

Sacramental and Liturgical Life in the Eastern Churches.

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Being very numerous and originating from distinct ancient Christian theological cultures, the Eastern Churches follow a great variety of liturgical and sacramental rites according to the origin, custom and tradition of each particular Church. Because the origins of each of the Eastern Churches can be historically traced to its founding Patriarchal Church it is also possible to identify among the Eastern Churches particular liturgical family groups that originate in the Alexandrian, Antiochene, Armenian, Chaldean and Constantinopolitan traditions.

This being the case you will I am sure appreciate that it is not possible in the limited time available to us to comment on every aspect of the liturgical and sacramental life of each of the Eastern Churches. I will therefore, speak about the sacramental and liturgical life of the Eastern Churches in more general terms and give specific examples from particular Churches when necessary and for the sake of clarity.

During the course of this talk I will refer to various Documents of the Second Vatican Council, Papal pronouncements, and statements made by the Vatican's Congregation for the Eastern Churches. In addition I will also refer to the liturgical and sacramental life as it is lived and expressed in the Western Latin tradition. In doing so I do not wish to imply the superiority of any particular tradition over another, but rather to provide points of reference for greater clarity and to indicate the rich diversity to be found in the Church's Eastern and Western liturgical and sacramental life.

The liturgical and sacramental life of the Eastern Churches and that of the Western Latin tradition compliment each other. Together they present to the whole world the real and awesome presence of Christ in noble simplicity and mystical splendour. The liturgical and sacramental life of the Eastern and the Western Churches being equally ancient, equally valid, equally noble, equally rooted in the paschal mystery of Christ, and equally formed in the faith that comes to us from the apostles celebrate and proclaim the same theological truth viz. that Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. The great variety and diversity in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Eastern Churches is then a treasury that enriches the whole Church and affirms the inalienable value of the particular heritage of each of the Eastern Churches and the unique witness they give to the Church's catholicity.

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Before we look more closely at some aspects of the sacramental and liturgical life of the Eastern Churches it is necessary to say a few words about the use of the terms 'catholic' and 'orthodox' when they are applied to the whole Church of Christ.

Before the great schism that so tragically spilt the Eastern and Western Churches the words 'orthodox' and 'catholic' were used together and inter-changeably to describe the whole and undivided Christian Church. However, after the great schism the word 'catholic' was used more often to specify the Western Church and the use of the word 'orthodox' more often identified the Eastern Churches that were no longer in full communion with the See of Rome, but who were in full communion with one of the ancient Patriarchal Sees and thus, for the most part at least, in communion with each other.

The word 'catholic', as we know, means universal, but the word 'orthodox' may be translated in two ways and means both 'right believing' and 'right glorifying' i.e. 'right worshipping'. When applied to the Church with this dual meaning the word 'orthodox' suggests both faithful adherence to authentic doctrinal belief and faithful adherence to the authentic celebration of liturgical worship. The word 'orthodox' then, reflects and echoes the ancient patristic adage *'lex orandi lex credendi'*, the rule of prayer being the rule of faith. It also reflects the teaching of St. Irenaeus when he says: *'our teaching is in harmony with the Eucharist, and the Eucharist confirms our teaching.'* Put another way the word 'orthodox' strongly implies that if you want to know what the Church teaches, then listen to how it prays.'

At the time of the Second Vatican Council when the Bishops of the Catholic Church undertook the task of liturgical renewal they looked instinctively to the liturgical and sacramental life and practices of all the Eastern Churches. The Decree on Ecumenism of the same council reminded the faithful of the Catholic Church of that great love and devotion with which their brothers and sisters in all the Eastern Churches i.e. those both in full communion and those not in full communion with See of Rome, celebrated the sacred liturgy and presented it to the Catholic faithful as a worthy example to be emulated.

[C.f. Decree on Ecumenism: Chapter 3:Section1: paragraph 15.]

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The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council recognised and acknowledged that the Eastern Churches had ‘jealously retained the symbolic biblical theology, explained at great length by the Fathers, that the Eastern Churches had preserved the sense of the awesome and inexpressible Mystery that surrounds and connotes the celebrative act and that in their liturgical texts and in their whole spirit, the Eastern Churches maintained the sense of liturgy with formula that were both rich and meaningful as unceasing doxology, as petition for forgiveness and as uninterrupted epiclesis. They recognised that the Eastern Churches possessed a spirituality drawn directly from Sacred Scripture and, consequently, a theology less subjected to strictly rational categories and that for historical and cultural reasons, the Eastern Churches had maintained a more direct continuity with the spiritual atmosphere of Christian origins, not as an indication of stagnation and backwardness but rather because of the Eastern Churches precious fidelity to the sources of salvation.’*

(*The text of my talk at this stage has been adapted and paraphrased from: Applying the liturgical prescriptions of the code of Canons of the Eastern Churches: The Congregation for the Eastern Churches.)

Since it has been acknowledged, not only by the Bishops of the Council but also by modern scholars, that the Eastern Churches have retained the symbolic biblical theology, explained at great length by the Fathers the sacramental and liturgical life of the Eastern Churches has provided a rich resource for those engaged in the study of Christian origins and indeed has provided new insights into the understanding of the symbolism of the Jerusalem Temple during the time of Christ and even in the inter-testamental period.

It is perhaps worth mentioning that in many of the ancient liturgical prayers of the Eastern Churches the words Temple and Church, when used to describe the building in which the liturgy is celebrated, are interchangeable and the Eastern Churches have perhaps more readily than the Western Church applied the symbolism of the Jerusalem Temple to the Christian celebration of the Eucharistic or Divine Liturgy. Saint Germanus, who was Patriarch of Constantinople from 715-730 and who is attributed with having written one of the early commentaries on the Divine Liturgy described the Church as follows: *‘The Church is the earthly heaven in which the heavenly God dwells and moves’*.

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Germanus' commentary on the Divine Liturgy or Eucharist very quickly became standard in the East, and most certainly in the Constantinopolitan tradition. His commentary interprets the various rites of the Eucharistic celebration symbolically, linking each stage of the Liturgy and each ritual act to particular moments in Christ's life and mission. This symbolic or iconic manner of liturgical interpretation follows the example used by notable inter-testamental figures such as Jesus Ben Sira, Philo of Alexandria and others who interpreted the liturgy of the Jerusalem Temple by attributing symbolic, iconic and mystical significance to every aspect of its enactment. This method of liturgical commentary, without doubt, set the pattern for later Christian liturgical commentators in both the East and the West and this method of commenting and explaining the Divine Liturgy is still quite common in some Eastern Churches even today, though perhaps less so than in previous generations.

The celebration of the Divine Liturgy in the Oriental Orthodox Coptic Church and in the Assyrian Orthodox Church of the East, to use two examples from the Eastern Churches pre-Chalcedonian tradition, manifests many ritual characteristics similar to those enacted in the Jerusalem Temple at the time of Christ. In the liturgical tradition of these two Churches no one enters the sanctuary unless they are barefooted and all who enter the sanctuary during the celebration of the Divine Liturgy do so clothed in white linen. You will perhaps recall that in the Latin Tridentine celebration of the Good Friday Liturgy the ministers approached barefoot to venerate the unveiled cross. You will recall also that the Jerusalem Temple priests always ministered in the Temple sanctuary barefoot and dressed in white linen and that the High Priest when entering the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement did so dressed not in his golden robes of glory, but rather in white linen.

The Western theologian Henri De Lubac, who was very influential at the time of the Second Vatican Council, echoed the principle of *lex orandi lex credendi* and the teaching of Iraneaus when he stated that the celebration of the Eucharist manifests the Church and the Church manifests the Eucharist. This theological principal that inseparably links the Church's understanding of itself with the Eucharist has from antiquity found liturgical expression in the Liturgy of Prothesis of the Eucharistic celebrations of many of the Eastern Churches, most notably in the Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopian, Eastern and West Syrian traditions and not least in the Byzantine tradition.

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The Liturgy of Prothesis, or the rite for the preparation of the Holy Gifts of bread and wine for the Eucharistic celebration, has no direct liturgical parallel in the Latin Church's Eucharistic tradition. The Liturgy of Prothesis has however, certainly influenced the Eastern Churches' liturgical art, in that the preparation of the icon parallels the preparation of the Holy Gifts for the Eucharist. This is by no means accidental since in the East the Divine Liturgy is understood as icon. It could be argued therefore that one may perhaps see evidence of its influence on the Latin Church's traditional rite of inscribing and blessing the Paschal Candle at the Easter Vigil.

During the Liturgy of Prothesis, which in the Byzantine tradition is also sometimes called Proskomedie, and in the Byzantine tradition precedes the celebration of the Divine Liturgy, the priest arranges the bread to be used for the Eucharist on the discos so that the piece of bread that symbolises Christ the Lamb and Bread of Life is placed at the centre and is then surrounded by smaller pieces of bread that symbolise the Mother of God, the saints and the angels, the living and the dead. Thus on the discos the bread to be used at the Eucharist is arranged symbolically to show the earthly and heavenly nature of the Church gathered in worship around Christ its head.

[*C.f. the diagram.]

In the Pontifical Divine Liturgy of the Byzantine tradition this symbolism is further extended. When the Bishop presides the Liturgy of Prothesis is left uncompleted by the priest and instead the Bishop himself completes it immediately before the Holy Gifts are brought to the Altar at the Great Entrance. In this way liturgical expression is given to the patristic principle that it is the Bishop's right and duty to preside at the Eucharistic celebration and indeed that no Eucharist should be celebrated outside of communion with the Bishop.

Again in the Byzantine tradition the unfolding of the Antimension by the priest during the singing of the Creed gives further liturgical expression to the Church's understanding of its nature and structure. This simple act, appearing in itself insignificant, is nonetheless fundamentally important in understanding the relationship between the nature of the Church and the celebration of the Eucharist.

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The Antimension is a decorative piece of cloth that contains relics of the saints, a copy of the Constantinopolitan Creed of Nicea, which has been blessed, anointed with sacred chrism and signed by the Bishop. The granting of the Antimension to a priest signifies that priest's communion with the Bishop and grants that priest Episcopal permission and authority to preside at the celebration of the Eucharist in the absence of the Bishop. The Holy Gifts are brought to the Altar and placed on the Antimension at the Great Entrance thus emphasising that the Eucharist being celebrated is celebrated in communion with the Bishop.

The Divine Liturgy or Eucharist is then is at the very heart of all the Eastern Churches and its celebration, in whatever Eastern tradition, never fails to hold Western Christians spellbound. The Icons, the chanting, the vestments, the perfumed incense and the elaborate ceremonial immediately engage the whole person. However, the liturgical tradition of the Eastern Churches should not be viewed as something quaint, esoteric, exotic, mysterious, but in the end superfluous and irrelevant because it is unable to speak in a manner that addresses the needs of humankind in the twenty-first century.

Since the Second Vatican Council the Holy Father Pope John Paul II, like many of his predecessors, repeatedly points to the vibrancy of liturgical and sacramental life in the Eastern Churches. He points to the Eastern liturgical tradition not simply because of its great antiquity and beauty, but because it has, from antiquity, enabled humankind fully, actively, and with conscious participation to give glory to God while at the same time bearing witness to God's glorification of humankind through the fulfilment of our Saviour's promise: *'when I lifted up I will draw all people to myself'*.

In his Apostolic Letter 'Orientale Lumen' of May 1995 Pope John Paul II 'underscores that in the Eastern Liturgies the sense of mystery is so strongly felt by all the faithful and that liturgical prayer in the east shows a great aptitude for involving the human person in his or her totality: the mystery is sung in the loftiness of its content, but also in the warmth of the sentiments it awakens in the heart of redeemed humanity. In the sacred act, even bodiliness is summoned to praise, and beauty, which in the East is one of the best loved names expressing the divine harmony and the model of transfigured humanity, appears everywhere: in the shape of the church, in the sounds, in the colours, in the lights, in the scents.

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The lengthy duration of the celebrations, the repeated invocations, everything expresses gradual identification with the mystery celebrated with one's whole person. Thus the prayer of the Church already becomes participation in the heavenly liturgy, an anticipation of the final beatitude.'

John Paul II further reminds us that the liturgical and sacramental life of the Eastern Churches contain elements of great significance for a fuller and more thorough understanding of the Christian experience and suggests that these elements are capable of giving a more complete Christian response to the expectations of the men and women of today. (*My text is here a paraphrase of: 'Orientale Lumen' and 'Applying the Liturgical Prescriptions of the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches'. Congregation of Eastern Churches.).

The Russian Chronicles tell us that this was most certainly the experience of the envoys of Prince Vladimir of Kiev when they attended the celebration of the Divine Liturgy in the great Church of Sancta Sophia in Constantinople. On their return to Kiev they informed Vladimir of their experience in the following terms:

'We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth, for surely there is no such splendour or beauty anywhere upon earth. We cannot describe it to you: only this do we know that God dwells there among men, and that their service surpasses the worship of all other places. For we cannot forget that beauty.'

The eventual result of their overwhelming experience at this celebration of the Divine Liturgy in the great Church of Holy Wisdom was not just the conversion of Prince Vladimir himself, but also the baptism of the whole of Kievan Russ. It is important to remember that these highly significant events took place before the Great Schism and at a time when the Church was still undivided.

Deeply rooted in the liturgical thinking of the Eastern Churches is the concept that in the Divine Liturgy we ascend with Christ into the glory of the kingdom and it is through the Divine Liturgy that the beauty of that kingdom is made manifest among us here on earth. The various stages of the Divine Liturgy are therefore understood as steps of ascent leading us upward to the very throne of grace that is approached with confidence by

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the Christian when accompanied by Christ and where the Christian is fed with the life of God.

This theology of ascent was, in the early history of the Church, the universal view as the ancient prayer:

'Almighty God, we pray that your angel may take this sacrifice to your altar in heaven'

of the Roman Canon suggests and has as its New Testament scriptural foundation the Letter to the Hebrews. The theology of ascent also echoes the understanding of the Psalmist and reflects the attitude of the Jewish pilgrims as they made their way to the Jerusalem Temple for the celebration of the great Old Testament feasts of covenant renewal.

In the Eastern Churches, without exception in the orthodox Churches and almost without exception in the Catholic Eastern Churches, the Divine Liturgy is celebrated with both the priest and the people facing east. For an explanation of this once universal Christian practice we can do no better than point to the explanation given by St John Damascene in *Expositio accurate fidei orthodoxae, IV 12: <PG> 94, 1133-1136.*

'This rich and fascinating interpretation also explains the reason for which the celebrant who presides in the liturgical celebration prays facing the east, just as the people who participate. It is not a question, as is often claimed, of presiding at the celebration with the priest having his back turned to the people, but rather of the priest guiding the people in pilgrimage toward the Kingdom, invoked in prayer until the return of the Lord.'* (**Applying the Liturgical Prescriptions of the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches 107. Congregation of Eastern Churches.*)

Before the liturgical renewal of the Second Vatican Council for the most part the Latin Church used only one Eucharistic Prayer, the Roman Canon. However, in the Western liturgical tradition the Spanish Mozarabic rite, the only Western Rite with little relationship to the Roman Rite, had almost as many Eucharistic Prayers as days in the year. The Roman Canon was celebrated with a variety of prefaces the use of which was determined either by the liturgical season or by the particular feast being commemorated. In the Ambrosian Rite the number of prefaces before and after the Council seem almost unlimited.

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However, since the Council the Western Church has introduced a limited number of additional Eucharistic Prayers and a greater variety of additional prefaces for use when appropriate. The various Eastern Churches, on the other hand, have from antiquity allowed the use of more than one Eucharistic Prayer or Anaphora. For example the Byzantine Churches, for the most part, use three; the Oriental

Orthodox Coptic Church use as many as four; and the Armenian Church, in the past at least, used as many as ten.

What perhaps may be of theological interest to us here is that the Oriental Orthodox Coptic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East have, throughout their long history, used the Anaphora of Addai and Mari. An Anaphora that is by implication very ancient, but an Anaphora that does not contain Jesus' words of institution.

What is perhaps of greater interest, and I would suggest of greater theological importance, is that despite the problem of the absence of Jesus' institutional words in the Anaphora of Mari and Addai, an Anaphora frequently used in the Divine Liturgy of the Assyrian Church of the East, inter-communion between Chaldean Catholics and the faithful of the Assyrian Church of the East is now officially permitted for pastoral reasons not only in their homeland, but also in the diaspora. This provision for mutual sharing of the Eucharist, motivated by concern for the good of souls and after doctrinal agreement had been achieved, though not the restoration of full communion between the Chaldean Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East, has been sanctioned by Rome. The importance of this agreement between the Chaldean Catholic Church, the Assyrian Church of the East and the Roman Church cannot be over stated since it has important implications for the sacramental and liturgical life of the Roman Church, the Chaldean Catholic Church, the Assyrian Church of the East, and indeed for the whole Church.

*For a fuller explanation and understanding of the Eucharistic agreement between the Chaldean Catholic Church, the Assyrian Church of the East and the See of Rome c.f. the official statement issued by the Vatican.

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As I am sure you are aware the Roman Church does allow Orthodox Christians to receive Holy Communion in certain circumstances. However, the Orthodox Churches as a whole are not altogether comfortable with this practice and as a result Catholics are not generally permitted to receive Holy Communion in Orthodox Churches. However, in the past, and again for pastoral reasons and with the permission of the competent authorities of the Churches involved, Catholics were allowed to receive Holy Communion in the Russian Orthodox Church during a short period of the Communist era, but only in the Metropolitan See of St. Petersburg, only in a limited number of specified Churches and only for a relatively very brief period.

An essential dimension in the sacramental theology of all the Eastern Churches is expressed in the prayers of ‘epiclesis’. The word ‘epiclesis’ literally means ‘invocation’ and is the name given to the prayer in the celebration of the sacraments that specifically invokes the coming of the Holy Spirit. A notable scriptural basis of this sacramental theology may be found in Luke Ch.11: 13:

‘If you then who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!’

Thus in the East, the Father is recognised and acknowledged as the Giver of the Holy Spirit who in the original Constantinopolitan Creed of Nicea, that does not, as I am sure you will recall, contain the ‘filioque’ clause, is identified as proceeding from the Father and who with the Father and Son is glorified. The belief that the Father is the Giver of all good gifts is finds liturgical expression in the prayer said towards the end of the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom in the Prayer before the Ambo:

‘For every good gift and every perfect grace is from above, coming down from You, the Father of Lights’

The sacraments are understood therefore, as being brought about through the power of the Holy Spirit who is the Father’s first gift to those who believe in his Son. The bishops and priests, though not the deacons, are through the grace of sacramental ordination empowered to invoke the Holy Spirit on behalf of the Church.

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This high theology of priestly orders finds early liturgical expression in the greeting and response:

'The Lord be with you' 'And with your spirit'

the word '*spirit*' in this response, unfortunately omitted in the present English translation of the Western Liturgy, refers to the sacramental grace of ordination bestowed on bishops and priests by the Holy Spirit and thus also refers to their empowerment to invoking the Holy Spirit in the name of the Church a gift that has been entrusted to the bishop or priest by the laying on of hands and sacred anointing.

This principle of epiclesis goes some way to explaining the differing traditions in East and West concerning the minister/s of the Sacrament of marriage. In the West it is the couple being married who are considered the ministers of the sacrament, whereas in the East it is the bishop or priest who is understood to be the minister of the sacrament.

In the East this fundamental dimension of epiclesis is seen as a guarantee that the sacraments are signs of God working on behalf of all the faithful for their salvation and are not misunderstood as a kind of magic. A prayer of epiclesis is therefore, to be found in most celebrations of the sacraments in almost all the Eastern Churches.

Although the literal and original meaning of the term epiclesis is 'invocation' it has long been held to mean more specifically a petition for the consecration of the bread and wine in the celebration of the Eucharist. Of this much has been written and much has been said.

As I have suggested already a prayer of epiclesis is found in almost every sacramental celebration in the Eastern Churches and, with only one exception that I am aware of, in almost every Anaphora used by the Eastern Churches. However, the position of the prayer of epiclesis in the Anaphora may vary according to the particular liturgical family from which it originates.

In the Eastern Churches as in the Western Church there is also an invoking of the Holy Spirit or second prayer of epiclesis requesting that the Holy Spirit sanctify and gather the faithful into the fullness of the Divine Kingdom. This second prayer of epiclesis is very ancient as may be discerned in the well known and often quoted formula of the Didache:

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'As this bread once scattered on the waters/mountains was gathered together and became one, so may your Church be gathered from the ends of the earth into your kingdom.'

While making reference to the Didache it must also be stated that like the ancient Anaphora of Addai and Mari, the Didache does not contain the institutional words of Jesus or a prayer of epiclesis for the consecration of the bread and wine. The Anaphora of Addai and Mari is the only example I am aware of where this is the case. However, if anyone possesses evidence to the contrary please do inform later, I would be most interested to learn more!

The role of the Holy Spirit in the sacramental and liturgical life of the Eastern Churches is further emphasised and expressed by means of the prayers of Anamnesis or remembering, which in the East are usually much longer and more detailed than is the case in the West. The prayers of Anamnesis that recall the events of salvation history have their scriptural basis in, among other places, the last discourse of Jesus with his disciples recorded in the gospel of John 14:26;

The advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send you in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all I have told you.'

The Anamnesis also has scriptural basis in the gospel of Luke in the account of the disciples encountering the risen Lord on the road to Emmaus. In that account the risen Lord himself explains the scriptures to the awesome amazement of the disciples. With their hearts burning within them these disciples press the risen Lord to stay with them and eventually come to recognise him in the breaking of bread. Rightly then, does the Russian Orthodox liturgical theologian the late Archpriest Alexander Schemmen remind us that the liturgy and the scriptures are equally *sources* of theology and not just subjects of theology. Rightly also does Schemmen together with Schillebeeckx point us to Christ the Sacrament.

As 'Sacrament' Christ manifests his presence in the Church and in the world and it is not unusual among theologians in both the East and the West these days to extend the concept of sacrament and to talk of creation as sacrament and the Church as sacrament etc. In fact Schemmen in his book *'The Eucharist'* identifies the various rites and the various stages of

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ascent of the Divine Liturgy by attributing to each of these rites and ascending steps the title of sacrament.

While the Western Church traditionally adheres to there being seven sacraments, in certain Eastern Churches the anointing and consecration of monarchs and monastic profession are also considered as sacraments. In the Eastern Churches where this is the case the assumption is that there are not just seven sacraments but at least seven.

Let me end this talk with a lighted hearted personal comment and suggest that in my opinion the more sacraments available to us the better!

Thank you.

Dom Dyfrig Harris