

Symbolism in Orthodox Liturgy

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The Orthodox Church and her symbolism have gone through various transitions during her two millennia of existence. The Church's approach to symbolism over the centuries has come from two vantage points, one vantage is describing the symbol and/or what it represents and the other vantage is trying to understand the concept of symbolism itself. This paper is a reflection on the developments of symbolism as it relates to the elements and events within the Divine Liturgy, primarily the Eucharist.

Compared to what Orthodox Liturgy is today, the gatherings of Christians were much simpler at the end of the first century. They were little more than a formal Jewish meal, to which was soon added a synagogue service of scripture reading, sermon and prayers. Christians lived vividly in the *in-between*, intimately conscious of past events – the risen Christ present in the Holy Spirit, while always anticipating the second coming – the heavenly Kingdom of God existing in the *here and now*.

The earliest writings describing the liturgy are not concerned with symbolism as much as with the specific actions that take place during a Eucharistic gathering, almost a *do's and don't's* guide. In the Didache, the section on the Eucharist leaves the door open to symbolism in one of the doxologies.

Thou, O Almighty Lord, hast created all things for thine own Name's sake; to all men thou hast given meat and drink to enjoy, that they may give thanks to thee, but to us thou hast graciously given spiritual meat and drink, together with life eternal, through thy Servant...¹

However, the original intent of the liturgy was not to provide symbolic ideas *about* the liturgy – it was intended for believers to *be* fully part of the preparation and sacrifice of the Eucharist. The gathering was simply one part of a person's whole liturgical lifestyle, which was lived as a follow-up after and as a preparation for the Eucharistic meal.

It was not until the fourth century, when Constantine legalised all religions and Justinian essentially made Christianity mandatory, that the birth of symbolism came into the Church. As a way of explaining what was happening in the liturgy to the new influx of nominal Christians, catechetical instructions were created not simply from the actual text and prayers of the liturgy itself, but rather, as interpretations of the early Christian understandings of Scripture. With any interpretive information, local perspectives or biases flavoured this symbolism, thus giving us what have been labelled as *Alexandrian* or *Antiochian* Schools of Allegory.²

Alexandrian Symbolism

One type of symbolism used to describe the liturgy, an analogical approach, focuses on the spiritual interpretation of Scripture. Paul Meyendorff provides us with insight on the focus of this

¹ Maxwell Staniforth and Andrew Louth, tr., *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers*, (London, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1968), 195.

² Paul Meyendorff, introduction and Commentary to *On the Divine Liturgy*, by St. Germanus I, Patriarch of Constantinople (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999), 23-25.

approach. "Reality...is spiritual, and the material symbols are only the means by which it is communicated. Thus the material world has value only insofar as it is symbolic, that is, only insofar as it is able to communicate, to reveal the spiritual realities."³ We can see within this world view there is the understanding that the symbol is directly related to that which it symbolises – the spiritual reality is manifested in the material symbol.

Origen developed this branch of symbolism at great length and thus provided the theological foundation for many theologians after him. Hugh Wybrew provides a good summary of some of Origen's key liturgical symbols.

We must learn to see in the letter of Scripture the spirit, in the Christian community the incarnate Word, and in her visible rites and ceremonies the saving activity of God. So the eucharistic banquet is a symbol of the union of the soul with the divine Word of God, and prefigures the perfect union to which we look forward at the end of time. But the different aspects of the rite also have symbolic value, as well as the whole. The altar, for instance, is the symbol of our interior worship: the smoke of the incense represents the prayers offered by a pure conscience. The bishop is the symbol of Jesus, the priests are Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the apostles: the deacons are the seven archangels of God. Bowing the knee symbolizes inner humility and obedience: the kiss of peace expresses genuine love. For Origen the Christian rite fulfils its prefigurations in the Old Testament, expresses the spiritual worship we are meant to offer now, and is the image and anticipation of the worship of heaven....

Origen's teaching about the Christian mystery and the Liturgy as one means by which it may be apprehended is the soil from which grew one strand in the Byzantine tradition of liturgical

³ *Ibid.*, 26.

interpretation and initiation. Developed by Dionysius the Areopagite in the fifth century and Maximus the Confessor in the seventh, it was taken up and given its final form in the fifteenth century by Symeon of Thessalonike.⁴

Alongside Origen, there were many other significant people in the Church who came from Alexandria as well as the whole monastic movement which blossomed in the Egyptian deserts south of Alexandria.

Stepping forward, it is Pseudo-Dionysius who embellishes Origen's symbolism regarding the Eucharist – the rite of the synaxis – more than any other father as of yet. Here he is writing catechetical lectures for new converts so they can gain a deeper understanding of the liturgy. Rather than focusing on the material symbols and what spiritual element they symbolise, his focus is on how these material symbols should spur a Christian on to a purer lifestyle by understanding what they have consumed in the Eucharist.

The variegated and sacred composition of the symbols is not unprofitable to [those yet being initiated], even though it presents only their external features. The sacred chanting of the scriptures and the readings teach the rules of virtuous living. Above all, it teaches the need for the total purification of the self from destructive evil. The shared, peaceful, and most divine distribution of the one bread and of the one cup lays down as a norm that having been nourished by the same food their lives must be joined in full sharing of inspired food. It also sacredly reminds them of the most divine Supper, which is the original symbol of all the rites.⁵

⁴ Hugh Wybrew, *The Orthodox Liturgy* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1966), 24-25.

⁵ John Farina, ed., *Pseudo Dionysius: The complete works*, Colm Luibheid, tr. (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1987), 211-2.

Another step forward leads us to Maximus the Confessor. In *The Church's Mystagogy*, Maximus doesn't speak of the elements of the Eucharist specifically as a symbol, but does propose what happens spiritually to those who receive "the sacrament" and how those who partake are transformed by the Body and Blood of Christ.

After [the preparation of the Eucharist], as the climax of everything, comes the distribution of the sacrament, which transforms into itself and renders similar to the causal good by grace and participation those who worthily share in it. To them is there lacking nothing of this good that is possible and attainable for men, so that they also can be and be called gods by adoption through grace because all of God entirely fills them and leaves no part of them empty of his presence.⁶

Maximus is essentially expounding on St. Athanasius' statement, "God became man that men might become gods," in *On the Incarnation*.

As hinted at in these examples, a spiritual gnosis developed as the centuries went on. The elaboration of how the spiritual realm was reflected in the Eucharist and the Divine Liturgy certainly did not remain stagnant, but was re-interpreted by new generations. As we reach the modern era we, like Paul Meyendorff, can reflect on the developed Alexandrian view point in light of an even broader context and therefore realise the limitations of focussing on one interpretation of the liturgy.

We find the typically Alexandrian focus on the divinity of Christ, with the resulting difficulty in expressing Christ's earthly ministry.... The result of this approach is...an imbalanced view of the liturgy, for it pays little attention to what the liturgy itself has to say, to its

⁶ Maximus the Confessor, "The Church's Mystagogy," in *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, George C Berthold, tr. (Mahwah, New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 203.

texts and rites, and imposes its own philosophical presuppositions on them.⁷

But thankfully there has not been just one interpretation of the liturgy. To balance the Alexandrian view, another view developed during the same time frame, called Antiochian.

Antiochian Symbolism

The second notable type of symbolism dating from the early church, an allegorical, typological approach, focussed on actual historical events within Judaism and the life of Christ. Paul Meyendorff again provides insight stating,

...this method stresses the connection of the rites with the historical Jesus.... The eucharist is seen as a memorial not only of the Last Supper, but of the entire earthly ministry of Christ, as well as a prefiguring of the heavenly liturgy. This approach, first seen in the writings of Isidore of Pelusa...and John Chrysostom, is synthesized by Theodore of Mopsuestia in his catechetical homilies.... The focus is on Christ's earthly ministry, on the historical events of His life...as well as on the high priesthood which Christ now exercises in Heaven.⁸

Cyril of Jerusalem also fits into this list. The symbolism presented in his catechetical lectures, specifically, *On the Mysteries*, is very tangible and straight forward to understand.⁹ In speaking of the Body and Blood of Christ he reasons that if Christ could turn water into wine at Cana, then he is equally able to turn wine into blood. Cyril compares the bread and wine to various verses from the Psalms. He also refers

⁷ Meyendorff, Introduction, 28.

⁸ Ibid., 28-29.

⁹ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Lectures on the Christian Sacraments* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), 68.

to Solomon's words found in Ecclesiastes as a foretelling not only of the bread and wine of Eucharist, but also the garment at Baptism and the oil used during Chrismation.

Go, eat your bread with merriment
And drink your wine with a happy heart;
For now God is well pleased with your works.
Let your garments be always white,
And let your head lack no oil (9: 7-8).

As Cyril's catechism follows the Liturgy he also makes the following comparisons:

- Priest's washing hands – We must serve blamelessly
- Kiss of peace – Reconciliation with each other
- Holy, Holy, Holy* – We join with the Seraphim in heaven

Ultimately, in stressing the precious nature of the Eucharist itself, Cyril compares it to carrying gold dust,

...make your left hand as if a throne for your right, which is on the eve of receiving the king. And having hallowed your palm, receive the Body of Christ, saying after it, Amen. Then...partake thereof, giving heed lest you lose any of it; for what you lose is a loss to you as it were from one of your own members. For tell me, if any one gave you gold dust, would you not with all precaution keep it fast, being on your guard against losing any of it, and suffering loss? How much more cautiously then will you observe that not a crumb falls from you of what is more precious than gold and precious stones?

Then...approach also to the cup of his Blood...bending and saying in the way of worship and reverence, Amen, be hallowed by partaking also of the Blood of Christ. And while the moisture is still upon your lips, touching it with your hands, hallow both your eyes and brow and other senses. Then wait for the prayer, and give

thanks unto God, who has accounted you worthy of so great mysteries (*Mystagogical Catachesis* 5.21, 22).¹⁰

It is obvious that at this time the Body and Blood were consumed separately, whereas for many centuries now it is only the clergy who partake of the elements separately and all the remaining faithful consume the combined Gifts.

This very tangible symbolism is easy for people to identify with and take to heart. It is therefore understandable why, with this kind of teaching and the nominal character of the new floods of people attending church, the numbers of (and certainly the percentage of) communicants dropped drastically through the fourth century.¹¹ In fact Orthodoxy world wide is only returning to frequent communion within the last century.

Another key contributor to the Antiochian symbolism is St. John Chrysostom, a widely known Church Father from the late fourth century, and one doesn't need to go far to find his commonly used version of the Divine Liturgy even today.¹² The text of the Divine Liturgy itself has survived many eras and cultures with few changes. As the *Golden mouth* preacher, Chrysostom's homilies are still enjoyed by many Orthodox Christians.¹³

¹⁰ Cyril of Jerusalem, Quoted in Wybrew, 36.

¹¹ Jerome Tarris, *The Discipline of Holy Communion*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Thesis, 1973, 22.

¹² "The Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom," in *The Service Books of the Orthodox Church* (South Canaan, Pennsylvania: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 2010), 31-96.

¹³ St. John Chrysostom's homilies are available on the Christian Classics Ethereal Library website, <<http://www.ccel.org/index/author/C>>

St. Germanus' Symbolism

With the rapid increase of nominal church goers under Constantine's rule in the fourth century, the two types of symbolism discussed above were reactionary attempts to explain what the events in Liturgy meant, as Paul Meyendorff notes.

The "Antiochene" response was to develop a symbolism of the liturgy which saw the presence of the saving works of Christ in the rites themselves. The "Alexandrian" approach, more spiritualizing, was to develop a kind of Christian gnoseology, far more mystical and individualistic, an approach popular particularly in monastic circles.¹⁴

It was not until the eighth century that St. Germanus integrated the two different schools of thought in *On the Divine Liturgy*. Meyendorff continues,

The Byzantine approach to the liturgy before Germanus was basically Alexandrian, following the interpretation of Ps.-Dionysius and Maximus... Germanus keeps much of this earlier Byzantine tradition, modifying it somewhat, and adds a more Antiochene perspective, far more historicizing and focusing on the human ministry of Christ.¹⁵

This work synthesizes these two types of symbolism as it describes church architecture, clergy vestments, the bread and wine used for the Eucharist, and various elements of and actions within the Divine Liturgy; this includes a phrase-by-phrase commentary on the Lord's Prayer. Although Germanus' work is not referred to much any more, it

¹⁴ Meyendorff, introduction, 40.

¹⁵ Ibid., 42.

had a significant impact on the Byzantine Empire when it was written and for many centuries following.

To demonstrate this synthesis is the following excerpt from St. Germanus' discussion of the Anaphora. To highlight the different symbolic types, Alexandrian is underlined and *Antiochian* is italicized.

The veil, or the aer, corresponds to the stone which Joseph placed against the tomb and which the guards of Pilate sealed... Thus Christ is crucified, life is buried, the tomb is secured, the stone is sealed. In the company of the angelic powers, the priest approaches, standing no longer as on earth, but attending at the heavenly altar, before the altar of the throne of God, and he contemplates the great, ineffable, and unsearchable mystery of God. He gives thanks, proclaims the resurrection, and confirms the faith in the Holy Trinity... Then the priest, leading everyone into the heavenly Jerusalem, to His holy mountain, exclaims: "Behold, let us lift up our hearts!" ...¹⁶

Meanwhile, somewhere during the next few centuries, there was another progression in the semantic understanding of what a symbol was, no doubt influenced by Western scholasticism. This new understanding, called *illustrative symbolism*, makes a clear distinction between the symbol and that which is symbolised. There is essentially nothing of the original contained in the symbol; the symbol is viewed as something completely different and only in one's mind is that which is symbolised actually understood.¹⁷ This definition is the predominant understanding of symbolism today.

¹⁶ St. Germanus I, Patriarch of Constantinople, *On the Divine Liturgy*, Paul Meyendorff, tr. (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999), 89.

¹⁷ Thomas Fisch, ed., *Liturgy and Tradition: Theological Reflections of Alexander Schmemmann* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), 116-119.

Nicholas Cabasilas' Symbolism

It was in the fourteenth century when a fresh perspective on symbolism within the Divine Liturgy was brought to light by Nicholas Cabasilas. In *A Commentary on the Divine Liturgy* his liturgical symbolism centred on Christ and events in His earthly life, death & resurrection. Cabasilas' extensive commentary on the Liturgy, from the preparation through to the final doxology, is still a well referred-to source in Orthodox circles today. The flavour of his commentary differs from previous writings on the Divine Liturgy by expressing how valuable each aspect of the Liturgy is to every person. In his pastoral perspective he even mentions that it would be beneficial if the preparation service were to be restored as part of the Liturgy as it was in the early days, so that all people would be reminded that the gifts are *directly* presented and offered from each of us as Orthodox Christians.

Similar to Antiochian symbolism, there is a tangibility to Cabasilas' commentary. For example, he expounds on the bread used for the preparation as follows:

The words and actions performed over the bread which signify the death of the Lord are only a description and a symbol. The bread therefore remains bread and has received no more than the capacity to be offered to God. This is why it typifies the Lord's body in his early years, for...he himself was an offering from his birth onwards.¹⁸

The other bookend to the Eucharistic sacrifice is symbolically after Christ's ascension. It is the Holy Spirit who consecrates the bread and wine, transforming them into the Body and Blood of Christ. The

¹⁸ Nicholas Cabasilas, *A Commentary on the Divine Liturgy*, J. M. Hussey and P. A. McNulty, tr. (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 41.

warm water (having the nature of both water and fire) added to the chalice also symbolises the Holy Spirit – portrayed both as fire and water – descending upon us after all things pertaining to Christ were accomplished.¹⁹

After discussing the whole Divine Liturgy, Cabasilas touches on a few additional things, such as the reason why the Gifts are called “Eucharist.”

Since the sacrifice is both eucharistic and supplicatory, why does it not bear both names? Why is it simply called the Eucharist?

It is because it takes its name from the more important element. Our reasons for thanksgiving are more numerous than those for supplication, since the number of benefits which we have received exceeds that of which we still have need; the latter are only a part, the former are the whole. The benefits we ask for are simply a part of what we have obtained already.²⁰

This symbolic view, though not influencing all areas of the Orthodox Christian world, has still had an impact. It has not been until the last century that other theologians have produced works considered to be as notable as Cabasilas. One such theologian, at least within the Orthodox Church in America, is Alexander Schmemmann.

“Contemporary” Symbolism

Schmemmann’s works may not provide a new type of symbolism that can be called *contemporary*, but does provide well researched and a re-interpreted understanding of life in the early centuries of Christianity. The best term to explain the original essence of the

¹⁹ Ibid., 90-91.

²⁰ Ibid., 116.

liturgical experience within the early church, according to Schmemmann, is *eschatological symbolism*. To understand what he means by this requires insight into the actual life experience of the early Christians. For them, the distinction between the symbol and that which it symbolizes was simply ignored. As Schmemmann states, "The whole point of the eschatological symbolism is that in it the sign and that which it signifies are one and the same thing."²¹ Simply stated, the prayers of the Divine Liturgy mean what they say. For example, the request during the Anaphora: "Send down Thy Holy Spirit upon us and upon these Gifts here offered...and make this Bread the Precious Body of Thy Christ.... And that which is in this Cup, the Precious Blood of Thy Christ.... Making the change by Thy Holy Spirit."²² literally means what it is asking for, and is not illustrative symbolism. In another work, Schmemmann describes it like this.

In the early tradition... the relationship between the sign in the symbol (A) and that which it "signifies" (B) is neither a merely semantic one (*A means B*), nor causal (*A is the cause of B*), nor representative (*A represents B*). We called this relationship an *epiphany*. "*A is B*" means that the whole of A expresses, communicates, reveals, manifests the "reality" of B (although not necessarily the whole of it) without, however, losing its own ontological reality, without being dissolved in another "res." But it was precisely this relationship between the A and the B, between the sign and the signified, that was changed. Because of the reduction of knowledge to rational or discursive knowledge there appears between A and B a *hiatus*. The symbol may still be means of knowledge but, as all knowledge, it is knowledge *about* and not knowledge *of*. It can be a revelation about the "res," but not the epiphany of the "res" itself. A can mean B, or represent it, or even in certain instances, be the "cause" of its presence; but A is no

²¹ Fisch, 127.

²² "The Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom," 69-70.

longer viewed as the very means of "participation" *in* B. Knowledge and participation are now two different realities, two different orders.²³

The patristic writers virtually never separated these; living sacramentally meant participating in the liturgical life of the Church throughout one's life, not just one morning a week. Certainly in our modern world, participation in symbolism has been completely overshadowed by illustrative symbolism – knowledge *about* things.

Schmemmann also states that since the sixteenth century, Orthodox theologians have functioned within a Westernized frame of reference when discussing sacrament, which is to remove / isolate the sacraments from their liturgical context in order to determine their *essence*. One significant event in Western church history provides us with some insight into how this disconnection came about.

At the end of the twelfth century a Latin theologian, Berengarius of Tours, was condemned for his teaching on the Eucharist. He maintained that because the presence of Christ in the Eucharistic elements is "mystical" or "symbolic," it is not *real*. The Lateran Council which condemned him... simply reversed the formula. It proclaimed that since Christ's presence in the Eucharist is *real*, it is not "mystical." What is truly decisive here is precisely the disconnection and the opposition of the two terms *verum* and *mystice*, the acceptance, on both sides, that they are mutually exclusive. Western theology thus declared that that which is "mystical" or "symbolic" is not real, whereas that which is "real" is not symbolic. This was, in fact, the collapse of the fundamental

²³ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 141-2.

Christian *mysterion*, the antinomical “holding together” of the reality of the symbol, and of the symbolism of reality.²⁴

To understand that which Schmemmann calls the early Christian’s eschatological symbolism, requires understanding their eschatology. With Christ’s incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension into heaven, and the descent of the Holy Spirit, the eon of the Kingdom of God was begun. Those who enter into this Kingdom through baptism and live in this Kingdom through Eucharist live in a constant tension between the *here and now* of this world and the *yet to come* of the Kingdom of God. Within this tension “the entire liturgy is the Church’s ascension to Christ’s table in His Kingdom, just as the Eucharistic Gifts sanctified by the Holy Spirit are the Body and Blood of Christ.”²⁵

Looking beyond the Eucharist, the whole sacramental life of the Church is meant to transform the earth and everything in it to a state that is even better than it was in before the Fall. “A sacrament...is always a *passage*, a *transformation*...into the Kingdom of God, the world to come, into the very reality of this world and its life as redeemed and restored by Christ.”²⁶ Living in a sacramental way *is* liturgy. The extension of the Divine Liturgy – the work of the people – into every aspect of our life is how we as Christians are able to bring about this transformation. This is the unity Schmemmann exhorts us to strive for.

To rediscover the initial and organic unity between the liturgy and the sacrament, the liturgy through the sacrament and the sacrament through the liturgy, as one dynamic reality in which *symbol* – the liturgy – is always fulfilled in the *sacrament* – such

²⁴ Ibid., 128-9.

²⁵ Fisch, 127.

²⁶ Schmemmann, 102.

then is the condition for the recovery of that perspective which alone can lead us beyond the dead-ends of our present situation.²⁷

John Meyendorff provides us with a similar perspective by looking at the modern North American context of the Orthodox Church. Since the 1970's the restoration of frequent Communion in the Orthodox Church is significant. The All American Councils within the Orthodox Church in America set an example.²⁸ But this comes at the risk of pietism, approaching the Eucharist casually, forgetting that the Son of God came to save the whole world and not just us at church. This sacramental world view must be demonstrated in our deeds and indeed our very way of life.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 150-1.

²⁸ John Meyendorff, *Vision of Unity* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987), 115-6.

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