

Introdouction to the Divine Liturgy for Newcomers

Introduction

Brothers and Sisters, Christ is in our midst.

St Nicholas Cabasilas begins his *Commentary on the Divine Liturgy* with these words:

The essential act in the celebration of the holy mysteries is the transformation of the elements into the Divine Body and Blood; its aim is the sanctification of the faithful, who through these mysteries receive the remission of their sins and the inheritance of the kingdom of heaven.

I was asked to say a few words today introducing the Divine Liturgy. When I taught a series on this two years ago, I had five introductory lessons that together took about an hour and a half to deliver, but today I'll try to compress that into 10–15 minutes. To this end, let's focus on the basic questions we learned to ask in grade school, why, what, who, where, and when. My goal today is not to provide comprehensive answers, but to further draw you into the Mystery.

Why

Why do we gather each week to celebrate the Divine Liturgy? In St Nicholas' quote, it is for our sanctification, to fit us for heaven. Call to mind Isaiah chapter 6, where the prophet is mystically taken up into the throne room of God.

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!”

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! I am undone; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.”

When we come into the presence of God, we must be cleansed. Yet God himself provides the cleansing. The prayers, hymns, and Scripture readings of the Liturgy are the culmination of our weekly preparation. These gifts prepare us for the reception of Christ himself, in in the Great Gift of Holy and Mystical Communion. This is also why the catechumenate period is so long in the Church, for to come into the presence of the Living God is fearful and dangerous (Hebrews 10.31). Who among us can dwell with the consuming fire? (Isaiah 33.14) Yet God himself has provided a way that we can live with him, “thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 7.25)”

What and Who

So, *what* then is the Divine Liturgy, that God has given the Church in Christ? And *who* celebrates the Mystery? The climax of the Liturgy is the Thanksgiving sacrificial meal of the Eucharist. We are called to “Lay aside all earthly cares that we may receive the King of Glory.” All the prayers, hymn, and readings increasingly prepare us to partake of Christ and participate in his sacrifice.

The Eucharistic Sacrifice

To understand what sacrifice is, let us review the Scriptures. In the Scriptures, sacrifices are always meals of a people with their God. We often think of slaughter and killing, but this emphasis is a later unhelpful development. The sacrifices of the Old Testament were shared hospitality whereby Israel would commune with God. A sacrifice requires the participation of God and of his people.

Note that the elements of the Eucharist are food, bread and wine. 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 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.

The Gospels rely on the image of the Passover/Pascha in describing the sacrifice of Jesus. In the Old Testament Pascha, God judges the gods of Egypt, displaying his power over them, and rescuing his people (Exodus 12.12). In anticipation and celebration of this event, the children of Israel are given a meal that defined them and their covenant with God. The prophets continued the theme and compared the return from exile in Babylon to the Exodus. Ezra ensured the returned exiles kept the Pascha. In anticipation of Jesus, the prophet Jeremiah received a vision of a new covenant between God and his people (Jeremiah 38/31.31–34).

In light of this, Jesus gave the Eucharist to his disciples before his death telling them to keep it as the sacrifice of the New Covenant. When we celebrate 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; this is not a historical reenactment but a remembrance, a reintegration into the work of God. Just as God rescued Israel in the Old Pascha, Christ in the New Pascha 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 could not hold the Author of Life and Christ defeated it from within. 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?”

Where and When

Having been rescued from the realm of Death and Hades, the answer to *where* and *when* the Divine Liturgy occurs is perhaps obvious. We are in the heavens—the Kingdom of God—with Christ and his ministering angels! The is revealed in the opening words “Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” And how we enter the Kingdom is unveiled in the first corresponding action: the priest makes the sign of the Cross with the Gospel Book signifying that we only approach and enter the Kingdom by the Cross. Consider the icon of Extreme Humility. The title on the Cross is “The King of Glory” reflecting St Paul’s words that the demonic powers did not know wisdom of God for had they understood it, “they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Corinthians 2.6–8) Jesus is revealed as Lord and King, not because he came in a display of power and wealth, but because he came as a poor lowly servant, identifying with his people and suffering death for them and at their hands.

We are made aware of the Cross through the preaching of the Gospel, which is God’s good news of salvation. In first century Greek, the word referred to a specific type of good news. When a king, governor, or military general would be received in a city, he had his messengers proclaim his gospels or good tidings detailing his accomplishments, the enemies he defeated, and what was expected of those now hearing these tidings. The proclamation of Christ’s Gospel shows us both what Christ accomplished and how we are to respond, in essence it shows us our great salvation. Therefore, the Gospel Book is enthroned on the altar as it proclaims Christ our Saviour.

Moreover, in the dialogue before the opening of the service, the deacon says to the priest, “It is time for the Lord to act.” This is taken from Psalm 118(119).125 where the next line is, “for they have scattered your teaching.” But God makes all things beautiful in his time, setting the longing for eternity in the hearts of humans (Ecclesiastes 3.11). In his time, God is calling us back to be refashioned in him. In the Divine Liturgy we ascend from earth to the heavens and are taken from chronological time into the eternal age. Both the time and space (after a fashion of speaking) of heaven has entered into our time and space. As Father Gabriel often says, “In the Liturgy, the there becomes here and the then becomes now.”

Conclusion

So in the Liturgy we find ourselves at the throne of God like the prophet Isaiah. When we behold the throne of Christ, we see it is the Cross upon which is written “The King of Glory”. The Eucharist flows from this vision. Our union with Christ is union into his death and resurrection. While this begins in your baptism, the fuller realization takes your entire life. In as far as are united to Christ and die to ourselves we are able to receive his kingdom and be renewed after his likeness. And at our departure from this world we are able to fully sing the funeral hymn with our mourners:

O thou who of old didst create me from nothingness, and didst honor me with thine image divine, but because I transgressed thy commandments hast returned me again unto the earth from which I was taken: Bring me back to that likeness, to be reshaped in that pristine beauty.

This is the Holy Mystery of the Eucharist, it transforms sinners into saints, sanctifying them and granting them the inheritance of Christ, making them members of his body in the Kingdom of Heaven. Let us then live our whole lives unto God as a sacrifice, participating in his actions and bringing his peace to a fallen world.

Let us conclude with the prayer of the deacon:

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.