Waiting for Communion. The main event of the Liturgy begins behind closed Royal Doors and curtain: clergy is communed in the altar.

The interior space of Holy Transfiguration Cathedral is organized to emphasize the centrality of the Eucharist. The nave is focused on the altar, and the semi-circular altar is facing the center of the nave.

LIFE IN WORSHIP

Liturgy as Communion in Theory and Practice

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In this article I would like to highlight some questions about Orthodox Liturgy regarding the dissonance experienced between Liturgy as it is fixed in its prayers and rubrics versus its practical celebration.

Let us look at how the Liturgy is perceived by parishioners—by the people who attend it with varying degrees of frequency. From my experience as a parish priest in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, it is apparent that that most people perceive the Liturgy as something that takes place "over there," in the altar. Even so, parishioners standing in the nave "watching" the liturgy, are indeed touching it in some way. But can it be said that they truly contribute to the celebration of the liturgy? The priest performs the liturgy, with everyone involved in the celebration—as well as deacons, subdeacons, cantors, singers, altar boys, and other ministers—all participate in some obvious way. But how can a regular parishioner, standing there in the nave praying, realize his or her participation in the celebration?

The Liturgy includes the involvement of everyone who attends it. The Liturgy is not a show; it should consist only of participants, not observers. Our celebration has unfortunately come to be seen by some as a kind of sacred drama performed before the faithful by clergy, choir, and ministers, and it is no longer *the* Liturgy

Photos of Holy Transfiguration Cathedral in Kiev by Serge Gadzhilov.

in which everyone takes part. For at least a thousand years we have had liturgical commentaries explaining the Liturgy in an illustrative, "symbolical" way that supports that view. In them the Liturgy is understood as a sacred drama representing the entire history of salvation—from the Incarnation and Nativity of the Lord Jesus Christ to his suffering and Resurrection, so that the celebration reenacts all the stages of sacred history, reducing our role to mere observers of the drama unfolding before us. Fr. Alexander Schmemann sharply criticized this method of interpretation (cf. "Symbols and Symbolism in Byzantine Liturgy" in his book *Liturgy and Tradition*).

This interpretation of Liturgy as sacred drama has been imposed upon us commentators, including some of the holy Fathers, but this view by no means derives from the prayers or rite of the Liturgy itself. In our present usage, common to all Orthodox Churches in general, both of the Greek and Russian traditions, the prayers of the Liturgy are generally said inaudibly, with the exception of a few parishes where the priest recites them aloud. The practice of audible prayers throughout the Liturgy was the general practice for centuries, and is prescribed by Novella 137 of the sixth-century emperor Justinian. Yet today our people cannot hear those prayers. They listen to pleasant singing, look at fine vestments, smell clouds of incense, but this limited, aesthetic experience of Liturgy does not often have an effect on their everyday lives—their families, jobs, their daily routines, and the entire world outside the church building. As a result the church building itself has come to be perceived today as a sacred place isolated from the "profane" world.

The study of our Liturgy's origins reveals that the early Church chose the word *leitourgia* for their common services for the breaking of bread—the term was free from any notion of sacrality. In ancient Greek *leitourgia* means "public service" or "public work," a work in which everyone is involved and for which all bear some responsibility. The ancient *leitourgia* involved all free citizens of the polis, the city. In our own time we have witnessed a kind of true *leitourgia* in the Ukrainian Maidan in the winter of 2014. Everyone was involved in it and everyone was fully aware of his or her own responsibility for it. The participants kept vigil, brought food and firewood, provided medicine, collected money, cooked, built barricades, hosted visitors, provided free transportation, and so forth. It was a perfect example of a situation where the small responsibilities of individuals came together to manifest the greater responsibility for a newborn public society. This is an example of Liturgy in the ancient sense of the term: an authentic common service, the common work made up of a diversity of services. It is more than unfortunate that this same notion of *leitourgia* is not manifested today in our celebration of the Divine Liturgy. We celebrate the same Eucharist as did the ancient Church. New rites and prayers emerged over the centuries, but the core of the Eucharistic celebration remains the same. It is our attitude toward the liturgical celebration that has radically changed. Unfortunately our approach to church services has become extremely individualistic and pietistic: we do not realize our responsibility for what happens during the services in the

church and for what happens when we leave the church building and go into the world. Our liturgical practice takes place in an atmosphere in which we pray as individuals, hardly discerning the prayers, and making no attempt to understand the words. It has turned into a kind of pious meditation. Similarly, these days we perceive the church building as a sacred space, the temple, and sometimes that entails the notion of its radical separation from the outside "mundane" world. But if we consider the buildings the first Christians used for liturgical celebration when they were able to worship freely, we see that the commonest original type of Christian church building was a basilica—a public building, not in any way sacred. And the early Christian communities prior to the official establishment of the Church in A.D. 324 worshipped in ordinary houses.

Our Divine Liturgy consists of two parts: the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The central event of the first part is reading of the Holy Scriptures and the explanatory sermon, which is a means of engaging the participants. The second part, the Eucharist, is nothing less than sharing a meal with our Lord and one another. And it is Jesus himself, not the presiding priest, who shares this meal. The reception of the Holy Gifts is not the only purpose of the Eucharist. Its core purpose consists of a number of things relating to the involvement of all gathered. This Eucharistic core does not mean only that, "I receive Holy Communion," after which my communion is finished. Liturgical participation implies sharing a common responsibility. We intentionally draw a parallel between the Eucharist and the Last Supper, but furthermore we assert that our participation in the Liturgy, our reception of the precious body and blood of Christ, is not a repetition of the Last Supper but our actual participation in that same event in which Jesus participated with His disciples in the Jerusalem cenacle.

Let us consider the Last Supper as it is described in the New Testament. Jesus took twelve of his closest disciples, selectively chosen. They were the people who trusted Jesus and to whom he entrusted himself, despite his knowledge of the one who would betray him. These disciples were chosen neither for their social status nor for other external virtues. They were simply the people who had heard Jesus and who were ready to leave everything and follow him. This was the criterion of discipleship. And then Jesus gathered with these twelve in the cenacle and did some very simple things. We know that the meal included the bread and the cup. Jesus took the bread, said the blessing, broke the bread, and gave it to the disciples. Similarly with the cup: he took it, blessed it, gave thanks, and gave it to the apostles, saying: "Take, eat, this is my body… Drink everyone from it, this is my blood." The same simple things we say and do in our Liturgy today. But the simple process has become covered with layer after layer of elaborate rites that have evolved throughout the ages, making it difficult for us to discern the essential core under all the Byzantine beauty of hymnody, processions, rites, vestments, and so on. We can barely perceive the unadorned kernel of what is actually taking place. We have ceased to comprehend the plain truths at the core of the liturgical event. Do we iden-

tify ourselves as disciples gathered for Liturgy in the same manner as the apostles at the Last Supper? And that we have assembled not of our own accord, but because it is Jesus who has invited us to gather? *We* are the people to whom Jesus entrusts himself. We are responsible for our teacher and for all he has taught us. Jesus entrusted the words and the actions over the bread and the cup to the apostles, saying: "Do this in remembrance of me." And these were the people responsible for the continuation of the Lord's work. They were responsible not only for themselves but for the work entrusted to them. Now, in the Church, we partake of the same supper. We hear the same words, take part in the same service, share the same meal, receive the same gifts—the body and blood of our Lord—and it is we who are called to continue Jesus's work that he entrusted to those disciples. We communicants are the people who are responsible for continuing his work.

Here a number of secondary matters emerge, including some technical ones, but the primary issue is our attitude toward the Liturgy. We have to explore all possible ways to make our Liturgy more liturgical. The participation of the faithful should be not merely encouraged, it must become the essential feature of the liturgical celebration. First, we should gather together in a church, or we should say as the Church, bringing our simple food: bread and wine (I call it simple because bread and wine are common food for everyone, but it takes a lot of hard work of many people to produce it—and it is truly in the preparation of these gifts that the Liturgy begins—a liturgy before the Liturgy!), and then praying together, giving thanks to God, and taking part in a certain dialogue, and then sharing the Lord's meal with everyone gathered.

I am unable in this short space to outline an exhaustive plan for liturgical reform. We can read prayers aloud, we can restore congregational singing, we can share the greeting of peace, and so on. Certainly we should try to do such things as these and much more. Until there is the perception of common involvement and common responsibility for what takes place in the Liturgy we should not claim that there has been a revival in the Church. The Church consists of small Eucharistic communities. Moreover, according to the work of Fr. Nicholas Afanasiev, each Eucharistic gathering is *the* Church. The Eucharist is the event in which the Church reveals and completes herself. As we seek appropriate ways to revive Church life, we can look to our Western brothers and scholars, both Orthodox and Catholic, as well as to our common ancient Church legacy for models and experiences of liturgical life. We should study the methods and fruits of the Western liturgical movement and of the Second Vatican Council in their efforts to make the Liturgy more liturgical. We can also gain insight from the experience of the Orthodox Churches in the West. Some of their communities, such as New Skete Monastery and some parishes of the Orthodox Church in America, have attempted to implement significant liturgical reform, with varying degrees of success.

It should be noted that in the Western Church, where the liturgical movement arose, the liturgical situation was much worse than in the

Orthodox Church. It was perhaps such dire circumstances that actually helped our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters to rise up and to grow into what they are now in respect to the liturgy. If we compare the present reformed Catholic mass with the Orthodox Liturgy, we immediately notice the identity of structure, and we understand that their services are the same as ours in their basic aspects. Certainly they have varying nuances, but the core and basic elements of the celebrations are very similar or even identical. On the other hand the two differ in that the original structure, visibility, and accessibility of the liturgical core as well as the people's participation have become much clearer in the reformed Catholic rite. As an Orthodox presbyter, I can affirm that the Catholic Liturgy is actually more liturgical than the one celebrated in most of our Orthodox churches today.

Meanwhile, we do have a kind of Liturgy in our parish worship. I am an eyewitness of a true Liturgy in our Church—as manifested in the *akathistos* prayer. This prayer form often becomes true Liturgy, because people are really involved in the service of it. First, the language of most *akathistoi* is much simpler and easier to understand than that of the classic liturgical prayers and hymns. Most of its sentences are short and written in a Slavonicized Russian rather than in Church Slavonic. It is the people who sing its refrains. They participate with understanding and by singing. I have one more reason to describe the *akathistos* as more liturgical than the Divine Liturgy. On Sunday in my parish the service begins with an *akathistos*, and when it starts, a priest comes out to hear confessions. During the *akathistos*, people rarely come forward for confession, as they are afraid of leaving the service. But they are not afraid to request confession during Divine Liturgy! When the Divine Liturgy begins, the "sacred drama" occurs, and then it becomes time for private matters, a confession,

"Let my prayer arise in your sight, as incense..." During the service, not only the icons are censed, but also the people, the images of God.

Mosaic icon of the Communion of the Apostles.

for example. So people experience their own participation in the *akathistos* prayer, but they perceive the Liturgy as something taking place on a stage, not something they themselves participate in.

We discussed these issues at a recent Kiev Summer Theological Institute. One priest noted that our parishioners participate in the Eucharist as individuals, not as community, and connected this phenomenon to the preparation required to receive the Holy Gifts. As a rule, a parishioner keeps these obligations: reading the prayer rule (three canons and the canon and prayers before Holy Communion), fasting additionally for at least one day or, even better, three (it's actually not a complete fasting but rather a kind of a vegetarian diet, with no meat, milk and eggs; and with the ordinary fasting days on Wednesday and Friday it became a four days of vegetarian diet before the Sunday Eucharist), and going to confession. Keeping such a rule on a weekly basis, or even twice a month, is quite exhausting, but this tradition became customary not so long ago, in the age of liturgical decay of eighteenth and nineteenth centurues. Traditions, such as this fairly recent burdensome practice of additional fasting etc., can be altered for pastoral reasons. If we priests insist on them, we become like Pharisees who weigh men down with burdens too hard to bear—while not burdening ourselves with them. As long as we afflict people with such burdens we have no right to submit other claims regarding the responsibilities of real common participation in the Liturgical celebration. As long as burdens such as the challenging preparation for Holy Communion exist, people come to the Liturgy as individuals, and the entire Liturgy for a parishioner is reduced to receiving the Holy Gifts or, receiving Communion when there's no other communion involved beyond the ritual act.

The healing of such issues comes with a change of mind. The first aspect of this change of mind is the understanding that participation in the Eucharist such as described above is far from being complete. If we are invited to a wedding feast, the purpose of our participation is not just eating. We share the festal meal, but the meal itself is not the whole purpose. The goal is a deeper communion with each other, and the same is true for the Eucharist, which is also a celebratory meal. Here is a table with the meal served by our Bridegroom, Jesus the Lord, and we presbyters preside over the ceremony and of-

fer people not our own meal but that served for us all by Jesus. The entire Liturgy is a kind of long, detailed, comprehensive toast given to our God before sharing the chalice of life. So what is essential is not merely to partake of the sacred meal, but to participate in the entire Eucharistic prayer of thanksgiving offered by us all: all the supplications, all the gestures, and the entire Liturgy.

Finally, as we say, the "liturgy after the Liturgy" occurs when people bring out what they have experienced at the church and share it with their neighbors. But just as necessary is the "liturgy before the Liturgy," already mentioned above. Otherwise we behave like those Corinthians whom St. Paul criticized for being "consumers"—coming to the Liturgy only for the purpose of taking something from it, not for giving or sharing. But the Liturgy is formed from what we bring to it, not merely the bread and wine, but what we offer from our hearts and minds.

The Liturgy is manifested when people practice the Christian life every day. They gather not only to take something, but first and foremost to give and share. A friend of mine once pointed out to me that in the Torah—the core of the Holy Scriptures—the following verse is repeated three times: *You should not come before God with your hands empty* (Exodus 23:14, 34:19, Deuteronomy 16:16). The offering could be not only bread and wine, or oil and candles, as in the early Church, but, according to St. Paul, a human heart converted to Christ. Thus, in the Liturgy we say that our offering is the sacrifice of praise. But a worthy sacrifice must be prepared. Do we bother to prepare our own sacrifice of praise as a part of our congregational sacrifice, before we go to church?

Understanding is the first stage of maturity. Not all people can gain such an understanding of the Liturgy by themselves, and thus the pastors and preachers are called to teach them. But pastors and preachers must reach this understanding themselves before they can pass it on to the people. I invite all of you to think about the dissonance between the real Liturgy as I've described it and the way our Divine Liturgy is currently celebrated and perceived by the faithful. We need to look for appropriate ways to address the problems. Let's make our Liturgy a true communion. ✠

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