

EASTER IN THE ANCIENT CHURCH TODAY

While Easter has come and gone for members of the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches, for more than 300 million Orthodox Christians around the world, Easter or Pascha this year falls on April 27. Catholic, but not Roman, the Orthodox Church follows the decree of the undivided Church in determining the celebration of Easter.

The First Ecumenical Council held in Nicaea, Asia Minor in 325 A.D. determined that Easter should be celebrated on the first Sunday following the full moon of the vernal equinox, but always after Jewish Passover, in order to maintain the historical sequence of events. If the full moon falls on a Sunday, Easter is celebrated on following Sunday. The Easter cycle in the Orthodox Church reverts to the Julian calendar which was followed at the time of Jesus.

The celebration of Easter is preceded by Great Lent which is observed by fasting, spiritual vigilance, and special prayer services. This reaches its climax on Holy Week when all the sufferings and humiliation of the Son of God are recounted in ancient Byzantine hymns and readings from Old Testament prophecies and psalms relating to the Passion of Christ. On Holy Friday evening the somber mood of Lent begins to give way to the expectation of the triumph of Life over Death.

The Graveside Lamentations chanted by the congregation in front of the Bier of Christ or *Epitaphios* relate both to the sorrow of the believers for the death of Jesus, and to the anticipated joy of His Resurrection from the dead. The *Epitaphios* contains a flower decked canopy which traditionally is carried out of the church in a solemn procession.

At the Easter midnight service all lights are extinguished as the celebrant priest carries the sacred flame from the altar table to the congregation, chanting "Come receive the light from the unwaning Light, and give glory to Christ who is risen from the dead!" With the distribution of the flame to all believers, the interior of the church is flooded with a radiant glow. Following the Gospel account of the Resurrection, all join together in chanting, "Christ is risen from the dead, by death conquering death, and granting life to those in the tombs." The joyful celebration of the Holy Eucharist rounds off the paschal feast, after which Orthodox Christians exchange the greeting of "Christ is Risen! Truly He is Risen!"

Fr. Peter G. Rizos, Pastor

Annunciation of the Virgin Mary Church

