

Explanation of the Hajmeh Ceremony

By Rt. Rev. Philip Raczka

The Hajmeh Ceremony that we perform on Holy Saturday Night is a short but beautiful ceremony. Most people enjoy it very much and look forward to it all year. All though the ceremony is brief, it is full of meaning and can be enjoyed even more if it is understood properly.

The ceremony starts in the darkened church recalling the darkness of sin, death and life without God (*Matthew 22:13*). The main celebrant lights the Paschal Candle, which represents that Christ is the Light of the World (*John 8:12*). He comes to the Holy Doors with the Light of Christ shining in his hand representing that Christ shone in the darkness and was not overcome by it (*John 1:5*). The priest invites all to light their candles saying: *Come all you faithful and take light from the Light that never fades, come and glorify Christ who is risen from the dead*. Baptism is called Holy Illumination for by it Christ enlightens our whole being with his presence, knowledge and glory. That is why our baptismal clothes are white showing the glory of the Lord that we share because He is in our hearts (*John 14:23*). White is the color of the glory of the Lord as shown to us by the clothing of the Christ at the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor (*Matthew 17:2*). So the Ceremony of Light reminds us that Christ is the Light and that Light is in us because we are baptized (*Ephesians 5:14*).

After our candles are lit we make a procession to leave the church. We have many processions in our church services. They serve different purposes but they all help us to realize that we are pilgrim people. Our permanent home is not here but with the Lord in heaven (*Philippians 3:20*). Even the words “parish” and “parishioners” mean a group of exiles¹. This idea of exile is very strong in the New Testament, St. Peter uses it in the opening of his First Epistle (*1 Peter 1:1*) as does St. James (*James 1:1*). So our procession reminds us

that we are pilgrims, but with a mission to proclaim the resurrection as we sing: *O Christ our Savior, the angels in heaven sing a hymn of praise to your resurrection. As for us who dwell on earth, make us worthy to glorify You with pure hearts.*

Outside of the front door of the church the main celebrant reads the resurrection Gospel according to St. Mark (*Mark 16:1-8*). We incense the Gospel Book before the reading because Christ is present in it, and we carry lit candles because He is the Light of the World (*John 8:12*). We listen with complete attention to the proclamation because when the Gospel is read in the Liturgy it is Christ Himself speaking to us². The Holy Spirit prepares our souls to hear the Gospel so that in listening to it the Logos may abide in us as He did the Virgin at the Annunciation³. Christ contains in Himself all that He accomplished for our salvation, therefore when the Resurrection Gospel is read that Mystery is present also⁴. So outside the doors of the church by the reading of the Gospel, Christ and his glorious resurrection become present to us.

Our reaction to this divine and salvific Presence is to proclaim and celebrate. Taking the Paschal Candle and the censer the priest announces solemnly the Paschal Troparion: *Christ is risen from the dead and by his death He has trampled upon death and has given life to those who are in the tombs*. All present repeat the refrain twice making the proclamation and the celebration their own. The custom of singing a hymn after the reading of the Gospel, in order to proclaim and celebrate the mystery made present, goes back to 4th century Jerusalem⁵. It is maintained by the Byzantine Rite after the Orthros Gospel and by the Syriac Rite after the Divine Liturgy Gospel.

The priest now continues to incense around the table holding the Gospel Book, while chanting *Psalms 67* with

¹ Raniero Cantalamessa, *The Eucharist: Our Sanctification* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993) pp. 95-98.

² 2nd Vatican Council, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* #7 (1963).

³ Jean Corbon, *The Wellspring of Worship* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), page 67.

⁴ Robert Taft, *Beyond East and West: Problems in Liturgical Understanding* (Rome: Edizioni Orientalia Christiana, 2001), pages 15-29.

⁵ Egeria, *The Diary of a Pilgrimage* (Ancient Christian Writers, New York: Newman Press, 1970), page 92 (Chapter 24).

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the congregation alternating the Paschal Troparion. This incensation is a solemn homage offered to the risen Lord present in the Gospel Book and the Gospel proclamation. When the priest starts to sing the doxology he incenses the entire congregation who are the living Temples of God (*I Corinthians 3:16-17*).

Then the deacon intones the Litany of Peace which is augmented by 5 additional petitions. The proclamation of the Word of God in the Divine Liturgy, Vespers and most other services is followed by intercessions. Christ is our Great High Priest who intercedes for us with the Father (*Hebrews 7:25 & 9:24*). Being present in the Gospel Book, the Gospel Proclamation and in the hearts of the Faithful we join our voices with Christ's to offer intercessions to the Father. We intercede for the whole world as the Apostle commands, not just for ourselves and our friends (*I Timothy 2:1-3*). To intercede for others is a special ministry of the Christian tied to our adoptive sonship and union with Christ (*Galatians 4:6*). St. John Chrysostom (+407 AD) comments on this special ministry of the baptized in his *Baptismal Catechesis* as do other early Christian Fathers⁶. The 5 special petitions added to the Litany pray for our participation in the victory of Christ over sin and the Devil.

After this, the priest knocks on the doors of the church with the hand cross, while chanting *Psalm 23/4* with the Sacristan answering from inside the church. This represents Christ opening for us the gates of Paradise that were closed by the sin of Adam (*Genesis 3:23-24*). Christ now enters heaven with us, who had been captive to sin and death (*Ephesians 4:8*). Thus the priest leads the entire congregation into the church to represent Christ leading us into heaven.

While we enter the church we notice that all of the lights are on, the Holy Doors of the Iconostasis are open and that fragrant incense is burning. At the same time the choir begins to sing the 1st Ode of the Paschal Canon of St. John of Damascus (+749 AD): *Today is the day of the resurrection...* We are now entering a foretaste of Paradise, as much as is possible in this life, we are by the grace of God in his eternal Kingdom. Thus, we do not kneel or fast and we rejoice without limit for the next 50 days.

It is the ancient tradition of the Church that our Lord Jesus will return for the Final Judgment and Resurrection of the Dead at midnight on Pascha⁷. That

means that a time will come, when we will enter the church after the Hajmeh ceremony, to find that we are with the Lord forever (*I Thessalonians 4: 17*). To Him be glory now and forever. Amen.

⁶ Edward Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1994), pages 163-4.

⁷Raniero Cantalamessa, *Easter in the Early Church* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993), page 3.