



ALBANIAN ORTHODOX DIOCESE OF THE AMERICAS

ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE

† THEOPHAN

**By the Mercy of God
Bishop of Philomelion
and the Albanian Orthodox Diocese of the Americas**

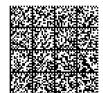
PASTORAL LETTER RESURRECTION OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST PASCHA 2024

**To the honorable clergy, and the beloved Orthodox Christians faithful,
sons and daughters, members, supporters, benefactors and friends of God-Protected
Albanian Orthodox Diocese of the Americas.**

Grace, Mercy, Peace and Joy from our Resurrected Lord Jesus Christ, and from us, paternal blessings!

Dear faithful and beloved sons and daughters in the Christ, the holy Feast of the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, which surpasses in greatness all other feasts, once again pours its rays of light, grace, blessing and hope on us and on the entire creation, warming our souls and bodies, and helps us to understand that death has been defeated forever, and the everlasting life has been given to us all.

In the mystical night of the Resurrection, we are called to come closer, with emotion, fear and trembling, to the ringing of bells and the sound of trumpets, to receive the Holy Light and to meet Him *"the SON, that ever-existed, together with GOD the Father and the HOLY SPIRIT; the uncreated 'SUN' that co-created our celestial sun"* as the Myrrhbearing Women, who came early in the morning to the Tomb, looking to meet the Creator of Life. The thousands of believers with lighted candles utter, from the depths of their souls, the Paschal greeting *"Christ is Risen!"*



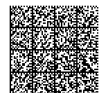


The dark night is flooded with Light, the sad shadow of death is removed; "the Sunrise of sunrises dominates the whole universe, shining with the unapproachable Light of the Resurrection." *"Now everything has been filled with light"* - it is heard from the chanter stand of the church - *"and the sky and the earth and those below."* So the Pascha can rightly be called the "Festival of Light," because the Light rose again through Christ the Lord from the darkness of the grave. Thus the Light is part of the work of saving the world, Christ the Lord, Risen from the dead becoming "the illumination of the nations," the *"True Light that illuminates every man who comes into the world."* (John 1:9).

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ the Lord,

The Resurrection of the Lord *"on the third day according to the Scriptures"* (The Creed), is described by all four evangelists, who saw Jesus raised from the dead and became confessors and preachers of this Divine Miracle. The Evangelical accounts are very important, because they come from direct witnesses of this Divine Miracle by which death was overcome and life was given to all people. In this sense, the *Holy Apostle Peter*, addressing the multitudes gathered in Jerusalem, on the occasion of the Feast of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended upon the Holy Apostles, said that *"God has Resurrected this Jesus, of whom we are all witnesses."* (Acts 2:32).

For example, the *Holy Apostles and Evangelists Luke, John and Mark* report that *"Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, and the others with them"* came to the Tomb of Jesus *"on the first day of the week, after Saturday (Sunday), very early in the morning", "while it was still dark", they "saw the stone rolled away from the Tomb" and "entering, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus"* (Mark 16:1-4). While they were perplexed about what had happened, *"behold, a young man stood before them, in shining garments"*, who asked them: *"Are you looking for Jesus of Nazareth, the Crucified One? He is Risen! He is not here. Here is the place where they put Him"* (Mark 16:5-6). The *Holy Apostles and Evangelists Luke and John* also emphasize an important aspect, namely that the *Holy Apostle Peter* "and the other disciple whom Jesus loved" (*the Holy Apostle John*), ran to the Tomb, went inside and saw *"the shroud laid down... and the napkin, which it was on His head, it was wrapped separately"* (John 20:7). How the two disciples could see the shroud and the napkin, "while it was still dark", asked the Holy Fathers of the Church, but it were they who gave us the answer. Thus, *Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, in the well-known work: "On the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ", writes that all those who followed the *Holy Apostle Peter* that night, believed in the Resurrection, because the Tomb of Christ was filled with Light that was also visible and immaterial: *"All those who were with Peter - the Holy Father says so*





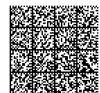
beautifully - *saw and believed, because the Tomb was full of Light. Although it was night, they saw the face inside the Tomb; and with the spiritual senses*". The existence of this Heavenly Light is also supported by *Saint John of Damascus* who explicitly says that the Light that shone in the Tomb of Christ, on that night of the Resurrection, was the uncreated Light of GOD the Creator, the Light from Mount Tabor seen by the *Holy Apostles* Peter, James and John, at the moment of the Holy Transfiguration of the Lord. This "*Light from heaven, like lightning, suddenly shrouded*" Saul from Tarsus on the road to Damascus and transformed him, from a persecutor of Christians, into the greater Apostle Paul of the Lord, the "*Apostle of Nations*". Through this shining and Holy Light, the celebration of Pascha becomes a Feast of the Light of God, the uncreated and glorified Trinity, of the Light that illumines our soul and mind, so that we may live in the Light, to be Children of the Light, having the Light of our Savior's Resurrection in us, because He is the Warrant and the Source of our Salvation.

My dearly beloved Orthodox Christians,

After His Crucifixion and Death, Christ the Lord descended to *hades* to bring the Good News of His Resurrection to the foresleeping ones and to raise up all those "fallen from the ages". However, He descended as a Glorious Conqueror and as a Triumphant Emperor into the dark kingdom of death, to illuminate it with the Light of His Holy Resurrection, to "*trample death by death*" and, thus, abolish our own death. After spending three days into the *hades*, Jesus returns to the new Tomb of Golgotha, clothed in Glory and dressed in the Light of unspeakable majesty and brilliance. His Transfigured Holy Body becomes a torch that burns with power, crosses the heavy stone slab of the Tomb and His Resurrection is realized through an explosion of uncreated Light, which illumines the entire creation and the whole universe.

This Light of the Resurrection pours ceaselessly, for two thousand years, every Saturday of Pascha over the Holy Sepulcher of the Lord in Jerusalem, when God allows it to be seen not only by the perfect ones but also by those who are imperfect, and even by unbelievers, with the aim of leading them to Salvation. The Resurrection of the Lord is, therefore, a celebration of Light, a Divine Miracle above all miracles, to which we are all called, because together with the Risen Christ, all humanity is resurrected and reborn. In this sense we understand the words of the *Holy Apostle* Paul addressed to the Christians in Corinth: "*But now Christ has Risen from the dead, and became the firstfruits (of the Resurrection) of those who have fallen asleep ... As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive (will rise)*" (1 Corinthians 15:20, 22).

Through His Resurrection, Christ the Lord calls us, therefore, to spiritual rebirth, to the





regaining of the holiness and innocence received at Baptism, to the Paschal Light that follows the time of sorrow, of repentance and fasting, of the fight against sin. The liturgical call "*Come and receive the Light!*" is an exhortation for all Christians to become "sons of the Light", to live in the joy of the teachings of our Lord Jesus and to fight against all tendencies that try to reject the evangelical saving truths. Today, it is spoken and written more and more that contemporary society is going through a deep state of spiritual crisis that accentuates and favors the distancing of people from religious and moral values, which have become, at least in some parts of the world, purely optional elements. Due to this state of affairs, theologians warn that there is a risk of ending up in a society dominated by "Neopaganism", a society that cultivates doctrinal relativism such as "all religions are good". From here, to the return to the dark world of superstitions, to the occult practices, and pseudo-scientific currents, the road is not very long. That is why, as Christians, we have the mission not to forget that through the Holy Resurrection of the Son of God we were freed forever from the bonds of sin, darkness and death, Holy Pascha being the cornerstone of our Faith, the celebration of Truth and Light uncreated that shines forever over the whole universe and over all beings, more than the sun, the moon and the stars.

With these thoughts and feelings, I urge you all to "purify our senses and our consciousness", to banish from our mind and soul the darkness of malice, selfishness and vain pleasures, to become sons of the Light, to believe with all our soul and with all our conscience in Christ the Lord Risen from the dead, as the beginning of our resurrection, because, as a Holy Father of the Church wrote: "*He is the forgiveness, He is our Pascha, the Pascha of our Salvation; He is our life, resurrection, light and salvation!*"

Wishing you all, a blessed holidays with peace, health and in all spiritual growth, I greet you like the Holy Apostles, toward the *holy Myrrhbearing Women*, with the Christian greeting: "**Christ is Risen!**"

Prayerfully yours in the Resurrected Lord and God Jesus Christ our Savior,

+ THEOPHAN

of Philomelion

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