"Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over the whole earth, until the ninth hour. And it was about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying: Eli, Eli, lamma sabacthani? That is, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? … And behold the veil of the temple was rent in two from the top even to the bottom, and the earth quaked, and the rocks were rent. And the graves were opened: and many bodies of the saints that had slept arose, and coming out of the tombs after His Resurrection, came into the holy city, and appeared to many." — Matthew 27:45-46, 51-53

We have hope that comes from Jesus Christ, even in the midst of the darkness and terror of our times. Amid the darkness and suffering of that first Good Friday, there was also reason for great hope. It is a tradition within the Catholic Church that Good Friday was the 'wedding day' of Our Lord and God, Jesus Christ, with His Bride, the Church.

There is an image of Our Lord and God, Jesus Christ, which commemorates His 'wedding day.' The icon or image of Jesus on His wedding day has been known through the centuries as 'Christ the Bridegroom'.

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Christ the Bridegroom

The icon of Christ the Bridegroom shows Our Lord as He appeared on His wedding day, which was Good Friday. In the Eastern rites of the Church, an icon (from the Greek, εἰκών *eikōn*, "image") is a religious image in which we are invited to gaze into the mysteries of God. Icons are much more than mere works of art; they are meant to witness to the immutable Truth as a mirror to Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. As such, we do not refer to the iconographer as having 'painted' the icon; we say that the icon was 'written'.

Icons are filled with symbolism meant to communicate the truth. Christ the Bridegroom

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shows Our Lord humiliated by the Roman soldiers. The crown of thorns not only represents His Kingship but is especially meant to be a symbol of Christian marriage in the Eastern rites of the Church. The rope binding Jesus' hands is seen here as another symbol of marriage, the binding to one's spouse. The purple cloak mocking Jesus as King represents His wedding garment. The reed given Him as a mock-scepter is a symbol of His extreme humility. Hence, this image of Our Lord's Passion is often referred to as the 'Icon of Extreme Humility'.

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Stavronikita (16th century)

We can also call to mind the icon of the Wedding Feast at Cana, where in some versions only the bride is crowned — unlike Eastern Catholic weddings, during which both spouses are crowned. Where the bridegroom is not crowned, it is to emphasis that Jesus Christ is the

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Bridegroom. The bridegroom is always responsible for providing the wine at the wedding feast. Jesus, the Bridegroom, provided the wine at His first public miracle at Cana in Galilee, through the intercession of His Virgin Mother, Mary, Who was at His side (cf. John 2:1-11).

Many of the Church Fathers believe the turning of water into wine to be a foreshadowing of the miraculous *transubstantiation* of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. This always occurs during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and relates to the Bridegroom shedding His Precious Blood on the Cross at Calvary, with Our Lady at the foot of the Cross. The wine and water at the Wedding Feast at Cana also prefigure the Blood and Water that would pour forth from the Sacred Heart of Jesus, as it was pierced by the soldier's spear on that first Good Friday (cf. John 19:34).

Christ the Bridegroom icon is the centerpiece of Eastern Christianity's 'Holy Week Service of the Bridegroom', which begins the evening of Palm Sunday and continues through Great and Holy Monday, Great and Holy Tuesday, and Great and Holy Wednesday (as those days are called in the Christian East). This icon of Christ the Bridegroom is processed into the church by the priest during the first service on Palm Sunday evening and it will remain there until Holy Thursday.

The Bridegroom icon and the related services are commonly known in the Greek tradition as *O Nymphios*. 'Bridegroom Matins' are prayed during the Holy Week Service of the Bridegroom.

The 'Bridegroom troparion' used each day in the Bridegroom Matins is chanted three times after the reading of the Psalms at the beginning of the service:

> "Behold, the Bridegroom comes in the middle of the night, and blessed is the servant He shall find vigilant; but unworthy is he whom He shall find neglectful. Beware therefore, O my soul, lest you be weighed down by sleep, lest you be given over to death and be closed out from the kingdom; but rise up crying out: 'Holy! Holy! Holy are You our God; through the intercessions of the Theotokos, have mercy on us.'"

The following 'Bridegroom kontakion' is said on Monday of the Bridegroom Matins, also known as Great and Holy Monday, of which the Gospel reading is that of the barren fig tree which was cursed and withered because it did not bear fruit (cf. Matt. 21:18-20):

> "Be mindful of the hour of the end, O my soul, and fearing because of the cutting

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> down of the fig tree, labor diligently with the talent that was given thee, O hapless one, and be watchful and cry: Let us not remain outside the bridal chamber of Christ."

On Great and Holy Tuesday of the Bridegroom Matins, the Parable of the Ten Virgins is read (cf. Matt. 25:1-13). That Gospel passage is reinforced by the following exaposteilarion hymn, and is also reflected in the above-noted troparion and kontakion:

> "I see Thy Bridal Chamber adorned, O my Savior, but have no wedding garment that I may enter. O Giver of Light, enlighten the vesture of my soul, and save me."

On Great and Holy Friday, the fifth and most solemn day of Great and Holy Week, the Fifteenth Antiphon of the Matins is chanted by the priest:

> "Today, the Lord Who raised the dry land from the waters, is raised upon the cross. A crown of thorns is placed upon the head of the King of Angels. He clothed the sky with clouds; now, today, He is clothed in a purple robe. In the Jordan, He freed Adam; now, today, He is slapped in the face. The Bridegroom of the Church is fastened with nails; the Son of the Virgin is pierced with a spear.
>
> We worship Your Passion, O Christ.
> We worship Your Passion, O Christ.
> We worship Your Passion, O Christ.
> Let us now behold Your glorious Resurrection."

At this point, without a doubt, we know that our Lord and God, Jesus Christ, is the Bridegroom. Acclaim from the East resonates with voices from the West: the Bride of Christ is the Church; and the date of the marriage was on Good Friday, known in the East as Great and Holy Friday.

The Eastern Catholic Bridegroom Matins is conducted in an atmosphere of mourning, in part, because of the shame all Christians should feel for the fall of Adam and Eve. The Bridegroom instituted the Sacrament of Baptism to wash away the stain of Adam and Eve's Original Sin from our souls, symbolized by the water that flowed from the wounded side of Our Lord on Good Friday. On Great and Holy Friday, the priest intones: "In the Jordan, He

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freed Adam."

Just as the Holy Week Service of the Bridegroom goes on for several days, so too did a Jewish wedding. At one point in the Jewish wedding, the bridegroom would take leave of family and friends to consummate the marriage to his bride in the 'bridal chamber'. On Good Friday, Great and Holy Friday, Christ the Bridegroom took leave of His family and friends on Calvary. After drinking the bitter wine of vinegar at His Marriage, so unlike that which He had miraculously made at Cana, the Bridegroom declared from His Holy Cross: "It is consummated" (John 19:30).

Thus, having then fallen into the sleep of death, the spear of the soldier would then pierce the side of the Bridegroom, and the Bride of Christ, the Church, would emerge alive, born of Blood and Water from Her Divine Spouse. As Eve was born from the side of sleeping Adam, so too would the Bride of Christ be born from the side of the Second Adam, Jesus Christ. As such, being of 'one Flesh' with the Lord, the Church can properly be referred to as the 'Mystical Body of Christ'. Standing at the foot of the Cross of Her Divine Son on Good Friday was the Blessed Virgin Mary. Hence, She who is truly the Mother of God *(Theotokos)* is also 'Mother of the Church'.

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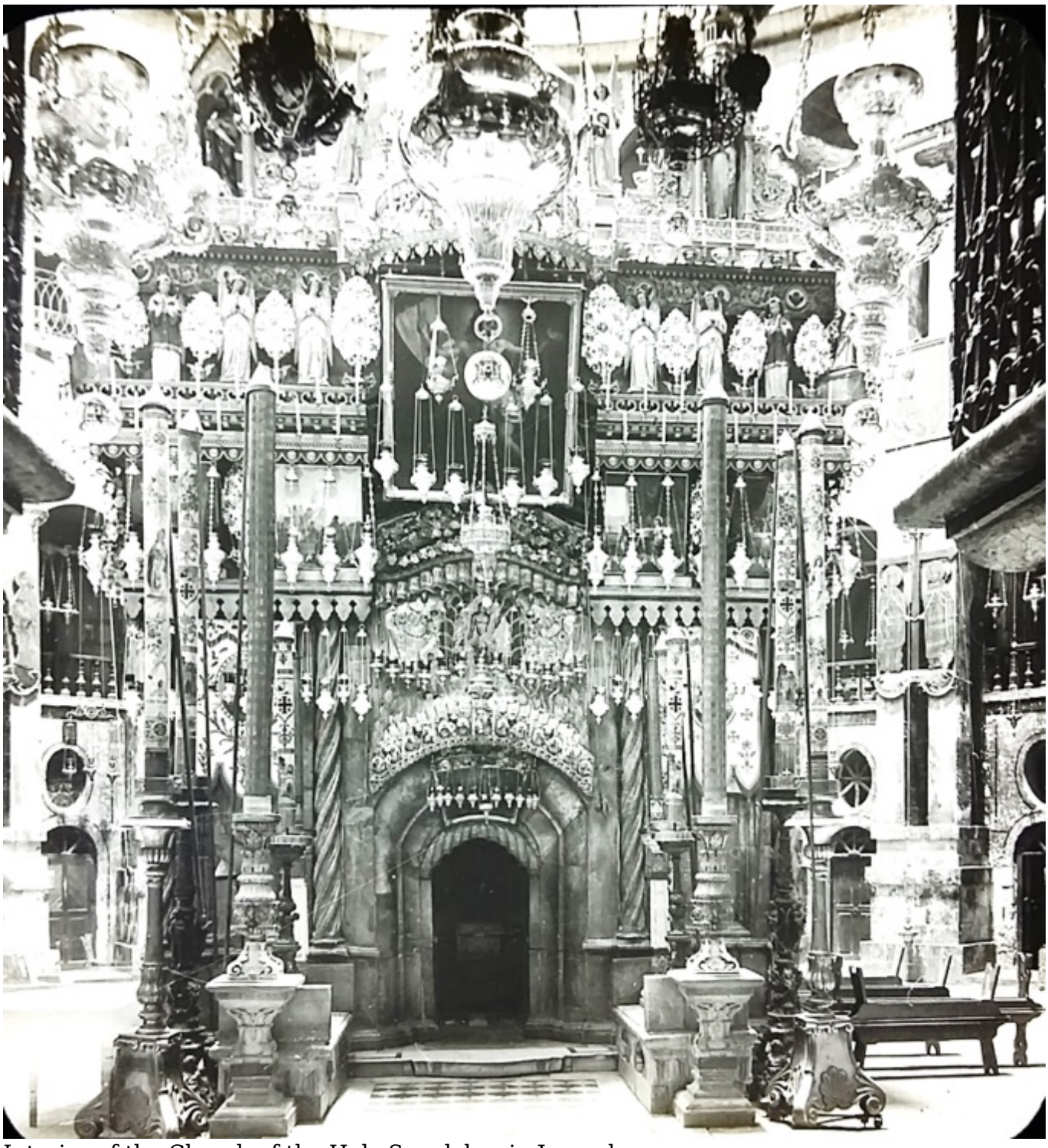

Interior of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem

Christ the Bridegroom would be placed in the bridal chamber of “a new sepulcher, wherein no man had yet been laid” (John 19:31). On the Third Day, Christ the Bridegroom would rise

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again, emerging from His bridal chamber united forever in a new and eternal (marriage) covenant with His spotless Bride, the Church.

Like the women at the tomb of Jesus on Easter Sunday, there is a Byzantine Catholic women's monastic community in the Eparchy of Parma at "Christ the Bridegroom Monastery". As these good sisters point out, "the image of Christ as Bridegroom doesn't come to an end on Good Friday. We continue to sing about Jesus as the Bridegroom during the paschal season!" These devout religious women provide us with prayers from the Byzantine Resurrection services:

> "Bearing torches let us meet the bridegroom, Christ, as He comes forth from His tomb; and let us greet, with joyful song, the saving Pasch of God."
>
> "O women, be the heralds of good news and tell what you saw; tell of the vision and say to Sion: 'Accept the good news of joy from us, the news that Christ has risen.' Exult and celebrate and rejoice, O Jerusalem, seeing Christ the King coming from the tomb like a bridegroom."
>
> "O Passover, save us from sorrow; for today Christ has shown forth from the tomb as from a bridal chamber and filled the women with joy by saying: 'Announce the good news to My Apostles.'"

May these truths from the Christian East serve to enhance our appreciation of the awesome realities and significance of Good Friday. May these truths give us hope, even in the midst of the darkness and terror of our times.

Christ the Bridegroom, have mercy on us!

Holy Mary, Mother of God and Mother of the Church, pray for us!

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