"THE ONE WHO BOTH OFFERS AND IS OFFERED"THEOLOGICAL SEMIOTICS OF THE PRAYER OF THE CHERUBIC HYMN IN THE ORTHODOX LITURGY

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Abstract:During the Divine Liturgy of the Orthodox Church, called the Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, there is a particular prayer, uttered by the priest alone, called the prayer of the Cherubic Hymn, where we can find several theological ideas of sacrifice. The meaning of this prayer is that Christ himself is the priest and the victim of the sacrifice and the Liturgy is a door to the eternal Liturgy of heavens, where Christ sacrificed himself once and for all.

Keywords: sacrifice, liturgy, Eucharist, Orthodox, worthiness

The Holy Liturgy in the Orthodox Church is the core and the foundation of the entire structure of the Church. If the cultural differences made a huge gap between the western and the eastern Christendom, the Roman Church assumed a more jurisdictional way of thinking, based on the Roman law and the scholastic theology. On the other way, the protestant Reform went too far in the destruction of all ecclesial structures and media, being based on Scripture and personal faith Ŕ *sola fide*. The result was that the Roman Catholic Church became an Ģimperiumģ of faith, and the protestant denominations became a constellation of different personal approaches of the religion. Too much law into the Church throws away the spirit and spirituality, enforces the fossils of human domination and build a pyramidal earthly ecclesial architecture. Too much individual approach leads toward atomization, theological minimalism and residual negative thinking.

Both, the catholic and the protestant ways are extremes due to a human understanding of the faith, where God is exiled in his heaven and a vicar is installed in his place, or everyone claims to have personal and individual access to him toward faith, destroying the communitary sense of the Church.

The Orthodox theology, faithful to the seven ecumenical councils of the first millennium, kept a doxological approach of the Church, where Ecclesia is bound together through Mystery and ritual around the Divine Liturgy, serving the Holy Spirit, the Comforter and the Sanctifier of all. Thus, the jurisdictional excesses were avoided, the human principles of law, subject of human error and reason, were subdued to the Law Giver, which is God, the atomic tendencies of individualism were attenuated. The Orthodoxy is essentially a liturgical Church, a Liturgy of union between heaven and earth, God and human people, eternity and time. This approach succeeds to avoid the invasion of human mind into the concept of the Church and the demiurgic approach of the leaders to become gods.

The whole Liturgy of the Church is thus a hymn of humility and epiclesis / invocation of the presence and glory of God, through the songs, prayers and supplications of the people of God[1]. From here it comes the ascetic and transforming nature of the Orthodox way, were *metabole* / transformation, becoming, of the Bread and Wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, means also the becoming of the people under the Holy Spirit, Ģ*theosis"* / becoming

[1] We recommend Josef Lamberts, *Quelques reflexions sur l`epiclese*, in Questions Liturgiques, Leuven, no.84, 2003-2004, pp. 226-243.

god through grace. The entire community of the Church tends to become holy, through her membership into the Body of Christ.

In the West, the presence of the Spirit, the third Person of the Most Holy Trinity, was obliterated by an excessive christocentric approach of the theology, where the heresy of Filioque was invented in order to rise the reign of the Son, to the detriment of the Spirit (against the express word of Christ, the Spirit proceeds from the Father and from the Son). This excess of theological thinking threw away the Spirit and the sanctification of the people from the agenda. The Spirit was seen mainly as the love between the Father and the Son. This heresy led to a divorce between theology Ŕ a sum of scholastic axioms, and spirituality Ŕ the expression of the human love to God. In the Orthodox Church theology is spirituality, the mystical sense if the mind of the Church, the prayer is synonym with theology.

In the absence of understanding the role of the Spirit in the life of the Body of Christ, that is the Church, the catholic believer ceased to invoke the Spirit into the sanctification of self, of the nature and of life. That is why the epiclesis Ŕ the invocation of the Holy Spirit, is missing from the Liturgies of the roman church. The catholic understanding of the Eucharistic transformation is at the time of saying the words: Take, eat, this is my Body. In the Orthodox Church, the Eucharistic transformation occurs only after the supplication performed by the community that invokes the Spirit over the Eucharistic gifts. Instead of a nearly magical understanding, the eastern liturgical rite preserved the sense of invocation and dialogue between human and God.

This doxological approach of the Orthodox Church can be seen in all the prayers of the Liturgy, these prayers being uttered by the priest, most of them loud, so that the faithful hear them. One of the most important prayers is the prayer of the Cherubic Hymn. A historical research about this prayer and its role in the Eucharistic Liturgy is made by Rev. P. Vintilescu, in his remarkable book ŖLiturghierul explicatŗ (Explaining the Liturgies)[2]. This prayer is a personal one, involving the priest alone, who asks the grace of God, to cleanse his soul in order to enter into the Altar with the Gifts that will become the Body and the Blood of Christ. This ritual called the Great Entrance was admirably analysed by Rvd. Robert Taft, one of the most important liturgical theologians in the whole world. In the first six centuries, the Eucharistic gifts were brought into the Church, and this movement of entrance with them slowly was adorned with hymns, rituals and gestures, so it became one of the most important moments in the whole liturgy[3]. The majestic entrance of the priest with the gifts of the people means the exchange of gifts and the reciprocity of liturgical alms. The people give to God their finest fruits, humanised through work and sacrifice. The bread is not simply a fruit of the earth, but it is the living nature mixed with human passion, with fire and work, so the many seeds of the grains become one, in the loaf of bread. Accordingly, the wine is not only the grapes, but the greatest gift of nature, mixed with human sacrifice, time, patience and humility, so from the many grapes, the wine will pour and brighten the human heart.

So the prayer of the Cherubic Hymn is a model of compassion, humility, sacrifice, but also understands the fact that the real sacrifice is Christ, the one who bring Himself to the Cross, for the salvation of men. So the gifts, coming from the human hearts, is a symbol of the divine love and sacrifice of Christ, who gives not something, but somebody, Himself, will all his life for the eternity of the people. The priest, saying this prayer, enters a universe of self sacrifice, where the clean heart is necessary for uttering the words of God and lending his voice, mind and hand to Christ.

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[2] P. Vintilescu, *Liturghierul explicat* (in Romanian), E.I.B.M.B.O.R., Bucuresti, 1998, the chapter ŖIntrarea cea Mareŗ, pp. 207-222.

[3] Charles Perrot, *L`Eucharistie dans le Nouveau Testament*, in Encyclopedie de l`Eucharistie, dir. Maurice Brouard, editions du Cerf, Paris, 2002.

In modern English, the prayer is like that: „No one bound by carnal desires and pleasures is worthy to approach, draw near, or minister to You, the King of Glory. For to serve You is great and awesome even for the heavenly powers. Yet, because of Your ineffable and immeasurable love for mankind, You impassibly and immutably became man. You, as the Master of all, became our high priest and delivered unto us the sacred service of this liturgical sacrifice without the shedding of blood. Indeed, Lord our God, You alone reign over the celestial and the terrestrial; borne aloft on the cherubic throne, Lord of the Seraphim and King of Israel, the only holy and resting among the holy ones. I now beseech You, Who alone are good and inclined to hear: Look down upon me, Your sinful and unprofitable servant, and cleanse my soul and heart of a wicked conscience; and enable me, by the power of Your Holy Spirit, clothed with the grace of the priesthood, to stand before Your holy Table and celebrate the Mystery of Your holy and pure Body and Your precious Blood. I come before You with my head bowed, and I implore You: Turn not Your face away from me, nor reject me from among Your children, but make me, Your sinful and unworthy servant, worthy to offer these gifts to You. For You are the One Who both offers and is offered, the One Who is received and is distributed, O Christ our God, and to You we offer up glory, with Your Father, Who is without beginning, and Your all-holy and good and life-creating Spirit, now and forever and to the ages of ages. Amen. The people chant: ℟So that we may receive the King of all, who is invisibly escorted by the angelic hosts. Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia℟.

The Deacon and Priest exit the north door preceded by candles and the censer, and when the hymn is paused, they exclaim the following alternately: ℟May the Lord God remember all of us in His Kingdom always, now and forever and to the ages of ages. People: Amen℟.

For a better understanding of the liturgical concepts, we analyse from the original language, written by Saint John Chrysostom, in ancient Greek:

℟Οπδείο άμηνο ησλ ζπλδεδεκέλσλ ηαηο ζαξθηθαίο επηζπκίαο θαη εδνλαίο πξνζέξρεζζαη ή πξνζεγγίδεηλ, ή ιεηηνπξγείλ ζνη, Βαζηιεύ ηεο δόμεο, ην γαξ δηαθνλείλ ζνη κέγα θαη θνβεξόλ, θαη απηαίο ηαηο επνπξαλίαηο δπλάκεζηλ. Αιι' όκσο, δηά ηελ άθαηνλ θαη ακέηξεηόλ ζνπ θηιαλζξσπίαλ, αηξέπησο θαη αλαιινηώησο γέγνλαο άλζξσπνο θαη αξρηεξεύο εκώλ ερξεκάηηζαο, θαη ηεο ιεηηνπξγηθήο ηαύηεο θαη αλαηκάθηνπ ζπζίαο ηελ ηεξνπξγίαλ παξέδσθαο εκίλ, σο Γεζπόηεο ησλ απάλησλ. Σπ γαξ κόλνο, Κύξηε ν Θεόο εκώλ, δεζπόδεηο ησλ επνπξαλίσλ θαη ησλ επηγείσλ, ν επί ζξόλνπ Χεξνπβηθνύ επνρνύκελνο, ν ησλ Σεξαθείκ Κύξηνο, θαη βαζηιεύο ηνπ Ιζξαήι, ν Μόλνο Άγηνο θαη ελ αγίνηο αλαπαπόκελνο, ζε ηνίλπλ δπζσπώ ηνλ κόλνλ αγαζόλ θαη επήθννλ, επίβιεςνλ επ' εκέ ηνλ ακαξησιόλ θαη αρξείνλ δνύιόλ ζνπ, θαη θαζάξηζόλ κνπ ηελ ςπρήλ θαη ηελ θαξδίαλ από ζπλεηδήζεσο πνλεξάο, θαη ηθάλσζόλ κε ηε δπλάκεη ηνπ Αγίνπ ζνπ Πλεύκαηνο, ελδεδπκέλνλ ηελ ηεο ηεξαηείαο ράξηλ, παξαζηήλαη ηε αγία ζνπ ηαύηε ηξαπέδε θαη ηεξνπξγήζαη ην άγηνλ θαη άρξαληόλ ζνπ Σώκα θαη ην ηίκηνλ Αίκα. Σνί γαξ πξνζέξρνκαη, θιίλαο ηνλ εκαπηνύ απρέλα θαη δένκαί ζνπ, κε απνζηξέςεο ην πξόζσπόλ ζνπ απ' εκνύ, κεδέ απνδνθηκάζεο κε εθ παίδσλ ζνπ, αιι' αμίσζνλ πξνζελερζήλαη ζνη ππ' εκνύ ηνπ ακαξησινύ θαη αλαμίνπ δνύινπ ζνπ ηα δώξα ηαύηα. Σύ γαξ εη ν πξνζθέξσλ θαη πξνζθεξόκελνο θαη πξνζδερόκελνο θαη δηαδηδόκελνο, Χξηζηέ ν Θεόο εκώλ, θαη ζνη ηελ δόμαλ αλαπέκπνκελ, ζπλ ησ αλάξρσ ζνπ Παηξί θαη ησ Παλαγίσ θαη αγαζώ θαη δσνπνηώ ζνπ Πλεύκαηη, λπλ θαη αεί θαη εηο ηνπο αηώλαο ησλ αηώλσλ. Ακήλ℟.

From the first phrase of this prayer, we can see the necessity of cleansing the spirit of the priest in order to receive the great dignity of carrying the Eucharistic gifts. The axiom of penance, humility and confession of sins is emphasized. The divine service is great and awesome even for the heavenly powers, which are the angels, archangels and thrones. Yet, because the ineffable and infinite love of God, that fills the gap of unworthiness of men, Christ offers himself to sinful and unworthy hands. He becomes man and High Priest for us. So, we see that the Incarnation of the Logos is entered in the Liturgy, as an eternal reality,

where the Human Christ, God and Man, is the source of all life of the universe[4]. The Christ is the real High Priest, the Bishop of all creation, the Sanctifier of the world, and the priests appointed by him, through the grace of the Holy Spirit and through the Mystery of Ordination and sacerdocy, they are only the icons and advocates of this great work of sanctification, that is the Divine Liturgy.

This prayer is therefore a supplication for forgiveness of sins, for obtaining worthiness and for entering into the sacred realm of the Mystery of the Lord: His Cross, death and Resurrection. The Divine Liturgy is a Ŗsacrifice without the shedding of bloodŗ. Ŗαλαηκάθηνπ ζπζίαοŗ is the real sacrifice, the entering into the eternal life of God, where his state of sacrifice is unending. Christ gave his blood for the mankind, at the completion of ages, but the result and the reality of this self giving is eternal, so in contrast to the old sacrifices of animals, in the Old Testament, His sacrifice is divine, full and unrepeatable[5]. The Liturgy does not repeat the sacrifice of Christ, that is unique (Ŗapaxŗ / once, in the words of Saint Paul the Apostle), but is a door to the eternal sacrifice of the Logos.

In this liturgical offering, the human persons offer bread and they receive the Body of Christ. They offer wine and they receive the Blood of Christ together with His life, which is divine and immortal. They offer their time and they receive his eternity. They offer themselves as offering, and they receive God himself, uniting with him. This asymmetric exchange of love proves the life of the Church, in which every believer is nurtured from the Mother Church and receives food and life. The Church is the Body of Christ and the Mother of all believers, in the conscience of the Christian people of God.

We remark in this prayer the humility of the celebrant, the bowing of the head during prayer, and the conscience of representing the people in the face of Christ.

What is of great importance in this prayer is the theology of reciprocity, where human persons and God express their love that makes the universe alive[6]. Christ is God and man, and this unity of essences in one person Ŕ as the ecumenical Council of Chalcedon stated Ŕ is the source of the unity between God and the Church of Christ. Moreover, Christ is the celebrant and the offering, the priest and the victim, the shepherd and the lamb, Ŗthe One Who both offers and is offered, the One Who is received and is distributedŗ, as the verses of the prayer show.

A deep understanding of the essential ideas of liturgical Orthodox theology will offer a meaning to the eastern mind of the Church. In a world where the sacerdocy is diminished by magical approaches, where the intimacy of faith is dying under the siege of electronic eyes, the theology of the Divine Liturgy comes to strengthen the sense of community, the real meaning of divine love united with our love, the great news of eternity that was given to the people through the Incarnation and the Sacrifice of Christ.

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[4] Cf. Enrico Mazza, De la Cene du Seigneur a l`Eucharistie de l`Eglise, in Encyclopediede l`Eucharistie, p. 101.
[5] Pierre Beauchamp, *L`Eucharistie dans l`Ancien Testament*, in Encyclopedie de l`Eucharistie, dir. Maurice Brouard, editions du Cerf, Paris, 2002, p. 42.
[6] About the connection between creation and Eucharist in the orthodox Church, see Istrati Ioan, *The Cosmological Dimension of the Divine Liturgy*, in J.S.T.O.R.R., nr. 1, 2007.

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