

1] 'Father, the hour has come; glorify Thy Son that the Son may glorify Thee, since Thou hast given Him power over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom Thou hast given Him.' It is the practice of Orthodox Christians not only to prepare for Holy Communion with traditional prayers but also, to give thanks after receiving the Holy Gifts with traditional prayers. The Reader recites those prayers of thanksgiving in the altar with the priests, at the end of the service, whilst the Holy Gifts are being consumed. The first of those prayers contains the phrase that, 'When this life is ended in the hope of eternal life, I may attain unto everlasting rest.'

2] Everlasting rest: what an attractive idea! How often have you woken on a Sunday morning and thought you would like everlasting rest, remaining warm and coddled under the bedclothes, like a chrysalis in its cocoon, just awaiting the springtime, when you might emerge as a butterfly; rather than bother to get up and come to church for Liturgy? Or perhaps you gladly cast sloth aside and leap from your bed, emulating God's creature, the Sun, described in Psalm 18, 'Like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoices like a strong man to run its race.'

3] But those who have hope for eternal life, longing for everlasting rest, as expressed in the prayer of thanksgiving, are not thinking of eternal indolence, like some endless, motionless state of inertia. This everlasting rest is not the final end and goal of a slothful heart, content to be static, free of sinful passions certainly, but mindless, knowing nothing of the transfiguring energies of God.

4] In fact, the prayer goes on to pray, 'Where the voice of those who keep festival is unceasing, and the delight of those who behold the ineffable beauty of Thy countenance is boundless.' So this rest is unceasing festival, rejoicing to behold the beauty of the Divine. This is the everlasting rest that, as once again, the Psalmist tells us, the rebellious children of Israel under Moses failed to reach: 'For forty years I was grieved with that generation, And said, 'It is a people who go astray in their hearts, And they do not know My ways. So I swore

in My wrath, They shall not enter My rest.’ [Ps.94:10-11] The rest that they were offered was the Land Promised to the patriarch Abraham, that prefigured on earth the eternal kingdom of the heavens. The epistle to the Hebrews tells us that even Abraham, the friend of God, knew that the everlasting rest lay elsewhere: ‘By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob... for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.’ [Heb.11:9-10]

6] In truth, the everlasting rest that we seek is entirely different from any rest conceived of in this world. It parallels, indeed, that rest that God had after the act of Creation, who rested on the seventh day; the rest that was the completion of His purposes. Its type was prefigured in the fourth of Moses’ commandments, to keep the Sabbath day holy; Friday evening to Saturday evening, the holy day for God’s old people, the children of Israel. Christ Himself brought that commandment to its perfection when His sacred body rested in the tomb after His crucifixion, whilst His soul was alive, proclaiming salvation to the dead, harrowing Hell: the very image revealed in the icon of the resurrection. As St Peter tells us, ‘For this reason the gospel was preached also to those who are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.’ [1 Pet.4:6] Though the seventh day, the Sabbath, remains as the last day of the week, whilst this age continues on its course, Our holy day is the first day, the Lord’s Day, the perfected day, the day of resurrection. A day of rest indeed, but in a paradox, also a day of labour, for here we gather to offer Liturgy, the communal work of the people of God, offering up the Holy Sacrifice, to share with the angels in the liturgy, the work, of heaven.

7] Here we have, indeed, a foretaste of the eternal rest when there will be no need for sacraments, for mysteries, but we shall participate in the reality for ever, when shadows and icons will disappear and we shall know the LORD face to face.

8] As rest follows on after work, so the everlasting rest that we seek is a reward for labour; in fact, it is a synergy, a co-operation between the grace of God and our ascetic struggle in Christ. What we are talking about here is the perfecting of our humanity; its

restoration from the Fall and beyond that, it's fulfilment, as St Peter tells us (cf. 2 Pet.1:4) by participation in the Divine Nature.

9] This labour that we offer this morning, as with every Divine Liturgy, anticipates what is yet to come. In the Liturgy of St Basil, the Prayer for the consumption of the Holy Gifts, recited by the priest secretly in the altar after communion, begins, 'The mystery of Thy dispensation, O Christ our God, hath been accomplished and perfected, as far as is in our power...' In other words, as far as we are able, we have, hopefully, done the best we can - given our present limitations in this world - once again making the Anemnesis, the remembrance, of both what Christ has accomplished for us, and of what is yet to come.

10] All our liturgy on earth, all our ascetic labour, our prayer and fasting and almsgiving in the Lord, our denial of self and taking-up of the cross and following after Christ: this is the great work that we are engaged upon. The apostles and the early followers of the Way knew this. We read, how, at the end of his letter to the Romans, St Paul hails his fellow labourers: '*Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, who have laboured in the Lord,*' he writes. '*Greet the beloved Persis, who laboured much in the Lord.*' [Rom.16:12]

11] After completing on earth the work of our salvation, Christ too entered into His rest; just as He rested in the beginning at Creation, instituting the Sabbath on earth, so following the mystery of His incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection, He opened for us and instituted the way into His eternal kingdom. Now at this season we are celebrating His Ascension, His entrance into glory. As best we can in words, in earthly language, yet nevertheless, inspired by the Holy Spirit, we may talk of Christ's 'sitting at the right hand of God the Father,' as we affirm in the Nicene Creed. But Christ's everlasting rest is certainly no oblivion. For as the epistle to the Hebrews states, 'Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.' [Heb.7:25]

12] And the work of each one of us, now, is to bring our own redemption to completion; 'to be saved to the uttermost.' You know

the gospel teaching: 'Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth... but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.' [Matt. 6:19-21] 'Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him.' [Jn:6:27] Well, that same seal is upon us, upon all who have been chrismated, sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit, as St John tells us in his first epistle, 'The anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; the same anointing teaches you concerning all things... and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him.' [1Jn2:27]

13] For we have died in baptism, and our life is hidden with Christ in God (cf. Col.3:3). He tells us this morning in the gospel that the time has come for the Father to be glorified in His Son. And in as much as we glorify God on earth, when we come to enter our everlasting rest, God will be glorified in us too. Let me end not with my own poor words, but with the sublime interpretation of this mystery from one of the fathers: St Gregory of Nyssa, who writes concerning that everlasting rest and the life of the world to come, 'After the resurrection, when our bodies will be reunited to our souls, they will be incorruptible; and the carnal passions which disturb us now will not be present in those bodies; we shall enjoy a peaceful equilibrium in which the prudence of the flesh will not make war upon the soul; and there will no longer be that internal warfare wherein sinful passions fight against the law of the mind, conquering the soul and taking it captive by sin. Our nature then will be purified of all these tendencies, and one spirit will be in both, I mean in the flesh and in the spirit, and every corporeal affection will be banished from our nature.'