

The Hajmeh Ceremony Explained

By the Rt. Rev. Philip Raczka

THE HAJMEH CEREMONY that we perform on Holy Saturday Night is short but beautiful. Most people enjoy it and look forward to it. Although it 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 (Mt 22:13). The main celebrant lights the Paschal Candle, which represents that Christ is the Light of the World (Jn 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 (Jn 1:5). The priest invites all to light their candles: "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 (Jn 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 (Mt 17:2). So the Ceremony of Light reminds us that the Light of Christ is in us because we are baptized (Eph. 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 purpose but they all help us to realize that our permanent home is not here but with the Lord in heaven (Phil. 3:20). Even the words "parish" and "parishioners" mean a group of exiles. This idea of exile is strong in

the New Testament: St. Peter uses it in the opening of his First Epistle (1 Pt 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 (Mk 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 (Jn 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 us. 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 in the Virgin at the Annunciation. Christ contains in Himself all that He accomplished for our salvation; therefore when the Resurrection Gospel is read, that Mystery is present also. 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 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 this twice, making it 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 Jerusalem. It is maintained by the Byzantine Rite after the Orthros Gospel and by the Syriac Rite after the Divine Liturgy Gospel.

The priest incenses around the table holding the Gospel Book, while chanting Psalm 67 with 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 congregation, the living Temples of God (I Cor. 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 High Priest who intercedes for us with the Father (Heb. 7:25 & 9:24). With Christ present in the Gospel and in the hearts of the Faithful, we join our voices with His, interceding for the whole world as the Apostle commands, not just for ourselves and our friends (1 Tim. 2:1-3). To intercede for others is a special ministry of the Christian tied to our adoptive son-ship and union with Christ (Gal. 4:6). St. John Chrysostom (+407 AD) comments on this special ministry of the baptized in his Baptismal Catechesis as do other early Christian Fathers. The five special petitions added to the Litany pray for our participation in the victory of Christ over sin and the Devil. *

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