

Part 2: The Divine Banquet: Communing with God

Thank you again for attending. Let's begin with prayer.

Prayer

Illumine our hearts, O Master Who lovest mankind, with the pure light of thy divine knowledge, and open the eyes of our mind to the understanding of thy gospel teachings; implant in us also the fear of thy blessed commandments, that trampling down all carnal desires, we may enter upon a spiritual manner of living, both thinking and doing such things as are well-pleasing unto thee. For thou art the illumination of our souls and bodies, O Christ our God, and unto thee we ascribe glory, together with thine unoriginate Father, and thine all-holy, good, and life-creating Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.

Introduction

Last time we discussed the end or purpose of the Divine Liturgy, why we gather each week. To summarize, we gather to celebrate the Holy Mystery of the Eucharist where bread and wine are transformed into the Divine Body and Blood, and we the faithful are made holy by partaking.

This week we will address *what* the Divine Liturgy is. It is a sacrificial meal with our God, who is both the giver of the meal and that which is given in the meal. The whole of the Liturgy culminates in the Eucharist where we participate in the sacrifice of Jesus and commune with him.

But before we discuss the sacrificial meal, I think it would be helpful to give an overview of the structure of the Divine Liturgy. This will enable us see how it flows from the beginning and progresses to culminate in the Consecration and Reception of the Gifts of the Eucharist.

Structure

My first time attending the Divine Liturgy, over ten years ago, was bewildering. I had no idea what was going on. After attending several

times, I slowly became aware that not only was there a structure, but all of the service was building toward the Eucharist.

One side of your handout includes an outline of the Divine Liturgy for you to look at while I give a narrative. One note: when a church does not have a deacon, his parts are said by the priest.

In one of the services that precedes the Liturgy, the Service of Preparation, the priest and the deacon prepare the Bread and Wine, setting them forth on a table in the north alcove of the sanctuary. This is where the Gifts are located when Divine Liturgy starts.

The Divine Liturgy proper is divided into two parts: the Liturgy of the Word, which concludes with the homily, and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Originally these were two separate services, with the Liturgy of the Word developing from the Sabbath synagogue service. Soon after the Christians were cast out of the synagogues, both services began to be celebrated on Sunday, one following immediately after the other.

The Liturgy of the Word opens with a quiet conversation in the altar between the priest and deacon. After the deacon is blessed he goes forth to the solea and asks for the blessing to begin the divine Liturgy. The priest recites the exclamation and the deacon calls the church to prayer in the litany of peace. This is followed by a set of hymns, the antiphons, with alternate lines from the Psalms sung by the chanter and the congregation.

Toward the end of these hymns, the priest and deacon come out of the sanctuary with the Gospel Book accompanied by altar servers with the lamps, cross, and fans. The priest blesses the entrance and he and the deacon enter through the central Holy Doors while the altar servers enter through the north and south doors. The choir and congregation sing the variable hymns, specific to the season, day, and place of the Divine Liturgy.

In preparation for the readings, the congregation sings the thrice holy hymn while the deacon and priest say prayers and offer incense to the Lord. The Epistle Lesson is read by the reader, the Gospel by the deacon, and the homily preached by the priest. This concludes the first part of the Liturgy: the Liturgy of the Word. Of old, a litany for catechumens was offered at this point after which they were dismissed for instruction.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist commences with prayers offered for the faithful. The priest places the Gospel book upright on the Holy Table and unfolds the sacred cloth on which the paten and chalice will be placed.

The choir sings the first part of the cherubic hymn, calling us to lay aside all earthly cares, while the priest and deacon say prayers to the same effect, reminding themselves it is a great and fearful thing even for the angelic powers to serve God. The censer is again taken up and the whole sanctuary is filled with smoke as Isaiah saw when he entered the throne room of God. The deacon with the paten and the priest with the chalice exit the sanctuary accompanied by the altar servers with the lamps, cross, icons, and fans. As they walk through the nave, the priest asks the Lord to remember us all in his Kingdom. The priest and deacon with the Gifts enter through the Holy Doors and reverently place them on the Holy Table. The cherubic hymn is concluded, reminding us of the purpose of laying aside all earthly cares, so that we may receive the King of Glory.

The Litany of Supplication is offered and we are again reminded that our whole life is to be offered unto Christ our God. In a future talk, we will discuss the progression of these litanies. But they spiral toward heaven, drawing us closer to the Kingdom. It is reminiscent of the structure of the Apocalypse, where St John structures the book as series of cycles with each cycle taking us ever closer to the conclusion of the vision.

Next, the kiss of peace is exchanged and the congregation confesses their faith with the Nicene Creed. The priest calls us to lift our hearts up to the Lord, and the congregation responds. During the response the priest begins

the anaphora—lifting up—prayers. The first anaphora prayer concludes with a reference to the angelic powers serving God, “the cherubim and the seraphim, six-winged, many-eyed, soaring aloft, borne on their wings: Singing the triumphal hymn, shouting proclaiming and saying:” And the faithful respond with the chorus Isaiah recorded “Holy, holy, holy, Lord of Sabaoth; heaven and earth are full of thy glory.” The priest prays the second anaphora prayer recounting the Last Supper and says aloud Jesus’ words of Institution.

“Take, eat. This is my Body which is broken for you, for the forgiveness of sins. Drink this all of you. This is my Blood of the New Covenant, which is shed for you and for many, for the forgiveness of sins.”

He and the deacon lift up the Gifts to God as an offering and ask the Holy Spirit to change the Gifts into the Body and Blood of Christ. The people respond with the ‘amen’. Again the faithful are remembered before God. In this mercy we boldly call upon God as Our Father, asking for him to ‘give us our daily bread’. The priest elevates the Lamb and breaks it, placing it in the chalice along with hot water ‘full of the warmth of the Holy Spirit’. The priest and deacon commune within the altar and then exit to commune the faithful, saying to each, “The servant of God, {Name}, partakes of the precious and all-holy Body and Blood of our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ, unto the forgiveness of sins and unto life everlasting.

After all have communed, the people give thanks to God, a final litany is prayed and we are charged to go forth in peace with one final blessing and prayers for God’s mercy.

In this brief overview, we saw that all of the Divine Liturgy progresses toward the Eucharist. We are prepared for its reception by the offerings of prayer, hymns, incense and readings.

Sacrifice and Meal

Let us now turn toward discussing sacrifice. First note, that the elements of the Eucharist are food because just as physical food essential to sustain life

and strengthen those who eat of it, the Eucharist is spiritual food to sustain our Life in Christ. While grain and grapes are given by God, grown with his sunlight and rain, it also takes human labor in order to transform them into bread and wine. This cooperation of humans with the Divine is especially suited for the Eucharist; it points to our whole life being offered to God as sacrifice. The transformation of grain into bread and grapes into wine involves crushing the raw material—reminding us of our sanctification and death to sin—and uniting many individual elements into one loaf or cup—reminding us of the union we have in Christ.

In examining the concept of *sacrifice*, I'm reliant on Fr Jeremy Davis' excellent book, *Welcoming Gifts*. Often we have a misunderstanding of Biblical and Liturgical sacrifice due to the contemporary use of the word. We equate sacrifice with drudgery and pain, with having to grit our teeth and do our duty. However, this is not the case in the Bible. While every sacrifice involves cost, the ancient and Biblical concept of sacrifice is that of hospitality with a meal shared between people and their God.

The ancient concept of sacrifice as a meal was not only operative for ancient Israel, but for the surrounding nations as well. However, the gods they worshipped and ate with were demons, as St Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry...The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that 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 the one bread. Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.

The Old Testament sacrifices of the burnt offering, sin offering, peace offering, thanksgiving offering, etc. were meals with the God of Israel. In the case of sin offerings, the sacrifice served as a meal to restore the relationship and reconcile with God. However, the author of Hebrews writes, "But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." As the sacrifices of the Torah were not sufficient to deal with the root of the issue and eradicate sin, God offered us himself. God the Son became man in order to live a life pleasing to God in a fallen world and offer it to God for the life of the world. As Hebrews continues, "But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God."

The Gospels rely on the image of the Passover in describing the sacrifice of Jesus. In the Passover, God renders judgment upon the gods of Egypt, displaying his power over them, and thereby rescuing his people. In anticipation and celebration of this event, they are instructed to keep the Passover annually. This meal defined the children of Israel and their covenant with God. So important was it that the prophets likened the return from exile in Babylon to the Exodus and Ezra ensured the returned Hebrews kept the Passover. Moreover, the prophet Jeremiah envisioned a new covenant enacted between God and his people.

Therefore, Jesus gave the Eucharist to his disciples before his death telling them to keep it as his memorial and the new covenant. He tells them that he will not drink of the fruit of the vine until he drinks it in the kingdom of God. St Paul writes Christ is our Passover Lamb, sacrificed for us, and we should keep the feast in sincerity and truth. When we keep the feast of the Eucharist, having properly prepared, we receive Christ and are united to him in his kingdom. We participate in the one sacrifice he offered for our salvation. Just as God rescued Israel in the Passover, Christ after the Last Supper defeated sin, death, and the Devil and rescued us from their grasp. He did this in a most unexpected way, through entering death on the Cross.

Death, of course, could not hold the Author of Life and Christ defeated it. As St John Chrysostom says in his Pascal Homily,

“[Hades] took a body, and face to face met God! It took earth and encountered heaven! It took what it saw but crumbled before what it had not seen! “O death, where is thy sting? O hades, where is thy victory?”

Conclusion

In summary, we answer the question, “*What* is the Divine Liturgy?” by responding that it is a sacrifice, a meal shared with God. The Eucharist at the heart of the Divine Liturgy is participation in the Body and Blood of our Lord, in his very Life. Christ both gives us the Eucharist and is given in the Eucharist. He is both the priest and the offering. Just as grains of wheat are united and transformed to form bread and likewise with grapes and wine, so are we united together and transformed to be the Body of Christ, dying to ourselves and offering our whole life to Christ. Therefore, let us join with the deacon in prayer:

O Christ, great and most holy Pascha, O Wisdom, Word and Power of God: Grant that we may more perfectly partake of thee in the never-ending day of thy Kingdom.

Having thus detailed what the Divine Liturgy is, next time we will focus on *when* the Liturgy occurs and the Never-Ending Day.

Are there any questions? {Questions and maybe answers.}

Thank you, let us close with prayer.

Our Father...

Through the prayers of St Nicholas of Thessaloniki, and all our holy fathers and mothers in the faith, O Lord Jesus Christ, our God, have mercy upon us and save us. Amen