

“PROTHESIS”-A RECAPITULATION OF HISTORY IN THE DIVINE LITURGY

Istrati Valentin Ioan
Rev. Lecturer PhD, „Ovidius” University Constanta

Abstract: The Prothesis is a preparatory service, performed in private by the priest, where the Gifts of bread and wine are prepared for the Liturgy. All the service is rich in verses of Psalms, which shows the nature of Liturgy of fulfilment of the prophecies of the Old Testament. The Liturgy is the redemption of humanity from death, the extension of the Passion of Christ, the presence of God through the mysteries of the Church and the prove of unity between man and God.

Keywords: sacrifice, Prothesis, Liturgy, Eucharist, love, redemption, Passion, death, resurrection, ritual

The divine Liturgy in the Orthodox Church is the heart of the whole ritual of the Church, the heart of Christian dogmatic theology, of the moral theology, of preaching of the faith, shortly, of the entire architecture of the Church of Christ.

The Orthodox Liturgy is not only – as in Reformation denominations – an anamnesis of the passion of Lord Jesus, an appeal to the saving past of humanity, but it is the entry into the Kingdom of God, the present end (eschaton) working into the clouds of history, the tension between life and death, and more than that, the tension between the earthly life and the eternal life, the validation of the entire thesaurus of thought and feeling of the Church, the assumption of the whole humanity, live and departed in the same expiatory prayer, the pouring of humanity into the Blood of God who became man for us.

The Liturgy is therefore the initial point of the Church (the Last Supper) and the endless terminus point of eternity, where we enter through celebration. This sense of the primary Church and the true one is now incomprehensible to the majority of reformed believers and hardly digestible to the catholic ones, who wonder of the impressive temporal extension of the Liturgy (several hours), of the importance of Liturgy into the personal economy of human spirituality, of her infinite and always new meaning in the understanding of theology.

The Divine Liturgy is therefore the entrance of the eclesial community and of every person of the Church into the reality of the Sacrifice, Death, Resurrection and Glorification of Jesus Christ, a Kingdom of God in mystery, subsisting in history, but working through grace into the life of mortal human beings.

In the Orthodox Church everything begins and returns to the Liturgy: the hierarchy, the apostolic kerygma, the canon law, the semiologic abyss of the liturgical theology. The dogma itself subsists in Liturgy. The Church is Liturgy, extended in history and humanity. “Our doctrine is in Eucharist and the Eucharist confirms it”.

The presence of the believers at the Liturgy forms their spiritual personality and their liturgical rhythm of life and grace. Every liturgical feast is a carrier of the uncreated grace of God, giving a certain gift. Into the hermeneutical economy of the feast, the man enters and understands the spirit of the feast¹, dives into the ocean of meanings of the love of God, becomes a carrier of the Holy Spirit, following Christ, the Source of all feasts in history and

¹ Constantine Andronikoff, *Le sens des fetes*, Editions du Cerf, 1971, pp. 207.

eternity. In this way of thinking, the Nativity of the Lord is a rebirth of humanity and of every believer, a graceful nativity where the human person receives the confirmation of his unity with God through the holy mysteries, in the Liturgy, through Holy Eucharist. His life becomes a Bethlehem of love with God and his body receives Christ and becomes the manger where Christ is born. Therefore the remembrance of the saving events is not only a mental exercise, but an ontological one, where the Christian faithful receives the spirit and the sense of the feast, being integrated through grace into the Body of Christ, that is the Church.

The introductive part of the Liturgy is performed in private, by the priest, in a small chamber at the left side of the altar, called "Proskomidiarion", in greek "thisiasterion", meaning the place of the holy sacrifice. This chamber, placed in the north of the altar, contains a table or a niche into the wall, where Prothesis is performed. It symbolises the Cave of the Nativity, but also the Tomb of the Resurrection. The Prothesis is the preparation of the Holy Gifts before their placement on the Holy Table.

The Prothesis developed over the centuries, from a solemn journey of the gifts of bread and wine by the believers, to a proper service, performed with sotto voce. This ritual of Prothesis contains the cutting of the particles of bread and their placement on the holy Disk.

We observe the great and rich content of verses of Psalms, cited during this service, which shows that the Liturgy is the eschatological and theological fulfilment of history, written by the prophets of Ancient Testament. The Holy Spirit, "who spoke through the prophets" put into the minds of the prophets these words, in order to validate the fulfilment of the ages: the Incarnation of the Son of God and His presence into the Church through the Holy Spirit until the ends of ages.

One of the first prayers, about the fulfilment of the prophecies is: "You have redeemed us from the curse of the law by thy precious Blood. By being nailed to the Cross and pierced by the spear, you have become a foundation of immortality for all people. O our Savior, Glory to you". During this prayer, the priest takes the prosphora of Christ, elevates it at his forehead with both hands, keeping also the Spear with his left hand. It is a gesture of consecration of the bread in order to be sacrificed to become the matter of the Holy Mystery of Eucharist. In this mystery, the entire work of sacrifice of the Lamb of God, Christ, is remembered and presented, in order that the whole Church enter into the graceful spiritual dimension of Golgotha. We remark the theological idea of the redemption from the curse of the Law (as Saint Paul the Apostle said). The Liturgy assumes and transcends the Old Law, fulfils the vetero-testamentary prophecies, gives eternal meaning to the Judaic rituals, redeems the humanity from the slavery of death and institutes the New Jerusalem, the Church of Christ, built on His blood, from His side, pierced by the spear of Longinus. Therefore the Liturgy is an eruption of grace of a millennial expectation and an ontological apogee of union between man and God.

The divine Eucharist is in fact God Himself, present and working into the world, extending Himself in the people through the Holy Spirit into the Mystery of the Sacrifice, sanctifying the humanity and the entire creation, giving sense and life to the created universe into the light of Most Holy Trinity.

The prayers of the Prothesis show that fact that already, the bread and the wine are meant for, consecrated for service, pulled away from the common use and they become "the Holy Gifts". They suffer a continuous and progressive work of sanctification, so they cannot be again profane aliments, but prophecies of the Eucharistic fulfilment of creation.

The priest then, begins the cutting of the bread. He takes the bread into his left hand and the spear or lance in his right hand, makes the sign of the Cross over the seal with the lance and says three times: "In remembrance of Our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ". First, he moves to the central portion of the seal bearing the inscription ICXC NIKA (Jesus Christ Conquers) in its four corners. This portion is called the Amnos, or the Lamb, which

represents our Lord who takes on the sins of the world. The Lord is called "Amnos" or Lamb, because like a lamb, He accepted His death with humility and without protest.

We see in this ritual the conscience of the presence of the Lord into this service, the value of liturgy as remembrance of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of mankind. The Christian Liturgy is the continuation and the fulfilment of the ancient Judaic ritual of sacrifice of the lamb, as a remembrance of the great escape from Egypt. The sign of the Cross is the sign of benediction and this sign, made on the bread, is the token of the presence of Christ in this ritual.

It follows a succession of old Testament verses from prophet Isaiah, where the priest acknowledges the identity of the Lamb of sacrifice into the prophetic visions of Isaiah and the historical presence of Jesus, who died on the Cross for the redemption of the people. The lamb led to the slaughter is the prophecy of the Lamb that takes away the sins of the mankind, as Saint John the Baptist said when he saw Jesus. The Eucharistic Liturgy is therefore a great completion and fulfilment of the prophecy and also the stream of life flowing from the side of Christ, through his blood, that saves us from death.

The priest cuts the "Amnos" in a shape of a square, saying: "*He was led as a sheep to the slaughter. And as a lamb before the shearer is dumb, He opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied Him. Who shall declare His generation? For His life is raised from the earth.*" (Isaiah, Chapter 53, Verses 7-8). In these words, we can see the orthodox faith into the mystagogical extension of the Passion of the Christ into the life of his Body that is the Church.

The church foresees the Eucharistic "metaboli", the transformation of the bread into the Body of Christ, refers to the "Amnos" as the Lamb of God and enters into a celestial reality where Christ is all in all, transforming through the eternal grace all the people in parts of his Body, into the Kingdom of God.

The Priest then elevates the "Prosforon" or Oblation Loaf to commence the Prothesis. In his right hand he holds the Lance. Placing the square, face down on the Diskarion (Platen, Disk), the Priest carves crosswise without cutting the segments through and says: "Sacrificed is the Lamb of God, the Son of the Father, Who takes away the sin of the world for the life of the world and for its salvation"(John, 1, 29; I John, 2, 2).

As a reminder of how a soldier pierced His side, the Priest thrusts the lance into the face of the square of bread reciting: "And one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately there came out blood and water. And he who saw it (that is Saint John the Evangelist) bore witness and his witness is true (John 19, 34-35).

The Priest pours into the Holy Chalice wine and water, since the Bible states that blood and water ran down His side when He was pierced by the spear of a soldier. Then, the Priest blesses the Chalice and recites: "Blessed is the union of the Holy, now and for ever, and from all Ages to all Ages".

For the Virgin Mary, the Theotokos, a triangular form of bread, is then carved from the left side to the square, and placed on the left of the "Amnos" on the Disk (Paten). The prophetic words recited are: "On Thy right hand stood the Queen, arrayed in gold in wrought with many colours" (Psalm 45, 9).

From the right to the opening of the centre of the Bread, nine pieces are removed and placed on the right of the Host on the Disk. Those are in honour and memory of:

- 1) The Archangels and Bodiless Powers,
- 2) Saint John the Baptist and the Prophets,
- 3) The Apostles,
- 4) The Holy Fathers and Prelates (Hierarchs),
- 5) The Holy Martyrs,
- 6) The Holy, God-bearing Fathers and Mothers,

- 7) The wonder-working Doctors (Anargyroi),
- 8) Saint John the Chrysostom or Saint Basil the Great, depending on whose Liturgy is being celebrated on the particular day.
- 9) The saint or saints celebrated in that particular day.

These 9 hosts of saints represent the entire spiritual universe, the triumphant Church in the heavens, all creation resting into the Kingdom of God. On the Disk are present Christ, the Centre of the universe, His Mother as mother of Intercession, all angels and saints into the heavens, and the believers, alive or departed. For each one of them, the Priest puts a tiny crumble of bread, remembering his or her name, as a prayer for them and as a presence of the souls of believers into the Blood of Christ, because all these pieces of bread will be poured into the Chalice, into the Blood of Christ.

The Prothesis as a part of the Liturgy shows us the essential meaning of the liturgical service: the entering into the spiritual realm of God, the mystery of presence and work of God in history, the union between Christ, the saints, the living and the departed, into the Church, the living Body of Christ.

Understanding this symbolic and mystical ritual, we can understand the deep spiritual liturgical rhythm of the Church, the bond between this life and the afterlife, between material and spiritual, between time and eternity.

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