our Saviour so that our suffering may become His suffering; and hence reap the fruit of suffering. It is written: *'For God is not unjust to forget your work and labour of love which you have shown toward His name...'* (Hebrews 6: 10). It is also written: *'...for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness'* (Hebrews 12: 10).

Our problem is that when suffering comes, instead of uniting us with Christ more and more, it separates us from Him; instead of increasing our faith, it becomes the cause for a faith crisis. Therefore, let us pay attention so that we do not get cut off the spring of resurrection but rather allow it to flow for us and in us!

This prepares us to bear 'God's presence'. The early Christians were called: 'bearers of the divine presence' because a life in which the grace of resurrection indwells, shines and attracts others in the ministry of the Kingdom. Thus God dwells in His temple which is our inner man (1Corinthians 3: 16) and the divine anointing of His glory settles upon us, even if we do not feel it. This does not make us proud, but on the contrary, it increases our humility and we understand the meaning of the words: *'He must increase, but I must decrease'* (John 3: 30). And so, with joy, I decrease; and with glory, He increases. This is what creates an unseen attraction of others towards God and His Kingdom. In this context, Saint Seraphim says: *'Be filled with the indwelling of God, His fire and His love, and others will find their salvation around you.'*

Another mystery

There is another mystery related to our responsibility towards the world which we understand in the light of the Early Fathers' calling and the mystical nature of their teaching and that is: *to mystically deposit the mystery of resurrection in our world!*

How can we do that?

This can happen when our life becomes *a sacrifice offered up to heaven*, as we constantly experience death and resurrection. Apostle Paul wrote: *'For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter'* (Romans 8: 36).

This also happens when our life becomes *a seed put in the ground*. Do we remember the words of the Lord: *'...unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies...'* (John 21: 24). Therefore, our life is likened to a grain of wheat. As long as it is a grain of wheat, it can be sewn and put in the ground. Refer also to Matthew 13: 38: *'the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom'*.

Having looked at the biblical bases of this point, we can now say that when our life becomes a sacrifice offered up to heaven and a seed put in the ground, it mystically works in ministering to the world by the power of resurrection, even if we were unable to go to any place, here or there.

This is a very important matter, even if some may not understand it or accept it. It is important because as we draw towards the end of the world, evils increase and the devil becomes fiercer –as explained above. As a result, the evil powers in the heavens (Ephesians 6: 12) strongly resist every work of ministry and evangelism. In addition to this, the surrounding evil causes the souls to be blocked towards spiritual matters. When the visible work of ministry stops or is hindered, the role of the mystical work starts.

The sacrifice limits the activity of the evil powers in the heavens and even binds it –in-as-much-as this sacrifice bears the power of resurrection.

The mystical seed deals with the blockage in the souls towards the spiritual matters and even creates a mystical attraction towards God and His Kingdom.

What a great mystery!

We see how the Holy Spirit works in different souls attracting them to worship, seclusion, mystical life, and to offering their whole life as a sacrifice of love and consecration to God. In the same way we pray that God may send workers to His vineyard, we also need to pray that God may set apart souls for this mystical calling because of its great importance.

Finally

+ We need to realise that these days our world truly needs a different ministry, a ministry that touches the souls from within creating in them the fire and zeal for deep repentance.

+ We need a ministry that opens the heavens and releases the ministry of the angels for us and with us –as we read in the book of Acts. With this ministry, the live coals of purification that prophet Isaiah saw (Isaiah 6) would come to touch not only the lips but the hearts and the flesh that has been defiled and enslaved.

+ We need a ministry that wells out of hearts set aflame with divine zeal and contrition and that are exceedingly humbled before the Lord so that He would look upon us and upon our world which has turned into a dreadful lake of uncleanness. This lake daily drowns many young people in its uncleanness. Because of these humbled broken hearts before Him, God would send His mercy (refer to the Christmas message) that would bring out these souls from this lake of uncleanness and revive them. Not only this, but He would make them hear anew the divine call: '*who will go for Us?!*' Hence, they will be sent forth in the work of the Kingdom of God. By this, the generation is transformed from an unclean generation to a missionary generation!

+ Instead of the lake of uncleanness that had swallowed them, their lives would be transformed into a lake of divine love that is manifested in various ways: sacrificial life, ministry, diligence in worship, and testimony to the point of martyrdom.

+ Let us not forget the words of the apostle to us '*you have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin*' (Hebrews 12: 4).

+ Thus, the world is kept from perishing by holy prayers and living sacrifices. Yes, indeed, it is kept from the plan of the devil to possess it and dominate it in order to drag it to eternal damnation.

We thus witness the greatness and the glory of resurrection anew.

We enter into the fellowship of glory attracting with us the perishing souls to become ministering holy souls.

So, God would be known and glory would be given to Him anew and forever.

Amen.