

The Ceremony of Forgiveness

In ancient times in Eastern monasteries a beautiful custom existed in which the rite of mutual forgiveness on Cheesefare Sunday was performed. This rite of forgiveness was carried out in the evening, following a modest repast. All the monks in the presence of the faithful asked pardon of one another for past offences, then embraced, and gave each other the kiss of peace. The faithful did the same among themselves. In some places, while this rite of forgiveness was being carried out, the stichera of the Pasch (Resurrection) was sung: "Today the sacred Pasch has been shown forth to us..." The last stichera ends with an appeal for mutual forgiveness: "and let us embrace one another and say: 'Brethren' even to those who hate us, and let us forgive all things..." The singing of the sticheras of the Pasch (Resurrection) was to signify that just as during the season of Pasch or Eastertide, so now at the threshold of the Great Fast we should mutually ask pardon for offences for the sake of Christ who fasted, suffered, and rose for our sake.

This very moving rite of forgiveness was still observed at the Kievan Pecherska Lavra until the Communists took over the government. Here also, the monks first had a meager pre-lenten repast, after which all superiors and monks donned their mantles and proceeded to the church. All the superiors of the Lavra, from the highest to the lowest, stood side by side in the middle of the church and the whole monastic community, consisting of several hundred members, one by one approached the superiors, then kneeling, they kissed each other three times while saying, "Forgive me, Father," or "Forgive me, Brother." During this time, the choir sang the stichera taken from the solemn Vespers of Cheesefare Sunday: "Adam sat opposite paradise bewailing his nakedness..." After the completing of the ceremony, all departed in silence.

Truly, these four pre-lenten Sundays have a deep significance for our spiritual life. For whoever beats his breast as did the Publican and learns humility from his example; whoever learns from the parable of the Prodigal Son to trust in God's mercy; whoever on Meatfare Sunday, after meditating on the Terrible Judgment, is seized with fear of God's justice, which fell so severely upon our First Parents, as we have seen in the service of Cheesefare Sunday — for him the fast will not be so terrible. Rather, he will understand that it is necessary for his heart and soul. He will willingly fast and make prostrations, knowing that fasting and sorrow for sins can best prepare him for the feast of the Resurrection of our Lord.

A Byzantine Rite Liturgical Year 1992, Toronto, Julian J. Katrij, OSBM,
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