

The moment and the eternity, the historical and the universal.

Christ is risen!

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

Since the beginning of the “age of the enlightenment”, which historians conventionally date in the first two decades of the XVIII century, the Western mind is struggling with a dilemma that seems to be unsolvable.

How can an event that has taken place in a particular historical context and place, and that had a very limited duration in time, have any value as a universal truth, extending beyond the limited time and place where it has occurred?

If we re-write this sentence in our Paschal perspective:

How can an event that has taken place in a particular historical context and place (*Jerusalem, Palestine, 1st century of our era, under Tiberius, Roman emperor*), and that had a very limited duration in time (*in just few hours Jesus died on the cross and descended into hades*), have any value as a universal truth (the salvation of humankind from death and sin), extending beyond the limited time and place where it has occurred?

It seems that the modern Western mind has lost the *ability* to *connect* the finite and the infinite, the limited and the unlimited, the immediate and the eternal, and historical facts cannot be used to prove metaphysical truths.

Such “inability” has been examined extensively by the German philosopher and theologian G. Lessing (1729 – 1781), one of the major thinkers of the “era of the enlightenment”. Lessing repeatedly declared his *inability* to give a universal (or ontological) validity to historical events, limited in time and place and “non-repeatable”.

Lessing *pictured* this separation between an event circumscribed in time and place and an eternal and universal reality, as being an impassable *ditch* (or canyon, βάραθρο, φαράγγι, ravijn, ущелье, овраг, рів, râpă).

Lessing says: "That, then, is the ugly great *ditch* which I cannot cross, however often and however earnestly I have tried to make that leap." (G. E. Lessing. "On the proof of the spirit and of power." In: Philosophical and theological writings).

And what Lessing states, seems to be (tragically) true: the post-enlightenment man seems unable to cross:

-the ditch between death penalty by crucifixion and the *eternal* sacrifice of His Body and Blood offered by Christ, the High Priest, to the Father on Calvary,
-or the ditch between His descent into hades and the salvation of humankind from *eternal* death,
-or the ditch between the bread and wine blessed and shared by Jesus with His friends -foretelling His Sacrifice on the Cross- and Christ's real and *eternal* presence in the Holy Gifts on every altar of every church, "always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20, NIV).

Does this ditch exist because we place our trust only *in our own ability* to cross it? Is this ditch self-created? Probably. For Lessing, a historical fact *terminates* in the moment the fact itself is *finished*. Reasoning with Lessing, what remains after the crucifixion may be only the memory and the example of Jesus the historical Jewish rabbi.

There is a hermeneutical problem here: the belief that the Holy Scripture is merely a book of history, or biology, or medicine, and that what we can draw from it, is history: facts which happened in the past. But the Bible is not such a thing: it's a book of *theology*. The answer given by the blind man healed in John 9:25 is not only a medical diagnosis, nor the mere description of a biological phenomenon: it is also and foremost a theological statement, and a confession of faith: "I was blind, but now I see".

Thus, the key to the solution of Lessing's problem for us Christians is simple, almost obvious: it is Jesus Christ, and our faith in Him.

And the tool to the solution is: shifting our frame of mind from history, geography and biology to *Theology*.

The third council of Constantinople (VI Ecumenical Council) has "perfected" our (human) understanding of Christ. The Christological dogmas formulated in the Ecumenical councils tell us that in Christ the human and the divine natures and wills are united and co-present. In other words, the "Jesus-event" restricted in time and space in first-century Palestine co-exists with the eternal and universal *Logos*.

Christ Himself is the solution to Lessing's dilemma. The *incarnation* of the *Logos* is the *bridge* crossing the ditch and connecting its ends.

Since Christ is the *Logos* made flesh, everything He does is assumed into the eternity of God. For this reason, with integrity we can see Christ's Body and Blood in the Holy Gifts on the altar. This happens because, as Bulgakov says,

“the Last Supper has the full strength of divine incarnation” (S. Bulgakov, *Holy Grail and the Eucharist*).

What is our role in this respect? We are asked to have faith in what Jesus has said and promised. Faith is not believing the unbelievable. Rather, faith is placing our trust in Him and not only in our intellectual efforts.

We can read Christ’s words in the Gospel. These words are there, for us, and nobody and nothing will erase them. These words have been carved for ever, and will never fade away.

We are asked to trust His words and His promise, to trust Him.

Let us trust Christ, let us trust Him to the extreme. Trust Him to the point of embracing the “per absurdum” reasoning of Dostojevskij, when he said that, should he ever be compelled to choose between truth (small “t”) and Christ, he would choose Christ. Always.

If we put our trust in what Jesus has said and promised in Galilee, Samaria and Jerusalem two-thousands years ago, we shall have faith in the Eternal *Logos*, because in Him the Divine and the human are indissolubly united.

Faith is the only way to confront the “light of reason” of Lessing’s era (and of today) with the Light of Pascha, shining from the empty tomb that hosted He who is the Light of the world.

Let us contemplate His Holy icon, Let us contemplate the mystery of the incarnation of the *Logos*. Let us trust Him, and we shall see a bridge stretching on the ditch, and Christ’s hand stretched out to reach us.

Christ is risen!

F. Paolo

May 2020