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The Great Wager Between Believers and Unbelievers

by Photios Kontoglou

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On Pascha Monday, in the evening after midnight, before fore lying down to sleep I went out into the little garden behind my house. The sky was dark and covered with stars. I seemed to see it for the first time, and a distant psalmody seemed to descend from it. My lips murmured, very softly: "Exalt ye the Lord our God, and worship the footstool of His feet." A holy man once told me that during these hours the heavens are opened. The air exhaled a fragrance of the flowers and herbs I had planted. "Heaven and earth are filled with the glory of the Lord."

I could well have remained there alone until break of day. I was as if without a body and without any bond to the earth. But fearing that my absence would disturb those with me in the house, I returned and lay down.

Sleep had not really taken possession of me; I do not know whether I was awake or asleep, when suddenly a strange man rose up before me. He was as pale as a dead man. His eyes were as if open, and he looked at me in terror. His face was like a mask, like a mummy's. His glistening, dark yellow skin was stretched tight over his dead man's head with all its cavities. He was as if panting. In one hand he held some kind of bizarre object which I could not make out; the other hand was clutching his breast as if he were suffering.

This creature filled me with terror. I looked at him and he looked at me without speaking, as if he were waiting for me to recognize him, strange as he was. And a voice said to me: "It is so-and-so!" And I recognized him immediately. Then he opened his mouth and sighed. His voice came from far away; it came up as from a deep well.

He was in great agony, and I suffered for him. His hands, his feet, his eyes—everything showed that he was suffering. In my despair I was going to help him, but he gave me a sign with his hand to stop. He began to groan in such a way that I froze. Then he said to me: "I have not come; I have been sent. I shake without stop; I am dizzy. Pray God to have pity on me. I want to die but I cannot. Alas! Everything you told me before is true. Do you remember how, several days before my death, you came to see me and spoke about religion? There were two other friends with me, unbelievers like myself. You spoke, and they mocked. When you left, they said: 'What a pity! He is intelligent and he believes the stupid things old women believe!'

"Another time, and other times too, I told you: 'Dear Photios, save up money, or else you will die a pauper. Look at my riches, and I want more of them.' You told me then: 'Have you signed a pact with death, that you can live as many year as you want and enjoy a happy old age?'

"And I replied: 'You will see to what an age I will live Now I am 75; I will live past a hundred. My children are free from want. My son earns a lot of money, and I have married my daughter to a rich Ethiopian. My wife and I have more money than we need. I am not like you who listen to what the priests say: "A Christian ending to our life ..." and the rest. What have you to gain from a Christian ending? Better a full pocket and no worries ... Give alms? Why did your so merciful God create paupers? Why should I feed them? And they ask you, in order to go to Paradise, to feed idlers! Do you want to talk about Paradise? You know that I am the son of a priest and that I know well all these tricks. That those who have no brains believe them is well enough, but you who have a mind have gone astray. If you continue to live as you are doing, you will die before me, and you will be responsible for those you have led astray. As a physician I tell you and affirm that I will live a hundred and ten years ...'"

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Keywords used: death

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After saying all this, he turned this way and that as if he were on a grill. I heard his groans: "Ah! Ouch! Oh! Oh!" He was silent for a moment, and then continued: "This is what I said, and in a few days I was dead! I was dead, and I lost the wager! What confusion was mine, what horror! Lost, I descended into the abyss. What suffering I have had up to now, what agony! Everything you told me was true. *You have won the wager!*

"When I was in the world where you are now, I was an intellectual, I was a physician. I had learned how to speak and to be listened to, to mock religion, to discuss whatever falls under the senses. And now I see that everything I called stories, myths, paper lanterns—is true. The agony which I am experiencing now—this is what is true, this is the worm that never sleeps, this is the gnashing of teeth."

After having spoken thus, he disappeared. I still heard his groans, which gradually faded away. Sleep had begun to take possession of me, when I felt an icy hand touch me. I opened my eyes and saw him again before me. This time he was more horrible and smaller in body. He had become like a nursing infant, with a large old man's head which he was shaking.

"In a short time the day will break, and those who have sent me will come to seek me!"

"Who are they?"

He spoke some confused words which I could not make out. Then he added: "There where I am, there are also many who mock you and your faith. Now they understand that their spiritual darts have not gone beyond the cemetery. There are both those you have done good to, and those who have slandered you. The more you forgive them, the more they detest you. Man is evil. Instead of rejoicing him, kindness makes him bitter, because it makes him feel his defeat. The state of these latter is worse than mine. They cannot leave their dark prison to come and find you as I have done. They are severely tormented, lashed by the whip of God's love, as one of the Saints has said [St. Isaac the Syrian]. The world is something else entirely from what we see! Our intellect shows it to us in reverse. Now we understand that our intellect was only stupid, our conversations were spiteful meanness, our joys were lies and illusions.

"You, who bear God in your hearts, Whose word is Truth, the only Truth—you have won the great wager between believers and unbelievers. This wager I have lost. I tremble, I sigh, and I find no rest. In truth, *there is no repentance in hell*. Woe to those who walk as I did when I was on earth. Our flesh was drunk and mocked those who believed in God and eternal life; almost everyone applauded us. They treated you as mad, as imbeciles. And the more you accept our mockeries, the more our rage increases.

"Now I see how much the conduct of evil men grieved you. How could you bear with such patience the poisoned darts which issued from our lips which treated you as hypocrites, mockers of God, and deceivers of the people. If these evil men who are still on earth would see where I am, if only they were in my place, they would tremble for everything they are doing. I would like to appear to them and tell them to change their path, but I do not have the permission to do so, just as the rich man did not have it when he begged Abraham to send Lazarus the pauper. Lazarus was not sent, so that those who sinned might be worthy of punishment and those who went on the ways of God might be worthy of salvation.

"He that is unrighteous, let him do unrighteousness yet more; and he that is filthy, let him be made filthy yet more. And he that is righteous, let him do righteousness yet more; and he that is holy, let him be made holy yet more" (Apoc. 22:11).

With these words he disappeared.

Ed. note: Earlier in the book (chapter 2) we have quoted the teaching of Blessed Augustine that ordinarily it is only the saints who are able to have contact with the living, while ordinary sinners are bound in hell and cannot come out. However, it does happen, as in the present case, that God allows a soul from hell to appear to the living for some special purpose. F. Pose; some similar appearances are recorded in the book *Eternal Mysteries Beyond the Grave*. As Blessed Augustine writes: "The dead of themselves have no power to intervene in the affairs of the living" ("Care for the Dead," ch. 10), and appear to the living only by God's special allowance. It remains true, nevertheless, that such appearances are very rare, and the vast majority of the appearances of the "dead," most notably those that occur through mediums, are the work of demons masquerading as the dead.

From *The Soul After Death*, Fr. Seraphim Rose, Platina, 1980, pp.227-232. Originally from From Kontoglou's book *Mystical Flowers*, Athens, 1977.