

## The Transformative Power of Worship

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In his book, *The Science of Spiritual Medicine*, Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos writes: “It has been said that man is not just a rational being, nor even a social being, but above all a ‘liturgical’ being. He was created so as to live rightly, to offer the true Liturgy.”<sup>1</sup> In modern Greek, when someone says, for example, that a machine *leitourgei*, it means it is working, it is functioning properly. So, a human being, to function properly, must *leitourgei*: he must liturgize and be a liturgical being, as God intended him to do and be. Our life, therefore, is supposed to be one continual and unbroken Liturgy, a continuous uninterrupted spiritual communion between us and God and our fellow human beings, as it was in Paradise. This is what we were created to do, this is the paradisaical state of existence to be reclaimed by us in Christ and in the Church.

Elder George Kapsanes of blessed memory, the former Abbot of Gregoriou Monastery on Mt. Athos, wrote in his work, *The Eucharistic Life*, the following:

The first man was both king and priest. He was able to receive other people, all things, even himself, as gifts of God. And through thanksgiving man could offer them up in return to his God and Father as a sacrifice. Man lived in a theocentric manner where God was the center of his life. He received everything as gifts from God and returned them to Him as His own gifts. And so, there existed in Paradise an exchanging of gifts.<sup>2</sup>

Elder George continues:

Unfortunately, however, and as we all know, man was led astray by the devil. The devil sought to overturn the Creator’s plan by having man make himself the center of the world instead of God and to live anthropocentrically instead of theocentrically; not eucharistically, but autonomously and egotistically; to use the gifts of God, other human beings, and himself, without offering them to God, without giving thanks to God; to use these things in an egotistical and selfish manner.<sup>3</sup>

The Fathers speak of the first Church as that which existed in Paradise, before the fall. That Church was ruined by sin but restored by the work of Christ.

Having said all this, what we should focus on is that we were meant to live liturgically, and eucharistically, but we fell from that primordial and blessed ideal, and then regained it

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<sup>1</sup> Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos, *The Science of Spiritual Medicine* (Levadia: Birth of Theotokos Monastery, 2010), 37.

<sup>2</sup> Archimandrite George, Abbot of the Sacred Monastery of Gregoriou, *The Eucharistic Life* (Mount Athos: Sacred Monastery of Gregoriou, 2004). 8 (in Greek).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

through the transfiguring sacramental and worshipping life of the Church made available to us through the work of Jesus Christ. The great ecclesiastical writer and 14th-century contemporary of St Gregory Palamas, St Nicholas Cabasilas, in his book, *The Life in Christ*, puts it this way:

Those who participate in the sacramental Mysteries, those gates of heaven, are reborn and recreated spiritually, and in a unique and exceptional way are joined and united with the Savior. This wonderful action of the Sacraments is what St. Paul had in mind when he preached at the Areopagus to the Athenians that ‘in Him we live and move and have our being’ (Acts 17:28). And truly Baptism gives to man his being and life in Christ. The Sacrament of Baptism receives a man who is distorted by sin and spiritually dead and it introduces him to the ‘new’, the spiritual, the Christ-like life. Chrismation, which follows immediately after Baptism grants to the newly baptized gifts and energies that are necessary for the life in Christ. The Holy Eucharist maintains and supports this spiritual life and health, for the ‘Bread of life’ gives us the power to always remain on this higher level of living. Thus, through the Holy Eucharist we live; through Chrismation we move and act, once we received our spiritual being in the beginning through Baptism.<sup>1</sup>

The ‘new’ or reclaimed spiritual existence is the liturgical mode of being, a way of living eucharistically and ecclesially. And it is the divine worship of the Church in which we actively participate that transforms us, for the liturgical life and tradition of the Church shape the ethos of her members and lead them into a transfigured manner of living.

The liturgical act is one of community, and so to live liturgically in Christ means to live in communion and fellowship with one another. “God is love,” declares St. John the Evangelist and Theologian (1 John 4:8). God is a community of love between three eternal Persons who share everything. In the life of the Church, we are to reflect that same communal existence of the Triadic God and become a community of love as well, becoming one in Christ sacramentally; one in thought, one in purpose, one Body of Christ.

A famous text from the *Didache*, or *Teachings of the Apostles*, says: “As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains and being gathered together became one, so may Your Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into Your kingdom.”<sup>2</sup> We are the many branches attached to One and the Same Vine,<sup>3</sup> so we are organically and ontologically connected one to another in Jesus Christ, and not just within the four walls of the church building, or just on Sunday, but beyond the building and outside of Sunday as well.

We must remember that the baptismal font is both a tomb and a womb,<sup>4</sup> a womb that is our common Mother. So, the Church is our common Mother who has given us birth, a new birth, by water and the Spirit. We are all children from the same baptismal womb of the same Mother Church, and therefore brothers and sisters in Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Life in Christ* 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Didache*, 9.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. John 15:5.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Romans 6:3–11 and John 3:3–5.

Our Church emphasizes the importance of a eucharistically centered existence, which means that Holy Communion is at the heart of our life; communion with God and with one another. We are not saved alone, but in the community. A common aphorism is: “To hell alone, to Heaven together.” While atheistic existentialism will say, “Hell is other people,”<sup>5</sup> our Saints repeatedly say, “My brother, my sister, is my salvation.”<sup>6</sup>

The *Great Divorce* by C.S. Lewis shows hell to be a place where its inhabitants are so far away from one another and living in such isolation that the strongest telescope barely shows the dwelling place of one’s nearest neighbor. Heaven is the complete opposite; it is the anti-hell. It is the Church—all of us together and in close proximity—gathered around the enthroned Lamb in corporate worship.<sup>7</sup>

The Book of Acts is clear about how the people of God are to live, that is, communally, ecclesially, eucharistically, liturgically. Indeed, we are not only to attend the divine services for the benefit of our own soul but for the benefit of all the members of the Church. By our absence from the community of believers, we deprive it of our presence, our unique offering, and our prayers. St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain wrote the following:

How can the Church be called a gathering of Christians at a time when you are not gathered together therein? How can the Church be called the Body of Christ at a time when you, its members, are absent from it? Or how can the Church be called the Place and Temple of God if you despise it and fail to gather together in this place in order to send up prayers and doxologies to God?<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, as a community of believers, as the Body of Christ, as the temple composed of living stones, we are not only responsible for one another but actually even the instrument of our brother and sister’s salvation. St. Paul says:

You are members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him, the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him, you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.<sup>9</sup>

And St. Peter writes:

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Jean Paul Sartre, *No Exit*.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. St. Anthony the Great: “Our life and our death is with our neighbor. If we gain our brother, we have gained God, but if we scandalize our brother, we have sinned against Christ” (*Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Alpha 9).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Revelation 4 and 5.

<sup>8</sup> *Christian Morality* (Thessaloniki: B. Regopoulos, 1999) 301.

<sup>9</sup> Ephesians 2:19–22.

As you come to Jesus Christ, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup>

After the fall, Cain says to God, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”<sup>11</sup> that is, “Am I responsible for my brother, for his well-being, for his salvation?” This is after the breakdown of the first Church, and so, Cain murders his brother. He feels no responsibility towards him. This is an anti-Church, anti-liturgical, outlook on life. But we, who live in Christ and live liturgically and eucharistically, are indeed the keepers of our brothers and sisters, assisting them unto salvation.

St Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, stated: “Our manner of thinking is conformed to the Eucharist and the Eucharist confirms our manner of thinking.”<sup>12</sup> This means that the way we think, act, and live is to be conformed to the Liturgy. The shared communal life in the Liturgy is the shared communal life to be lived outside the Liturgy, turning our whole life into one beautiful Liturgy, one grand thanksgiving. We are then able, through Christ and in Christ, and within the life of the Church, to commit, commend, entrust, hand over, and bind, one another unto Christ our God.

When we hear the petition, “Let us commit ourselves and one another to Christ our God,” we offer ourselves, and we also offer the lives of our brothers and sisters, to Christ in a special sense. St Nicholas Cabasilas, cited earlier, in his commentary on the Divine Liturgy, says: “We do not offer ourselves alone to God, but each other also; for, according to the law of love, we must seek the good of others as well as our own.”<sup>13</sup> Elder George of Gregoriou Monastery on Mount Athos also quoted earlier, puts it this way:

In the Church we see Christ being sacrificed, and so we, too, learn to sacrifice ourselves for our brethren. In the Divine Liturgy it is revealed that the ethos and character of Christ is not authoritarian or individualistic, securing what is only good for Him, but His is an ethos of self-offering, love, and sacrifice. This is how we learn to love, to offer ourselves, to sacrifice ourselves, to humble ourselves.<sup>14</sup>

And St Sophrony the Athonite of Essex, speaking about ‘living the Liturgy’, says:

The priest, who celebrates the Liturgy, as well as the faithful present, learn to live at two levels, after the example of Christ Himself: In spirit, they learn to dwell in the Divine sphere, and at the same time to participate in the tragic happenings of the inhabited

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<sup>10</sup> 1 Peter 2:4–5.

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 4:9.

<sup>12</sup> *Against Heresies* 4.18.5.

<sup>13</sup> *A Commentary on the Divine Liturgy* 14.

<sup>14</sup> *The Eucharistic Life*, 22.

world... This going deeper into the Liturgy is necessary for all of us in order that the Liturgy's eternal reality may accompany us in our daily life.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, if the Church is like a beautiful sweet-smelling garden, as St John Chrysostom describes it,<sup>16</sup> departing from worship, that fragrance should accompany us, and those around us should smell it and partake of it through our actions, our words, our demeanor, and even by our sharing with others what we have learned in church or what we have experienced. This point, which echoes the experience of so many of us, is made clear by Erasmus, who says:

I think there are far too many who count up how many times they attend church and rely almost entirely upon this for their salvation. They are convinced that they owe nothing further to Christ. Leaving church they immediately return to their former habits. I certainly do not hesitate to praise them for getting to church, but I am forced to condemn them for stopping at this point.<sup>17</sup>

We begin the Divine Liturgy with, "In peace let us pray to the Lord," and we end it with, "Let us go forth in peace." The heavenly peace attained within our experience of the Church's worship is now to be taken with us: into the world, into our friendships and relationships, into our places of employment and schools, into our families and homes. Caught up in the Divine sphere during worship, one might think of St Peter on Mount Tabor saying to the transfigured Christ, "Lord it is good for us to be here."<sup>18</sup> But then Jesus takes the disciples down from the height of glory to mundane and everyday life, into the tragic happenings of the inhabited world. But they take the ecstatic and transforming experience of the Transfiguration with them into everything they do and to everyone they encounter.

In conclusion, when we go to church, as we enter God's holy temple, hopefully, we check at the doors all our earthly attitudes and thoughts and cares, everything worldly, as the Cherubic Hymn exhorts us: "Let us lay aside every earthly care of this life." But may the reverse not be true: let us not check the Liturgy or Christ or the grace we have experienced at the doors of the church as we exit to go back into the world and our homes and everyday lives. Let us take the Liturgy with us. Let us take Christ with us.

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<sup>15</sup> Archimandrite Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is* (Essex: Sacred Patriarchal Stavropegic Monastery of St. John the Baptist, 1996), 364 (in Greek).

<sup>16</sup> *On Repentance* 4.

<sup>17</sup> Erasmus, *Enchiridion*.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 17:4.