

EASTER PASTORAL LETTER OF HIS BEATITUDE SVIATOSLAV

Most Reverend Archbishops and Bishops, Very Reverend and Reverend Fathers,
Venerable Brothers and Sisters in Monastic and Religious Life, Dearly Beloved Laity in
Christ of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church

Christ is Risen!

You have descended into the depths of the earth, O Christ, and have broken the eternal bonds which held the captive, and like Jonah from the whale on the third day, You arose from the tomb! (Ode 6, Paschal Canon)

Beloved in Christ!

This year we approach the Pascha of Christ in the midst of particular challenges, suffering, cruelty, indignities, and ruin. For our people, in Ukraine and abroad, it would seem that the cross of our Lord was abruptly thrust upon our shoulders from the very beginning of Great Lent, and we have already been carrying it not for a day or two, a week or two, but continuously, day and night. For us, Holy Friday has become our daily bread, our everyday reality, and we do not know when the glorious day of victory over evil, hate, and violence will come. However, precisely today our Lord calls on us to have no doubt in the victory of light over darkness, life over death, truth over falsehood, and He assures us of His love and grace. From Him, our Risen Saviour, we draw strength in the midst of our suffering today. He is the source of our hope. Therefore, together with the apostle Paul, we say today: “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair... For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh” (2 Cor. 4:8,11). In that spirit with confidence, we greet one another with the victorious salutation: Christ is risen! Truly, He is risen!

You have descended into the depths of the earth, O Christ... In His suffering and death on the cross, Christ descends into the depths of our fallen human nature. Accepting the worst cruelty—betrayal, unlawful condemnation, mockery, spitting, strikes in the face, scourging, and killing (see Mk. 10:33-34), the Son of God takes upon Himself all the consequences of human sin. He touches the furthest distance from God, the worst human downfall, the greatest defacement of dignity, for which mankind was created. Possibly, this week in the context of war, when we read or listened to the Passion Gospels, we especially felt and experienced all that our Lord underwent for our salvation.

At the same time, we have become aware of how human nature remains fallen, how the devil continues to control human beings, who have no God in their hearts. He who sows hatred and instigates war against one's neighbour, opposes the Almighty. All war is a clear manifestation of the ruinous, murderous action of the devil, for only the evil one is able to spread fear and carry death in such a manner, is able to inflict such wounds, and destruction, and pain, and loss. And even when the path to recovery and healing of

trauma may seem distant, closed, or unpassable for those suffering, we must remember that with the Risen Christ there is nothing that cannot be conquered or healed.

The war of Russia against Ukraine is the latest war of a prison of nations that seeks to reestablish itself before our very eyes. The occupier once again brings to us chains, with which entire generations of our ancestors were fettered. The chains that bound the arms of Cossacks who built Saint Petersburg. The chains that for centuries bound the intellectual and ecclesial life of Ukraine. The chains of serfs, chains of the Holodomor, chains of millions of deported and exiled Ukrainians, whose bones are strewn across the vast Siberian expanse “to the ends of the earth.” The ideologues of Russia’s war against Ukraine state openly that our existence is a mistake of history — one that must be rectified precisely through “eternal bonds” of death and destruction. This is a war against the very right of the Ukrainian people to its own history, language, and culture, to its own independent country, its own existence.

From a spiritual perspective it has become clear how our aggressive neighbour is unable to cast aside his false idols and how in them he continues to pursue his greatness at our cost. With his cruise missiles, bombs, and artillery shells, he seeks to instill fear, to drive us into the depths of the earth and nonexistence, to bind us with eternal chains. And precisely in those underground shelters a miracle takes place — one of common prayer, selfless help of neighbour, unbroken spirit, and of demonstrating the power of the presence of God.

And have broken the eternal bonds which held the captive... Our traditional icon of Christ’s Resurrection is the icon of the Descent into Hades. On it we find depicted the dislodged doors of hell and the broken chains of sin. The Resurrection of Christ is a feast of victory — victory of life over death, of Divine truth over diabolical falsehood, of love over hate. One of our soldiers wrote on his helmet the following prayer: “God, if I am killed on the field of battle, take me into paradise, for I have already been in hell!” In His resurrection Christ emerges not only from the empty tomb, but from the depths of hell and from deadly captivity for humankind. He emerges not alone, but by taking our forebearers Adam and Eve by the hand, he leads all humanity out of the bonds of death. He takes the hand of our soldiers and volunteers, our civilian population, who have seen the hell of Russian occupation — he takes the hand of Ukraine and leads it to resurrection, filling it with the paschal joy of the victorious hymn, “Christ is risen!”

Today, when Ukraine is defending itself against an insidious foe, more than ever we are called to spiritual warfare, remembering that evil can only be overcome by good. Saint Paul reminds us that we must be cautious, so that in the midst of the horrors of war we remain human and not fall into the devil’s trap of malice and hate: “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery... For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Gal. 5:1,14).

And then he encourages each of us to open up to Divine grace and allow the 10 Holy Spirit to bear His life-giving fruit: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience,

kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law” (Gal. 5:22-23).

Pascha is the feast of the victory of love over hatred, of joy over sorrow, of peace over war, of patience over panic, of kindness over anger, of faithfulness over betrayal, of gentleness over unrest, of selfcontrol over voracity. Pascha is the victory of spirit over flesh, of truth over mendacity, of life over death. Christ rose from the tomb in order to raise up and grant victory to those, who have been swallowed up by death, slavery, and degradation, as once was Jonah by the whale.

And like Jonah from the whale on the third day, You arose from the tomb! What an irony it is that the enemy planned to celebrate his victory in the capital city of Kyiv in three days! He thought that he would quickly swallow up an entire people, but his insidious plans were broken by the heroism of our armed forces. In reality, it is Christ, risen on the third day from the tomb, who grants us who believe in His resurrection, faith in victory over hell and death. St. John Chrysostom, in his paschal sermon, notes that the enemy of the human race “took a body, and met God face to face. It took earth, and encountered Heaven. It took that which was seen, and fell upon the unseen.” Similarly, our enemy took what he saw, but fell because of what he failed to see—the power of the spirit, faith, and love of our people! Our victory, the victory of Ukraine, flows from the power of the risen Christ, who leads us out of the depths of the horrors of war and death, who breaks the eternal bonds and victoriously leads us to life. To celebrate the Pascha of Christ in a time of war is to already taste our victory. Let us have no doubt!

The one who brings death is destined for defeat because Ukraine is celebrating Pascha! Again, John Chrysostom, echoing the words of the Apostle of the Gentiles (see 1 Cor. 15:55), proclaims: “*O Hell, where is your victory?* Christ is risen, and you are overthrown. Voskres Khrystos, and the demons are fallen. Anesti Khrystos, and the angels rejoice. Christ is risen, and life flows freely.” The one who sought to enslave us by death is already defeated, for his main weapons of colonization and aggression have been destroyed by Christ Himself through His death on the cross and glorious Resurrection.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ! Today I extend to all of you my fatherly and brotherly embrace, and share with you the joy of Pascha. I embrace all who fight on different fronts—spiritual and physical, especially our unbreakable soldiers, our dedicated pastors, and tireless volunteers. I embrace with paschal joy all who have been forced to leave their home and even their native land, and pray for your speedy return in a time of peace, which will surely arrive. I embrace in prayer all the wounded, so that in your suffering you feel the support, love, and gratitude of an entire nation, but especially—God’s grace and constant love. I greet all who all over the world support and assist Ukraine, in efforts both great and small. As a world community we have shown ourselves to be like a beehive, where each of us senses in spirit what he or she must do in the face of danger. I embrace those who are in occupied territories, in areas of military engagement—those who do not have the possibility to prepare an Easter basket and who sing “Christ is risen!” under the roar of cannons and exploding shells. In the hope of the

resurrection, I cry and weep with all who lament their dead, from the ranks of the armed forces, and from the civilian population.

May each of us today sense hope in a bright future in peace and harmony, for the Resurrection of Christ is the source of peace. May the rich symbolism of our traditional pysanka remind us that the Risen Lord is the source of heavenly gifts, of joy, goodness, victory, and eternal life.

I embrace with a fatherly love all the clergy, religious, and faithful in Ukraine and throughout the world, and sincerely wish you all a blessed Easter feast, a tasty sharing of our traditional blessed egg, and a Paschal joy that is full of light. The grace of our Risen Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Christ is risen! – Truly, He is risen!

+ SVIATOSLAV