

The Church Building

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The Liturgy of the Church can help us in our study of theology. The words of the Services of the Church express the theology, which the Church believes and within which it lives. In Western theological thinking, this is expressed by the Latin phrase, *lex orandi, lex credendi*. This phrase expresses the close link between worship and theology. In this paper, I intend to study the theology of the church building or parish church by examining the appropriate references in “The Office at the Consecration of a Church.”¹ These references, for the most part, are found in the various prayers which the Bishop recites at significant moments in the service. I have limited this study solely to the service in I.F. Hapgood’s volume believing that it is useful to discover all the riches of one particular service.

There is a profound Old Testament influence in this service. The Bishop’s first prayer recalls Moses, Bezaleel, and the Tabernacle whose structure and furniture were revealed to Moses by God on Mount Sinai.² The Tabernacle is “a law and a pattern... wherein ordinances and divine worship were instituted, which were the image and type of the true.”³ The prayer then recalls Solomon and the Temple in Jerusalem.⁴ In both cases the initiative is God’s. He shows Moses the pattern of the Tabernacle and He inspires Solomon to build the Temple. King Solomon’s prayer of dedication of the

¹ Isabel Florence Hapgood, *Service Book of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic Apostolic Church*, (Englewood, New Jersey 1983), pp493-511; subsequent references Hapgood & page number

² Exodus 31.1-5; all quotations from the Bible are taken from the Revised Standard Version.

³ Hapgood, p.496

⁴ Hapgood, p.496

Temple in Jerusalem expresses his and his people's gratitude to God.⁵ In the same way, in later generations and in our times, God inspires faithful people to build and to beautify their Churches/ Temples. There is an interesting similarity between the Temple in Jerusalem and an Orthodox Church. Both have careful arrangements of spaces for different categories of people. The Temple in Jerusalem had courts for gentiles, Jewish women and Jewish men, the Holy, and the Holy of Holies. An Orthodox parish church has areas for catechumens, the faithful and the clergy, and the iconostasis which separates the altar and the clergy from other parts of the church.⁶ Although Early Christian churches were modelled on a Roman secular building, the *basilica*, it is possible that internal arrangements that the Temple in Jerusalem influenced also influence the internal arrangements of an Orthodox parish church.⁷

The Church building is for God and His worship. In his first prayer, the Bishop says that it is "to Thy glory, and to the glory of Thine Only-begotten Son and of thine all-holy Spirit."⁸ The Bishop calls the church "thy dwelling place" and "the abode of thy glory."⁹ In another prayer, which has Old Testament echoes, the Bishop asks God, "Fill with thy glory divine this Temple erected to thy Praise."¹⁰ The Church is consecrated by invoking upon it the sanctifying grace of the Holy Spirit.¹¹ The Church, then, is a place where God's

⁵ 1 Kings 8.15-61 especially verses 23-4.

⁶ For a description of the exterior and internal arrangements of an Orthodox Church, see pages 5-15 of the handout material for Liturgics, Liturgical Theology First Semester.

⁷ Peter G. Cobb, 'The Architectural Setting of the Liturgy', in Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, Edmund Yarnold SJ and Paul Bradshaw, eds, *The Study of the Liturgy*, (London SPCK 1992), 528-42 at 529; for an early medieval commentary on the buildings of the Temple and its theology, see the Venerable Bede, *On the Temple*, trans & ed. Seán Connolly, (Liverpool University Press 1995)

⁸ Hapgood, p.496

⁹ Hapgood, p.496

¹⁰ Hapgood, p. 502; Exodus 40. 34-35, 'Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud abode upon it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle'; 1 Kings. 10-11, 'And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord'

¹¹ Hapgood, p.496

presence dwells and where He hears our prayers.¹² In the Bishop's second prayer, he speaks of people gathered in the Church "sending up unto thee petitions for ourselves and for all people."¹³ These phrases speak of the worship of God that will take place within the Church, which the Bishop is consecrating. In his first prayer, the Bishop speaks of God hearing the prayers which His people pray in His Church, "Thou wilt hear in heaven and wilt show mercy and be gracious unto them."¹⁴ This echoes Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem where he says, "Then hear Thou in heaven, and forgive the sins of thy people Israel, and bring them back again to the land which thou gavest to their fathers."¹⁵ Solomon's prayer strikes a balance between an affirmation of God's presence in the Temple and His continuing presence in heaven. On the one hand, Solomon says, "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain Thee; how much less this house which I have built!"¹⁶ Again and again in the course of his prayer, the king repeats the phrase, "hear thou in heaven."¹⁷ On the other hand, in the dedication of the Temple and in King Solomon's prayer, there is an affirmation of God's presence in His temple. We are told that "a cloud filled the house of the Lord."¹⁸ A cloud is a symbol both in the Old Testament and the New of God's presence with His people.¹⁹ The prayer repeats again and again that God will hear them if they direct their prayers towards Him in His house: "that thy eyes may be open night and day

¹² For another place where God's presence was discerned in a particular place, see Genesis 28. 16-17, 'Than Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it' and he was afraid and said, 'How awesome is this place. This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven'.

¹³ Hapgood, p.502, see also Matthew 21.13, 'He said to them, 'it is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you make it a den of robbers''. See also Isaiah 56.7, 'for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples'.

¹⁴ Hapgood, p.496

¹⁵ 1 Kings 8.34, see also 1 Kings 8.49; for the whole prayer, see 1 Kings 8.12-61

¹⁶ 1Kings 8.27

¹⁷ 1 Kings 8.30 'yea, hear thou in heaven thy dwelling place', 32, 34, 36, 39, 43, 45, 49,

¹⁸ 1 Kings 8.10

¹⁹ Exodus 13. 21 'And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of light to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night'; Mark 9. 7, 'And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, 'this is my beloved Son; listen to Him'.

towards this house, the place of which thou hast said," "My name shall be there" and "if they turn again to Thee and make supplication to Thee in this house."²⁰ If God hears the prayers that are made to Him, then He is present in the house where the prayers are made.

As we have seen, the Bishop's prayers affirm the presence of God in the church consecrated by him for the worship of God. This affirms that God is especially present in the worship that takes place within the church.²¹ The presence of the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ in the tabernacle on the Altar is also a symbol of Son of God present in His Church. On the other hand, we share King Solomon's conviction that buildings made with human hands, whether the Temple in Jerusalem or our parish churches, cannot fully contain the glory of God. We as Christians will experience the presence of God most fully in heaven at the end of our journeys on earth.

In a later prayer in the service, the Bishop speaking of the Church as a place of worship says:

And vouchsafe that without condemnation we may offer therein praises and exultations unto thy glory, and unto thine Only-begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and thy Holy Spirit, with understanding, and with all emotion; and that those who worship thee in thy fear may show themselves worthy of thy divine bounties; and that these prayers offered up by us and by all thy people unto thine ineffable loving-kindness may be acceptable unto thy goodness.²²

People's worship is directed to God the Holy Trinity, and consists of "praises and exultations" and "prayers" in hope that the prayers "may be acceptable unto thy goodness" and the worshippers may be "worthy of thy divine bounties." In his first prayer, the Bishop says, "That therein blessing thee in Psalms and songs, and mystical rites we may always magnify thy loving kindness."²³ These words remind us of the importance of the place of the

²⁰ 1 Kings 8. 29 & 33b, see also 1 Kings 8.30, 35, 38, 42, 44, 48,

²¹ Matthew 18.20, 'for where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them'.

²² Hapgood, p.507

²³ Hapgood, p. 496

Psalter in Christian worship.²⁴ Several Psalms are recited in the course of this service including Psalm LXXXIV, which speaks of the House of the Lord, Psalm CXXXII, which speaks of King David's desire to build a house for the Lord, and Psalm XXVI: "Lord, I love the habitation of thy house and the place where thine honour dwelleth."²⁵ The Bishop's second prayer identifies the role of the Apostles in establishing and maintaining the worship of the Church. They had been strengthened by the Holy Spirit and "administered Baptism unto the adoption of Sonship, builded churches, established Altars, and instituted the laws and precepts of the Priesthood."²⁶ These words identify the importance that the Church has always placed upon the Apostles' teaching and fellowship. The successors of the Apostles in our day are the Bishops of the Church. St Paul writes thus,

but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.²⁷

In this verse, St Paul is speaking not of a building of bricks or stones but rather of buildings composed of Christian people and communities. We might compare St Peter:

Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.²⁸

²⁴ Athanasius, 'Son, all the books of Scripture, both Old Testament and New, are inspired by God and useful for instruction, as the Apostle says; but to those who really study it the Psalter yields especial treasure', *The Letter of St. Athanasius to Marcellinus on the Interpretation of the Psalms*, (Crestwood, New York 1982), p.97

²⁵ Hapgood, pp 498, 500 & 501

²⁶ Hapgood, p. 502

²⁷ Ephesians 2.19b-22

²⁸ 1 Peter 2. 4-5; cf. Peter G. Cobb, 'The Architectural Setting of the Liturgy', in Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, Edmund Yarnold SJ and Paul Bradshaw, eds, *The Study of the Liturgy*, (London SPCK 1992), 528-42 at 529

Both the buildings of Christian people and the building of stones exist for the purpose of worshipping God.

The worship which takes place in the Church building centres on the Sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist/the Divine Liturgy. In his second prayer, the Bishop refers to the Holy Eucharist in these words, “offering the unbloody sacrifice to thy goodness.”²⁹ In his third prayer, the Bishop refers once more to the Holy Eucharist as he consecrates the Altar: “that the unbloody sacrifice which shall thereon be offered unto thee may be transmuted into the most pure Body and precious Blood of thine Only-begotten Son, who is the Lord, and God, and Saviour Jesus Christ, unto the salvation of all thy people, and of our unworthiness.”³⁰ The word “unbloody” distinguishes the sacrifices of the new covenant from the “bloody” sacrifices of the old covenant.³¹ The presence within the Church of the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of our Lord makes the building the dwelling place of God. We have already seen a reference to the Sacrament of Baptism in the description of the work of the Apostles. The words, “unto the remission of sins both voluntary and involuntary,” has a reference that is clearly and solely Eucharistic as the words of administration of the Holy Eucharist in the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom suggest: “the servant of God...partakes of the precious and Holy Body and Blood of our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ, for the remission of sins and unto life everlasting.”

The Church is a place where the relics of the saints are preserved and venerated. The service describes how the relics of saints are placed within the Altar and within the Antimension upon the altar. The Bishop prays “...through the intercession of the saints whose relics thou hast graciously permitted to be placed in thy most honourable Altar ... enable us to offer unto thee thereon the unbloody sacrifice.”³² We have here a reference to the Communion of the Saints whose prayers for us in heaven surround us on earth and the examples of whose lives on earth encourage us in our earthly pilgrimage.³³ In a few

²⁹ Hapgood, p.502

³⁰ Hapgood, p.503

³¹ St Paul discusses this at length in Hebrews 7-10

³² Hapgood, p.508

³³ Hebrews 12.1-2, ‘Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses’

beautiful words, the service describes the Church “for a haven for the tempest-tost, for a healing of passions, for a refuge for the weak, for an expelling of evil spirits.”³⁴

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³⁴ Hapgood, p. 496