

## Liturgical Teaching

The word "liturgy" means "group work or popular work". It was later used to define the prayer of Holy Mass and the Eucharist.

The Eucharist, in our Church and in the holy Bible, is the gathering of the clergy and the congregation around the Lord's Holy Body. That is why it is called the sacrament of thanksgiving or the sacrament of offering.

Thus, Orthodox teaching places Holy Communion at its very center. We see the priest declare, while he raises the platter with the Body over his head, "*Given on our behalf for our salvation, the forgiveness of our sins, and eternal life to all who partake of it.*" If the teaching of any man lacks this liturgical element and if it does not give Holy Communion the place it deserves as the basis of being rooted in Christ and of the resurrection in the age to come, it is not Orthodox teaching. Why?

### **A. The Effects of the Liturgy:**

There is no doubt that the liturgy has many effects on the lives of the members of the Body of Christ, some of which we can summarize as follows:

#### **1. Union with the Lord Jesus Christ:**

This is the most important effect of the liturgy, for the Lord says: "*He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in me, and I in him*" (Jn. 6; 56). Thus, as the Holy flesh and blood of our Lord pass through the tissues of our nature, body, spirit, mind, and soul, we unite with the Lord.

#### **2. Union with our brothers in the flesh:**

St. Paul says: "*The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of one bread*" (1Cor.10:16,17). Thus, we only pray over one offering which we all share as members of one Body, one Christ.

### **3. Union with those in heaven:**

We consecrate the icons in church with the Holy Chrism because we believe that the icon is a holy presence, that of a saint! Thus, the deacon cries out, alerting us: "Lift up your eyes to the east to see the altar, with the body and blood of Emmanuel on it, with the angels and the archangels standing and crying, 'Holy, holy, holy'".

We also mention the names of the departed saints in our prayers, and we pray for all those who have slept before us. At the end of Mass, the priest dismisses the angel of the Sacrifice saying: "O angel of this Holy Sacrifice, remember us before the Lord, to forgive us our trespasses". Therefore, we feel that we are united with those who are in heaven, the saints and the angels.

### **4. Responsibility toward the world:**

We cry out: "Amen, amen, amen; O Lord, we preach Your death, and Your holy resurrection..." This is a feeling of responsibility toward the world and to every person who does not yet know about his portion in salvation, or about Christ, the Savior. The Church is not a closed entity, but is open to all. This is the responsibility for spreading the good news of salvation, whose head is Christ and whose spirit is God's Spirit. The Heavenly Father takes care of it with love, and the heavenly host surround it with care. "***Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith***"(Heb. 12: 1,2).

The Christian individual leaves Holy Mass full of love and gentleness, full of the desire to talk about the Lord and what he has done for us, which is to have mercy on us, to save us, and to grant us His heavenly Kingdom. The Eucharist is the path to the ministry.

### **5. Forgiveness and Salvation:**

The Liturgy is the means of salvation and forgiveness. We have evidence of this when the priest cries out in the final confession, as though warning those who neglect partaking of it: *"Given on our behalf for our salvation and the forgiveness of our sins ...."*. Did not the Bible say: *"without shedding of blood, there is no remission" (Heb. 9: 22)? "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins" (Eph. 1: 7); "the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 Jn. 1: 7); "Therefore, Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. " (Heb. 13: 12).*

That is why the priest says in the prayer before Communion: *"Grant me, my Savior, that I might consider Your suffering my treasure, Your crown of thorns my glory, Your pain my happiness, Your bitterness my sweetness, Your blood my life, Your love my pride and thanksgiving. O wounds of Christ, wound me with the spear of Divine love. O death of Christ, intoxicate me with the love of the One who died for me. O blood of Christ, purify me of all sin."* Attending Mass with reverence and going early in addition to partaking of the Holy Sacrifice vouchsafe forgiveness and salvation, for the priest prays saying: ***"When we offer the sacrifice on your altar, sin departs from our members through Your grace."***

## **6. Achieving Immortality:**

The Lord says: ***"He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."*** (Jn. 6: 54). For this is "the bread of life that comes down from heaven," the food of the spirit, and the way of inheritance. It is as though there were an organic contact with the Eternal, Living God, Who said: *"Because I live, you will live also."* (Jn. 14: 19). Therefore, the fathers say: "he who is far from the altar, is deprived of the bread of God." We believe that everyone who neglects Holy Communion, becomes an abode for death and for every unclean spirit. We know that *"blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."* (Mt. 5:8). *"...holiness, without which no one will see the Lord."* (Heb. 12: 14). Thus, Holy Communion is the way to see God, the Almighty, and to obtain the eternal heritage.

If such are the effects of Holy Communion, can we envisage orthodox teaching that does not speak about it urging people to partake of it without affectation or pretense and with the spontaneity of the experienced believer? One of the basic characteristics of Orthodox teaching is frequent speech about the liturgy, the Eucharist, the unity of the body, and abiding in Christ.

### **B. The Liturgy ... Kinds of Prayers**

One of the most important characteristics of the liturgy is that it raises those who take part in it from one level to another in different kinds of prayer, some of which are:

There is no Orthodox prayer that does not begin with thanksgiving!! In the Psalms, in praise, in the raising of incense, in mass, in weddings, and in funerals, thanksgiving is the most outstanding trait of liturgical prayer. The Church wants to teach us to live in it, thanking God Who controls everything, Who does all good, Who is merciful "in every state, for every state, and in whatever state." This is the rite of those in heaven and to which the church lifts us everyday before the offering of evening incense, at midnight, and before the raising of morning incense, as though it wants us to feel the presence with us of those who are in heaven. It makes us share with them in praising God, for there is nothing else but perpetual praise in heaven. That is why the priest prays:

"Give those who are on earth the praise of the seraphim..." The praises of the Church are generally praises of salvation. "They sing the praise of our salvation with a voice that is full of glory " The order of the praise and hours of midnight constitute a journey of salvation:

#### **The First Praise: (Ex. 15)**

This is the praise of "salvation", for the people were liberated from the slavery of Pharaoh and went into the wilderness..... the praise on crossing the Red Sea.

#### **The Second Praise: (Ps. 132)**

This is the praise of "thanksgiving." After the removal of the bonds of slavery, we have to thank God for His great mercy. "Oh give thanks to the Lord, for He is good. For his mercy endures forever."

### **The Third Praise: (The Three Young Men)**

After the crossing and thanksgiving comes "the struggle". The way of the kingdom is not strewn with roses only, but with thorns as well. Even if we have to face death in the furnace, there will be a fourth who is like a son of the gods!

### **The Congregation and the Doxologies:**

The person who has overcome the death of sin through Divine grace and faithfulness in the struggle, enters into fellowship with the saints; he remembers them, asking for their intercession and prayers. He unites with them and gives glory in their names, for they form the procession of victors. We should "*consider the outcome of their conduct.*" (Heb. 13: 7).

### **The Fourth Praise: (Ps. 148, 149, 150)**

It is the praise of "praises". The one who has fellowship with the saints is invited to participate in the praise of those in heaven: "*Praise God in all His saints...*" There, they sing the hymn of Moses, the slave of God, and of the Lamb. There is fulfilled the verse: "*Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms.*" (Jas. 5: 13). It is the place from which sadness, gloom, and sighing have fled; in the light of the saints, we see God "face to face" and live with Him, by Him, and in Him for ever and ever.

### **The Psalmody of the Day:**

It is general praise of the Lord Jesus Christ, the beloved author of our salvation. We meditate on His Name with David saying: Beloved is the Name of the Savior, which the psalmist boasts of saying: "If we are poor and lack the wealth of this world and have nothing to give in charity, we have the gem, the pearl of great price, the sweet Name that is full of glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. If we stay with

Him in our inner man, He makes us rich so that we can give others, not the wealth of this passing world that we ask for, but the salvation of our souls that we attain through calling on His Holy Name. When we sing hymns, let us sweetly say: "Our Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on our souls" (The psalmody of Wednesday).

### **The Day's Praise of Theotokos:**

This is a marvelous theological praise which tells of the great mystery of the Incarnation and the unity of the two natures within our Mother, the Virgin, the Second heaven, the Beautiful Dove, the Censor, the Dome, the Kingly Throne, and the laboratory where the union of the two natures takes place. We call upon her saying: *"All the heavenly hosts bless you for you are the Second Heaven who lives on earth. The Virgin Mary is the door of the east, the pure bride of the real bridegroom. The Father looked down from heaven, and did not find your equal; He sent His only Son, who came and was incarnated in you"* (Theotokos of Wednesday).

We refer the reader to the praises of salvation of the "the night of the Apocalypse" in which the Book of Revelation is read while we keep vigil next to the tomb of the Savior, waiting for His saving descent to hell and His liberation of those enslaved there, those who lived and died in the hope of His coming. We sing, with the church, an enormous number of praises for salvation taken from both Testaments, the New and Old. If we meditate on them, we will realize the joy the Church possesses because of salvation, and the honor it wishes to offer the Savior!

Our human frailty, our shortcomings and our negligence often cause us to sin.

That is why the Church has instituted for us the sacrament of repentance, in extension to the commandment of the Lord: **"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."** (Jn. 20: 23). Orthodox repentance has four components:

- . Repentance for sin, from all one's heart...
- . Determination to forsake it, striving as hard as possible, in all faithfulness.

. Faith in the blood of Jesus which forgives all sin.

. Confession to the priest, the steward of God's sacraments, who examines the sincerity of repentance through the Holy Spirit, and who grants forgiveness and absolution, also through the Holy Spirit.

The Church does not cease proclaiming throughout the liturgy: "Have mercy upon us O God, be compassionate to us; hear us and bless us; keep us and help us; remove your wrath from us; surround us with your salvation and forgive our sins." This is the prayer that the priest offers with reverence, lifting up his hands in the form of a cross, holding a cross with a candle which symbolizes the Lord Jesus Christ, the light of the world, crucified on the cross for our sakes.

Which one of us does not bow in reverence when the priest prays: "Your people and your household ask You, and through You, the Father saying: 'Have mercy upon us, O God the Father, who controls all; have mercy upon us our Savior; have mercy upon us O God, and be merciful to us':

We always say Psalm 50 after the prayer of thanksgiving: "*Have mercy upon me, O Lord, according to Thy tender mercies.....*" We do not cease beseeching God saying; "*Lord, have mercy*" many times throughout mass.

God does not withhold anything from us. He grants us the privilege of asking but also commands us saying: "*Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.*"

Thus, in the liturgy, we pray asking for: the sick, travelers, the dead, the place, the Church, the fathers, the meetings, the servants, all the people, the climate, the fruits, the water, the widow, the stranger, the guest, that unbelievers might come to the faith, the confessors, the gifts, those who in debt, etc.

We take the excellent opportunity after the sanctification of the sacraments, with the descent of the Holy Spirit, to raise our requests to God, confident that He listens and answers

These are only simple examples to demonstrate the kinds of prayers we offer up during the liturgy. The orthodox teacher thus lives, with his children, these different prayers that are capable of cleansing their hearts and of giving them an understanding of spiritual life.

### **C. The Liturgy ... and the Word**

There is no doubt that the liturgy, and in particular the Coptic Orthodox liturgy, contains many chapters of the Bible in the readings that are selected with profound wisdom.

The readings on Sundays tell about the Savior and the plan of salvation from His birth to His passion, His resurrection, His ascension, the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the establishment of the Church.

The readings of the weekdays tell of the saint of that day, whether he is a patriarch, a saintly monk, a saintly virgin, or a martyr. When one contemplates the readings of a single day, one discovers how coordinated they are and how they form the framework for one topic.

During every mass, we read three psalms and three gospel passages, during vespers, matins, and during mass as well as the a passage from the Pauline epistles, from the Catholic epistles, and from the Acts of the Apostles. We also read the prophecies and many other passages from the Old Testament during the 'Paskha' and the praise. The Church wants to take us from the 'spoken word' on the pulpit to the 'living Word' on the altar.

There are many saints the secret of whose saintliness was one verse they heard from the pulpit, like St. Anthony. This happened at a time when sermons were rare and were replaced by reverence, submission and obedience to the Spirit of God!

The orthodox teacher does not ignore the relation between the liturgy and the word or the ritual cycle of the year and the observance of days. The liturgy teaches us using numerous methods:

- ? Listening to the word of God spoken from the pulpit
- ? Union with the Word of God through communion
- ? Taking the saints in the Synaxarium as examples
- ? Through the Fathers' exegeses of the Scriptures in the forms of sermons and through the Hagiology

St. Augustine said: "I receive the Bible from the Church, as interpreted by the fathers, and lived by the saints."

The Church frequently offers us sermons from the Fathers during the 'Paskha' and on the different occasions when we remember the saints.

#### **D. The Liturgy ... and the Trinity**

In the liturgy, we meet with our God, Who is Consubstantial and three in one person, in a marvelous and secret manner.

. In the Prayer of Reconciliation, we meet with " the Heavenly Father... Who is deserving and just....". We see our Heavenly Father Who created heaven and earth, the sea and all that is within them. We see the angels and archangels around Him, singing hymns of praise and saying: "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord of hosts..."

During the "Holy, Holy, Holy", we meet with the story of redemption. In it, we say about the Person of the Son: "and in the last days, You appeared to us who sat in darkness and the shadow of death in Your Only Begotten Son, our Lord, God, and Saviour Jesus Christ, Who, from the Holy Spirit and from the Virgin Mary, was incarnated and became man. He taught us the way of salvation and bestowed on us the grace of birth from above through water and the Spirit. He loved His own... and gave Himself for us to the death that prevailed over us.... He arose from the dead on the third day, ascended... and sat...."

. This is followed by the prayer of Sanctification in which the priest tells how the Lord "took bread in His hands.... and gave thanks, blessed, and sanctified.... and said 'Take eat; this is My body...' and the cup also ..... etc. He tells us that every time we eat of his Body and drink of His Blood, we witness to His death and confess His resurrection. We respond with our determination to do so. The deacon then calls out: "Bow down to the Lord in fear and trembling..." while the priest kneels in reverence praying: "We beseech You, O Lord our God, we Your undeserving sinful slaves, we kneel to You because it is Your good pleasure, may Your Holy Spirit descend upon us and upon this offering on the altar; may He purify it and transubstantiate it, and make it holy for your saints." The priest makes

the sign of the cross on the bread three times saying: "May He make this bread His Holy Body" and "this cup also, His Precious Blood of the new covenant..."

Next, since the priest finds Emmanuel in our midst in the glory of His Father and the Holy Spirit, he begins the requests for the Church, the fathers, the meetings, the servants, the nuns, all the congregation, the dead, the plants, the winds, and the water, and the congregation of departed saints.

He then says the prayer of "division", and distributes the sacrament to the congregation. Thus, all are united with the Lord Jesus Christ and with those in heaven, as well as with each other.

This is a brief overview of the holy liturgy which should form the axis of orthodox teaching because of the prayers, blessing, and theology it contains and because of the effects it has.

Truly, orthodox teaching is by necessity liturgical teaching!