

Lethargic Dynamism on Eucharist and Spirituality

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*The tragedy of Orthodox history is always seen in the triumph of outside evil: either persecutions, or the Turkish yoke, Communism – never inside. And so long as these convictions do not change, I am convinced that no Orthodox revival is possible.*¹

In today's world an important fact to realize is that with greater freedom, the Church is faced with a greater responsibility; we have been called not just to examine our society, but also to examine our own structures in order to communicate with the world. Divorce between faith and action, so many times obvious in our everyday Church life points to the deeper theological issue. I am suggesting here that to start with examination of this difficult issue it is necessary to revive our internal approach to the Church, i.e. the approach that is connected with the essence of the Church's being: *Eucharist and Spirituality*.

My intention here is to bring into the scope of our interest question of division between our faith and our everyday actions. It is an extremely painful process today to rediscover and to enlighten the real meaning beneath terms like spirituality, eschatology, and liturgy. Moreover, it is more complex to relate all these terms with the problems in civilization, and not to make them an excuse or an escape from the culture and history. Church needs to realize that instead to judge the world, the world needs salvation. Instead to accuse only outside factors for our own difficulties, it's time to understand what happened in our theology that we are still imprisoned in- to passive understanding of our faith.

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1. *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemmann 1973-1983*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, (2000), pg. 47.

1. Eucharist

Whenever theologians write about the Orthodox Church they are eager to emphasize the Eucharistic experience as the center of our lives. Unfortunately, this experience is not self-evident in our everyday Church's life. Moreover, I would like to say that our understanding of Orthodox life is more and more sub-Eucharistic, sub-Liturgical. We are witnesses that in many churches Liturgies are performed without any or with only a few communicants. Unfortunately, we disregard the importance of this experience. Studies of social scientists have challenged us to realize the fact that ritual is extremely important for the development of "religious worldview." Clifford Geertz for example, remarks that for the participants in a religious performance their participation becomes the realization of a specific religious perspective²; model of what is believed and a model for believing³. From Basil's *Letter 93* we can see a strong Eucharistic foundation in his own community. In that famous letter, he expressed:

To communicate also every day, to receive one's share of the sacred body and precious blood of Christ is an excellent and beneficial practice, because the Lord himself says clearly, 'He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life'. Who, in fact, could doubt that to partake continually of life is to live fully⁴?

It is evident that without this experience of communal participation, there is no healing of our divided nature into One Body; there is no healing of our Orthodox ethos. It is an ethos that should enlighten the world, "if in the Eucharist the world through the prayers of the church is sanctified and becomes the manifestation of God's reign, then it is the Church's mission to be the living memory and active presence of God's kingdom as much as this

2. CLIFFORD GEERTZ, "Religion as a Cultural System", in the book: Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, Basic Books, New York, (1973), pg. 87-125.

3. MARGARET Y. MACDONALD, "Women Holy in Body and Spirit: The Social Setting of 1 Corinthians 7", in the book: *Christianity at Corinth: The Quest for the Pauline Church*, ed. Edward Adams and David G. Horrell, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, London, (2004), pg. 167.

4. OLIVIER CLÉMENT, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, New City Press, London, (1995), pg. 123.

is possible within the constraints of history.”⁵ Through a revival of Eucharistic life, we can ground a clear message that the Church’s struggle against injustice in this world (and more social engagement) “is not just another task but an essential part of the church’s confession in the world.”⁶ Otherwise, we are condemned to live some kind of *lethargic eschatology*. That is the eschatology without any connection with this world, eschatology that does not empower us on any action except fear of Last Judgment.

Today, Communion is understood as a relationship between individual and object that person deserves. Individual with its own powers and strivings deserves object [i.e. Christ’s Body] completely separated from the other people. Communion does not make us any more participants in One Body; moreover, it calls us for separation from the others. Instead of unity, Communion became the tool that destroys and brakes community. The whole *ritual*⁷ connected to Holy Communion speaks for itself. In that ritual, the most important person is only individual that wants to participate for its own sake in the complete isolation of others, which are in some way not just unnecessary but obstacle for his personal ‘spiritualism’. I am convinced that the Eucharistic experience is responsible for a true understanding of the Christian ethos that has practical implications in our everyday struggles. Instead of being consciousness of the Church Eucharist has been understood as consciousness of individual believer. Cultic understanding of Eucharist as a consequence had estrangement from the Church and the society. Outcome of such understanding has been so called therapeutic ecclesiology.

Through these examples it is obvious that our conception about Orthodoxy, which is communal in the opposition to Western religiosity, which is individualistic, is not quite true. Orthodoxy shows itself the most weak just on this living case where we can notice that the concept of individualism is shaped in its perfection. In the Eucharist individual does not need anyone else, the other is a threat. Unfortunately, the true meaning of the Eucharist

5. Rev. Dr. EMMANUEL CLAPIS, “Wealth and Poverty in Christian Tradition”, Greek Orthodox Theological Review 54:1-4, (2009), 169-187, pg. 181.

6. COENRAAD BOERMA, *The Poor Side of Europe*, WCC, Geneva, (1989), pg. 99.

7. It is tradition in many Orthodox countries for people in order to take communion to fast seven days or more even if it is not fasting period for the Church, (*Church Slavonic Typicon*, 32).

stays unrevealed and completely blurred if we would look on it from the prism of our practical Church life.

1.2. Eucharistic “Materialism”

The Eucharistic experience is the source of a true understanding of anthropology and material world. Bread and wine, as material substances that we use for the Eucharist, show us the importance of material nature. In addition, Christ gave us these material substances in order to communicate with Him through them. Such an understanding has anthropological implications where the body cannot be disdained in favor of the soul. Today’s mentality even in the Orthodox world is a “supermarket” mentality, namely the mentality where material nature is there only to be used and abused. For many, such an escape from material is found in a “spirituality” which completely diminishes creation by their attempt to escape from it. In anthropological terms, to diminish the importance of the body means to be passive towards the troubles of this world.

As Christians many times we perceive our spirituality as an individual communion with God. In order to achieve enlightenment and purification we are ready to break every bond with society, and creation. Gregory of Nazianzus, on the other hand, in his *Oration 14* praised active spirituality, which means our participation in worldly problems.

Let us therefore purify ourselves through works of mercy. Let us by means of this beautiful herb remove from our souls all stains and all defilement; making them, some *white as wool*, some *white as snow* (Is. i. 18) according to the measure of the fervour and goodness of our heart⁸.

Saint Gregory identified purification with works of mercy and with practical deeds: “Let nothing come between your good will and the deed.”⁹ The goal of the spiritual life here is identified with love. To achieve love means to be more involved with the practical necessities of our brethren.

8. *Oration 14*, M.F. Toal, *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers*, Chicago: Henry Regnery, (1959), 4.62.

9. *Oration 14*, *Ibid.*, 4.63.

1.3. Eschatological Identity and Social Engagement

The Liturgical experience empowers us with the eschatological identity in each of us. Moreover, the Eucharist is a witness of the eschatological reality for and in this world¹⁰. Unfortunately, eschatology often is understood as completely separated from history. This separation between eschatology and history makes our understanding of the meaning of this world and history more difficult. The Cappadocian Fathers in their so called *poverty sermons*, through usage of *Matthew 25*¹¹ show us better than any other theological book what the meaning of our eschatological identity is. Eschatology is not separated from history, but it is its fulfillment.

The eschatology of the Eucharist is not “world renouncing”, not a turning away from time, but above all the affirmation of the reality, the certainty and the presence of the Kingdom of Christ which is “within”, which is already here within the Church, but which will be manifested in all glory only at the end of “this world.”¹²

Saint Gregory of Nyssa in his usage of *Matthew 25* was very dramatic. We can see this from the beginning of the *De pauperibus amandis 2*. In this passage we notice how Nyssa was trying to empower people with love and charity through a description of fear. After he described the image of the last judgment he stated, “this image impresses my soul with such fear that it seems to be coming to life, and no reality seems at all urgent, nor can my spirit take interest in any other topic of study or reflection except these words.”¹³ A tragic fate can be avoided through charity, i.e. love. Invoking this fearful image of the last judgment, Nyssa awakened people to respond and to act. Both love and fear go hand in hand in order to provoke good deeds.

10. About connection between Eucharist and activism: PETROS VASSILIADIS, *Eucharist and Witness*, (1998), WCC Publications, Geneva

11. *Homily 6, I Will Pull Down My Barns*, M.F. Toal, *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers*, Chicago, Henry Regnery, (1959)

12. ALEXANDER SCHMEMANN, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, SVS Press, Crestwood, New York, (2003), pg. 73.

13. *De pauperibus amandis 2*, SUSAN R. HOLMAN, *The Hungry Are Dying*, Oxford University Press, (2001), pg. 200.

God's blessings follow from obeying his commandments. In transgressing them, one courts condemnation. Let us choose blessings and flee the curse... The commandment is vital especially now, with so many in need of basic essentials for survival, and many constrained by need, and many whose bodies are utterly spent from suffering sickness. In caring for them, you will see for yourself the realization of the good news¹⁴.

After Nyssa presented this image, he raised the question. Why do people still not want to help? "This is why: no one fears the pronouncement, 'Go, far from me, into the eternal fire.'"¹⁵ The end of his *Homily* is eschatological, showing to people where their identity lies. We can see here the real meaning of eschatology, which does not mean an escape from history, but rather an active participation in history.

2. Spirituality

If we look at the first Christian communities, it is striking to see how they conceived spirituality. "It is important that in both the Pauline and later Christian writings the 'spiritual person' is not someone who turns away from material reality but rather someone in whom the Spirit of God dwells."¹⁶ From that point, we can conclude that which is spiritual is a dimension of life that is empowered only by God, and connected with the active presence of God. For Early Christianity, the spiritual was not primarily connected with extraordinary inner experiences "but with the new network of communal relationship and perception that the presence of God makes possible for each spiritual person."¹⁷ That means that we should discern that besides a contemplative understanding of spirituality there is *active* as well.

It is dangerous if we forget that spirituality can be expressed in everyday life, so long as any work is immersed in God and out of love for Him and

14. *De pauperibus amandis* 2, *Ibid.*, pg. 200-201.

15. *De pauperibus amandis* 2, *Ibid.*, pg. 204.

16. MARK A. MCINTOSH, *Mystical Theology*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, (1998), pg. 6.

17. *Ibid.*

others¹⁸. This social frame of action and engagement speaks to us. Spirituality does not mean a rejection of the world as if we should view this world as sinful and try to do nothing to save it. If we are investing all our hopes and dreams into this world, if we are relying only on this world, then all the evil passions of the flesh will become visible. However, if we begin to look at this world through eyes which are enlightened by God's love and communion with Him, then we reflect God's love toward every creature. Creation becomes our road towards God.

Saint Basil the Great in his *Homily in Divites* suggested that the source of the entire evil is rooted in misdirected love. "It is not clear that you have considered your own enjoyment more precious than the comfort of the masses? Surely the more you abound in wealth, the more you are lacking in love."¹⁹ With this question arises the importance of a true understanding of *spirituality* and *communion with God*. If these are balanced, then love has to be reflected in practical life.

2.1. Communion with God in Love

If spirituality continues to be understood only as an inner experience, it will become simply another product for individual consumerism. Unfortunately, contemporary society tends to foster the idea of individualism and a sense of freedom from moral or social responsibilities. Such a culture tends to destroy the sense of communal or cultural solidarity, which are preconditions for any social engagement. We are living in a culture where greed and the "endless accumulation of material possessions are regarded as normal and legitimate..."²⁰, and that "has to be eroded by alternative values such as

18. I am suggesting two studies about Christian spirituality: PETROS VASSILIADIS, "Eucharistic and Therapeutic Spirituality", *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, Vol. 42, Nos. 1-2., (1997), pg. 1-23. and JOHN D. ZIZIOULAS, "The Early Christian Community", *Christian spirituality : origins to the twelfth century*, edited by Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff in collaboration with Jean Leclercq, Crossroad, New York, (1985)

19. Basil's *Homily in Divites*, translation of this part taken from: BRIAN E. DALY, S.J., "Building a New City: The Cappadocian Fathers and the Rhetoric of Philanthropy", *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7:3, The Johns Hopkins University Press, (1999), pg. 445.

20. MICHAEL TAYLOR, *Christianity, Poverty and Wealth*, WCC Publications, Geneva, (2003), pg. 71.

self-restraint, simplicity, a sense of proportion, justice, generosity, volunteerism (a 'giving culture'), holism and greater discernment as to 'means' and 'ends'".²¹

In our everyday life, we are witnessing that society proclaims religion to be a matter of one's individual being²². Every social involvement of Christians is often opposed by these accusations. Society actually has only brought to the fore something that is a reality in our Christian life²³. As Christians we conceive of our spirituality as an individual communion with God. Indeed, in order to achieve enlightenment, we are ready to break every bond with society, and creation. In context to this, we need to stress openly that every kind of Christian spirituality that is separated from God's creation is a false spirituality. It is not possible for someone who is empowered and fulfilled with divine love to remain silent and passive in the face of the troubles of the world around him.

In coming closer to God, our healed heart will be empowered for perfect love towards every being. Through God, our being becomes immersed in the depths of his love. From this perspective, spirituality is not some kind of independent intellectual or emotional relationship between God and man where the whole creation is despised and abandoned. Moreover, creation is put in its proper place as a space where we are *striving for communion with God* and a place where we are called to *reflect divine love*. This understanding of communion with God teaches us to act and to commit deeds of love.

Spirituality in this approach becomes a matter of participation in the Eucharistic community as a way of overcoming individualism

21. Ibid.

22. Lenin once said that religion should be held a private affair "so far as the state is concerned. But by no means can we consider religion a private affair so far as our Party is concerned". Even through these words Lenin himself declared that religion is a public and not private affair. LENIN, VLADIMIR ILICH, *Collected Works*, Volume 10, Moscow, (1978), pg. 83.

23. ALEXANDER SCHMEMMANN: "After being dean of a seminary now for more than twenty years, I notice that the word "spirituality" is pronounced much more often than the name of Jesus Christ. And the spirituality advocated by this second type of theology is above all a spirituality of escape, a highly personal spirituality, without any reference to the world.": *Liturgy and Tradition*, SVS Press, Crestwood, New York, (2003), pg. 92.

through the purification of the heart from all passions, but also through the actual gathering of the Eucharist, which places creation in the movement – in space and time – toward its proper eschatological end²⁴.

In addition, a communion with God is a calling to strive unceasingly here and now in this world for every fruit of the Spirit. “The way we pray is mirrored in the way we treat our brother and sister.”²⁵

CONCLUSION

In the end we can make some conclusions that could be leading points for our future work on this issue. To be with Christ means to live in Him in our everyday life. To live in Him, through the Holy Spirit, making deeds of love is to be a spiritual person. For the Orthodox Church, in order to be more socially engaged, it is necessary to base Her actions on the solid ground of a healed Eucharistic community and a different way of understanding Christian spirituality. This revival is the precondition for our actions, or at least our external actions must be simultaneously conducted together with our internal renewal. With this internal revival, every faithful can be called to involve himself in the warfare against injustice but also in fight for the better world for everyone. This involvement can be governed from two directions. The first is to empower people to act on their individual level to help their communities, and the second is to empower people to be more involved in such organizations that provide relief for those in need. That is also our way to diminish the schizophrenia that exists between the Church and “worldly” life.

This can also make practical implications for the Church’s attitude towards this world. Church as an active presence of God’s Kingdom in the

24. JOHN D. ZIZIOULAS, “The Early *Christian Community*”, *Christian spirituality : origins to the twelfth century* edited by Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff in collaboration with Jean Leclercq, Crossroad, New York, (1985), pg. 43.

25. JOHN CRYSSAVGIS, “Orthodox Spirituality and Social Activism”: *The Orthodox Churches in a Pluralistic World: an ecumenical conversation*, edited by Emmanuel Clapsis, WCC Publications; Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Geneva, Switzerland, (2004), pg. 314.

frame of history needs to be more sensitive when evil through visible discrimination in this world is actively present. It is sad to admit that Church often understands Her public role in her attitudes of political anachronism and ethical safeguarding. For many other things She prefers to be passive. Some think that whatever Church says it is not going to do any good, and for that reason it is better for Church to be silent, sometimes even in the face of great violence. I would like to recall to our mind the Gospel story where one soldier slaps Christ. We need to bear in mind that Christ deliberately decided to accept death, and nothing could change that, but still He poses the question to the soldier: “Why do you slapped me?” This question and this voice still haunt Orthodoxy. Even though Christ’s question didn’t change anything, He raises the question against injustice.

There have always been two races in the world; they exist today, and this division is more important than all other divisions. There are those who crucify and those who are crucified, those that oppress and those who are oppressed, those who hate and those who are hated, those who inflict suffering and those who suffer, those who persecute and those who are persecuted. It needs no explanation on whose side Christians should be²⁶.

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²⁶ *The Orthodox Churches in a Pluralistic World : an ecumenical conversation*, edited by Emmanuel Clapsis, WCC Publications; Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Geneva, Switzerland, (2004), pg. 181.