

The Eucharist As The Presence Of Christ In The Iconic Gathering Of The Church

Introduction

This paper has been inspired by the debate for centuries between Latin and Greek churchmen over the time of change of the offered bread and wine into the Body and the Blood of Christ. Examining the issues in this debate has resulted in an understanding of the liturgy, in its various eucharistic canons, as the presence of Christ in the iconic gathering of the Church. This result was derived from the re-examination of the debate from the perspective of Orthodox liturgical theology, referring particularly to Frs Alexander Schmemmann and John Meyendorff.

This presentation is a summary of this examination and how the understanding is derived from the liturgical theology of Schmemmann and Meyendorff, which is also that developed by Metropolitan John Zizioulas and Fr Nicholas Loudovikos.

To begin the presentation, liturgical theology will be discussed to set the framework from within which the liturgy is to be understood. This is especially important to determine the purpose and goal of the liturgy. Then the liturgical theology will be outlined. Various liturgical rites will then be examined to see if they indeed reflect this theology and how they do so. Once this is complete the problems of various positions of the debate will be addressed followed by a proposed solution to the debate.

Liturgical Theology

Before beginning with liturgical theology proper, it will be worthwhile to take a moment to consider how the liturgy fits into a broader picture of theology. This is because the liturgy is not something of itself for itself but part of, if not central to, the divine economy or plan.

According to St Maximus the Confessor, the Incarnation and "recapitulation" of all things in Christ is the true "goal" and "aim" of creation. Also, according to Maximus, Christ as man "accomplishes in all truth the true human destiny that he himself has predetermined as God and from which man had turned: He unites man to God." Thus, the goal of the divine plan is the union of man to God, that is theosis or deification.

This union is an important principle for understanding liturgical theology and this is reflected in the understanding of Schmemmann, for whom the purpose of worship is to "express the Church as the

unity of that Body whose Head is Christ." Schmemmann also makes an important statement that "its purpose is that we should always 'with one mouth and one heart' serve God, since it is only such worship which God commanded the Church to offer." Another statement of relevance from Schmemmann is that "[t]he Eucharist is *the* Sacrament of the Church; i.e. her eternal actualisation as the Body of Christ, united in Christ by the Holy Spirit." This stresses the Eucharist as the realisation of the union. Meyendorff makes the following points:

[T]he Church, as the Body of Christ, is precisely a communion of God and man, not only where God is present and active, but where humanity becomes fully "acceptable to God," fully adequate to the original divine plan; prayer itself then becomes an act of communion, where there cannot be any question of its not being heard by God.... Thus, all Christians — including the bishop, or the priest — are individually nothing more than sinners, whose prayers are not necessarily heard, but when gathered together in the name of Christ, as the "Church of God," they are a part in the New Testament, to which God has eternally committed Himself through His Son and the Spirit.

Also:

As a manifestation of the Church's unity and wholeness,... the local church where the Eucharist is celebrated was always considered to be...the whole Body of Christ manifested sacramentally and including the entire "communion of saints," living or departed.

We can see in Meyendorff that the Eucharist is the realisation of the Church as acceptable to God, according to the divine plan. We can also see that that whole Church, "the 'entire communion of Saints,'" is manifested in the Eucharist. Finally of interest is that the prayers are heard "when gathered together in the name of Christ, as the 'Church of God.'" This conforms with Schmemmann's statement that God commands to offer "with one mouth and one heart". Meyendorff agrees with Schmemmann that the Church is realised in the Eucharist. Meyendorff also connects the Eucharist with the communion of God and man in the divine plan that we see as the true human destiny in St Maximus the Confessor. This is supported both by Zizioulas, in *Being is Communion*, among other works, and by Loudovikos in his work, *A Eucharistic Ontology*.

The theme that is to be taken from these expressions of liturgical theology is the gathering together of individual members as the Church of God, with the entire "communion of the saints," which enables their communal prayer "with one mouth and one heart" to be united with the offering of Christ and accepted by God.

Connecting Liturgical Theology to the Liturgical Texts

The texts of the rites of St John Chrysostom, St Basil the Great and the Roman Rite will now be considered in the light of the theme of liturgical theology presented. The main purpose of this examination is to see how principle features of the rites reflect the theme outlined above. The Roman Rite is included because the anaphora has changed little since its use from well before the schism and it was recognised as manifesting the same Body of Christ, that is Church, as the Eastern rites.

The rites of St John Chrysostom and St Basil the Great are the same in structure with only the “mystical” prayers differing, so they will be treated together with particular prayers highlighted to show how they uniquely reflect the theme. The first relevant feature of the anaphoras, after the Creed, is the giving of peace to all, which is essential to unity because there can be no unity where there is strife and division. The next feature is to foreshadow the reception of the grace, love and communion of the Trinity, which points to deification. Then there is a call to lift hearts to the Lord, consistent with union with God at the core of our being. The next feature of interest is uniting with the angels in singing the triumphal hymn, or Sanctus, indicating a union of both spiritual and physical creation. Next, there is a remembrance of: Christ’s dispensation; the words of institution; and his command, which is to “do this in remembrance of me.” Thus, connecting and uniting the liturgy with both the supper instituted by Christ himself and his whole dispensation including his coming again. There is then an exclamation of offering that recognises the offerings to be Christ’s and that the offering is according to all and for all, thus continuing the connection of the assembly’s offering with that of Christ in being according to all that he did and commanded and on behalf of all creation. Immediately after this, there is an epiclesis prayer that the Spirit may come upon the gifts and upon all the faithful and make them into the Body and Blood of Christ, so that by partaking of them they may receive the aspects of deification thus realising, in becoming, what they are iconically presenting. St Basil’s rite, in the prayer following the epiclesis, makes clear the purpose of this prayer is the “union of all”. This reflects well the statement of Schmemmann that the Eucharist is the Church’s “eternal actualization as the Body of Christ, united in Christ by the Holy Spirit.” In St Basil’s rite, the epiclesis prayer continues for us to find “grace with” (that is union with) all the Saints and all the faithful, thus showing the gathering is connected to the entire communion of Saints. The offering continues, in St John Chrysostom’s rite, for all the Saints, and all the faithful in all circumstances of life. The prayers for the different circumstances of our lives reflect that Christ unites with our whole life in all its various aspects, that Christ is truly to become all in all. St Basil’s

rite has the following phrase, “Be Thou Thyself all things to all men” within these prayers and this confirms the understanding expressed here. The offering prayer finally finishes with the doxology:

And grant us with one mouth and one heart to glorify and praise Thine all-honourable and majestic name, of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages.

Here we can see the phrase “with one mouth and one heart” used by Schmemmann confirming that this is the worship that God commanded to be offered. The offering is now finished with the consent of all the faithful present with their “Amen”. Thus, the closing part of the anaphora with the epiclesis and offering prayer confirm that the offering is made to unite the faithful with all the Saints, with their Bishop and with all faithful Christians in all aspects of their lives. This conforms with goal of Creation and the liturgical theology as discussed above. The gathering is truly an icon of the Church of God into the name of Christ and as such, according to Schmemmann and Meyendorff, the offering is accepted because it is confirmed as being the worship that God commands the Church to offer “with one mouth and one heart.” The Holy Spirit fills this icon and actualises the presence of Christ in entire congregation and in the gifts, all are the Body of Christ. After the “Amen”, the laity are called to communion, following the prayer: “Our Father”, so to partake of the offering as participators of the altar, that is as the royal priesthood and to re-become Church.

The Roman rite approximately follows the same pattern with three notable variations. The first point of variation is that the memory of the saints, bishop and faithful occur before the words of institution. The memorials are of similar form and style as the eastern rites but located earlier. This earlier position of the memorials indicates that the memorials are not something done in the presence of the consecrated gifts, as Nicholas Cabasilas’ commentary of the liturgy would suggest, rather, the different position conforms with the idea that the memorials are done as part of the process of forming the icon of the Church of God as the entire communion of saints as is emphasised by the Areopagite in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. The next point of variation is that the Roman Rite does not pray for the descent of the Holy Spirit, i.e. have an explicit epiclesis. Even though the intent of the epiclesis can be seen in various places in the Roman rite, there is not that prayer that many have understood, in the East, to effect the consecration. The third aspect is the final portion of the anaphora prayer and doxology:

Through Whom, Lord, thou always create, sanctify, fill with life, bless and bestow upon us all good things. Through Him, and with Him, and in Him, is to thee, God the Father Almighty, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all honour and glory, forever and ever.

We have here a clear expression of the understanding of uniting with the offering of Christ, through whom the Father effects all good things in/by the Holy Spirit, which means that this prayer also functions as an epiclesis. Then the anaphora receives the “Amen” of the people. Thus, the Roman rite also works well with the theme outlined above in that the liturgy is realised in the completion of the anaphora that establishes an icon of the Church of God united in the offering of Christ.

Moment of Change

Briefly to consider the moment of change and a solution to the debate that inspired this paper. The debate was between the Latin understanding that the gifts change at the words of institution but this conflicts with later asking God to accept the gifts. The Greek understanding, of a change at the epiclesis, has a problem that there is no explicit epiclesis in the Roman, and western rites generally, thus no act of consecration. Yet, these rites were accepted for centuries before the schism. Also, the continuance of making the offering in St John Chrysostom’s rite after the epiclesis produces the same problem as with the Latin understanding. So, it seems that neither the words of institution themselves nor the epiclesis itself are appropriate moments for the change of the gifts consistent with the rites examined.

The proposed solution to the problem is to see the change happening at the completion of the anaphora with the confirming “Amen” of the people. This fits well with the theme outlined, and the structure of the rites examined because once the offering is confirmed as that commanded by God “with one mouth and one heart,” completing the iconic form of the Church of God united to Christ then this icon can be and is realised by the Holy Spirit, and the offering immediately becomes the food for which it maintains, the Body of Christ. One would then expect an immediate move to commune to complete the union in the partaking and this is exactly what we see happening in the various rites. The “Our Father” also confirms the realisation of the Church of God because only as sons of God is it legitimate to call God “Father”. The Church is realised both before and after partaking of the Eucharist; it must be the Church to have a valid Eucharist, which in turn re-establishes the Church and sustains it. Note: the Eucharist is not an initiation into the Church but something done by those already in the Church as the Church to sustain themselves in and as the Church. This fits well with the idea of becoming-in-communion that we see in Loudovikos.

Conclusion

Having briefly examined liturgical theology, as has been presented by Schmemmann and Meyendorff this presentation has considered key rites in regard to this theology. It has been argued that the theology is consistent with the rites and that the purpose of the rites is to manifest the Church through iconic union of the local community in aspects of its life with Christ and the entire communion of saints. The presence of the Body and Blood is effected by this iconic union of the assembly with Christ's offering, and completed by the Holy Spirit with the consent of the laity at the confirming "Amen", thus manifesting the Church of God in Christ by the Holy Spirit. This reflects the realisation of the Church in the Eucharist as Schmemmann and Meyendorff maintain in their liturgical theology because the worship is be "the public act which eternally actualises the nature of the Church as the Body of Christ."

Also, if Liturgical piety is to be shaped around the understanding of the moment of change as with the "Amen" of the people after the doxology of the anaphora then the importance of the role of the laity would be greatly enhanced and each member of the congregation would have a definite sense of involvement with the offering in contributing his or her voice to the communal "Amen". It would also help to provide a greater sense of bond between the priests and the laity because the priest must wait for the laity's "Amen" before the mystery is complete; they are offering the sacrifice together and need each other to complete the iconic form. This does not diminish the iconic role of the priest but rather unites it with the people and thus all are united as one in Christ. This is also more consistent with the standing lay "Amen" at the end of the anaphora rather than the present innovation in some places of lay "Amens" during the epiclesis prayer.

Further research could be conducted on both examining more rites in terms of this solution and liturgical theology. Also, in re-examining canons and ancient liturgical practices, such as excluding the catechumens and heretics, in terms of the iconic gathering of the community as the Church.