

Spiritual Aspects
On the Northridge Earthquake
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What Is Behind EARTHQUAKES?

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WHY DOES GOD PERMIT EARTHQUAKES TO HAPPEN?

On my trip from New Jersey to Los Angeles, before the plane took off, the crew announced that a destructive earthquake had occurred centered in Northridge, California. It was felt as far as San Diego and Las Vegas. Also the Los Angeles airport was closed. Then they showed pictures of the event on the airplane's cinema screen, demonstrating the extent of destruction, especially in the San Fernando Valley and in Santa Monica. At that point, I felt as if God had invited me to share the suffering with our people in California, as had happened during my initial service in Los Angeles, in 1971.

Many spiritual thoughts and questions crossed my mind, throughout my flight some of which included:

- * *Why does God permit earthquakes to happen?*
- * *What is the role of the divine Providence in the midst of these destructive natural disasters?*
- * *What is the significance of earthquakes in the Bible, both the Old and the New Testaments?*
- * *What is the role of the church towards the victims?*

Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty
Santa Monica, January 1994

EARTHQUAKES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Once, Adam could joyfully hear the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden (Gen. 3:8) and hold a loving conversation with Him, discovering His mysteries and great love. When the peaceful dialogue with God was lost, God spoke to man in many languages, including "*The language of earthquakes.*" God did so in order to shake man's hardened heart and move the inner mountains, so that he would accept the peaceful and joyful kingdom of God inside him.

Long ago, instead of thanking God for His love when He sent Moses and Aaron, providing a means of salvation, Korah, Dathan, Abi'ram and all their company rebelled and became jealous and full of envy. God spoke *the language of earthquakes* and the ground under them opened up and swallowed them up, so that their rebellion would not spread among the congregation. (Numbers 16: 31-33)

God created the world beautiful and useful for serving man for his prosperity and enjoyment. But if the nature of man becomes corrupted, God reveals the destructive forces of nature, not for the sake of revenge, but for man to examine himself and recognize sin as an earthquake that destroys his inner-self.

Israel left God, the source of his peace and strength, and chose to worship and praise the idols, thinking that the idols can provide satisfaction, rest and peace.

Jeremiah looked around him and saw the corruption that affected the religion and civil leaders, as well as the people and said: "*I looked on the mountains and, lo, they were quaking and all the hills moved to and fro.*" (Jeremiah 4:24) He saw the earthquakes shake the earth and realized that every spiritual or civil leader that God wanted to make as high as a mountain to support the people is now shaking and becoming a source of terror.

Another example is when Zechariah the prophet expressed God's speech to Jerusalem that was polluted by idols, saying: "*On that day His feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives which lies before Jerusalem in the east; and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley; so that one half of the mountain shall withdraw northward, and the other half southward. . . and you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the day of Uzziah, king of Judah. Then the Lord your God will come and all the holy ones with Him.*" (Zechariah 14: 4,5)

This is what David the psalmist expressed by saying: "*Then the earth reeled and rocked; the foundations also of the mountains trembled and quaked, because He was angry.*" (Psalm 18:7)

In the days of king Uzziah, an earthquake occurred (Amos 1:1); as well as in the days of Herod the great, which killed more than 10,000 people.

ELIJAH THE PROPHET AND THE EARTHQUAKE

When Elijah's soul was very bitter, he was invited to meet the Lord. The first book of Kings describes this meeting as the following: "*And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a low soft voice. And when Elijah heard it, he*

wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave." (1 Kings 19:11-13)

It was impossible for Elijah to meet God and directly speak with Him except through the "*low soft voice*". When the spirit calms down, it is able to listen to and communicate with the language of love, imitating its Christ Who was described as "Never to be heard screaming nor raising His voice in the streets." (Matt. 12:19). This calmness is preceded by a great and strong wind, then an earthquake and finally, a burning fire.

This is the work of the Holy Spirit Who blows on the soul like a mighty wind, as on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). The Holy Spirit quakes the depth of the soul in order to destroy its stony nature, then purify it with the Divine Fire of Love so it calms down to meet with its Christ.

In other words, we will not experience the life of serenity and the hidden communion with the Holy One unless God's Spirit quakes the deeds of our old nature. Then, we will live according to the new nature, carrying the image of our Creator.

Let us raise our voices with the psalmist saying: "*Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob, who turns the rock into a pool of water, the flint into a spring of water.*" (Psalm 114:7,8)

With every earthquake that shakes the earth, let us ask for an inner quake that touches our depths; not to destroy us, but to destroy the deeds of the old man while it builds the new one. Thus Christ reigns in our souls, destroying all that is earthly in our hearts to establish His heavenly kingdom. We will, then, sing: "*The Lord reigns; let the people tremble! He sits enthroned upon the Cherubim; let the earth quake!*" (Psalm 99:1)

With this we can also understand the words of Isaiah the prophet: "*You will be visited by the Lord of Host with thunder and with earthquake and great noise, with whirlwind and tempest, and the flame of a devouring fire.*" (Isaiah 29:6)

EARTHQUAKES AND THE FLIGHT TO EGYPT

Isaiah the prophet saw the entrance of Christ the Lord into Egypt accompanied by an earthquake that shook the idols and melted the hearts, and said: "*Behold, the Lord is riding on a swift cloud and coming to Egypt; and the idols of Egypt will tremble at His presence, and the hearts of the Egyptians will melt within them... In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its border... The Lord of Host has blessed us, saying, 'Blessed be Egypt, my people.'*" (Isaiah 19:1,19,24)

Thus the earthquake declares the presence of the Lord, Who destroys all the idols in order to establish a blessed kingdom in the depth of the heart and convert the temples of idols into a holy house for Him. In the Lord's presence, evil quakes, trembles and is destroyed, and then rises a divine house that time cannot corrupt nor death conquer as long as our Lord dwells in it.

EARTHQUAKES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the Old Testament, we saw how man lost the purity of his ears and was no longer able to hear the inner voice of the Lord. However, God spoke to him in the language of destructive earthquakes; not to destroy him, but to destroy the hardness of his heart. God wanted to establish in him a circumcised and holy inner ear that can identify the divine voice and respond to it.

In the New Testament, God uses earthquakes as a means of conversation with humanity, in several occasions, the most important of which are:

1. At the crucifixion, when the earthquake was accompanied by intense darkness. (Matt. 27:45, 51-54)
2. At the resurrection, when the guards trembled. (Matt. 28:2, 3).
3. At the descent of the Holy Spirit, on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2).
4. While Paul and Silas were imprisoned in Philippi, and the prison's doors were opened and the chains were unfastened (Acts 16:26).
5. In the speech about the signs of the last advent of the Lord. (Matt. 24:7; Mark 13:8; Luke 21:11; Rev. 6:12; 8:5; 11:9,13; 16:18)

EARTHQUAKES AND MEETING WITH THE CRUCIFIED

At the crucifixion, the earthquake was accompanied by intense darkness. (Matt. 24:45, 51-54) Hence, with every earthquake, the victims who have faith see their Christ crucified and arising from the dead. They saw Him sharing their sufferings, not with words of consolation or with monetary compensations, but by offering His life as a sacrifice of love, given for their sake.

We all hurt for those who became homeless. A consolation for us is that our Christ, the Creator of heaven and earth, became homeless and expelled outside, hanging on the tree of the cross.

Every helping hand that extends out to support those homeless victims, in fact extends out to Christ the Lord Himself, who had no place to rest His head.

The earthquake that happened at the moment of crucifixion was accompanied by temporary darkness, declaring the anger of nature because of man's ungrateful heart toward their Creator and Savior. So is lawful for us, with every earthquake, to extend our hands to him, in a spirit of gratefulness towards our savior through His suffering creation, the victims with material and emotional losses. It is an opportunity to practically meet with the Crucified.

THE EARTHQUAKES AND THE EMPTY TOMB

St. Matthew the evangelist says:

"Now after the Sabbath, towards the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.

"And behold, there was a great earthquake.

For an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat upon it" (Matt. 28:1, 2).

As if the earthquake is a divine trumpet, inviting everyone to see the *empty tomb* and recognizing Christ's resurrection. *If the earthquake of the crucifixion*

invites us to meet the Crucified through the victims of earthquakes, then the earthquake of the resurrection invites us to discover the true meaning of the new life: It is a union with the Heavenly One, a fellowship with him and the experience of the resurrected life.

With every earthquake, we raise our voices with St. Athanasius, the apostolic: "And I am against the world." Let the whole world quake, for my heart is not in the world but it has passed to the heavenly places themselves!

With every earthquake, we should sing with St. Paul, the apostle: " And raised us up with Him, and made us sit with Him in the heavenly places." (Ephesians 2:6)

The world, with all its disasters, cannot lock us up in its tomb, but we are joyfully resurrected in our Christ.

EARTHQUAKES AND UNFASTENING OF THE CHAINS

When the apostles Paul and Silas were imprisoned, they praised God in the middle of the night (Acts 16). *Then an earthquake occurred* and the gates of the prison were opened and the chains were unfastened, the jailer met with the apostles to be blessed. So the jailer met with them together with his household, to experience the *joy of salvation*. Every earthquake is an invitation for us to reexamine ourselves:

Do we carry *the spirit of joy and praise in the midst of this world's sufferings*, even if our bodies are full of wounds and the world puts us into tribulation, undeserving?

Can we become witnesses of Joy to our Christ, who gave us salvation in the midst of these losses?

Can we, (with our Christ), transform the bitterness into sweetness?

If we live the joyful evangelic life in the midst of the sufferings of this world, God will attract the hearts of the unbelievers. Like an **earthquake God destroys their lack of faith, attracting them to the joyful evangelic life.**

EARTHQUAKES AND EXPECTING THE COMING OF THE LORD

When the Lord came, incarnated for the sake of salvation, the whole world resembled a sleeping human being who does not realize what is going on around him. On the other hand, St. Mary recognized Him, then the baby St. John the Baptist in his mother's womb, his mother (St. Elizabeth), St. Joseph, the shepherds and the wise men. Only a few understood His mystery, according to their ability; however, His second coming will be preceded by "earthquakes" to alert the ungrateful humanity. It is a divine warning, so that everyone gets ready to meet Him in His glory, as the Judge.

"For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All this is but the beginning of the birth pangs" (Matt. 24:7, 8)

"When He opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake." (Rev. 6:12, 13)

"And at that hour there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell; seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven" (Rev. 11:13).

"The seventh angel poured his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, 'It is done!'" And there were flashes of lightning,

voices, peals of thunder, and the great earthquake such as had never been since men were on the earth, so great was that earthquake" (Rev. 16:17).

Thus, God uses all means, even earthquakes, to prepare souls for repentance to expect His coming joyfully.

Finally, with every earthquake, we remember that the Architect of the whole world who knows its secrets, emphasizes: "Heaven and earth perish..." With every quake we await the end of the world and await His advent so that we can live with Him in his heavens where there are no quakes nor disasters.

The city hastened and send its engineers to the areas afflicted by the earthquake to inspect its buildings. If they put a red sign, everyone had to evacuate the building immediately. Now, the heavenly Architect is warning and no one is listening or believing.

From the inspiration of the Northridge quake

**Quake My Earth
And Build Your Heavens Inside Me**

- + I hear Your voice in every occasion,
and I recognize Your superb Providence,
O the Savior of my soul, the Almighty One.
- + With every quake shake the depth of my soul,
to destroy my self-pride,
crack my earthly thoughts,
and convert the hardness of my heart into intense love.
- + In the old days, a wind blew, then an earthquake, then a fire,
and then in wonderful calmness Elijah met with You.
Let Your Spirit blow inside me,
quake all violence and evil,
and enflame my longings towards You;
so I enter quietly into Your dwelling.
There I will see You and hear Your voice,
O my soul's Groom.
- + Your flight to Egypt was accompanied by a quake that shook the idols.
The idol temples were converted into holy churches.
In place of the animal offerings, You offer Yourself, a sacrifice of love that never ages.
Instead of the curse, You blessed Egypt Your people.
Destroy, O Lord, every evil inside me and declare Your kingdom within me.
- + With earthquakes, I see a lot of homeless people.
I remember the quake of Your crucifixion,
and see You hanging outside the city with no home!
You are in the midst of those who suffer, embracing them.
May I extend my hand to offer from what You have given me!
- + I remember the quake of the resurrection,
and I run to Your tomb to see it empty.
I realize that You are not there, but You have risen, O my Savior, overcoming death.
I wish I would not like the tomb of this earth and not be buried in it.
Instead I would run to You and live with You in the heavens.
Shake the depth of my soul, so that I may live with a heavenly spirit.
- + We are all awaiting that great earthquake.
You, the Creator of heaven and earth,
Emphasize: "Heaven and earth will perish . . ." !
Let them perish, and let us enjoy the new heaven and the new earth.
Let the whole world quake; and, let us enjoy its Creator.
Grant us the blessing of not fearing the shaking of the world
because You are in the midst of Your church and its foundation will not be shaken!

**DIVINE MESSAGES FOR EARTHQUAKES
AND ITS MEANINGS (EQUIVALENCE)**

- + The quake of Korah and his company = for discipline.
- + The quake of Egypt = God wants to dwell in our heart.
(He shakes the idols that we built in our hearts.)
- + The quake of the crucifixion = meeting with the Crucified Christ through His suffering children.
- + The quake of the resurrection = meeting with the Risen Christ by shaking the earthly lust and practicing the resurrected life.
- + The quake of the Pentecost = the power of God's Spirit who shakes our old man and grants us the new life.
- + The quake of the suffering church = God uses our joy and our praise in the midst of suffering as a witness to those with hardened hearts.
- + The quake of the second advent of the Lord = an invitation for humanity to await the righteous Judge with the spirit of repentance.