

The Bridegroom Has Arrived



By Protopresbiter Kyrillos Leret-Aldir.

"Behold, the Bridegroom cometh in the middle of the night"

Year after year this sentence drops in the well of my heart with a deep splash and an even drier, sharp and longer sound. In our churches we anticipate the Office of Mattins for Holy and Great Monday to the late evening of Palm Sunday. The invading dusk through the church windows assists to strike my emotion and thought in a simple vision. That one that we carry in our hearts, when we contemplate the reminiscences of our childhood and youth projected to the shortening future of the matured, or even shorter future, of the old age. Life is a night with so many imponderables. If we look to the past, how many events we would have liked to

change! Our present, ... are we totally happy with it? If only that little thing or factual point or feeling would be just a little different! And, our future how uncertain it is, how difficult, how unknown, and certainly to be concluded with our death. So many things are beyond our understanding, so many things escape our ability, so much we would love to enjoy. Life is a night, a very dark night which we survive to the next dawn and to the next dusk. Indeed, life is a dark night.

A great number of Orthodox Christians do not have this experience because they have not attended the three services of Mattins that correspond to Holy and Great Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. Which, as I was saying earlier, we celebrate on the evenings of Palm Sunday, Monday and Tuesday of Holy and Great Week. There is another reason also which may contribute to not experiencing this awareness and that is ignorance, or lack of training to perceive the language of the Church. I do not mean lack of understanding the ecclesiastical Greek – which also, obviously, could be a reason – but that personal care to enquire, to ponder, to attend frequently and lovingly the Church's services. That is, as the Gospel says:

“The sower sows the word. And these are the ones by the way side where the word is sown. When they hear, Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts. These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness; and they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a time. Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word's sake, immediately they stumble. Now they are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word, and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful” (Mk. 4:3-20).

Year after year this troparion sinks into and wounds my heart, not with pain but to alertness towards my future, my eternal future! It is an openness of my unreadiness for my death because I feel the multiplicity of tides with and interests in this fleshy life. They all occupy my heart in place of the presence of my God.

“...blessed is the servant whom He shall find watching, but unworthy is he whom He shall find in slothfulness.”

The priest comes out from the Sanctuary with the icon of Christ. Not the icon of Jesus the mild, the teacher, the glorious. But the Christ, the one who took on Himself the sins of the World, its insults, affronts, revilements, abuses, its scoffs, its mockeries and its persecutions. Not the Jesus dead in the Cross, but the Christ in the midst of His suffering:



The Creator is struck on the face... By His own consent... He is smitten with a reed... The Judge is spat upon... God who has adorned the whole earth with flowers is crowned with thorns; He is scourged, and patiently He endures mockery and wears the scarlet robe of disgrace. All these things He who is God accepts and suffers in His flesh.” (Canticle Five, Small Compline of Holy and Great Thursday.)

Am I in slothfulness? Beware, then, my soul, and be not overcome by sleep, return to soberness, you are not alone:

“Let your heart not be troubled: you believe in God, believe also in Me” (Jn. 14:1), “...keep my commandments” (v. 15), “I will not leave you orphans” (v. 18).

The parable of the ten virgins is used now to introduce us into a psychological metamorphosis in our heart.

A few times I have heard the sentence ‘the Church is a hospital’ and I have felt somehow uncomfortable with it. It was used to accommodate the toleration of some indulgence in misdeeds. Yes, the Church is a hospital where also there are amputations and drastic medicines. It is a hospital where there are ongoing treatments against sin and a rebuilding of the weaknesses left by sin in our physical and spiritual organism, that is, our Christian personality. And I say Christian personality very intentionally, because, once we are Christians, we are not anymore just men or women, we are a new creation, we are children of God. Therefore, the treatment of our ailments has to be appropriate for that type of being and existence. The treatment we receive in the hospital of the Church is geared to our eternal life.

What is our eternal life?

“Truly, truly (Αμήν, αμήν) I say to you he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgement, but has passed from death into life” (Jn. 5:24).

Therefore, eternal life is Christ, to receive Christ. However, we must not forget His other words: *“Who ever desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Mk. 8:34b). Neither, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in the heavens” (Mt. 7:12.)*

Therefore, last year, I was writing that “Christian life is action: action of

prayer; action of learning what is the will of God, that is His commandments; and action of fulfilling these commandments of God.” The Holy Mother Church, each year, drops in the well of our heart this warning, for us to sharpen our watchfulness; but also for us to rejoice in that our Lord and Master of our eternal life is the bridegroom of each one of us: He comes with love to love. The Church, in its ceremonies, makes us to repeat three times the poem -or troparion- and so, also, during the three days that antecede the Great and Holy Thursday. In this day it will be put before our contemplation the greatest act of love of Jesus the Christ, the Word of God –Ο Λόγος τού Θεού- Incarnate and the Redeemer and Saviour of mankind: the institution of the Eternal Mystery of His presence among us: *“I will not leave you orphans”*

“My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world... I am the bread of life... that one may eat of it and not die ... the bread I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world ... Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in Him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me” (Jn. 6:32-58.)

So, in the hospital that is the Church we receive “the medicine of immortality, and the antidote which prevents us from dying,” says the holy bishop Ignatius of Antioch (who suffered martyrdom in 110 A.D.) in his letter to the Ephesians. This is what we do in the celebration of the Divine Liturgy, under the guidance of the Comforter, in obedience to the Archbishop and the presbyters with an undivided mind, that we should live in God through Jesus Christ. So, looking towards the Holy and Great Thursday the Church sings to us:

“Behold the Bridegroom comes in the middle of the night; and blessed is the servant whom He shall find watching, but unworthy is he whom He shall find in slothfulness. Beware, then, O my soul, and be not overcome by sleep, lest thou be given over to death and shut out of the Kingdom. But return to soberness and cry aloud: Holy, holy, holy art Thou, O God: through the Mother of God have mercy upon us.”

For us, later, to reply:

I see Thy bridal chamber adorned, O my Saviour, and I have no wedding garment that I may enter there. Make the robe of my soul to shine, O Giver of Light, and save me... and save me... and save me! (Exapostilarion of Holy and Great Week)



The Bridegroom Carried Himself in His Own Hands

We have been two months since our last encounter. Then we were preparing for the celebration of Great and Holy Week, Passion Week. That week in which we encountered the Bridegroom, Christ, suffering for our sins, giving his human life for us:

“Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends”

(μείζονα ταύτης αγαπήν ουδείς έχει, ίνα τις τήν ψχήν αυτού θή υπέρ τών φίλων αυτού) (Jn. 15:13.)

Changed by this vision we sung transformed: I see Thy bridal chamber adorned and prepared for me and, if I have no wedding garment, you my Lord and King, make the robe of my soul to shine, because You are the Giver of Light. Passion week, and even more Pascha Week with the joy and security gained through the resurrection of the Lord, has opened that veil of doubt, of fear, of loneliness of the night that is this mortal and temporal life of ours. Our Faith shines in the midst of our uncertainties and sorrow:

"I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you" (Jn. 14:18)

There is only one thing we have to do:

“blessed is the servant whom He shall find watching.”

That is the life of the disciple of Jesus, the Christian, a continuous watching to fulfil His commandments, and a continuous repentance for his inadequacies, changing him, if short in perseverance to a growth in humility, thanksgiving and love. A difficult task for man, which, in Christ’s love for him, He took in hand to ease with His own Life, with His own Being, with His own Natures, with His own Flesh and His own Blood:



“I am the bread of life... unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you... For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed... so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me” (Jn. 6:32-58).

The simplicity of the words of Jesus is extreme: “this is my body,” “this is my blood”- “τουτό μου ἐστι τό σῶμα,” “τουτό ἐστι τό αἷμά μου.” The human intellect experiences vertigo leaning over this chasm, this... Mystery! The bread and wine changed –μεταβαλῶν- in such a real manner that, as Kyrillonas, the priest, will say, in the 4th century, in that Last Supper Jesus carried Himself in his own hands. (Paschal Homilies, paragraph 1035.)

St. Cyprian, explains the meaning of something we, the priests, do in the Divine Liturgy. Just before receiving Communion -and following the breaking of the Holy Body and mixing of a particle with the Holy Blood in the chalice- we add hot water, after this has been blessed with the words “*Blessed is the warmth of thy holy things*”, and pour it into the chalice saying: “*The warmth (of faith, full) of the Holy Spirit.*” The Saint explains that in the water is understood the people, which are conjoined with Christ in whom they believe and from whom they will never be separated:

“For because Christ bore us all, in that He also bore our sins, we see that in the water is understood the people, but in the wine is showed the blood of Christ. But when the water is mingled in the cup with wine, the people is made one with Christ, and the assembly of believers is associated and conjoined with Him on whom it believes; which association and conjunction of water and wine is so mingled in the Lord’s cup, that that mixture cannot any more be separated. Whence, moreover, nothing can separate the Church—that is, the people established in the Church, faithfully and firmly persevering in that which they have believed—from Christ, in such a way as to prevent their undivided love from always abiding and adhering. Thus, therefore, in consecrating the cup of the Lord, water alone cannot be offered, even as wine alone cannot be offered. For if any one offer wine only, the blood of Christ is dissociated from us; but if the water be alone, the people are dissociated from Christ; but when both are mingled, and are joined with one another by a close union, there is completed a spiritual and heavenly sacrament (mystery). Thus the cup of the Lord is not indeed water alone, nor wine alone, unless each be mingled with the other; just as, on the other hand, the body of the Lord cannot be flour alone or water alone, unless both should be united and joined together and compacted in the mass of one bread; in which true sacrament our people are shown to be made one, so that in like manner as many grains, collected, and ground, and mixed together into one mass, make one bread; so in Christ, who is the heavenly bread, we may know that there is one body, with which our number is joined and united.” (Letter to Caecilio, number 13)

Through the centuries there have been men and women who have not been able to receive and accept this act of the Lord Jesus in the night when He

was going to be betrayed. Not only the Scribes and the Pharisees of the Jews also some of His own disciples were not able to accept it. When He on a certain occasion said, *“Unless you eat My flesh and drink My blood, you have no life in you.”*



“many of His disciples, when they heard this, said ‘this is a hard saying; who can understand it?’.... From this time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more.”
(Jn. 6:60, 67)

Saint Kyrillos of Jerusalem precisely, because it is difficult to believe the grandiosity of this Mystery, explained to his learners in this

manner:

"Since then He Himself declared and said of the Bread, This is My Body, who shall dare to doubt any longer? And since He has Himself affirmed and said, This is My Blood, who shall ever hesitate, saying, that it is not His blood?"

And he answered:

"Wherefore with full assurance let us partake as of the Body and Blood of Christ: for in the figure of Bread is given to thee His Body, and in the figure of Wine His Blood; that you by partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ, may be made of the same body and the same blood with Him. For thus we come to bear Christ in us, because His Body and Blood are distributed through our members; thus it is that, according to the blessed Peter, we became partakers of the divine nature." (Mystagogia IV.)

Frequently in these pages I bring to your attention the fact that the Christian life is a life of action, of three types of action. Now comes the action of learning to the fore. Have we asked ourselves, ***'Do I know that which I am going to receive in the Holy Communion?'*** Better still, ***'Do I know Who I am going to receive?'*** Even more, ***'who am I and what am I to receive Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the Living God? What is the disposition of my soul to receive such Holy Food and Drink?'***

Sometimes I wonder if the Christians, who come to receive the Body and Blood of the Lord from my hands, really know Who is He they are receiving. Why? Firstly, there is the general attitude of approaching the Sacrament; secondly, the way of retiring away after receiving it. Usually the communicants have learned well that they should approach fasting from food. In general, I feel they do so, although some times they confuse the Eucharistic fast with the fast of Lent or that of Wednesdays and Fridays. However, very few think of the need of fasting from sin and cleaning themselves through the Mystery of Confession and Repentance before receiving the Sacrament, thereby producing a change to their lives, towards fulfilling the Commandments and establishing a life of prayer in their daily routine.

Let us remember the troparion we commented for Passion Week: *"...blessed is the servant whom He shall find watching."* Watching is learning; watching is praying and watching is fulfilling the will of God, His commandments. The Mother Church suggests to us reading The Canon of Preparation for Holy Communion, the night before coming to Communion and in the morning, before we leave for the Church, the Prayers of Preparation; these ones in fear and trembling. Reading these texts we learn. It is also advised to us that we reconcile ourselves to those that have wronged us or those we have wronged: doing so we love, even our enemies, as the Lord commanded.

However, if we approach simply fasting from food, we shall be the unworthy servant which the Bridegroom finds in slothfulness who like the five foolish virgins (Mt. 25:1-13) went to meet the Bridegroom unprepared. Yes they carried lamps, but with no reserved oil

Brethren, let us love the Bridegroom and prepare our lamps –that is, our life-with care, shining with virtues and right faith; that, like the wise virgins of the Lord, we may be ready to enter with Him into the wedding feast. For God the Bridegroom grants to all the incorruptible crown. (Holy and Great Tuesday)

The Bridegroom's Sacrificial Act



Again it has been two months since our last encounter. In these last three encounters I have called your attention to our encounter with our Bridegroom, Christ, giving his human life for us, to put on us his own divine life. For this we see that He has prepared His bridal chamber, the Divine Liturgy. In this mysterious-secret-event we take part as receivers of His invitation and commandment:

“I am the bread of life... unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you...For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed... so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me” (Jn. 6:32-58).

In our June article I wrote: ‘The simplicity of the words of Jesus is extreme: “this is my body,” “this is my blood”- “τουτό μου εστι τό σώμα,” “τουτό εστι τό αιμά μου.” The human intellect experiences vertigo leaning over this chasm, this... Mystery! The bread and wine changed –μεταβαλών- in such a real manner that, as Kyrillonas, the priest, will say, in the 4th century, in that Last Supper Jesus carried Himself in his own hands. (Paschal Homilies, paragraph 1035.)’

Examining the words of Jesus in the concrete historical environment in which they were pronounced, the bread and wine distributed by Jesus in the Last supper to his disciples were, really and truly, his own body and his own blood. The consequence of this examination is that, if the Saviour would have used these expressions in an improper, metaphoric or symbolic manner, the disciples necessarily would have understood them wrongly.

Therefore, the Lord would not have allowed such a misunderstanding in something so crucial for the life of His Church.

So crucial that it has past to us in the reading of the *Apostolos* of Holy and Great Thursday every year: 1 Corinthians, chapter 11, verses 23 to 32.

The Apostle Paul was writing to the Church living in the city of Corinth, which was not only a great centre of Hellenism and a magnet to every sort of philosophy and religion, it was also a notorious centre of immorality. Saint Paul had organized this Christian Community, which grew strong and was composed mostly of poor people, who had to make a living in an environment that could create awkward problems for the newly converted. The letter is written to correct abuses and to clarify what was the faith and morals of the Church:

“For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, “Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.” In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, “this cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.” For as often as you drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes. Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgement to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body” (1 Cor. 11:23-29.)



The Apostles understood that the Lord spoke properly, clearly and straight for them to understand correctly. As also Paul confirmed this, and the post-apostolic tradition bore witness to it, which links with the apostolic times and continues through the centuries up to today.

Further more to the point, the Apostles, given the intimate state of affairs in their relationship with the Lord, could not but take the words of Jesus in the proper, clear and straight sense in which they had been pronounced. There had been occasions during the course of their relationship, when the Apostles had taken to the foot of the letter the expressions of Jesus, even when they should not have been taken thus; then Jesus corrected several times this literal understanding that He had given to them (Jn. 4:31-34; Mk. 8:15-21.)

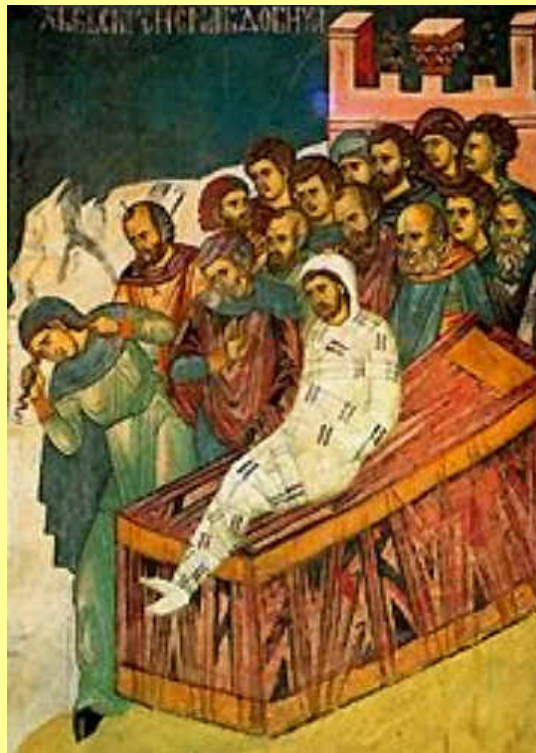
However, at the Last Super, it was thrust upon the ears and minds of the Apostles the proper sense, first of all in the context of the foregoing circumstances and, secondly, in the words themselves pronounced by Jesus.

The infallible effectiveness of the words of the Lord was evident to the Apostles:

They had heard their Teacher say: *“Lazarus, come forth,”* and in the place where they had seen the deceased of four days buried, his feet and hands tied, they witnessed him come out of the sepulchre (Jn.11:43-44.)



Three of them had heard the Master, and the others had learned (Mt. 9:26), that Christ had called to Jairus' dead child, *“Little girl, I say to you, arise”* and they have been astonished that the girl got up and walked (Mk. 5:41.) And what about the rising of the son of the widow of Naim?



The efficiency of the word of Jesus was so well known by the public that a pagan centurion came to Him in Capernaum requesting healing of his servant with the words, *“...only speak a word and my servant will be healed”* (Mt. 8:8.)



The Apostles also had experience of the infallible effectiveness of the word of the Saviour over the inanimate matter: *“He rebuked the wind and said to the sea ‘be still!’ And the wind ceased and there was a great calm”* (Mk. 4:39.)



Moreover, Jesus’ power had been made palpable to the Apostles in the concrete multiplications of bread (Jn. 6:1-15; Mt. 15:32-39)



and in the changing of the water into wine in the wedding in Cana (Jn. 2:1-11.)



In addition the Apostles were aware that the body of the Lord was easily exempted from the ordinary laws to which any other body was subject, as they saw over the waters of the sea (Jn. 6:16-21) and in the transfiguration (Mt. 17:1-9.)



In my opinion, the promise that the Lord had given (Jn. 6:32-58, which I used to start this article and on which I commented also in my articles of last April and June 2003,) psychologically obliged the Apostles to accept the proper, clear and straight sense of the words of Jesus. It was impossible to forget that promise, which in itself, was surprising and, in addition, had been so crucial for them to follow Jesus. For many others it was the cause for abandoning Him (Jn. 6:67-70.)



Jesus had designed the Eucharist, that is, the Divine Liturgy, as the centre of the Christian life; an act, of such sublime and unique grandeur to the glory of God and love towards man, which instituted the New Testament. And, He gave the command to repeat this that He had done: “...do this in remembrance of Me” (Lk. 22:19.) We call this “Act” The Divine Liturgy –*Ἡ ΘΕΙΑ ΛΕΙΤΟΥΡΓΙΑ*.

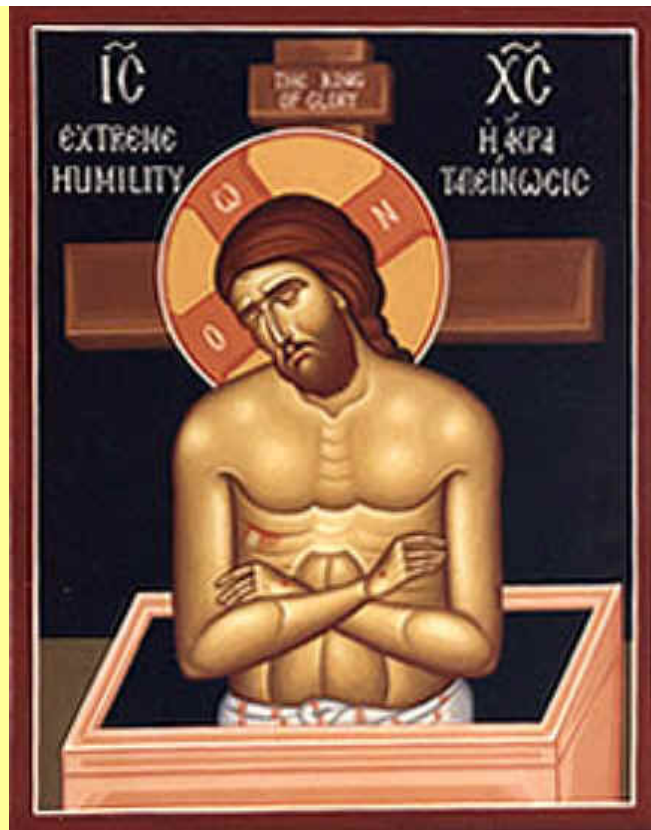


The *sacrificial* character of this “*act*” is shown in the Holy Scripture. We encounter expressions that are typically sacrificial. In a principal manner, right in the line about blood, “*which it is shed for many for the remission of sins*” (Mt. 26:28) and which is called “*blood of the New Testament*” (Mt. Ibid and Mk. 14:24; Lk. 22:20 and 1 Cor. 11:25). This sacrifice has necessarily an intimate relationship with the Sacrifice of the Cross, but in the Last supper appears offered in the supper itself according to the participles used *body broken / blood shed*. And even, stronger force of meaning is expressed by St. Luke, who says: “*This cup is the new Testament in My blood, which is shed for you,*” thus it appears more clearly that it is not the blood shed on the cross but the one contained in the cup. Therefore, the sacrifice offered by Jesus in the Last Supper is united indissolubly with the Sacrifice of the Cross.



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To be continued

ã Protopresbyter Kyrillos Leret-Aldir: April, June, August 2003.

® ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN COMMENT Editorial Presentation:

Sinai, Burning Bush.

The Bridegroom, 1984.

Aer with the Communion of the Apostles. Late XIV c., Chelandary Monastery, Mont Athos.

The Chalice of Abbot Suger of Paris.

The Mystical Supper,

Iconographer: Lionda, N.

Date: 20th c. (Late)

Heritage: Greek

Courtesy of St. Isaac the Syrian Skete - F30 - www.skete.com and
Mosaic Transfiguration (Sinai, 6th Century) - F65

Date: 6th c. (Mid) Location: St. Catherine's Monastery, Mt. Sinai. Style: Mosaic

The Cross of San Pierino (13th century.)

Divine Liturgy, Angel Carrying Diskos

Iconographer: Theophanes the Cretan

Date: 16th c. (Mid)

Location: Stavronikita Monastery, Mt. Athos

Heritage: Cretan

Courtesy of St. Isaac the Syrian Skete - CF715 www.skete.com

An old Chalice.

Extreme Humility (20th century.)

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