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Death as an eschatological-historical challenge

Abstract: Since the eschatological-historical perspective of existence is the foundation of the existence of the Orthodox Church, death as a historical “phenomenon” certainly represents the greatest challenge to such a way of existence. Unpleasant associations and discomfort in our mental confrontation with death arise on the one hand from the fear of bodily pain that often accompanies the post-mortem states of a person. However, negative associations in relation to the notion of death most often have their origin in the ideological approach to death. Death, in this sense, is the last enemy that is identified with the terrible “reality” that somehow happens in space and time against the will of man. From a different perspective, we note that the mystagogical approach to death begins with the awareness of its association with man from the act of his creation, so that in divine mystagogy death becomes undoubtedly recognized first as a condition for the possibility of our repentance. Therefore, in the mysterial axiological dimension of life, death as a historical reality does not represent an ideological danger to existence, but a kind of path to the divine salvation of post-fallen man. The threat of death enables man to renew his life in a God-human manner according to eschatological-historical patterns by which man acts as an icon of God. To that extent, the way of researching our topic must be related to the Church as a liturgical-symbolic community on which the world rests, since it acts as the Body of Christ in which mortal man and creation with the help of divine actions are directed towards God as the Cause of immortality.

Key words: death, threat, fear, snake, original sin, symbol, Lord, resurrection.

Introduction

The eschatological-historical dimensions of our existence in the world as the Church are projected and witnessed as such by the divinely established liturgical-symbolic way of human life. We recognize the eschatological dimensions of the historical Church as the real presence of grace that the Holy Spirit distributes to all members of the Church in analogy to their individual powers of receptivity. In this sense, the virtuous way of life represents a kind of meeting

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of the members of the Church with the gracious gifts of the Holy Spirit. However, in the historical dimension of the world's existence, the sin of the first man actualized the natural weakness of material beings and things, a weakness that man is now *read out* from himself and from the creation around him as a kind of opposite to life. We find the origin of this life's "opposite" in the unlogical (ἄλογος) movement of man towards sin, so that when a person sins in any way, he sins according to some kind of his own *second* nature. In the literary symbols of the book of Genesis, Moses describes the origin of sin, as well as the terrible consequences that sin caused. Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned— (cf. Romans 5:12). It is obvious that in the corresponding verses the apostle Paul makes an etymological distinction between the death of the first people and the death of all other people. For the first people he uses the verb εἰσῆλθεν, with meaning *enter* (of death to the world) and in the context of other people he uses the verb διῆλθεν, which would have meaning of *passing*, (*ra*)*spreading*¹. Fear of this *the last enemy*, as the apostle Paul calls death (cf. 1 Cor. 15, 26), represents in a way the deepest and most subtle feeling towards a real, terrible and unwilling, i.e., violent existential threat that does not escape any living being. It is precisely because of this fear of death, that death as a "phenomenon" is perceived as a threat to every perspective of existence. Death as a "phenomenon" imposes itself primarily on the ideological-objectivist way of knowing as a judgmental reality that opposes life on all its levels. We would not be wrong if we also say that the fear of death comes from the knowledge of the absolute powerlessness of man to deal with death on his own.

At the same time, however, the distortion of the truth of life after the fall causes the reality of death to be viewed superficially, that is, distorted. The approach to death is mainly conditioned by ideological delusions. Due to the life that gives the impression of flourishing in and around a person, it is not easy to perceive death from one's own inner perspective. Man's intellectually, that is, ideologically oriented process of knowing by persistent habit resorts to always ready ideological matrices that identify the phenomenon of death as a phenomenon distant in space or time. However, in the Christian vision of existence, time and space are not only categories of observed movements, but also measures of death (cf. Petrović, 2012, 82–83; 91–93). The ideological approach to death implies an unconscious, but essentially hypocritical view of death as a "natural phenomenon". However, when the effects of death *get a little closer* to a person in the form of his own infirmities, illnesses, or losing a loved one, death is in the least a "natural occurrence" for such a person. For this reason, the question

¹ That would mean death *entered* into the first people. Therefore, death did not "pass" through the first people, that is, it did not "spread", but entered through them, just as death did not "enter" people before us, but spread from the first people to all posterity. The apostle Paul also uses the term νεκρός when he talks about the sin associated with spiritual death (cf. Eph:2, 1–5; Col. 2: 13).

is posed: in what way is death first recognized in man as an existential threat that cannot be ignored?

In addition to its, we would say, existential seriousness with which man recognizes death, the “encounter” with death begins in the mental realms, more precisely, in the rational encounters of the mind with the limits of its own finitude. Because of these limits, a kind of irreconcilable rebellion arises in the depths of man’s soul *according to* and *against* this very natural state of affairs. The very fact that man with his conscious or unconscious, but in any case *acting* rebellion, he most often shows his inner intention to overcome, or neglect, or ignore death through his activities. He actually tells us that death is recognized in some way as *violent phenomenon* which in man first imperceptibly intertwines with life, or rather, acts hiddenly, being woven somewhere in the mysteries of the life force, so that in the end it cruelly and definitively dominates all created beings. Death is revealed as a definitive obstacle between the expected, that is, the future, and the real psychophysical way of life. In addition, death finally opposes the desire of man to live forever. In other words, no one who exists wants to die of their own free will, so death in its cruelty acts as a real threat to the very desire for eternal life, and because of the fear of death, man begins to doubt the possibility of eternal life. For this reason, the fear of death becomes the initiator of the deepest questions related to the meaning of life (cf. Πλεξίδας, 2015, 15–16), a life that can be extinguished so easily due to all kinds of misfortunes of this world.

At the same time, however, the natural logos of existence testifies to man about life which, by divine providence, historically began as a process that seems never to end, and man therefore lives in the hope that there is a way of deliverance from this last enemy, whose innumerable effects take place in man and before the final moment of death. If a person in the depth of his being had no awareness or feelings about this, immanent, divinely woven urge to live, i.e., about the life’s effect of the natural will of his being, he would not even be afraid of death, but would willingly surrender to death at the first moment when if an opportunity for such a possibility arises in his life.

On the other hand, the fact that what we do not know about death is the other side of our reality of existence and this given in itself makes the prudent mind begin to search for the true divine Cause of all existence (living and non-living), as for the *corner stone* of existence (cf. Is. 28:16). To that extent, remembering death is one of the fundamental principles of Christian life. Therefore, the most general questions that the reality of death imposes on us are: why does death act as a danger? Does death hide “within” the possibility of a different perception of reality than the one in which we habitually live? In other words, is it possible that with some paradoxical meaning death can also project some kind of deeper mystery of existence?

Death in the literary symbolism of the book of Genesis (2–3)

In order to be able to identify death with some kind of “reality” that can be grasped, and to offer possible answers to the above questions, we start from the first biblical mention of death. In the book of Genesis, Moses talks about the commandment of God given to that mystagogical being of man immediately before the creation of wo-man. Namely, God said to man: “Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof *thou shalt die by death*” (מורתחמות, *moth tamuth*)” (Gen. 2:16–17). In many places of the biblical text, we find similar double expressions, and they represent emphases, that is, emphasizing the elements of the divine economy of salvation, either through the corresponding names of God, or through other biblical expressions. In the aforementioned biblical verse, we are actually talking about literary symbols with which Moses clothed a divine warning about the extreme seriousness of the “appearance” that the immediately created man will surely encounter. Man, therefore had to be extremely careful and completely devoted to God as the Cause of man’s life, that is, extremely serious towards the true Goal of what he does regarding both is soul and body. In Moses’ later description of the serpent’s temptation, we notice that the woman answers the snake’s question by mentioning God’s warning in a different way than the one God warns the man before the creation of the woman (Gen. 2:7). Namely, the sharpness of the previous emphatic expression *you shall die by death* (מורתחמות, *moth tamuth*), as if lost in the words of the woman, and now reads: “. . .lest ye die (בפתחמותין, *pen tmuthun*)” (Gen. 3:3). In the third chapter of the book of Genesis, we notice the serpent’s distorted or twisted meaning of the commandment that God explicitly mentions (in verse Gen. 2:17). The snake actually draws the attention of the woman towards some special way of knowing, that is, to knowledge that supposedly exists in reality, and which God withheld from the man and the woman. In this sense, the serpent says: “Ye shall not surely (if you eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil — acc. m.), but (He deliberately does not tell you anything about it, although actually — acc. m.) God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:4–5). Therefore, the content of the words “you will surely not die” is opposite to the content of the words “you will die” and the way of existence after the fall that we live to this day makes man by his nature afraid of death precisely because of the truth of the divine words of warning addressed to the first man. From the serpent’s words, however, we conclude that according to its “science” death does not actually exist. Unlike the essence of the serpent’s words, the divine words have their real ontological resonance in the depths of the human conscience, which recognizes the seriousness of the mortal threat very well. Hence the possibility of a “natural” fear of death. Otherwise, as we mentioned earlier, the fear of death would not exist in any segment of our life.

The next neglected aspect of death is shown in the fact that the man ready to sin does not think about death as of it being *wages of sin* (cf. Rm. 6:23). The original sin separated the first man from Eternal Life by joining man to death. It happened first through *woman's*, and then *man's* obedience to the words of the serpent, with which the snake first lured the woman to doubt the possibility of a divine way of human existence as God himself offered it to the man. This doubt further led to a multiplicity of thoughts, and finally, started the desire of the heart towards mental fantasies, that is, towards imagined visions of non-existent realities. Death already then, through the cessation of trust as an expression of faith in the Word of God, began to act in such a way that the original sin from its beginning was actually the beginning of a different reality, a reality to which the Lord warned man with the words “thou shalt surely die” (Genesis 2:17). We find this mystagogical truth in the verses of the book of Genesis: “And now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever. Therefore, the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So, he *drove out the man*; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.” (Genesis 3:22–24). Literary symbolism of words *out of the Garden of Eden* actually indicates the area of the mortal way of life, that is, temporary life through mortal processes that have their end in the coming final death as the last enemy.

However, in the previous biblical description of events, we find that God appoints Adam to work in and guard the Paradise in the middle of which was the Tree of Life. When God placed man in Paradise, man was not placed in the middle of Paradise, — the middle of Paradise was the area of the Tree of Life (cf. Gen. 2, 9). Man's work in Paradise also involved paying attention to God's commandment about eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, for which Moses does not say where in Paradise it was planted, and in this apparently “geographical” ambiguity in the description of the position of the Tree of Life in relation to the *position* of man and the tree of knowledge of good and evil, one sees the very essence of the divine commandment to the first man. The work in Paradise and guarding it, caution regarding the tree of knowledge of good and evil, but also being allowed to eat from every tree in the garden represent not only Moses' literary-symbolic description of the mysterious existence of ancient Adam, but the very meaning and essence of the lives of all people who have ever lived, who are living now, and who will live on earth. Keeping the commandments of heaven would provide a person with an unshakable union with God and with his neighbor, since the commandments of God are in some miraculous way united with the deepest areas of the human conscience. Even in our time, therefore, in the post-fall world, the eschatological-historical dimensions of existence inextricably imply all three commandments of Paradise: eating from the fruits of nature, working to preserve all beings and all matter, and a way of being apart from sin, that is, separation from the fruit of the tree of knowledge

of good and evil. The forces with which man can carry out his eschatological-historical designation throughout all three aspects of his activity are, as they were in Adam's time, in God, so that the appropriate way of existence, as it was once in Paradise, can last as long as the divine gift of life lasts. This is one of the reasons why the apostle Paul says: "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17).

The horror and tragedy of death after the alienation of man from the heavenly way of life was different before the coming of God into the world, that is, before the Resurrection of Christ. Now the divine establishment of the Church of Christ brings a different approach to death as *the last enemy* (cf. 1 Cor. 15:26) whom the apostle Paul also calls *gain* (cf. Phil. 1:21), because of which the question arises: in what way can death be both *the last enemy* and *gain*? The liturgical-symbolic way of existence of the Church precisely exudes the victory of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ over that most terrible enemy of man, so that death in a way *summons* or *puts our faith to the test*. So, let us see, what is the relationship between our faith and death, which is a frightening natural inevitability for most people?

In order to try to give an answer to this important question of our life, let us first remember that the Lord has set death for people like some kind of definitive fence or obstacle that stands between us and Him, and that because of this no one who lives in sin, or who commits sin may be *close to God*, that is, to be without fear of death since death is "the wages of sin" (Rom. 6:23; cf. Gen. 2:16–17). On the other hand, the Lord says that whoever does not lose his soul for His sake (cf. Mt. 16:25), or whoever does not hate his life (cf. Lk. 14:26), is not worthy of Him, so that these Lord's words open the question of the perspective from which the Lord views this universal "phenomenon" we call *death*; Therefore, is death as scary for Him as it scares us humans as a cruel and unavoidable reality?

Some Testimonies of the Holy Fathers about death

If we were to speak from a critical-historical perspective about the position of the holy fathers of the Church on the issue of death, based on a critical-historical reading of their writings, we would speak either of the complete cessation of life, that is, of man's non-existence that would last until the event of the universal Resurrection, or we would, speak of death as an event within which the soul, itself being immortal, continues to live after being separated from the body (cf. Διονύσιος Ἀρεοπαγίτης, PG 3, 553BC). We note in this sense that none of the options of our critical-historical way of researching the Holy Fathers' writings offers any realistic way out of man's fear of death, but rather some kind of essentially ideological attitude towards death. Therefore, the question of fear of death remains without any answer other than the one, also ideological, and essentially hypocritical: "one must die". In this way, our mental world comes to terms with a kind of ideological approach to death, while in real life death shows itself not only as the last enemy, but also as a cruel companion and a psychophysical

threat that always lets us know that it is there, next to us, and within us. It is paradoxical that in the ideological approach to death, its ultimate seriousness is neglected, or rather, the onslaught of that the last enemy whom we must meet, who is “waiting” for us, and against whom we can do nothing.

The Holy Fathers of the Church of Christ did not have a unique, systematic or doctrinal approach to the problem of the temporal “distance” between death and the last judgment (cf. Marinis, 2015, 59), nor did they treat death from an ideological perspective. Hence the diversity in contemporary hermeneutical approaches to the Lord’s story about the rich man and Lazarus, since in them the ideological perspective prevails in approaches to the problem of death (cf. Berchie, Dakio, 2015, 107). This hermeneutic variety actually moves between two concepts: the first one we call *median state of the soul*, that is, the state of the soul between man’s death and the universal Resurrection (cf. Calvin, 1960, 2:997) and the allegorical indication of the final Resurrection of the dead as one of the three possible interpretations of the mentioned paradigm of the Lord (cf. Cooper, 2003, 104–108). In the ideological approach to death, only the tragedy of this phenomenon remains, which is shown only from an individual perspective, and, as we have seen, if death happens to “someone else”, the tragedy of death is often only a verbal statement.

If we want to approach death from a different angle, we must first overcome ideological approaches to death. Death as a tragic event affects us first of all because we are dominated by the fear of death, that is, the fear to which we generally surrender like all those who have no hope (cf. Γρηγόριος Νύσσης, PG 46, 13A; see also 1. Thess. 4:13). In other words, the fear of death shows our hopelessness. In addition, death is also the cause for which every bodily activity of ours is stimulated, especially activities related to the maintenance of such a perishable way of life. Regardless of the type of activity we engage in (e.g., production of food, beverages, medicine, weapons, construction activity, etc.), each of them provides a person with a sustainable permanence of a perishable way of life. By spiritually relying on these historical activities, we actually divert our attention from the reality of death, observing it now as a “normal state of affairs” precisely from the perspective of such activities of ours (cf. Γρηγόριος Νύσσης, PG 46, 13AB). Because of this, we can see death as our slavery in perishability precisely because of our own share in maintaining the *perishable* way of life.

In the tradition of St. Gregory of Nyssa, we find the view that divine voices are like commands that oblige us to believe that souls live forever. Since we accept these commandments with our minds, without knowing what actually happens at the moment of death, that is, we do not know whether after death the life-giving cause somehow still exists in one part of the person or not, our grief for the dead becomes even more tragic (cf. same, 17AB). In addition, in the traditions of the holy fathers of the Church, we find different attitudes about the essence of what we call *death*. A striking testimony of man’s attitude towards death as

towards *non-beings* we find in St. Athanasius the Great who says that “the transgression of the commandment brought back (the first people) to what is *by nature* (εἰς τὸ κατὰ φύσιν), that as the (previously) non-existents (οὐκ ὄντες) came to being, so now within the being (εἰς τὸ εἶναι) they suffer decay in time (and that is) for a reason; because if by nature they once did not exist (οὐκ ὄντες), but were rather called into being by the presence and love of humanity of the Logos, it means that people, depriving themselves of divine meaning and returning to non-beings (εἰς τὰ οὐκ ὄντα), (because non-beings are evil, and beings are good because they became from the true God), deprived themselves and the beings eternally (κενωθῆναι καὶ τοῦ εἶναι ἀεὶ). This means that beings that decompose (by their nature) remain in decaying and in death. Man is mortal by nature, because he became from the non-beings (ἄτε δὴ ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων γεγονώς). And if, because of the similarity with the One Who Is (man) preserved understanding towards Him, he would have weakened decaying by nature and remained non-decayed, as Wisdom said, ‘observance of laws, conviction of non-decaying; and becoming immortal, he would live as God, just as the divine Scripture says this when it says, ‘I said you are gods, and the sons of the Most High, but you as men die, and as one of the chiefs you fall’” (Ἀθανάσιος Μέγας, PG 25, 104BC). However, despite the clarity of the above words of St. Athanasius, we are left with the question: does this mean that our approach to death should be some form of “reconciliation” with temporary non-being as our temporary non-existence?

If we consider death from the perspective of the immortality of the soul as the moment in which the body dies, we are first asked the question of what we actually notice happens to the body after death? If the body is subject to decay, is it mortal or immortal? Since the elements of which the body is made are disintegrating and the old man no longer exists either in form or (of course) in movement, we consider that the body does not exist!?. However, here it cannot be a question of the non-existence of the body, since the elements of which man was made are not lost but are stored each with its closest related element. That is why apologists answered philosophers’ questions about how God can resurrect the dead when, according to them, some people died by being eaten by animals? In other words, how can God know again put together *into one* all the elements that have changed several ways of existence through different bodies? Therefore, we could speak not about non-existence as the ultimate determinant of the human body, but about the joining of elements that continue to exist until the universal Resurrection of the dead, so that we could also speak about the “immortality” of bodily elements. For this reason, we refer to Dionysius the Areopagite’s theological tradition of the divine, who speaks precisely about non-existence as a wrong approach to death, and he expresses this attitude with the words: “Of those who are the unsacred (ἀνίερων), some unreasonably think that they end (life) in non-existence², and others (consider) that

² We find this meaning of death in the teachings of the Jewish sect of the Sadducees. Their doctrine implied that there was no resurrection. This sect was very influential during the New Testament

the physical connection with souls is broken forever as inappropriate (souls) in (their) godly life and blessed endings, (both) not understanding nor sufficiently (being) taught the divine science, *that our most godly life has already begun in Christ* (Διονύσιος Ἀρεοπαγίτης, PG 3, 553BC)! Therefore, the divine Dionysius does not see death as non existence, nor as liberation from the body, or as the termination of the “inappropriate” communion that the soul has with the body, and when he speaks of death in another place, the divine Dionysius states that “death is not the absence of our essence, as others think, but the separation of (things) united, (while) the soul is guided invisibly, (and) as if in the absence of the body it becomes invisible (ἀειδῆ), and the body, covered with earth, disappears from human understanding (κατ’ ἀνθρωπον ιδέας ἀφανιζόμενον)” (Ibid, PG 3, 404B). If neither of the aforementioned viewpoints that the divine Dionysius denies is Christian, the question of our relationship to death arises again.

Final word on the mystery of death

When St. Basil the Great talks about death, he cites, among other things, the examples of the Old Testament fathers who typologically testified to death through their way of life. So, for example, he says that Jonah fulfilled the type of three-day death in the whale’s belly. In this way, like other Old Testament righteous men, he announced the shadow of the truth, and all the prophets revealed the types of those realities that were signified by the types, so that through Moses’ passage through the sea, the latter Gospel plan of salvation was enigmatically drawn. Saint Basil states in a typological sense: “For what was the forgiveness of sins (back then)?” What is the renewal of life in the sea? What spiritual gift was (shown) through Moses? What was the mortification of sins there? If they did not die with Christ, they were not raised (οὐδὲ συνηγήρθησαν). They did not carry the icon of the heavenly one, they did not offer the dying of Jesus in the flesh, they did not strip the old man, they did not dress the new man, renewed in knowledge, according to the icon of the one who created him” (Βασίλειος Μέγας PG 32, 124C-125A). These words of St. Basil impose on us a question of a similar context. Namely, can one see on us, the baptized today, through the Holy Sacrament of Baptism, but also later in life, that we have undressed the *old man* and dressed as the New and heavenly? If we do not judge sentimentally and biasedly, but by the symbolism of the events around us and within ourselves, we must admit that there is not much difference between our way of life and the life of the unbaptized. The fact that the negative symbolism of events finds us more and more often and more suddenly in time, speaks of the fact that we are actually ungrateful for God’s grace, and therefore not up to the challenges

times as they controlled the temple and cooperated with the Romans in ruling over Judea. In their opinion, death meant the dying of the soul together with the body (cf. Nichols, 2010, 32). The question that arises here is: how could the Sadducees, since they did not believe in eternal life, had anything to do with the management of the temple?

of the historical moment in which we live. The wrath of God, which also works through the elements of creation, tells us that our all-corrupt way of life is clearly coming to its end, that is, to a dead end. How did it all happen, and what is our perspective in dealing with death?

The critical-historical approach by which the post-fall mind investigates things is based on mental-experiential parameters and perceptions. From the position of the Christian faith, we would say that the mind acts in such a way as if it had the intention of preventing any other possibility of knowledge. However, the mental way of knowing is not the only way of human knowledge. We would not be wrong if we said that the insistence on the action of the critical mind does not allow a person the possibility of a different way of knowing. In other words, our objectivist way of understanding things and beings, and our latter “free” action in space and time, simply “disrupts” God in an effort to perform his soteriological part of the work on us, beyond the desires of our minds and hearts. Even when it comes to death, man’s critical-historical way of researching death also projects this “phenomenon” through a general objectivist level of understanding beings, things and phenomena. That is why every attempt to explain death ends with some kind of ideological galimatias in understanding the biggest existential problem. The ideological approach to death can give the impression of truth, until the moment when the Lord Himself begins to gradually reveal to man the true importance of “what” we call “death”, according to the measure of man’s receptivity. For this reason, we must leave the speculative plane of the critical-historical way of knowing and discover in the Lord the possibility of a different perception of reality as an incomparably higher form of knowing than the mental one. A change in the way of knowing is conditioned by a change in the way of life, a change that includes not only a change in the way of thinking, but also a change in all the life orientations of the postmortem man in a new way of life. This fact represents the basis and true goal of the holy mystery of Baptism. In this sense, death is an integral part of changing our way of life even now, and that is why the Lord first connected his own death with our Baptism. Thus, death as a phenomenon is actually at the service of the act of the holy mystery of Baptism as the basis of the possibility of salvation in Christ, and just as the Resurrection does not take place without death, so the beginning of a new life in Christ does not take place without Baptism. The Lord Jesus Christ for his followers in the divine leadership of his glorious death and Resurrection actually instituted death as the reality of the Holy Mystery that works in this life as well, but also in the moment when the Spirit is handed over to God and the Father for the last time (cf. Ps. 31:5). The Lord Himself sees death as falling asleep (cf. Jn. 11:11), while the disciples of the Lord, like all of us see *falling asleep*, that is, *dreaming* first of all as a harmless or carefree part of everyday life whose short-term appearance is simply taken for granted and transient. However, when the Lord openly tells the apostles that death is sleep (cf. 14), then due to the Lord’s approach to death, the attitude of the apostles towards death also changes, as

shown by the words of the apostle Thomas: “Let us also go, that we may die with him (Lazarus)” (16). From an identical perspective, the apostle Paul also said: “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” (Phil. 1:21).

Since in our daily life sleep is a necessary and taken-for-granted phenomenon, and death a terrible threat, it seems impossible to accept the Lord’s words in any other way than as a metaphor. However, there is also one not so rare phenomenon that we notice in time when we lose a close relative or friend. Namely, even though we know that someone we love has died, somehow in the depth of our being, the Lord seems to give us the knowledge that our neighbor has not died, which is a complete paradox for the critical-historical action of the human mind. If death is a natural phenomenon, then it would agree in our literary field as complete, that is, as a definite non-existence of the deceased. But, in many cases, we simply forget that our dear person has died, and it happens as if we expect them to appear from somewhere every moment, and it happens literally, as if the person has fallen asleep and just needs to get up, wake up, and *around a corner* appear before us. In contrast, the critical-historical way of thinking is completely opposed to any similar attitude of being. Falling asleep as the *epistemological* prism through which the Lord observes death represents the appropriate form of the ecclesiological perspective into which the Lord introduces us, so that he *who fell asleep, did not die, but awaits the Resurrection* (cf. Marinis, 2017, 86). That’s why in our Symbol of Faith, it doesn’t say “...I’m waiting to die”, but *I am waiting for the Resurrection of the dead*. The apostle Paul also says: “... but I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren concerning them which are *asleep* (περὶ τῶν κοιμωμένων) that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope” (1 Thess. 4:13).

The divine Dionysius the Areopagite called the deceased *sacredly asleep*, and the bodies of the deceased names *sacred bodies* (Διονύσιος Ἀρεοπαγίτης, PG 3, 556D) and they have a “sacred rebirth” (Ibid, 556B). The process of becoming again begins through the earthly life of Christians, which Dionysius sees as a kind *competition*, and calls the Lord *creator of the competition* (“τῆς ἀθλοθεσίας δημιουργός” — Διονύσιος Ἀρεοπαγίτης, PG 3, 401D) who laid down the laws of competition, and as a good one became a competitor himself. He fights together with us in a ministerial way for our freedom against the state of death and decay (cf. Ibid, 401D-404A). The one who is ministerially baptized is led by a liturgical-symbolic experience resulting from the three-time immersion in water, whereby the baptized *imitates the divine death of the three-day grave of the life-giver Jesus as much as imitation of God is acceptable to husbands*, and “in whom (in Jesus), according to the words of the mysterious and hidden tradition, the ruler of the world finds nothing (of his own)” (Διονύσιος PG 3, 404BC). The divine Dionysius wants to say that we should approach death as we approach other sacred mysteries of the Church, with mysterious caution and more boldly (resolutely). Until the moment of the final sleep, all diseases are accepted as *angels of death*,

that is, as periodic wages for sin until that final moment when we enter death as in the holy Mystery of life, due to the fact that the Lord assures us with the Holy Spirit, as he has done countless times before, that by dwelling in Him *neither death shows its sting, nor hell its victory* (cf. 1 Cor. 15:55). Let us not forget at this point that the Lord said to the apostle Paul: "...my grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). Because of this God-given truth, the apostle Paul continues with the words: "I will prefer to boast in my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may dwell in me" (the same)!

The divine Dionysius sees the Holy Mystery of Baptism in the context of the Lord's death, which is actually established for our salvation in the sacred-symbolic form of the mysterious act, and in accordance with the receptivity of every person to the image of the Lord's mystery of death. Since the sacred sacraments are symbolic acts of divine institution, this means, first of all, that in this way God can perceive everyone who approaches and participates in the holy Mystery of Baptism as all-visible and all-knowing. Let's remember that the old Adam first had to answer God's question, "Where art thou?" (Gen. 3:9), since after the sin of the first people, Moses uses these literary-symbolic words. That is why the Lord Jesus Christ established the way of our imitation of death and Resurrection so that we could be visible to God regardless of whether we are among the living on earth or have fallen asleep. Death does not make a person invisible to God in the way that people do not see and do not know their dead. Because of His authority over death, our Lord has a completely different way of looking at death than the way we sinful people can look at death. That is why the divine Dionysius in the same context mentions the words: "(The Lord) knoweth them that are his" (2 Tim. 2:19), and "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints" (Ps. 116:15), where the words "the death of his saints" have the meaning of those "who are in the holiness of perfection (ἐν ὁσιότητι τελειώσεως)" (Διονύσιος Ἀρεοπαγίτης, PG 3, 437C). It is this reality that the divine Dionysius links to the holy mystery of Baptism, in which immersion in water takes place the mystically guided symbolism of our death (for life according to the flesh) into the symbolism of our new life in the Lord. Of course, the divine Dionysius actually transmits to us the Pauline tradition about the baptism of Christians in the Death of Christ (cf. Rom. 6:3).

Facing death for Orthodox Christians represents one of the testimonies of faith in the Lord, and that is why facing death happens according to individual receptivity to the Lord's uplifting mysteries in which one can rejoice in one's own death. From such mystagogy, or from such a perspective, the apostle Paul speaks of death as a gain! For this world, death remains the reason for fleeing into sin in order to "wash away" the unpleasantness of death with sin and *cowardice* (cf. Διονύσιος Ἀρεοπαγίτης, PG 3, 557D), and to get the impression that death happens to "someone else", thus postponing facing death until the last hour during life. Precisely because of this fact, death is the most tragic and

terrible reality for this world, which can best be read from the human faces of those who, after a life spent in sin, found themselves facing the death from which they were fleeing into sin.

Effective acting of the holy mystery of Baptism is first of all a liturgical-symbolic meeting place of our death and the Lord's death. We identify our baptism into Christ's death with our own *mortification to sin* about which the apostle Paul speaks (cf. Rom. 6:11), which ultimately represents a prerequisite for a virtuous way of life *to God in Christ Jesus* (the same), while our final death is inseparable from the word of God about the *transition from death to life* (cf. Jn. 5:24), and this mystical aspect of life is not our achievement "by nature", therefore, it is not in our power, but is a gift of God that is revealed and given to us according to our faith, that is, according to the degree of our receptivity as a gift of Eternal Life (cf. Διονύσιος Ἀρεοπαγίτης, PG 3, 484B) with divine foretastes starting from the realization of this divine gift even here in history. Theology declares the dead as living who have moved from death to the most divine life (cf. Διονύσιος Ἀρεοπαγίτης, PG 3, 437B). That is why the holy mystery of Baptism is mystagogically revealed by the hierarch who, by baptizing, actually descends to the death of those who are being baptized and, by praying to God for deliverance from perishable death, renews them with divine and eternal existence (cf. *ibid.*). Orthodox Christians always have death in mind and face death again and again. Everyone must pass through death, since the Lord, as the physician of our entire nature, heals fallen man precisely from death. Just as in this life a physician must examine a wound in order to know what needs to be done to heal it, and then he heals the wound by putting salve on it and the patient is completely healed, so the Lord heals death in such a way that he looks at it like a physician examines a wound, the difference being that the Lord is actually the Physician who heals death, that is, an incurable wound for us (cf. Διονύσιος Ἀρεοπαγίτης, PG 3, 552D-553A).

Liturgical-symbolic life mysteriously conveys the divine gifts with which we face death not only when it finally occurs, but also with its "actions" (and) until the moment of final death. The physician of our souls and bodies shows in this way that the Resurrection is not without death. That is why it is important to keep in mind that the Lord Himself is fighting against death in us, and we are called to allow the Lord to lead this decisive battle for us against which we have no other forces to fight; it is impossible for us to defeat this enemy by ourselves. Our mysterious way of life and knowledge is a gift of God that incomparably surpasses all the ingenuity of the human mind, or all ideological approaches to death. The mystagogical way of knowing prepares us for the last enemy in such a way that according to our receptivity, death gradually ceases to be a terror, and becomes a mystagogical challenge to our faith. That is why the holy fathers did not even approach death from the position of "doctrine", but from the position of faith. On the other hand, the various divine revelations to the holy Fathers of

the Church did not have legitimacy based on rational assumptions, since death as an event transcends rational powers, but the legitimacy of man's faith. We can *gain* from death only if Christ is our life (cf. Phil. 1:21), and in the way that Christ was life for the apostle Paul (cf. Gal. 2, 20). Faith in Christ as in Life remains active even through death, and this is one of the hermeneutic dimensions of the words of the Apostle Paul, for whom Abel "by it (faith) he being dead yet speaketh." (Hebrews 11:4), but also the words of the Apostle James: „Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead" (James 2:17), while according to the words of the apostle Paul, "if we be dead with Christ, *we believe* that we shall also live with him" (Rm. 6, 8). One of the meanings of the verse of the Old Testament of the Kingdom of Heaven should be read from the same perspective: "but the just (in Christ), shall live (with Christ) by his faith" (Habak. 2:4)³.

³ This verse in the ancient Hebrew version reads: "the just shall *with his faith* (באמונתו, *bemunaθo*) live". However, in the Septuagint translation it says: "the just shall from *my faith* (ἐκ πίστεώς μου) live", where the possessive pronoun *my* refers to the Lord who conveys these words to Habakkuk. In the old Serbian translation, we find: "and (my) just one of faith shall be alive". We find an interesting version of this verse in the Holy Scriptures, which was translated from the ancient Hebrew language by prof. Dr. Dragan Milin; namely, he quotes the words: "...and the just shall live from *the truth*". However, the ancient Hebrew word *truth* which is more commonly used in the Holy Scriptures of the Old Testament, is not אמונה (*emunah*, whom the Seventy translate in the mentioned verse with the expression ἡ πίστις -faith), already is כראר (*emeθ*). But the very fact that in a certain number of places the Seventy also translate the expression אמונה (*emunah*) with the word ἡ ἀλήθεια (*the truth*), tells us about another possibility of reading the mysterious Christological meaning of our verse. In our context, however, we opt for the meaning of the ideographic sum אמונה (*emunah*) as we find it in the same place in the Septuagint, but also in most cases in the ancient Hebrew version of the biblical text.

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Смрт као есхатолошко-историјски изазов

Будући да је есхатолошко-историјска перспектива постојања темељ постојања православне Цркве, смрт као историјска појава свакако да представља највећи изазов таквом начину постојања. Непријатне асоцијације и нелагодност у нашем умственом суочавању са смрћу произилазе с једне стране из страха од телесних болова који често пута прате посмртна човека стања. Међутим, негативне асоцијације у односу на појаву смрти своје порекло најчешће имају у идеолошком приступу смрти. Смрт у том смислу јесте последњи непријатељ који се идентификује са страшном реалношћу која се некако мимо воље човека дешава у простору и времену. Из другачије перспективе запажамо да тајноводствени приступ смрти започиње свешћу о њеној придружености човеку од чина његовог постанка, да би у богодејственом тајноводству смрт била најпре препозната као услов за могућност покајања. Због тога, у тајноводственој аксиолошкој димензији живота смрт као историјска реалност не представља идеолошку опасност по постојање, већ својеврсни пут ка божанском спасењу слепадног човека. Смртна претња омогућује човеку богочовечанску обнову живота по есхатолошко-историјским узорима по којима човек дејствује као икона Божија. Утолико и начин истраживања наше теме мора бити везан за Цркву као за богослужбено-символичну заједницу на којој почива свет, будући да Она дејствује као Тело Христово у коме смртни човек и творевина уз помоћ божанских дејстава бивају управљени ка Богу као Узроку бесмртности.

Key words: смрт, претња, страх, змија, првородни грех, символ, Господ, васкрсење.

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