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# Fire from Heaven: Holy Saturday at the Lord's Tomb

by Mother Nectaria McLees

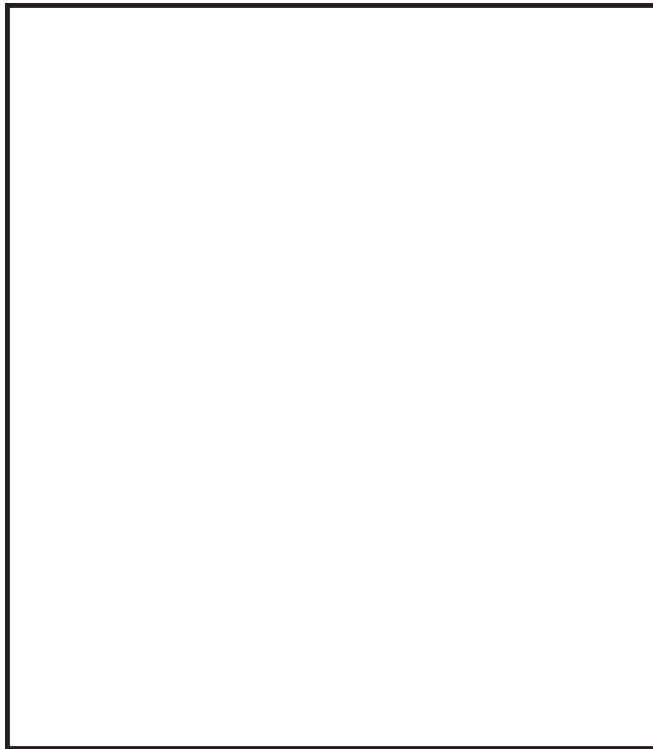
*"Do you see anything?" The question has been echoing around us for hours in Arabic, English, Russian, Albanian, Amharic, Romanian, Greek, Bulgarian... and the answer is always the same, "Not yet. Lord have mercy!" Irina and I have been in the church of the Holy Sepulchre for twenty-seven hours, hunched over tiny canvas campstools, with dried bread, fruit and a little water in bags under our feet. Since yesterday's service of the Royal Hours we have waited, alternately praying, dozing and watching our space shrink to the diameter of the stools on which we sit.... On Good Friday the funeral service of the Lord begins, and we watch as the epitaphion, the burial shroud with the embroidered image of Christ, is carried out. We are shaken. In this holy place it is as if we are watching a real funeral, and many of the pilgrims weep aloud. During the night, an old Greek woman tells us of having been thirty times to Jerusalem for Pascha. The Romanians in front of us push back further and further, trying to stretch their legs, until one of the men is sitting on my feet. He ignores my pleas to get up, and when I try to push him off, he jumps up and shakes his fist at us, shouting that we are dirty Russian Communists. I tell him loudly that we are not Communists, we are Orthodox Christians, and he subsides into angry muttering. At dawn on Saturday morning Greek latecomers, jealous of our ten-inch stools, accuse us of hoarding space. An imposing Arab man who has been here from the night before steps in as our guardian and hovers over us protectively until the Israeli police arrive at 8:30 and order everyone to their feet, pushing us together to make an aisle around the center of the church. For the next six hours we stand in a crowd packed so tightly that we have to wrench our arms up to make the sign of the cross. The breaths of those around us wave against our cheeks and the back of our necks. The suffocating heat reminds us of our empty water bottles. We tell ourselves that it is fitting to suffer from thirst while the Lord is still in the tomb, and we pray God to give us pure hearts and a little more strength, that we might see the Holy Fire...*

N. Tikhonova

Although this scene took place in 1997, it is a Paschal vigil familiar to Orthodox Christian pilgrims for centuries: the timelessness of Holy Week

services and the long wait before the descent of the grace-filled fire on Holy Saturday. Few English-speaking Christians outside the Orthodox Church know of the Holy Fire, and those who do often believe it to be a hoax. Orthodox converts in the West may not even hear of it until they celebrate their first Pascha, when it descends with the shock of ice water over carefully reasoned conversions. “Do you mean that fire actually comes down from heaven to the Lord’s Tomb in Jerusalem on Holy Saturday, and everyone sees it?” That is precisely what is meant. And what the Orthodox have claimed for centuries.

We Orthodox Christians are like children. Although we have eagerly watched the Holy Fire descend for centuries, we know nothing about how it comes or even when it first began. It is universally accepted in Eastern Christendom as a heavenly manifestation, yet surviving accounts of the Fire’s miraculous character date only from the ninth century.

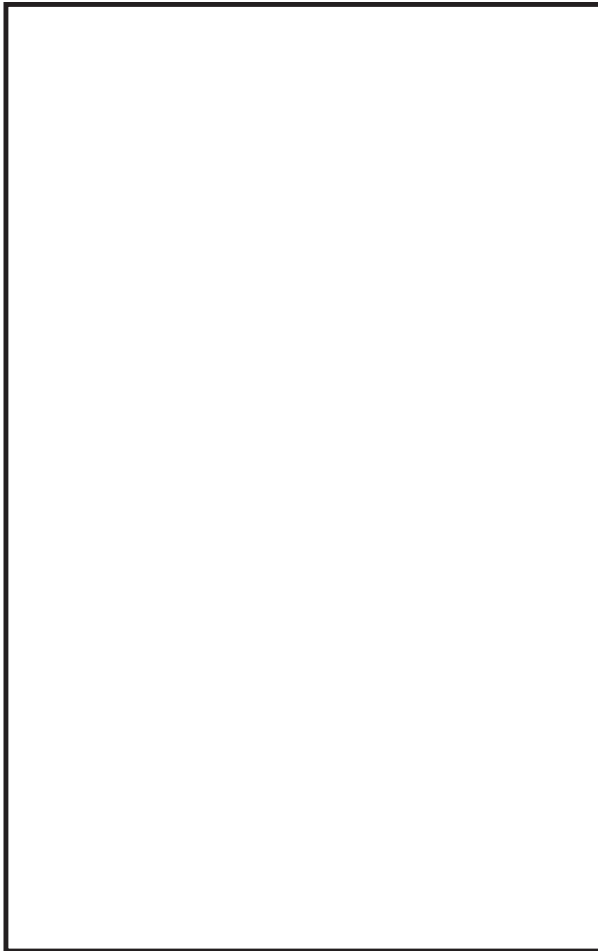


*The Edicule (Lord’s Tomb inside Holy Sepulchre)*

Earlier sources, among them a fourth-century diary of the Spanish nun-pilgrim Egeria and later lectionaries from Armenia, Georgia, and St. Sabbas Monastery, detail the Paschal services, including a candle lighting ritual celebrating Christ’s resurrection. The ritual was part of Holy Saturday vespers, the origin of the “new light” by which the church was illuminated the following year. The ritual was certainly known in other parts of Christendom, for Egeria spoke of the Paschal vigil in Jerusalem as being “exactly as we observe it at home,” although she notes that the Paschal flame in Jerusalem was taken from “within the grotto,” that is, from the Lord’s tomb. Nowhere does she indicate that the lamp-lighting itself was miraculous. Nonetheless, the opportunity to attend the Paschal cycle in Jerusalem was a coveted event, for there the *lucernarium* (service of light) was enacted in the miniature church over Christ’s Tomb, at the very place where the Lord had risen.

Almost fifty years before Egeria’s pilgrimage, St. Constantine the Great, the first Christian Emperor, built a small, richly decorated sepulchre-chapel over the Lord’s tomb. The original burial cave had been dug out of rock, and in order to enshrine the cave, the hill behind it was carefully chipped away until all that remained were the freestanding walls and roof enclosing the tomb. In Greek, the small chapel is known as the Kouklouvion, and in English, the Edicule (from the Latin *aedicula*, meaning little house). The Edicule was made the center of the over-arching Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which also contains a number of churches, chapels, and the site of the crucifixion on Golgotha. The actual rock on which the Lord’s body lay in the tomb was later covered by a marble slab, which pilgrims still kneel at today. Over this marble slab are hung dozens of oil lamps, with a larger lamp standing by itself on the marble. It is this lamp that is often the first to be ignited by the Holy Fire on the eve of Pascha.

There is no record of the Paschal flame ever appearing spontaneously outside of the Holy Sepulchre complex, and one wonders if the miraculous lighting didn’t begin sometime after the consecration of the church in the fourth century. In other countries there was a prescribed order for the Paschal vigil, in which the clergy lit the “new fire” with flint and tinder, and then the Paschal candle. This was an integral part of the service, but it was never equated with the divinely sent Fire in Jerusalem, which has always been acknowledged as uniquely miraculous. Indeed, for centuries these same churches made great efforts to transport the Paschal Fire from Jerusalem to Greece, Russia, Eastern Europe and the Middle East, overland and onboard ship, a practice that continued well into the twentieth century. It is now flown by airplane.



*Interior of the Lord's Tomb*

The history of the Holy Fire remains as mysterious as the Fire itself. There are no surviving narratives from early Christianity of supernatural properties associated with either the Jerusalem flame or its yearly appearance. If the yearly *lucernarium* was already miraculous, it is perplexing why so noteworthy an event would have entirely escaped the pens of early pilgrims, non-Christian travelers, and the Church Fathers themselves. One narrative by Eusebius in his *History of the Church* does relate a Paschal miracle concerning Bishop Narcis-

sus of Jerusalem (180-211), “thirtieth in line from the Apostles.” This story is not about the descent of the Holy Fire per se, but it is worth recounting as a miracle involving the Paschal lamps.

Once during the great all-night-long vigil of Easter, the deacons ran out of oil. The whole congregation was deeply distressed, so Narcissus told those responsible for the lights to draw water and bring it to him, and they obeyed him instantly. Then he said a prayer over the water, and instructed them to pour it into the lamps with absolute faith in the Lord. They again obeyed him, and, in defiance of natural law, by the miraculous power of God the substance of the liquid was physically changed from water into oil. All the years from that day to our own a large body of Christians there have preserved a little of it, as proof of that wonderful event.

Eusebius’ reverence for the miracle in Jerusalem is so evident that it does not seem likely that he would have omitted the fact that the lamps were also lit by supernatural means, either then, or a century and a half later when he wrote his history.

Likewise, although the writings of early Church Fathers such as Sts. Cyril of Alexandria and John Chrysostom often refer to light as a symbol of the grace and power of God, nowhere do they mention an annual miracle occurring at the Lord’s tomb on Holy Saturday. Granted that multitudes of books and manuscripts were destroyed by fire, invasion, and the ruin of time, the large number of early writings we do have left are uniformly silent about miraculous events associated with the lamp-lighting. This does not mean that the Holy Fire had not yet begun to manifest. It simply means that we moderns do not have the evidence. We stand before the mystery as ignorant as any simple pilgrim of the past thousand years.

The first surviving accounts of otherworldly fire lighting the Paschal lamps are foreshadowed by ninth century lectionaries that specifically mention the Holy Fire by name (in Greek, “to Agion Phos,” the Holy Light). Although these passages do not describe supernatural events, it is clear that they are referring to something worthy of reverence. The first description of the miraculous appearance of the Holy Fire is in 870, from a monk named Bernard, who writes in Latin, “an angel having come, light is lit in the lamps, which hang on the aforementioned Sepulchre.”

An anonymous Moslem account of the late ninth century clearly describes the supernatural appearance of the Fire, and relates for the first time, that for

some moments after its appearance the Fire does not burn those who touch it. It is an interesting sidelight that Arab-Moslem accounts of the descent of the Holy Fire are scattered throughout the following centuries, and to this day Moslems also attend the service.

One intriguing possibility is that if the Holy Fire did indeed begin to manifest in the eighth or ninth century when we first see eyewitness accounts, could this not have been a heavenly response to the iconoclasm that was threatening to overrun the Church? For two centuries, Christian iconoclasts attempted to force the Moslem-like exclusion of icons, frescoes, bas-reliefs, illuminated manuscripts, and other images of the Lord and His saints from worship. Because the Holy Fire descends only in the presence of the Orthodox Patriarch or his representative—the argument continues—this may have been a Divine reaffirmation of the truth of traditional Orthodoxy. Certainly, Christians are not the only ones who devoutly receive the Holy Fire; it has fascinated centuries of Moslems as well.

With the exception of two hundred years of Crusader rule, the Holy Land remained in Islamic hands from 638, when Byzantine Jerusalem fell to the Arabs, until 1917 when it was freed from the Turks and placed under British mandate. This state of affairs made for unsettled relations between Jerusalem's Christians and their secular Islamic rulers. Many of the city's Moslem governors were tolerant of religious differences and came in state to attend the service of the Holy Fire. Others thought the miracle was a hoax. In 947 one Emir of Jerusalem complained that "...in performing your celebrated miracle with magic artifices, you have filled all of Syria with the religion of the Christians..." He intended to forbid the ceremony, but when advised of the revenues he would lose from the pilgrim trade he allowed the service to be held on condition that the Christians pay a huge compensation. The money was gathered, and as the service proceeded in the governor's presence, the entire church suddenly flooded with otherworldly light. A huge hanging lamp directly in front of the governor unaccountably drained its supply of oil and water, and then spontaneously ignited, albeit with nothing to burn.

In 1192, Saladin, the Saracen conqueror of Jerusalem was so convinced that he had witnessed a fraud that he ordered the Paschal lamp in the Edicule blown out after the Holy Fire descended. As he watched, the lamp spontaneously relit. Again he ordered it blown out. Again it relit, and then a third time it lit again, to the joy of those gathered in the church.

A later and more destructive example of secular interference was the reign of the mad Caliph Al-Hakim (996-1021), a megalomaniac who impartially persecuted Christians, Jews and fellow-Muslims alike. According to Arab chroniclers, the popularity of the service of the Holy Light among both Christians and Moslems so infuriated Al-Hakim that he ordered the entire Holy Sepulchre complex leveled. Some historians believe his motives were in fact political, but in any event the holiest church in Christendom was destroyed and hundreds of others pillaged and ruined. At his succession, the Caliph's son El-Zahir (1021-1035) gave permission for the Holy Sepulchre to be rebuilt, but a lack of funds delayed the reconstruction for two decades. The Church was finally completed in 1042 under the patronage of Byzantine Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos. The Crusaders enlarged it when they took Jerusalem in 1099, and their church is the one we see today.

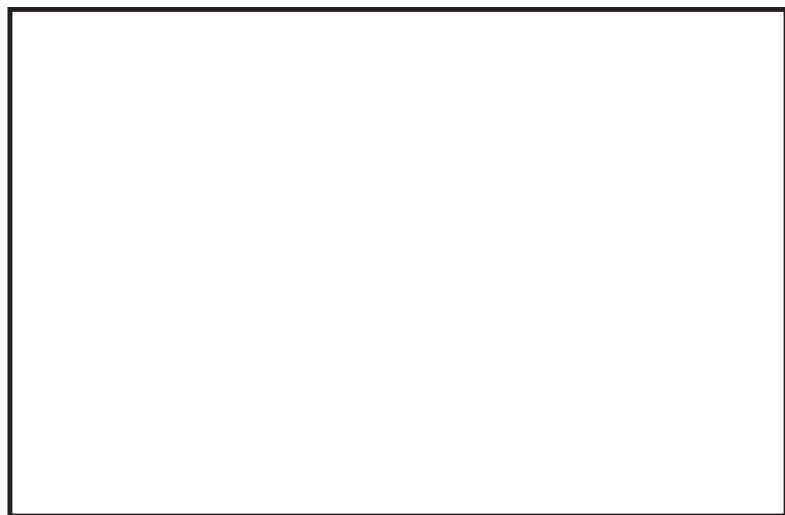
Since its ninth-century appearance in written narratives, the miracle of the Holy Fire has been recounted hundreds of times in travel and religious literature. The outward form of the service today has much in common with that of early centuries.\* The lamps are put out and the door of the Holy Sepulchre is sealed with wax to replicate the original sealing of the tomb with the stone. The Church is incensed with a procession around the Edicule. Finally, the Patriarch of Jerusalem enters the tomb, while the people wait and pray in the darkened church. From the ninth century on, we have reports of the spontaneous lighting of the lamp on the tomb, from which the Patriarch catches two large torches and thrusts them out of the sides of the Holy Sepulchre to the waiting crowd.

From the first attempts of Moslem rulers to prove that the descent of the Holy Fire was a hoax, a practice arose to insure the credibility of the Orthodox, which continues until now. After the lamps are put out on Saturday morning, the tomb is thoroughly searched by Turkish guards to verify that there is nothing left inside with which to kindle a flame. The door of the tomb is then sealed with wax and left closed and guarded until the Patriarch enters in the afternoon. Prior to breaking the seal, the Patriarch is thoroughly searched by the guards and non-Orthodox clergy for matches or other implements. He then enters the Lord's Tomb, and kneeling, prays until the Holy Fire descends.

Historically, those who accompany the Greek Orthodox Patriarch have

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\*One difference from earlier centuries is the time of the lamp-lighting service. It was first held on Saturday night before the Paschal vigil, later moved to Saturday morning, and is now served in the early afternoon.



*Courtyard of Holy Sepulchre Church were Patriarch Sophronius and the Orthodox Christians waited in 1580*

varied. From the ninth century narratives, it is apparent that Orthodox hierarchs from the West participated in the service along with Armenians and Copts. Even after the schism of 1054 between the Greek East and the Latin West, Roman Catholic Crusaders ruling Jerusalem came to the service faithfully, praying with the Orthodox and receiving the sacred flame. The Holy Fire, however, descends only when the Greek Orthodox Patriarch or his representative is in the tomb. Although the Holy Fire can descend before the Patriarch enters, and once even appeared in the courtyard outside, it has never come down when a non-Orthodox hierarch was in the tomb alone.

Unfortunately, Roman Catholic participation came to an end in 1238 when Pope Gregory IX forbade Catholics to participate in the rite, declaring it a hoax. Unfortunately, it is impossible to evaluate the decision, as there are no surviving records detailing the Pope's objection. Armenian and Coptic bishops in Jerusalem still play a major role in the service. In past centuries, the Armenian bishop has at times accompanied the Greek Patriarch as far as the narthex of the tomb. Presently, both the Armenian and the Coptic bishops wait outside the tomb. Once the Holy Fire descends, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch passes torches to the Greek and Armenian Bishop through specially designed openings near the front of the Holy Sepulchre, the Copts receiving it seconds later. These hierarchs then distribute the Holy Fire to their own

people. There has never been any Protestant representation.

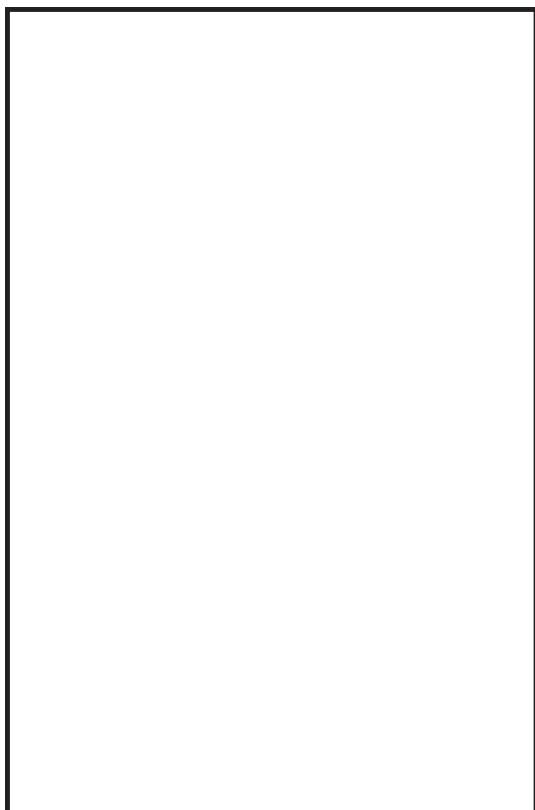
Relations between the various Christian groups worshipping in the Holy Sepulchre have not always been harmonious, particularly in regard to Greek Orthodox preeminence. In 1580, Jerusalem's Armenian community promised the Moslem governor a large sum of money if he would prevent the Orthodox from entering the Church on Holy Saturday. He agreed, and at dawn, after the elated Armenians entered the Church, the doors were shut on the Orthodox, who remained in the courtyard with Patriarch Sophronius. While the Armenians waited eagerly inside the Church, the disconsolate Orthodox continued to pray. Suddenly, one of the great stone columns at the door of the Holy Sepulchre split, and the Holy Fire sprang out of it. Thousands witnessed the miracle. After the Patriarch lit his own candle and those of the Orthodox present, the Moslem gatekeepers threw open the doors, and the Orthodox triumphantly marched in singing, "What God is as great as our God..." The split column still stands, and is pointed out to every pilgrim to Jerusalem.\*

The local Arab population took the victory of the Orthodox so much to heart that every year young Arab men (usually Christian, but sometimes Moslem as well) celebrate the Orthodox regaining entrance to the church with an enthusiastic and unrestrained procession. In the hours preceding the descent of the Holy Fire, streams of young Arab men weave through the crowds. Sitting on one another's shoulders, they circle the Holy Sepulchre chanting, "Iesu Kum!" (Jesus is Risen!)—the Arab crowd responding with great vigor, "Hakkam Kum" (In Truth He is Risen!). Hour after hour the turbulent litany drowns out normal speech. Before the Patriarch enters on Saturday afternoon, one of the young Arabs, his eyes darkened with kohl, does a sword dance in front of the Holy Sepulchre with such flamboyant energy that it almost overshadows the Greek hierarchical procession that follows. A nun living in Jerusalem told the author that some years ago the Greeks forbade the Arabs to do the sword dance. When the Patriarch entered the tomb, however, the Holy Fire did not appear. The pilgrims waited anxiously for several hours, and it was only after the dance was allowed that the Holy Fire descended.

The appearance of the light can differ from year to year. Often it first manifests by the spontaneous lighting of the lamp on the Lord's Tomb. At

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\*It is also said that one of the Moslem gatekeepers, seeing the miracle, proclaimed Christianity as the true faith, for which he was immediately martyred by his fellow Turks.



*Detail of pillar with the crack from which the Holy Fire sprang out*

other times it is seen in the air of the vast dome above the Lord's tomb as a ball of light or as miniature bolts of lightning before it descends to light the lamps. It can also appear as a cloud, or smoke, and has even been seen as a cross of light. A few early witnesses insisted on it having come as a dove, or by the agency of an angel. Alternatively, it appears as a diffused light throughout the church, spontaneously lighting lamps or even pilgrims' candles seconds before (or after) the lamp in the Edicule is lit. Some years it is described as first having a bluish color; in others it is very bright red until finally subsiding into the appearance of a normal flame. Once it appears, it takes only moments for the entire church to be lit, the flame passed candle by candle to thousands of pilgrims.

Antonios Stylianakis, a Greek Orthodox doctor, relates his impression: "My Lord, what was it? Torches, or an outbreak of fire? I thought that every-

thing had caught fire! Within moments, it passed by me.... I leaned over to light my candle. Later, I learned that at different points, candles were being miraculously lit by themselves, so that in a short time the flame had spread everywhere, even outside the Church... Inside the Church some of the flames were over a meter high, because many people were holding bunches of candles in their hands."

For centuries, Jerusalem pilgrims have carried bundles of thirty-three candles, one for each year of the Lord's life. The flame of thirty-three wicks can be large indeed.

A remarkable characteristic of the Holy Fire is that for the first ten or fifteen minutes after its appearance, it does not burn. Pilgrims can hold it to their hands and faces (the author did so herself) with no more than a pleasantly warm sensation. While pilgrims first see the Fire appear in various ways, often depending on where they are standing in church, the short period in which the flame does not physically burn is experienced by everyone. After a short time, the Fire becomes hot and burns like any natural flame.

One of the most complete narratives of the descent of the Holy Fire was written in 1846 by Monk Parthenius, a Russian pilgrim. The following excerpt is his narration of the events of Holy Saturday in the Holy Sepulchre:

When dawn came they began to put out the fire and lamps and nowhere was a lamp left burning. The Turks opened Christ's Sepulchre and put out all the lamps. Then the Turkish authorities and the Pasha himself came: a host of armed soldiers stood around Christ's Sepulchre. In the church everything had changed; everyone had become melancholy and the Arabs had become hoarse and weak. The church was unusually crowded and stuffy. Above, all the balconies were crammed with people in four rows. All the iconostasia and the domes were full of people. All were holding thirty-three candles in both hands in remembrance of the years of Christ's life. There was nothing lit anywhere.

The Patriarch went up to the main iconostasis with the consul. Meletius, the Metropolitan of Trans-Jordan, sat in the altar with the rest of the bishops, all melancholy and hanging their heads. In the church the Moslems with their weapons of war were giving orders; the Arabs had already stopped running about, but stood lifting their hands to heaven and uttering compunctionate cries; the Christians were all weeping or continually sighing. And who at that



*Procession around Lord's Tomb with the customary Turkish guard*

time could withhold his tears, beholding such a multitude of people from all countries of the world weeping and wailing and asking mercy from the Lord God? It was joyous to see that now, although unwillingly, the rest of the Christians were showing some respect for the Orthodox Greek Faith and for the Orthodox themselves, and that they were looking upon the Orthodox as though upon the brightest of suns, because everyone was hoping to receive the grace of the Holy Fire from the Orthodox. The Armenian patriarch went to the altar with two bishops and the Coptic metropolitan, and they bowed to Metropolitan Meletius and the rest of the bishops and asked that when we receive the grace of the Holy Fire, that we grant it to them also. Metropolitan Meletius answered with humility and told them to pray to God. They went to their own places. Then the royal gates were taken off and were replaced with others with a special opening.

It is not possible to describe what was then happening in the church. It was as though all were waiting for the Second Coming of the King of Heaven. Fear and terror fell upon all, and the Turks became despondent. And in the church there was nothing to be heard except sighings and groans. And Metropolitan Meletius' face was wet with tears. Then the Turkish Pasha came with the other

authorities, and they went into Christ's Sepulchre to make sure that nothing remained alight there. When they came out they sealed the Sepulchre, but previously they had placed a large lamp inside, filled to the very brim with oil. In it floated a large wick. They put the lamp in the middle of the Tomb of Christ. Now there were no Christians near the shrine, but only the Turkish authorities. And from the balconies they let down on ropes hundreds of wires with bunches of candles attached.

At eight o'clock according to Russian time (two in the afternoon), they began preparing for the procession with the Cross. The bishops, priests, and deacons, having dressed in all their sacred vestments, each took thirty-three unlit candles. Then from the altar, through the royal doors, were handed twelve banners, and whoever could took them. The soldiers cleared the way, and the chanters went behind the banners. From the altar through the royal doors came the deacons, priests, abbots and archimandrites, two by two, then the bishops, and behind all of them, Metropolitan Meletius. They went to the Lord's Sepulchre, and went around it three times chanting, "Thy Resurrection, O Christ our Saviour, the angels hymn in heaven; vouchsafe also us on earth with pure hearts to glorify Thee."

Having finished the procession, all the clergy went quickly into the altar with the banners. Metropolitan Meletius stayed alone at the entrance of the Sepulchre in the hands of the Turks. The Turks divested him, and the authorities searched him. Then they put the omophorion on him, opened the Sepulchre of Christ, and let him go inside. Oh, what fear and terror fell upon all them that were there at the time! All were silent and moaning and asking the Lord God that He not deprive them of the grace of His heavenly Fire. Some time passed. I do not know how long, for we were all beside ourselves from a kind of fear. But all of a sudden from near Christ's Sepulchre there shined a light. Soon light also appeared from the altar in the royal doors in the opening. And it flowed like two rivers of fire, one from the west, from Christ's sepulchre, and another from the east, from the altar. Oh, what joy and exultation there was in church then! Everyone became as though drunk or beside himself, and we did not know who was saying what, or who was running where! And a great noise rose in all of the church. All were running around, all were crying out in joy and thanksgiving—most of all the Arab women. The Turks themselves, the Moslems, fell on their knees and cried, "Allah, Allah," that is, "O God, O God!" Oh, what a strange and most wonderful sight! The whole church was

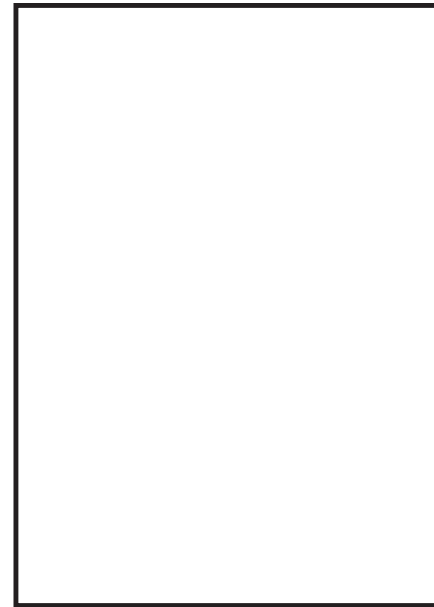
transformed into fire. Nothing could be seen in the church besides the heavenly Fire. Above and below, and round all the balconies the Holy Fire was being poured forth. And afterwards there was smoke about the whole church. And a good half of the people went out with the Fire and carried it about Jerusalem to their own homes and to all the monasteries.

...In Jerusalem I heard from many people with whom the Metropolitan himself had spoken about it openly, "Sometimes I go in and it is already burning; then I take it out quickly. But sometimes I go in and the lamp is not yet burning; then I fall down to the ground from fear and begin with tears to beg mercy from God. When I get up the lamp is already burning and I light two bunches of candles and carry them out and distribute them..."

With an increase of travelers from the West after the seventeenth century, we have many non-Orthodox accounts of the service from English, Continental and American witnesses. With few exceptions, they are unvaryingly disgusted by the Arab dancing, appalled by the deep faith of the crowd, and damn the appearance of the Holy Fire as "an infernal hoax." They explain that the fraud is wrought by the Greeks alone, the Greeks and Armenians together, or of the Turks in connivance with the Greeks. Never, by any possibility, could it be a miracle.

What never occurs to these critics is that their "hoax" has been maintained for well over a thousand years. Certainly it is a record in the history of mankind. This also presupposes at least eleven centuries of fraudulent Greek Patriarchs, not one of whom had the integrity to reveal the "secret" of the Holy Fire or deny its miraculous origin, even, presumably, when assiduously bribed. (Not to mention the remarkably consistent record of "secrecy" among the Greek priests, deacons and monks serving at the Holy Sepulchre who would have been party to the conspiracy—some of whom, like St. Gerasimos of Cephalonia, are canonized saints.)

Secondly, these narrators neglect to take into account the many attempts by the Moslem rulers of Jerusalem to discredit the Holy Fire, all of which were unsuccessful. Nor do they consider that relations between the Orthodox, Armenians and Roman Catholics have often been rocky at best. Who would more diligently work to uncover a fraud than these fellow-Christians, both in the interest of plain truth and to extend their own influence over the Holy Places? And what about the years in which the Armenian hierarch accompanied the Greek Patriarch as far as the narthex of the tomb, from where (three feet



*Opening in the Lord's Tomb  
from which the Patriarch thrusts  
torches lit by the Holy Fire*

away) he would certainly have observed any artificial means of lighting the lamp? Finally, not one of these travelers has ever admitted to making the simple experiment of taking a newly lit candle into his own hands immediately after the descent of the Holy Fire to see if it burned him. The critics disgrace their own rationalism. Let us leave them to their grumbling.

... *The Arabs suddenly appear again on each other's shoulders, shouting and crying, "Iesu Kum! Hakkam Kum! This time they stop in front of the Lord's Tomb. A youth with kohl-blackened eyes jumps out from their midst, waving two swords in a passionate dance. There is something archaic about him, like the wild, lamenting energy of the Old Testament. I think of David dancing before the Ark. He finishes and is carried away on the shoulders of his Arab brothers. Suddenly the doors of the Church open to admit the Patriarch and the Jerusalem clergy in procession. They incense the church and circle the Tomb, coming to a halt after the third turn. The crowd watches silently as the Patriarch is searched for matches. As the guards unseal the door I look up into the dome. High above me I see what look like small flashes of lightning in the air. I whisper to Irina, asking what she sees. She sees it as well, and others around us begin to point and exclaim. Finally the Patriarch enters the Tomb. The crowd is now silent, even the Arabs, and together we await the Holy Fire. Moments pass. There is darkness in the tomb and silence*

*in the crowd. An old woman near me whispers in Russian, "Gospody Pomiloi!" (Lord, have mercy!). The Greeks behind us echo, "Kyrie Eleison!" and one of them begins to weep. I wonder if this is what it will be like on Judgment Day—an immense crowd of people, holding our breaths in fear and hope, waiting on the Lord.*

*Suddenly there is a triumphant shout from the front of the crowd. We see a light in the Tomb, and torches are thrust out. The Holy Fire has come! The anxious faces become radiant. It is Pascha. Strangers hug one another; we are all brothers in our joy. I think, "This too, will be at the Last Judgment." It is only a moment before our own candles are lit—the sacred flame passed to us by the Romanians who shouted in the night. I put my hand over it. As they said, it doesn't burn! I touch the flame to my face, my hair—it is always the same, a wondrous warm light. Israeli policemen stand on the ledges of the pillars with fire extinguishers, putting out the candles they can reach. They are afraid of fire with so many pilgrims, but they, too, have caught the joy of the crowd. No matter. The candles are easily relit. The light will never go out. It is eternal. It is a miracle. He is Risen.*

*N. N. Tikhonova*

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