

The Orthodox Liturgy: Its Theology and Spirituality, Part One

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If we want to speak of the liturgy, we must speak of food. For the liturgy is the food and nourishment of the Orthodox.

The German philosopher Feuerbach defines man as what he eats. This seemingly material concept truly expresses the most prominent religious idea about humanity.

In the creation narrative, man appears as a hungry being, and the world appears to him as food. Hence, when God instructed Adam and Eve to grow, multiply, fill the earth, and dominate it, as in the first chapter of Genesis, He commanded humanity to eat from the earth: "I have given you every plant that yields seed, and every tree that yields seed; it will be your food" (Genesis 1:29).

Man must eat to live; he must partake of the world in his body and transform it into himself, into flesh and blood. He is truly what he eats; the whole world is a universal table for him. The image of the table, throughout the Holy Scriptures, is the central image of life, depicting life at the beginning of creation and at its end and perfection: "...that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom" (Luke 22:30). Therefore, the mystery of the Eucharist occupies the central place in the Orthodox liturgy. From the Lord's table, where the faithful gather with their priest around the chalice placed upon it, the perfect union between man and God is achieved in the body and blood of Christ. The table of the Divine Liturgy is a true image of the coming Kingdom: "For My flesh is food indeed and my blood is drink indeed. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in me, and I in him" (John 6:55-56).

We see in the Bible that the food we eat, and the world we must share with others to live, are both given to us by God as a form of communion with Him. The world, as our food, is not something "material" limited to physical functions that conflict with its spiritual functions through which we connect with God. Everything on earth is a gift from God to humanity, intended to make God known and to make our lives commune with Him.

Human beings are hungry, yes, but they hunger for God. Behind the hunger in our lives lies God.

The Orthodox liturgy stems from the Orthodox view of humanity, which holds that humankind occupies a unique position in the universe, distinguishing it from all other creatures. Humans alone bless God for all they receive from Him, including the life-giving food; they alone bless God in response to God's blessing.

The only natural, not supernatural, response for humankind after God has bestowed upon it this blessed and holy world is to bless God in return, to offer thanks, to see the world as God sees it, and consequently to know the world, to name everything in it, and to possess it.

Therefore, in the Orthodox faith, man is considered priest, called to present the world to God again after purifying and sanctifying it. Humanity is called to sanctify the world, restoring it to its state before the Fall. Man stands at the center of the world, uniting it and blessing it with God, receiving it from Him and offering it back to Him: "Thine own of Thine own, we offer unto Thee, in behalf of all and for all" (from the Orthodox liturgy).

The Eucharist of the Christian is to transform his life into a life of God and into communion with Him. For this reason, God created the world to be the material and instrument of one universal (catholic) sacrament of thanksgiving. And for this reason, God created man, to be a priest of this cosmic sacrament.

Humanity is capable of reshaping and modifying the world, of giving it entirely new meaning. Let us remember that the first task given to Adam was to name the living creatures (Genesis 2:19-20). Let us remember that, in the Divine Liturgy, we offer to God the fruits of the earth not in their raw form, but in the form that humanity has given them anew; we do not offer sheaves of wheat on the altar, but bread; not bunches of grapes, but wine.

The Orthodox liturgy plays an essential role in this area, for it aims to establish a living connection between God and humanity. This connection reshapes humanity in the divine image that God intended for it from the beginning of creation. Fallen humanity needs a fundamental transformation to become, as God intended, a priest of this universe. Therefore, Orthodox liturgy places great emphasis on repentance, mentioning it in all services, so that it is difficult for a sincere Orthodox worshipper not to live in constant repentance.

The Orthodox liturgy is not merely an individual act of worship, nor is it simply a set of ceremonial rituals that remind the believer of the Lord and what He has done for our salvation. It is not merely an outpouring of human emotions before God, nor a set of obligations performed by believers to appease their consciences, to assure them that they have fulfilled their religious duties.

It is much deeper than all of this; it is a **communal, thankful, transformative act**.

It is a **communal** act – the name itself indicates this. "Liturgy" means an act done by a group of people who are transformed into a community with a single, shared identity, whereas before they were a collection of individuals. The whole here is more than the sum of the individuals. This unity is fully realized in the mystery of the Eucharist through union with the Body and Blood of the Lord.

It is also an act of **thanksgiving** – every liturgical service contains complete passages of thanksgiving and praise to God for what He has given us for our salvation. Orthodox liturgical texts constantly praise and thank God, describing Him as the "good and loving God." Remember that the word "Orthodox" means "right glorification."

It is a **transformative** act – those gathered in the Church transform from a mass of humanity into the Body of Christ; the world transforms from fallen to divine. It draws humanity toward the Kingdom and gives it the impetus to begin building this Kingdom here and now.

We are united in our gathering, we give thanks and praise with joy, and we are transformed into divine beings who transform the world, which is in our hands, into a small Heavenly Kingdom, so that Christ's beloved may taste His Kingdom before it is fully realized within them in the next life.

The Church is realized and becomes truly the Church, in the sense that it is the living Body of Christ, in this liturgical communion.

(To be continued.)