

The Liturgy of the Orthodox Church

Spiritual and Doctrinal Dimensions

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I. An Introduction to Another World

i. The Notion of Tradition

It would hardly be an overstatement for me to say that the definitive mark of Orthodox liturgy is its traditional character. In the Orthodox Church, devotional forms and gestures have been meticulously and continuously preserved, without any major change, for centuries. I have, therefore, every reason to believe that, to a degree, my family shares today what Byzantines experienced in churches of Constantinople during the tenth century. The Byzantines were a liturgical people. Yet the Orthodox liturgy is a timeless re-enactment, not so much of past events, but rather of a presence, that of the heavenly kingdom, in the present time.

Western Christians attending the Divine liturgy (in particular) are commonly impressed by the strong aroma of antiquity and continuity generated by the ceremonial expression. Orthodoxy typically presents – and is indeed frequently so presented by the Orthodox – as a seamless robe, as a totality, in which every part adheres in the whole in primordial and perfect harmony. In actual fact, the attachment to *tradition* does not imply immobilism and stagnation. In reality there has always been growth and development in Orthodox liturgy. This change is slow, almost imperceptible, because it is a natural process, not a programmed reform from above or even from below. This is why we like to call it a living tradition. To quote the brilliant Roman Catholic liturgist, R. Taft: »Of course it results in any number of loose ends, hard to reconcile practices, customs that overlap or even contradict one another – but they are loose ends of the living, rather than the well-ordered immobility of the dead.«¹

The question of course is how Orthodox liturgy will be retrieved and presented not as emotional but as essential, not as attractive but as logical and theological. It must be admitted that Orthodoxy is often successful on the wrong grounds: because it is exotic,

¹ Beyond East and West: Problems in Liturgical Understanding, Washington D. C. 1984, p. 116. The truth of the matter is that the Orthodox liturgy presents a far greater contrast with, and divergence from, the liturgy of the early Church as it is known to twentieth century scholarship (not excluding Orthodox scholarship itself!) than the new liturgical reforms of the Roman, Anglican, and some other Western confessions. Part of the problem lies in the confounding by the Orthodox of (lower case »t«) »tradition« with (capital »T«) »Tradition«. See V. Lossky, In the Image and Likeness of God, 1975, pp. 141–68. Yet the vivid sense in the Orthodox Church today is that when Orthodox celebrate the Divine Liturgy, they *know* that their »gathering« is one and the same as that of the first century; they are well aware of the »roots« of their tradition, with which they are one.

or escapist, or sufficiently different. People are attracted – or perhaps distracted – by the orientalism (music, icons, mysticism).

Orthodox themselves are often enticed by the luggage that they carry around, by the symbolical explanation of every last button on an episcopal garment. Yet the liturgy and its music are symbolical of only one thing, »the one thing that alone is necessary« (Luke 10:42). Their ultimate meaning is the entering of the kingdom of heaven. And heaven is not what Bultmann could not understand. It is where Christ is. To quote John Chrysostom whose fourth-century liturgy we celebrate to this day each Sunday: »What do I care about heaven, when I myself have become heaven?«

So the liturgy is neither primarily ceremonial nor mystical. It is the celebration of one mystery, namely the certainty that »Christ is in our midst«. That is the central focus. And the music is the translation of this very conviction, mirroring the evolution of doctrinal ideas.² Verse and voice are intimately linked with theological vision. Unfortunately today there is less expression of individual emotion and imagination than in the first millennium. Nevertheless, the element of the »other-worldliness« is definitely preserved.

Now Tradition is *more than* the mere remembrance of certain acts of Christ and of some of his words. It is understood in terms of living with Christ and in Christ »through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit«. By analogy, the liturgy is *more than* a mere remembrance of acts and words of the Lord. It is *the* act of the Word; it is the act of self-sacrifice and love. Nicholas Cabasilas, the fourteenth-century liturgical commentator, notes: »The rite is not a mere figure or symbol, but a true sacrifice.«³

Here again, it is the Holy Spirit that is said to »celebrate the liturgy with us all the days of our life.« So the liturgy is seen as the way of entering communion with Christ, the means of appropriating salvation. And that is also the way in which tradition is understood.

It is precisely during the liturgy that Christ is transmitted, handed down to us (»trado«, »paradido«). In fact, there is a mutual handing over: »Thine own of thine own ...« Orthodox spirituality would affirm Irenaeus' words that »our whole life should conform the Eucharist, and the Eucharist should confirm our whole life.«⁴ There is, in the context of liturgy, a virtual identity between Christ and tradition, between Christ as past, present, and future (Rev. 4:8), between the one who has already come and who is yet to come.

The Body of Christ is comprised of a group of sinners which, through the Holy Spirit, is transformed into a community of believers who »in fellowship break the bread« (Acts 2:42). »The holy things are received by the holy,« and the group of sinners is rendered the communion of saints. No wonder there is such a strong emphasis on the invocation (the *epiclesis*) of the Holy Spirit in the Orthodox liturgy. The Spirit offers the assurance that »we have seen the true light, we have received the Holy Spirit, we have found the true faith.«

² See E. Wellesz, *A history of Byzantine Music and Hymnography*, London ²1961 and D. Conomos, *Byzantine Hymnography and Byzantine Chant*, Brookline 1984.

³ Commentary on the Divine Liturgy: *SPCK/St. Vladimir's Seminary Press*, p. 81.

⁴ Against Heresies IV, S. 18: PG 6, 1028 A.

ii. Tradition, Liturgy, and Doctrine

The reference to the Holy Spirit in connection with faith raises the further dimension of the importance and influence of *doctrinal developments* on the liturgy. Imperial patronage in the early fourth century had immediate and profound consequences for the Church generally, and for its worship especially. The emperor's influence was also felt in the domain of doctrine. The fourth century was one of fierce doctrinal conflict and unprecedented theological creativity for the Church. »Homoousian« and »hypostasiac« terminology, christological and trinitarian theology: These inevitably left their mark on Eastern liturgy. There is an added prominence, prestige, and privilege in liturgical matters that gradually is concentrated on the imperial city of New Rome, Constantinople, whose *typikon* becomes »typ-ical« for the whole of the Eastern Church.

No wonder then that liturgy is respected like doctrine, that the »lex orandi« is so closely connected to the »lex credendi«. It is not difficult to appreciate why Byzantines of old and Orthodox today feel that: »Truly, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law« (Matt. 5:18) of liturgy. Like John of Damascus, the eighth-century champion of icons wrote about tradition: »we do not change the everlasting boundaries which our fathers have set, but we keep the tradition, just as we received it,«⁵ so Nicholas Cabasilas can say of the liturgy: »Beyond this it is not possible to go, nor can anything be added to it.«⁶

There are certain doctrines, never formally defined, which are nonetheless maintained with as much inner conviction by the Orthodox Church as any explicit dogmatic formulation. St. Basil of Caesarea wrote as early as in the fourth century: »Some things we have from written teaching, while others we have received from the apostolic tradition handed down to us in a mystery; and both these things have the same force for piety.«⁷

Certainly, for the Orthodox, the liturgy belongs to one of those powerful »traditions handed down to us in a mystery.« This is precisely why no one will so much as blink an eye during the divine liturgy when the deacon – apparently out of nowhere, but certainly out of apostolic tradition and conviction – still cries out aloud, immediately preceding the recital of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (»symbol of faith«): »The doors! The doors! Wisdom! Let us be attentive!«

This recalls the early days when the church's entrance was jealously guarded – out of fear for persecution in the first christian period; out of fear for profanation in later centuries. Only the initiated members – those baptized and able to recite the common principles of belief – could remain in the church. No one moves today; certainly no one leaves. Chrysostom complained that in his day people seized this opportunity to leave *with* the catechumens. But the powerful reminder of the link between credal formulation and liturgical adoration remains.

⁵ On the Holy Images II, 12: PG 94, 1297 B.

⁶ On the Life in Christ, Book IV, 1: PG 150, 584. See English translation in SVS, New York 1974, p. 114.

⁷ On the Holy Spirit, ch. 27, in: Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. VIII, 1952, p. 41. Rendering mine.

iii. *Some Contrasts / Comparisons – »my world and your world«*

Attending an Orthodox liturgy, for many non-Orthodox is entering a different world, a world governed by a tradition that goes back many centuries: architecture, iconography, the altar space. Ritual and richness abound here. The faithful do not see the full altar; the »prothesis« where the gifts are prepared – without any obvious participation by the laity – is entirely out of sight.

Where Western liturgy is characterized by simplicity, the keynote of the Eastern eucharist is solemnity. The same may be said of liturgical space, movement, and dress. Solemnity, not simplicity. The distinction in the West between clergy and laity is less apparent, while the service is clerly visible and audible. All those present at a Catholic or Protestant service are normally expected to receive communion.

By contrast, in the Orthodox Liturgy, there is an air of reverence, as well as an atmosphere of informality. The congregation is in fact fairly silent – they will worship with their eyes and ears. They will also worship with their body – moving about, lighting candles, standing, kneeling, making the sign of the cross at any time and many times, bowing or fully prostrating. They worship even with their sense of smell – incense, bread, oil, candle. Surprisingly, not all – indeed few – will receive communion. Everyone, however, lines up for the »anti-doron«, the blessed bread, at the conclusion of the service.

There are some other details which may puzzle a Western christian: while the basic liturgical structure may be similar, many other differences will not be familiar. There is less emphasis on the »Ministry of the Word,« there are lengthy litanies, two central processions – the »little« and »great« entrances (the latter of which attracts the fervent reverence and devotion of the people to the *unconsecrated* gifts) –, the readings are sung, the sermon is not crucial, the kiss of peace is not exchanged except among the clergy, significant prayers are read »silently« (or »mystically« – in fact the »anaphora« may be as inaudible as the priest saying it is invisible –, communion is given with a spoon (to adults and babies alike).

There is almost a sense in which two services are going on at the same time – one in the sanctuary, and the other more visibly. The two coincide at some points, but in many ways the people in the congregation seem to be only passive attendants. This idea of two liturgies, or two levels of liturgy, is significant not so much in itself, but as a unique symbol of another two-fold reality. It is, as will be seen in the next section, a reminder that in the liturgy heaven and earth somehow meet, and in some very real way celebrate.

Furthermore, there is a strong symbolical element. Actions and words have a symbolical dimension. Gestures are made in the present, but they recall events in the past (the birth of Christ [prothesis = Bethlehem: Nazareth], the entry to Jerusalem [the Great Entrance], the burial of Christ [the placing of the Gifts on the altar]).

II. »Blessed is the Kingdom«

i. The Liturgy as Heaven

When the liturgy as text appears in the East towards the end of the fourth century, the Eucharist is seen to be offered by a Church still mindful as much of Christ's second coming as of his passion and resurrection. The sense of eager expectation was always heightened for the early Christians when they gathered for the eucharistic meal. The eucharist was an image of the heavenly banquet, of the divine kingdom. So the early Christians looked two ways: forward and backward, upward and downward; there was a keen sense of »anamnesis« (remembering of the past) and »anaphora« (referring to the future). Here then, already adumbrated, is the double emphasis on heaven and home, or on home as heaven. The future kingdom was a present reality, not a distant hope but an experienced joy: »Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am also« (Matt. 18:20). »And lo, I am with you always, to the end of the age.« (Matt. 28:20).

The Eucharist was a foretaste of that kingdom. On the bishop's chair, according to Ignatius of Antioch, Christ himself was seated.

The paradox of »homeliness« and »mysteriousness« is already apparent in the second-century theological descriptions, and the West seems early on to prefer images of sacrifice to models of thanksgiving. Thus while Irenaeus of Lyons (who came from Asia Minor to the West) emphasized the Eucharist as an offering of thanks, as a sharing of the first-fruits of creation, the view that came to predominate was that of Cyprian, that the sacrifice offered in the rite was the passion of Christ. We must of course be wary of simplistic distinctions: Cyril of Jerusalem (mid fourth century) underlines, in the East also, the propitiatory character.⁸ It is Cyril who introduces a pious element to liturgy (devotions preceding or during communion; decline in frequency of communion), coupled with a language of fear with regard to the sacrament. This dimension appears again in the teaching of John Chrysostom (therefore in Antioch and subsequently, in Constantinople). In the East, furthermore, practical movements gradually assume symbolical value. The third-century Syrian document called *Didascalia Apostolorum*⁹ describes the deacons' ministerial role as simply practical. In the same century, however, the great Alexandrian thinker Origen develops a theology of christian mystery and symbol. This teaching is developed into a tradition of liturgical interpretation and imitation by Dionysius the Areopagite in the fifth century, Maximus the Confessor in the seventh, Germanos of Constantinople in the eighth, Theodore the Studite in the ninth, Nicholas and Theodore of Andida in the eleventh, Nicholas Cabasilas in the fourteenth, and Symeon of Thessalonika in the fifteenth century. Simple, practical gestures assume solemn, profound significance: »It is the deacons who bring out this oblation ... which they arrange and place on the awe-inspiring altar, a vision ... awe-inspiring even to the onlookers. By means of the symbols we must see Christ, who is now being led out and going forth to his passion, and who, in another moment, is laid out for us on the altar ... And when the offering that is about to be presented is brought out in the sacred vessels, the patens and chalices, you

⁸ Mystagogical Catechesis 5f., On Faith and the Symbol: PG 33, 505–24.

⁹ ed. Connolly & Bishop, Cambridge 1909, p. 120.

must think that Christ the Lord is coming out, led to his passion ... by the invisible host of ministers ... who were also present when the passion of salvation was being accomplished ...

(The deacons) stand around and wave their fans ... because the Body laying there is truly Lord by its union with the divine nature. It is with great fear that it must be laid out, viewed and guarded. These things take place in complete silence because, although the Liturgy has not yet begun, still it is fitting to watch the bringing out and depositing of such a great and wonderful object in recollection and fear and a silent and quiet prayer, without saying anything.¹⁰

ii. *The Liturgy as Home*

When one enters the liturgy in the Orthodox Church, one is entering the familiar surroundings of one's *home*. There is, then, also a sense of homeliness and informality. Contemporary Orthodox, just like their Byzantine forefathers and foremothers used to, behave inside the church much as they behave outside. There exists, for them, no sharp division between sacred and secular. There is much movement, people drifting in and out, lighting candles, venerating icons, even talking. In the fourth century, John Chrysostom complained: »Here in church, there is great disturbance and confusion, and it is as bad as a tavern. There is so much laughing and chattering.«¹¹

To the outsider, it would perhaps appear »as bad as a tavern«. However, physicality and materiality are an important part of Orthodox worship. The bread is always real bread, the wine is bright and red (and it signifies not just death and sacrifice, but life and joy.) Baptism is full immersion, and confession involves physical contact in the laying on of the hand. There is bread and oil and boiled wheat. The patristic principle that »what is not assumed is not healed«¹² is very real here. And the liturgy becomes the ground on which all things meet, and outside of which all things are unrecognizable, isolated.

There is a powerful and pervading sense of home-ness: Orthodox bring to church the food and drink prepared at home. In fact, Orthodox are always leaving the church »dripping, dropping or chewing« something. They are »participants at a festive meal,« sharers of a banquet. But they are not consumers: they are worshipers. Prior to and in preparation for communion, the following prayer is recited: »The lamb of God is broken and distributed; broken yet not divided; forever eaten yet never consumed; sanctifying those who partake.«

There is an important message here for a consumer society like ours, where people are always eating, or drinking while they walk. The liturgical ethic reverses the social ethos: we are not called to be aggressive, to consume and struggle in a world where »only the fittest survive.« We are to share, to be vulnerable, to repeat the words of Christ at the Last Supper, not merely as the institution of a sacrament, but as the inspiration of a new way of life: »Take, eat of this my body; drink of this, all of you, this is my blood.«

¹⁰ Cf. *Taft*, *The Great Entrance*, p. 35.

¹¹ On the First Epistle to the Corinthians XXXVI: *PG* 61, 313.

¹² *Gregory the Theologian*, Ep. 1 to Cleidonius: *PG* 37, 181 C.

In the liturgy you breathe the clean, unpolluted air of the Resurrection. When the witness of the Revelation writes: »I, John, was in the Spirit on the Lord's day ... and I saw a new heaven and a new earth,« he is telling us: »I took part in the liturgy.« St. John is, here, the forerunner of Eastern/Byzantine liturgical commentators. He is saying: Everything makes sense and assumes full meaning in the liturgy. You feel at home and speak your mother tongue – the language of reconciliation and love. You know God exists, because you are embraced warmly and accepted unconditionally. You care for others because you discover them and discern their needs. You are sensitive to the »groans and pains« of creation (Rom. 8:22) because everything is valued and inspired. The only response is gratitude and grace. And the only note of dissonance is that of disconnection, or of ingratitude. You learn to share and to thank: for the sun and for the stars, for the pain and the tears, for the trees and the flowers, for the trials and the failures, for life and for death, for life's realities. This is why the liturgy actually begins from the moment when we leave our homes, when we are on our way to constitute the church. There is no »moment« when it commences, or »time« when it concludes. This is perhaps why Orthodox feel free to arrive late, or to come and go.

iii. Heaven on Earth

This is the *depth* of the liturgy, »the final mystery beyond which it is not possible to go.«¹³ This is the meaning of the liturgy as »heaven on earth« – as the presence of the angels, the archangels, the kingdom of heaven, the earth, the people, the whole of creation, and the Creator God as well. It is far more than the »here and now.« It is an all-embracing drama, a meeting-place of the earthly and the heavenly. This is made clear in our liturgy with the two »entrances«, when we pray: »Make with our entry an entry of your holy angels, celebrating the liturgy with us.«

»In this mystery,« we continue, »we are icons of the cherubim.« Again John Chrysostom affirms: »Those in heaven and those on earth form a single festival, a shared thanksgiving, one choir.«¹⁴

Now to the outsider, perhaps one of the most striking qualities of our liturgy is the opulent ritualism, at least in contrast to the apparent verbalism of other liturgies. Everything is always sung. Orthodox Christians do not come to church simply to pray. Nor do they go to church to be alone. Something is »happening« there, the kingdom of heaven is present there. There is an epiphany and a theophany, and you are called to »join in«, invited to participate. Sometimes people wonder whether Orthodox are aware of this liturgical depth in their tradition. Yet how many of those who join in a dance realize the historical origins of that dance, or even are aware of its sociological significance. And such ignorance hardly detracts from the power or profundity of the experience. Just before each liturgy, Sunday by Sunday, we pray: »God, our God, who sent your heavenly bread, the food of the whole world, to bless us, bless also the offering.«

For centuries Christians have been scandalized that we come together in liturgy to eat, and not just to see and hear and feel the Word of God.¹⁵

¹³ Nicholas Cabasilas, *The Life in Christ*, Book IV, 1: PG 150, 584.

¹⁴ Homily I, i on Order in the Liturgy: PG 56, 97.

The question, however, that needs to be raised in Orthodox circles is how this »otherworldliness« will spill over and into this world. As a window to heaven, the liturgy is not responsible for disconnecting the two worlds but for holding them together in a single reality and order. But what is the Orthodox Church doing to make the spilt blood and broken body of Christ relevant and life-giving to a young child starving for bread in Africa, to a young man dying of AIDS in the United States, or to a young mother suffering in former Yugoslavia? There is no condition, no tragedy, no experience, no pain left outside of the chalice. So what are we doing to share the Body of Christ, which is »broken, but never divided ... for the life of the world?«

III. »Let us Give Thanks to the Lord«

i. The Liturgy as Communion

The communal aspect of worship is central to the understanding of the Orthodox liturgical mind. There is a sense of belonging and devotion, within which one preserves one's personal rhythm. Upon entering the church one does not pray alone, but lights a candle before an icon – an image of the heavenly »cloud of witnesses« – and places it alongside the other candles that have been lit.

So the liturgy is never merely the sum of the gathered individuals. It is not a loose collection of people with some restricted parish plan, diocesan program, church policy, or religious vision. It is the freedom and space of heaven, where each journeys freely, sails at will, thinks and chooses personally. The liturgy does not check but confirms our hopes and dreams. Of course this does not happen at the expense or exclusion of others. The liturgy broadens our horizons and interests. There is ample room – every new presence is not stifling; every new person is not discomforting. In fact it seems as if everyone is present, crowding around the altar: »Hosts of archangels, tens of thousands of angels, the many-eyed cherubim and the six-winged seraphim ... the prophets, apostles, preachers, martyrs, confessors, ascetics,« the living and the dead, the young and old, male and female, conservatives and liberals, sane and insane, healthy and unhealthy, rich and poor, educated and illiterate, religious and agnostic. They're *all* there! We are never alone in liturgy, but always in the company of angels, in the communion of saints, and in the comfort of all creation.

What does not feed them *all* – is not for the joy of *all* – is not food and joy for us either. In liturgy we learn to love. We are not mechanical pieces of a political machine, individuals in an anonymous society. We have a personal ministry in the mystery of life, valued for what we are. In the encounter with the other – *every* other, created others and the Uncreated Other – Christ is formed in us. »God makes of us a home« (John 14:23).

¹⁵ Cf. *Origen*, in: *PG* 13, 1734. Also see *John Chrysostom*, Hom. in. Gen. VI, 2: *PG* 53, 55–7 and especially *Gregory Nazianzus*, On Easter, Oration XLV, 16: *PG* 36, 644–5. The notion of »hearing« the Word underscores the significance of silence in liturgy. Orthodox Christians pray that they »may be made worthy to hear the Holy Gospel«.

How can such a liturgy grow old or stagnate? Upon leaving the liturgy, we are a grain of mustard seed, a kind of leaven, witnesses to the kingdom in the world.

ii. The Liturgy as Mission

We may »depart in peace,« or rather »go out (= προέλθωμεν) in peace.« We move out once again to the same routine, daily schedule, to our respective work. Yet we know otherwise; we see differently; we work at another pace, as a dynamic presence in the world.

Because: »what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life, this we declare ... the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us ... so that you also may have fellowship with us ... so that our joy may be complete.« (1 John 1:1–4)

The goodness of God is celebrated and results in the godliness of creation. At the Small Entrance, we pray »O Master and Lord ... grant us to glorify your goodness.« And in this experience of reality, in this beginning and fulfillment of everything, there is nothing to add, nothing else to say or explain. The deacon, in mind-blowing words that are often missed, sings: »Let us stand in goodness.« This is not merely a call to be upstanding or awake. It is reminder of the radical reversal of secular values effected in the liturgy. The deacon is basically saying: »Don't just do something; *stand* there!« Again in the Orthodox liturgy, we sing: »Standing in the temple of your glory, we think we are in heaven.« This recalls the apostolic sentiment: »Lord, it is good to be here.« (Matt. 17:4).

And the music serves to underline the communal dimension of worship that unites heaven and earth, though it is sometimes undermined in Orthodox churches where the music is very intricate. In the early christian times, the term choir (χορός), communion (κοινωνία), and church (ἐκκλησία) are used almost synonymously.

The crucial question then is not what happens to the elements or what happens to me, but what happens to the Church. The liturgy is not for inner consumption. This, however, means that Orthodox Christians need to find a vivid language and to recover the liturgy from its reputation of traditionalism and stagnation in order to communicate its treasures. For example, what is the Orthodox Church doing to relate its liturgy to the younger generation and to other people in the English language? And so far as concerns the music, a compelling question is whether today we can use the same Byzantine criteria for English-speaking congregations.

iii. Theory and Practice

There are some more specific critical issues with regard to the contemporary reality. The element of sharing or communion is of course *the theology, or the theory. But what actually happens in practice?* There are certain factors that tended and still tend to obscure the corporate nature of the Liturgy. Curiously, it is often these very features – which diverge from those of the early Church – which are most likely to strike, even attract, the late twentieth-century Western visitor to a typical Orthodox liturgy:

i. First, the kiss of peace – mentioned by John Chrysostom¹⁶ and implied in the Liturgy attributed to him – gradually disappeared towards the end of the first millennium.

ii. Second, while in the early period the singing was shared between cantors and congregation, today it is almost entirely restricted to the cantors or choir. This probably occurred around about the same time, when the hymnography and music became more elaborate, especially in monastic circles.

iii. Third, the priest's prayers are no longer said aloud. In the mid-sixth century, Justinian found it necessary to legislate against the growing practice of reciting certain prayers in a low voice.¹⁷ However, this proved ineffective, and liturgical texts of the eighth century prescribe that the *anaphora* prayers be said *μυστικῶς*.¹⁸ By the time of Nicholas Cabasilas, it is taken for granted that the priest's prayers are inaudible.¹⁹ Yet in the seventh century, even children – who normally stood at the front of the congregation – were able to learn these prayers by heart precisely because they could hear them.²⁰

iv. Not only could people not hear all the Liturgy, but they likewise could not see all the Liturgy. The use of curtains in the sanctuary is widely attested to already in the fourth century (cf. Chrysostom at Antioch, Athanasius at Alexandria, Gregory Nazianzus at Asia Minor). The »iconscreen« was originally waist-high with pillars above the »templon«. But the space between the pillars was left open until at least the thirteenth century. Clearly the triumph of the iconophiles in the ninth century gradually led to the development of a solid screen, but this was as a much later phenomenon. Even so, of course, the icons are not seen as a barrier. The twentieth century Russian thinker/priest Pavel Florensky said that icons »do not conceal anything from the faithful.« Instead, »they reveal the entrance to the other world,« and »proclaim the existence of the kingdom of heaven.«²¹

v. Finally, how far did the laity actively participate by receiving communion? In the pre-Constantinian period, it was taken for granted that the whole congregation would receive communion every Sunday. Some even communicated daily (as Tertullian, Hippolytus, and even later, Basil, bear witness). This practice primarily survived in monastic circles.²² There have of course been individuals (some of them saints) who, through the centuries, have swum against the powerful swell and tried to encourage frequent communion. Yet Orthodoxy has developed a piety centered on infrequent holy communion, nourished by a rite with such profound spiritual and symbolical interpretation that actually tends to militate against frequent participation in the Eucharist.

In spite, however, of these problems – which Orthodox should at least recognize if not some day reconsider – the Orthodox liturgy has something important to offer the West:

¹⁶ Ep. to the Corinthians II, 18: PG 61, 527.

¹⁷ Novella 137,6 in: 565 CE.

¹⁸ cf. the Barberini codex.

¹⁹ cf. Commentary on the Divine Liturgy, SVS edition, pp. 50, 63.

²⁰ cf. *John Moschus*, *Spiritual Meadow* 196: PG 87, 3081 AB.

²¹ cf. *Eastern Churches Review* 8 (1976) 16–7.

²² Cf. *Evergetinos* IV, 34; Symeon the New Theologian, Catechetical Discourse IV and the fourteenth-century Hesychast: Kallistos and Ignatios Xanthopoulos, *Ascetical Works* 91: PG 147, 793–800. Cf. also K. Ware, »The Meaning of the Divine Liturgy of the Byzantine Worshipper«, in *Church and People Byzantinum*, ed. R. Morris, Birmingham 1987, pp. 7–28, to which I am indebted for this section.

»There is a participation in worship which is contemplative rather than active, of the kind appropriate in the Anglican tradition at a cathedral sung Evensong. There is a contemplative quality about the Liturgy and other Orthodox services from which Western Christians may have something to learn. Contemporary Western worship is sometimes so active that it can seem busy and be distracting. Liturgical prayer is punctuated by directions to sit, stand or kneel. The flow of the service is interrupted by announcements of page, hymn and eucharistic prayer numbers. The goal intended is full congregational participation. But the result can sometimes be restless and unprayerful. Revised services provide for silence to be kept at certain moments, but this is more often indicated than prayerfully used. It may be that in a busy, activist world Christians need worship which is not busy and activist. Perhaps something of the contemplative quality of Orthodox worship could impart to Western worship a dimension it has either never had, or is in danger of losing.«²³

IV. »New Heaven and New Earth«

i. The Liturgy as Cosmic

Now the emphasis, mentioned earlier, on »goodness« gives rise to final point about the liturgy, and is reminiscent of another passage, this time from Scripture: »And God saw everything that was made, and indeed it was very good« (Gen. 1:31).

It is so easy to misinterpret the liturgy as being an escape from this world, as a divine ecstasy. However, if I have mentioned tradition and preservation in the Orthodox Church, I need now to speak of the liturgy as transforming the whole world to the last speck of dust, the liturgy as realizing what »conservatives« and »preservatives« claim to do. We all *know* that the world should not be regarded as mere or useful necessity; we *say* that we should live in modest harmony with nature and not in audacious supremacy over it. Yet we are inexorably trapped – even in many attempts to offer solutions – within the stifling circle of our individual desire for self-preservation. The liturgy gives us a fresh and refreshing sense of *enlarged* life. Whenever we narrow religious life to our own concerns, we overlook the calling of the Church in the liturgy to implore – always and everywhere – for the renewal of the whole polluted cosmos.

So the whole world is the space of the liturgy. This is why we pray for people in all circumstances and of all needs: »for the sick, the suffering, the needy, those traveling, for those in captivity,« and »for the whole world, for the parish, every parish, for every city and land, and for the faith who dwell in them.«

Their is a mosaic in Ravenna portraying saints, martyrs, hierarchs, and faithful laity, each holding a crown which they will place at the feet of Christ. The Liturgy presents the same image at the *prothesis*: the priest places the »Lamb« at the center of the »diskos« (= the disk of the world), and all around are the fragments of bread symbolizing the Mother of God, the angels, prophets and saints, all the dead and the living. Together, heaven and

²³ Cf. H. Wybrew, *The Orthodox Liturgy*, pp. 179–80. This book is a lucid analysis of the development of the Orthodox Liturgy.

earth offer one hymn, one prayer, one feast, on doxology. This adds profound depth to the words of the eucharistic writer *par excellence* of the Apostolic Fathers, Ignatius of Antioch (d.c. 112):

»Unite in one prayer, one supplication, one mind, one hope ... For this is Jesus Christ and there is nothing better than he. Let all therefore hasten as to one shrine, that is God, as to one sanctuary, that is Jesus Christ.«²⁴

There is a keen sense that not only is everyone present at the Liturgy, but the entire creation is focused on the sacredness of God: »We give thanks to you also for this ministry which you deign to receive at our hands, though hosts of archangels and tens of thousands of angels wait on you ... singing, exclaiming, crying aloud and saying: Holy, Holy, Holy.« Everything that lives cries: »holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth. Heaven and earth are full of divine glory.«

Indeed everything that lives aspires to share in divine holiness and is an overture to paradise. It is not that the created world escapes to heaven; it is that the whole world is a part of heaven. The Septuagint translation of Psalm 8:4–6 is »you have made us a little less than the angels.« I prefer the Hebrew which is rendered »you have created us a little lower than divine beings« (cf. also Ps. 84: »you are gods, all of you.«) So there is no feeling of being stifled. In the Liturgy one is not an individual in an anonymous multitude, but an organic part of a mystery.²⁵ There one learns to share: to deny oneself, to diminish in humility, to accept, to enjoy, to endure, to thank (= eucharist), to glorify (= doxology). In short, one learns to love, which means to participate in the inner life of God since the briefest, and the only biblical definition of God is that »God is love« (1 John 4:8 and 16).

Through the Liturgy – through this self-offering and universal offering – the world is sanctified, and transformed. The Liturgy (of St. Basil) prays: »Lord, in return for things corruptible, grant us things incorruptible.«

ii. *The Iconic Dimension*

The vision and boundaries of the world are far broader than the limited space and life of any human being. I may be the center of this vision or theophany, but I become aware that I am also but a detail of the world. Indeed the world ceases to be something that I observe objectively and becomes something of which I am a part personally and actively. No longer do I feel as a stranger (threatened and threatening) but as a friend in and of the world. How sadly Christians have misinterpreted the words of Christ that we are *in* but not *of* the world (cf. John 17:14,16). This is then the iconic understanding of the world where the »other« world penetrates and permeates »this« world, and where the eternal inhabits and invests the historical. Nothing is profane, nothing whatsoever is neutral. Everything is an icon revealing God and indicating a way to God. The whole world is a liturgy – what Maximus Confessor in the seventh century described as a »cosmic liturgy.« And the liturgy merely confesses and celebrates what is already truly there, though often neither clearly perceived nor fully known.

²⁴ Magnesians VII, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1 *The Fathers of the Church*, New York 1947. My translation.

²⁵ cf. *Archim. Vasileios*, *Hymn of Entry*, Crestwood, N.Y. 1984, p. 76f.

The liturgy is an image of the world. As we have seen, when an Orthodox christian enters the church, he or she is entering the comfort of their own home. And we may add that, when they leave the church, they are still in the liturgy because the whole world is a sacrament. The whole of the world reveals a celebration of liturgy unleashed.

Our »original sin« lies precisely in our failure or refusal to view life and the world in terms of a sacrament of communion with God. The liturgical approach proclaims a world imbued by a God transforming the world. An attitude of *liturgy* is a crucial corrective to our errors in *ecology*. For we have learned all too well and only too painfully that the ecological crisis both presupposes and builds upon the economical injustice and imbalance of communion in the world.

What Orthodox and all christians need to remember is that the Church is called not to conform to but to transform this world. For the liturgy is not a compromise with this world, but a promise of the world to come. It is an epiphany, a showering of the light and beauty that form the perspective within which one can truly see and perceive. Indeed the same *light* that pervades Orthodox spirituality marks also the rhythm of Orthodox liturgy and music. The refrain chanted after Holy Communion is: »We have seen the true light.« This is not just poetry. Liturgy is never simply a matter of »receiving the sacraments,« of »hearing the word,« or of »composing the music.« Orthodox christians live – habitually, I would say – within a liturgical environment that transfigures body and soul, the entire world, in this vision of the light of the Transfiguration.

V. Concluding Remarks

Usually in religious circles, secularism is seen to be the main threat. Today I think that secularism has produced a form of »religion« that is useful or appealing. Here in the United States it may be *multiculturalism*, where everyone is entitled to their own culture and religion, where religion is good for business and politics. It is so important that we understand multiculturalism in the positive sense – where each culture is not interested only in itself and its own, whether primarily or exclusively; and where one culture does not override or overrun the others, whether indigenous or immigrant.

What is particularly striking about Orthodox worship – from an external, sociological point of view – is its intimate union with the culture of the people. Nationalism has in fact been both the bane and the blessing of Orthodoxy in recent decades. For the autonomy of the local, national Church does not produce anarchy but continuity of tradition. This does not undermine the catholicity of the Church, but serves rather to underline its universality through the diversity of expression.

It remains to be seen how Orthodox christians will spread their roots in this country, whether they will extend an invitation to their non-Orthodox sisters and brothers. Will their attitude be the scriptural: »Do not touch me« (John 20:17)? Or will it be Philip's: »Come and see« (John 1:46)? Just how will they »sing the Lord's song in a strange land« (Ps. 136:1), their old song in a land that has adopted them?

Yet, there is one lesson that can be learned from them, namely that »Christianity is a liturgical religion.« These are the words of the Russian theologian Georges Florovsky

(1893–1979): »The Church is first of all a worshipping community. Worship comes first, doctrine and discipline second.«