

# Understanding Death...and the Resurrection

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“Strictly speaking, a system of ethics which does not make death its central problem has no value and is lacking in depth and earnestness.”

—*Nikolai Berdyaev*

“Our one and only war... is the sacred battle with the common enemy of all people, of all mankind—against death.”

—*Archimandrite Sophrony*

Recently I met with some folks—both Orthodox and non-Orthodox—for what we rather laconically called a “theological talk.” The basis for our discussion was an article written by Father Alexander Schmemmann, titled “The Christian Concept of Death.” The title may not capture the full weight of the essay, since it is a look at the Christian concept of death in the light of the Resurrection of Christ.

With such a powerful theme, enriched by Father Alexander’s usual style that combines insightful penetration into the given theme, a captivating style of literary expression, and a series of challenging assertions that question our unexamined assumptions, our discussion proved to be an intense one that led us in many directions. All in all, it was a good way to spend an atypical Thursday evening.

Obviously, the theme of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ digs deep into the very foundations of Christianity. Who does not know the powerful words of the Apostle Paul: “If Christ is not risen, then your faith is in vain.” It is the Resurrection that ultimately makes the Gospel “Good News” —in fact the “best news” conceivable and outside of which all “other news” sounds rather vague and lifeless!

It is this joyous Good News that imbues the entire life of the Church according to Father Schmemmann:

*The joy of early Christianity, which still lives in the Church, in her services, in her hymns and prayers, and especially in the incomparable feast of Pascha, does not separate the Resurrection of Christ from the “universal resurrection,” which originates and begins in the Resurrection of Christ.*

Yet, a good deal of the essay is taken up with something of a “lamentation” from Father Schmemmann over the fact that many Christians are unaware of the ultimate consequences of the Resurrection of Christ, and that is the “universal resurrection” just mentioned above and which means the resurrection of the dead at the end of time with the “spiritual body” that the Apostle Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians 15. Jesus, bodily risen from the dead, is called the “first fruits of those who have fallen asleep,” thus anticipating and pointing toward the resurrection of the dead at the end of time.

But is this, in fact, what Christians believe? Father Schmemmann’s trenchant criticism is expressed as follows:

*The Resurrection of Christ comprises, I repeat, the very heart of the Christian faith and Christian Good News.*

*And yet, however strange it may sound, in the everyday life of Christianity and Christians in our time there is little room for this faith. It is as though obscured, and the contemporary Christian, without being cognizant of it, does not reject it, but somehow skirts about it, and does not live the faith as did the first Christians.*

*If he attends church, he of course hears in the Christian service the ever resounding joyous confirmations: “trampling down death by death,” “death is swallowed up by victory,” “life reigns,” and “not one dead remains in the grave.”*

*But ask him what he really thinks about death, and often (too often alas) you will hear some sort of rambling affirmation of the immortality of the soul and its life in some sort of world beyond the grave, a belief that existed even before Christianity. And that would be in the best of circumstances. In the worst, one would be met simply by perplexity and ignorance, “You know, I have never really thought about it.”*

Father Schmemmann is not speaking of non-believers in the bodily Resurrection of Christ, but of an unfortunate transformation of Christian thought about death itself and the impact of that unfortunate transformation on the understanding of the body, or of the relationship between “body and soul.”

Basically, Christians have resorted to a kind of warmed-up Platonism that claims that there is a real and natural division between the soul and body, a division which renders the body almost meaningless, or as a prison that the soul needs to escape from.

In opposition to this dualism, the Church’s Symbol of Faith (the Nicene Creed) affirms our belief in “the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.” This is far from merely claiming a vague belief in the “immortality of the soul.” Again, this is a resort to pre-Christian modes of thought and this way of thinking is foreign to the Biblical revelation. Here is how Father Schmemmann puts it:

*Indeed, all non-Christian, all natural religions, all philosophies are in essence occupied with our “coming to terms” with death and attempt to demonstrate for us the source*

*of immortal life, of the immortal soul in some sort of alien world beyond the grave. Plato, for example, and countless followers after him teach that death is a liberation from the body which the soul desires; and in this circumstance faith in the resurrection of the body not only becomes unnecessary, but also incomprehensible, even false and untrue.*

Such a pre- or non-Christian way of thinking will make us blind to the Apostle Paul's affirmation that death is the "last enemy," and that God desires the whole person—both body and soul—to be saved and transformed in the Kingdom of God. Such a belief even renders the Resurrection of Christ as a kind of superfluous miraculous event that does not really affect our destiny.

Orthodox Christian thinking at its purest resists and rejects this way of approaching death, but rather it drives home with a powerful realism the tragedy of human death. Again, in Father Schmemmann's words:

*Christianity proclaims, confirms and teaches, that this separation of the soul from the body, which we call death, is evil. It is not part of God's creation. It is that which entered the world, making it subject to itself, but opposed to God and violating His design, His desire for the world, for mankind and for life. It is that which Christ came to destroy.*

*Man, as created by God, is an animate body and an incarnate spirit, and for that reason any separation of them, and not only the final separation, in death, but even before death, any violation of that union is evil. It is a spiritual catastrophe. From this we receive our belief in the salvation of the world through the incarnate God, i.e. again, above all, our belief in His acceptance of flesh and body, not "body-like," but a body in the fullest sense of the word: a body that needs food, that tires and that suffers.*

In a relatively short essay, Father Schmemmann presents us with the distortions of Christian thinking on death which have twisted our whole conception of the meaning of the Gospel, and which, more specifically, undermine the great power contained within the Resurrection of Christ. Yet, if Father Schmemmann was anything, he was a life-affirming person and thinker who, in his expressive manner, always spoke and wrote of the "Good News" proclaimed throughout the New Testament and liturgical life of the Church. He thus pointed out defects that have entered our way of thinking so that we could recover the Gospel in all of its power:

*He alone rose from the dead, but He has destroyed our death, destroying its dominion, its despair, its finality.*

*Christ does not promise us Nirvana or some sort of misty life beyond the grave, but the resurrection of life, a new heaven and a new earth, the joy of universal resurrection. Christ is risen, and life abides, life lives ...*

*That is the meaning; that is the unending joy of this truly central and fundamental confirmation of the Symbol of Faith: "And the third day, He rose again according to the Scriptures."*

*According to the Scriptures, i.e. in accordance with that knowledge of life, with that design for the world and humanity, for the soul and body, for the spirit and matter, for life and death, which has been revealed to us in the holy Scriptures.*

*This is the entire faith, the entire love, and the entire hope of Christianity. And this is why the Apostle Paul says, "If Christ is not risen, then your faith is in vain."*

As a kind of appendix affirmation to the above, I would like to include, and thus conclude, with a passage from one of the most prominent Orthodox theologians of the twentieth century, the Romanian-born Dumitru Staniloae. Attempting to capture the essence of the Orthodox Church's absorption of, and appreciation for, the gift of Christ's Resurrection, Father Staniloae chose the word "salvation" as the best to summarize the Church's interior knowledge of ultimate reality:

*Salvation expresses the deepest, most comprehensive and many-sided meaning of the work which Jesus Christ accomplished. In this last dimension, that is to say, understood as the destruction of man's death in all of its forms and the assurance of full and eternal life, the word "salvation" produces in the Orthodox faithful a feeling of absolute gratitude towards Christ to whom they owe the deliverance of their existence and the prospect of eternal life and happiness.*