

*The Orthodox
Liturgy*

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE
EUCCHARISTIC LITURGY
IN THE
BYZANTINE RITE

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1 Western Eucharist and Orthodox Liturgy

The Eucharist is celebrated in the Western Churches in a wide variety of ways. Each Christian tradition, Roman Catholic, Anglican or Protestant, has its own distinctive ethos; and within each Church there is a great diversity of style. But a Western Christian familiar with the Eucharist in his own Church will not feel too far from home attending a celebration in another tradition. The movement for liturgical renewal which has led to the revision of forms of eucharistic worship in the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches and in many of the Protestant Churches has resulted in a remarkable convergence both of forms of service and of manner of celebration. Many differences of detail remain. But all traditions have been influenced by the study of the worship of the Church in the earliest centuries of its life, even if, in all the Churches, some congregations have embraced new forms and new ways with greater enthusiasm than others.

The Western Christian is used to a form of service whose structure is simple and clear. A brief introductory section, often penitential in character, precedes the Ministry of the Word, in which scripture readings and psalms proclaim the Christian gospel. They are more often than not expounded in a homily or sermon. At least on Sundays the Nicene Creed is recited. Then the congregation intercedes for the Church and for the world. The Lord's command to 'do this in remembrance of me' is obeyed in the Ministry of the Sacrament. Bread and wine are brought to the altar and set upon it, and the prayer of thanksgiving, the eucharistic prayer, is recited over them. The Lord's Prayer is said, and nearly all present receive the consecrated bread and wine in Holy Communion. The service ends with a brief conclusion and a dismissal. It is a short service, lasting only about one hour, even when celebrated solemnly with music and singing.

But simplicity rather than solemnity is more often than not the keynote of the modern Western Eucharist. Ceremonial is usually the minimum necessary for the performance of the

service. Unnecessary movement or gesture is discouraged, lest the essential structure and movement of the service be obscured. The setting of the service, too, is usually simple. Modern church buildings tend to be simple in their design and restrained in their decoration. It is emphasized that the building is only the place where the living church assembles, and where indeed it may well gather for purposes other than worship. The altar is designed to recall a table, where the Lord's disciples continue to celebrate the meal once eaten by Jesus and the twelve. As a focus of the celebration it must share its prominence with the lectern, from which the Church is nourished by God's Word in Scripture as in sacrament. The use of special vestments is often restricted to the chief celebrant, while readers and others who may be closely involved in the service wear ordinary clothes. Even the priest or minister may on occasion be scarcely distinguishable in dress from the rest of the congregation. In consequence of this fashionable preference for simplicity, it is sometimes hard to distinguish a Roman Catholic celebration from an Anglican or a Protestant.

The active participation of the whole church is a still more prominent characteristic of the modern Western Eucharist. Worshippers are encouraged to join fully in a service which deliberately includes congregational responses to help them to do so. The language of modern rites is simple and straightforward, to satisfy the desire for immediate intelligibility. Members of the congregation are often responsible for the readings and the intercessions, and assist with the distribution of Communion. New churches are designed, and older ones adapted, to associate the people as closely as possible with the altar and those serving at it. The Eucharist must be visible as well as audible, for, even if some distinction still remains between priest and people, it is the whole church which is the active celebrant of the service. Particular importance is attached to participation in the heart of the service, the sharing of the consecrated bread and wine. At a Roman Catholic Eucharist, quite as much as at an Anglican or Protestant celebration, all those present are normally expected to receive holy communion. Participation in the sacrament is not only an integral part of the Eucharist: it is its climax.

Western worshippers accustomed to this form and style of eucharistic worship enter a different world when they go into an Orthodox church to attend a celebration of the Divine Liturgy. They first enter a building whose shape and decoration are not only governed by a tradition going back many centuries, but are

considered to have a significance of their own, apart from the rite they have been elaborated to house. Passing through an inner porch, or narthex, they find themselves in a nave, square rather than oblong, devoid of all but a few chairs for the elderly or weak. They look up into a central dome, from whose summit an image of Christ the Almighty looks down majestically on the worshippers below. Round the drum supporting the dome there are prophets and apostles, and a procession of angelic deacons, while on the vaults surrounding the dome, and on the upper portions of the nave walls, are depicted cherubim and seraphim, the four evangelists, and scenes from the life of Christ. Particularly prominent may be those commemorated in the Church's calendar. Lower down are representations of monks and ascetics, martyrs and warriors, bishops and teachers, who enfold the congregation within a pictorial communion of saints.

Behind, on the west wall of the nave, is depicted the Dormition of the Virgin Mary; while to the east rises a screen covered with icons, separating the sanctuary from the nave. It may be comparatively low, or it may reach as high as the roof itself. Pierced by double doors in the centre and single doors to north and south, the icon-screen, in its taller form, largely reproduces the themes of the fresco or mosaic decoration of the nave. To the right of the central, or royal, doors is the image of Christ the Almighty, to the left that of the Mother of God with the Christ-child. On the royal doors themselves is the representation of the Annunciation, while the doors to north and south are adorned with the archangels Michael and Gabriel, or with holy deacons. Immediately above the royal doors there is a representation of the Last Supper. In the second rank of images are the saving events in the life of Christ, commemorated in the great festivals of the Church's year. Above them, in the third rank, are the apostles, turning in an attitude of supplication to an enthroned figure of Christ in the centre, on either side his Mother and St John the Baptist as chief intercessors for mankind. If there is a fourth rank, it contains the prophets, on either side of a Virgin and Child, while the whole screen is surmounted by a cross, bearing a painted image of the crucified Lord – for there are no three-dimensional figures in the church – flanked by the Virgin Mary and St John the Evangelist.

When the royal doors are opened, worshippers see in the middle of the sanctuary, arranged normally within a semi-circular apse, the square altar, richly covered, on which stand a cross, candlesticks, and an ark, often shaped like a church, in

which is kept consecrated bread from the Eucharist. They may catch a glimpse of the decoration of the apse. Nearest the ground two rows of bishops, vested for the Liturgy, turn towards the altar. Above them Christ stands at an altar, giving Communion to the apostles, on one side from the consecrated bread, on the other from the chalice. From the semi-dome of the apse, perhaps visible above the icon-screen, the Mother of God looks out above the altar into the nave. But worshippers will almost certainly not see the altar of the prothesis, at which the eucharistic bread and wine are prepared, and to which the north door in the icon-screen gives access; nor will they be able to see its decoration, in which scenes of the birth of Christ may find a place alongside those of his death and burial. Nor can they see into the south apse, which serves as a sacristy and vestry.

So different is the typical Orthodox church, with its many oil lamps and votive candles, and pervasive odour of incense, from the surroundings in which Western worshippers usually pray that they may be less surprised to learn that Orthodox Christians are accustomed to regard the church building itself as a sacrament. Far more than a utilitarian shelter for the congregation, it is an image of heaven on earth. For while the lower portion of the nave signifies the visible world, the dome, and still more the sanctuary, are images of heaven, where the triune God is worshipped by angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven. There Christ offers himself to the Father in an eternal sacrifice of love and self-giving: and into that sacrifice the worshipper is drawn by participating in the Liturgy which celebrates in spiritual reality what the church building proclaims in sacramental image.

Awesome as Western Christians find an Orthodox church, they notice that Orthodox Christians feel more at home in it than they themselves do in their far simpler setting. As the Orthodox come in, they go round the church, and kiss icons, putting lighted candles before them and praying. They may take a small round loaf, called a *prospora*, or offering, to the north door in the icon-screen, and hand it in, with a list of names of living and dead, to the deacon or server. There is an atmosphere at once of reverence and of informality, the latter greatly helped by the absence in all save some Greek churches of fixed pews or ordered rows of chairs, such as is rarely found in Western churches, where either the one or the other is normal.

Yet the Divine Liturgy, once it begins, unfolds with a degree of

hieratic formality now decreasingly favoured in Western Churches: and does so often with little apparent contribution to its progress from the congregation. Indeed, the first part of the service has been going on for some time before those in the nave become aware that the public Liturgy is about to begin. For perhaps an hour the priest has been performing at the side altar the rite of the prothesis or *proskomidia*, the preliminary preparation of the eucharistic bread and wine, for which no modern Western rite has any equivalent. But even when the public Liturgy begins, it is performed largely or entirely by the clergy and the singers: for every Liturgy is fully sung, the Western distinction between said and sung celebrations being unknown in the Orthodox Church. Little in Orthodox worship astonishes Western Christians more than the relative silence of the Orthodox congregation. They have been brought up to think that participation in worship means joining in the singing and saying of hymns and prayers. While in some Orthodox churches in recent years the people have come to sing some parts of the service, in others it is still sung by choir or chanters alone.

At the Liturgy, therefore, Western Christians must learn other ways of taking part in the service. It is impossible to attend the Liturgy with the traditional Western 'eyes closed'. Standing throughout the service, except perhaps to kneel at one or two moments, worshippers pray with their eyes: for every movement of the service has its meaning. They pray, too, with their minds, as they follow the chants and the readings. To the prayer of eye and mind they can add the prayer of the body. They may make the sign of the cross frequently, to associate themselves with the progress and the content of the service, and they may bow, with a gentle inclination or a full prostration, as custom indicates. Incense draws their sense of smell into worship, while music touches their emotions. But Western worshippers will not have learnt to participate in these ways before they receive their greatest shock: few, if any, of the congregation respond to the invitation to Communion. What is for them the normal climax of the service may be almost totally missing. Instead, at the very end of the service, they find themselves welcome to join with everyone else in receiving a piece of blessed bread whose name, the *antidoron*, shows it to be a substitute for the sacrament itself.

If Western Christians have to learn new ways of participating in the service when they attend the Liturgy, they have also to find their way through an order of service which differs significantly

from their own. The Liturgy, leaving aside the proskomidia, falls into two parts, the Liturgy of the Catechumens and the Liturgy of the Faithful. They correspond in general with the Ministry of the Word and the Ministry of the Sacrament into which all modern Western eucharistic rites are divided. But although the basic structure of all eucharistic rites is the same in East and West alike, important differences have appeared in the course of their development.

Western worshippers are used to a brief introduction to the main part of the Ministry of the Word. They may be invited to prepare for the celebration by confessing their sins. Having been absolved, they sing the Kyries or the ancient hymn 'Glory be to God on high', or both. A single prayer, or collect, concludes the introduction and introduces the readings. The Liturgy, by contrast, begins with a lengthy sequence of three litanies, one long and two short, each followed by an antiphon composed of a psalm or other chant. The only point of resemblance here with Western rites is the response 'Kyrie eleison' in the litanies, from which in fact the Western Kyries originally derived. After the third antiphon, often the Beatitudes, the clergy emerge from the north door in the icon-screen, bearing the Gospel-book, and, coming into the nave, return into the sanctuary through the royal doors. There follow three kinds of chant: an invitatory, based on the first verse of the Venite, Psalm 95; short hymns prescribed for the day, called troparia and kontakia; and the Trisagion, 'Holy God, holy and strong, holy immortal, have mercy upon us', which Western Christians may have heard sung in their own rite at the Veneration of the Cross on Good Friday. The invitatory bears some family likeness to the psalm verse used as an entrance antiphon or introductory sentence in Western rites: the variable short hymns, though different in form and origin, serve a purpose now not totally dissimilar from that of Western collects. But to the Little Entrance, as the procession of clergy is called, the Western Eucharist contains no obvious parallel.

Not until the Scriptures are read do Western Christians feel themselves on familiar ground. Since the reforms of recent years they are used to three readings: from the Old Testament, the Acts or Epistles, and the Gospels. Between the readings they expect portions of a psalm or a hymn. In the Liturgy they find two readings only, the first always from the New Testament Acts or Epistles, the second from the Gospels. Both are chanted rather than read. Between them psalm verses are sung, with Alleluia as a

refrain. They may notice that a few verses of a psalm are sung before the first reading, and wonder whether there was ever an Old Testament reading in the Liturgy. The readings are unlikely to be followed by a homily or sermon. Western worshippers are surprised, and may be relieved, to discover that there is no provision for a sermon to be preached at the Liturgy, though one may be given, most probably at the end of the service, or even, when there are many clergy, during their Communion.

Western visitors now begin to be a little lost. They are not surprised when the Gospel is followed by an intercession in the form of a litany. They are used to the intercession, or prayer of the faithful, coming after the scripture readings and sermon; though they may wonder why the Creed is not recited first, as the congregation's response of faith to the proclamation of God's Word. But they are puzzled when the catechumens are then solemnly dismissed, and no one leaves; and when the faithful are urged to renewed intercession, and given no opportunity to pray. Nothing in their own experience points them to a familiar landmark here. Nor does Western practice provide a reliable guide when, preceded by the first part of the Cherubic Hymn, the bread and wine prepared during the Proskomidia are brought in solemn procession by the clergy out of the north door in the icon-screen, and through the nave into the sanctuary. They may be used to an offertory procession, in which the bread and wine for the Eucharist, and the financial contributions of the people, are brought from the back of the church to the priest at the altar by representatives of the congregation. But in the Great Entrance it is the clergy themselves who bring the elements from one part of the sanctuary to another, and the bread and wine are accorded a reverence which Western worshippers associate only with the consecrated sacrament.

For as the procession appears the people cross themselves and bow, and many may kneel or prostrate themselves as the richly veiled chalice and paten are carried past. In some places they may lay young children in the path of the priest who carries the vessels, so that he steps over them on his way. Meanwhile, the clergy commemorate their church leaders, the rulers of the country, perhaps the sick and those in special need, and the departed, and finally the congregation and all Orthodox believers. Blessing the people with the elements, they take them into the sanctuary through the royal doors and place them on the altar. This, the moment of greatest ceremonial splendour in the

Orthodox Liturgy, is, like the Little Entrance, without parallel in the Western Eucharist.

Unlike the Western offertory procession, the Great Entrance does not immediately precede the eucharistic prayer. It is followed by another litany, and then by the kiss of peace. No sign of peace is given between clergy and people, or among the people, though one is exchanged among the clergy. This might be felt as a lack by Western worshippers, who would in any case be used to the kiss of peace elsewhere: if Anglicans before the offertory and consecration, if Roman Catholics after consecration and before Communion. In the Liturgy it precedes the recitation of the Creed, which serves as the immediate preparation of the eucharistic prayer.

This prayer, called the anaphora, or prayer of offering, is introduced by a dialogue similar to the Western introduction, except that its first greeting is the Grace. Its final response, 'It is meet and right', is lengthier than its Western counterpart. To the surprise of Western Christians, the choir has no sooner sung it than it begins the Sanctus. The first part of the anaphora has been said inaudibly by the priest behind the closed doors of the icon-screen, and he has raised his voice only to give the cue for the Sanctus. The rest of the prayer is said in the same way, punctuated by occasional phrases chanted out loud, to which the choir's response covers the next section of the silent prayer. The only words of significance which the congregation hears are the Lord's words relating to the bread and the cup. Only Roman Catholics who remember the old way of celebrating Mass will recall that until the reforms instituted by the Second Vatican Council the Canon of the Mass was similarly recited *sotto voce* by the priest, while at a Sung Mass the choir performed an elaborate setting of the Sanctus and Benedictus. But to modern Western Christians brought up to regard the eucharistic prayer as the most important part of the service, with which they should fully associate themselves in heart and mind, it is astonishing that it should be said as inaudibly as the priest saying it is invisible. There are places where this traditional practice has been modified in recent years: in some churches the royal doors are left open throughout the Liturgy, and in some part at least of the anaphora is said audibly.

The anaphora is followed by a litany, which first commends the gifts of bread and wine to God, and then repeats the petitions of the litany chanted after the Great Entrance. Then the Lord's

Prayer is sung. The proclamation, 'Holy things for holy people', and its response will be familiar to at least some Anglicans. After the Communion of the clergy, the people are invited to receive. The priest first recites on behalf of any intending communicants a prayer which professes faith, confesses sin, and asks for the fruits of Communion. He gives Communion in both kinds at once by means of a spoon. Western worshippers may be surprised to see babes in arms receiving the sacrament in this way too. Communion over, brief hymns and prayers of praise and thanksgiving bring the Liturgy to its conclusion. The people are blessed, and go up to the priest to kiss the cross used in blessing, and receive the antidoron.

Western worshippers attending the Liturgy for the first time are struck by the many differences, of structure as well as of detail, between the Orthodox service and their own. If they study a complete text of the Liturgy, and enquire how the Orthodox themselves understand the service, two general features will be impressed upon them which are new in their experience of Christian worship.

The first is the way in which, in practice, the Liturgy appears to be two services conducted simultaneously. The one is performed within the sanctuary by the clergy, and is largely both invisible and inaudible to the people in the nave. It consists of the whole of the proskomidia; the prayers accompanying the litanies; a number of other prayers, of which some are the private devotions of the clergy, while others contribute to the shape of the rite itself; and, above all, the anaphora, the most important prayer of the whole service. The other is both audible and visible to the congregation, and is conducted mainly by the deacon, standing in front of the royal doors. It consists of the antiphons and litanies; hymns and chants; readings; the processions of the Little and Great Entrances; the Creed; responses, especially in the anaphora; the Lord's Prayer and Communion; and the final prayers and distribution of the antidoron. The two coincide at some points, such as the readings, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer, and are interlocked at others: verbally, by the frequent greetings given by the priest from within the sanctuary and by the doxologies chanted out loud at the end of prayers recited inaudibly; visually, by the processions, and frequent appearances of the clergy at the royal doors. Nevertheless, the people in the nave appear, from a Western point of view, to be only passive attendants at the central portion of the service, which takes place

behind the icon-screen, while their attention is occupied by secondary chants. The Western Christian cannot help feeling that, while the Liturgy may be celebrated for the people, it is not celebrated by them.

The second characteristic feature of the Liturgy is the way in which nearly all its actions are understood to have a symbolic meaning. This can be seen from the text of the Liturgy itself most clearly in the *proskomidia*. The bread and wine have to be made ready. But they are prepared in such a way that by what is done and said the incarnation and the passion of Christ are represented. It is less evident in the text of the main part of the service. But when the bread and wine are put on the altar at the end of the Great Entrance, the priest recites some of the hymns of Good Friday and Holy Saturday; and after the clergy have received Communion, they say some of the hymns of Easter Day. Christ's burial is symbolized by the deposition of the gifts on the altar, and his resurrection has been represented by the time of Communion.

If Western Christians enquire further, they learn that these are only the chief moments in an interpretation of the Liturgy which relates every part of it to the earthly life and ministry of Jesus, and which extends its symbolism to the church building and its furniture. The *proskomidia* represents the incarnation and birth of Christ, and also – because he was born in order to die – his passion and death. The prothesis where it is performed stands for Bethlehem and Nazareth, and also Golgotha. The antiphons at the beginning of the Liturgy represent the time of his hidden life on earth, when he was known only through prophecy. He enters on his public ministry at the Little Entrance, when the Gospel-book symbolizes Christ's first appearance. The Epistle represents the preaching of the apostles, the Gospel that of Christ himself. The Great Entrance symbolizes his last journey to Jerusalem to suffer and die, while the placing of the gifts on the altar represents his burial by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. The altar is the tomb, the veils over the chalice and paten represent the grave-clothes. The resurrection is symbolized when, after the anaphora, a portion of the consecrated bread is put into the chalice; and when, after Communion, the vessels are removed from the altar and taken to the prothesis, the ascension is represented.

So the whole life of Christ is set before the people every time the Liturgy is celebrated: and if few participate in the service sacramentally, all can do so by contemplating the saving mystery

of the incarnation, passion, and glorification of the Lord. Such an understanding of the service seems strange to modern Western Christians, taught to regard sacramental participation in the Eucharist as alone normal. Older Roman Catholics will recall that, before frequent Communion became the rule, they were taught to meditate at Mass on the passion of Christ, every detail of which was symbolized in the movements and prayers of the service. This tradition, which with characteristic variants was common to East and West alike, has died out in the Roman Catholic Church since sacramental participation has been generally restored. It survives in Orthodox interpretations of the Liturgy, at which Communion is still in general rare.

For Western Christians the Liturgy offers an experience of eucharistic worship of a kind which they cannot find in their own tradition, and which for many of them has a profound appeal. Their own rites have been renewed in accordance with what modern scholarship assures them was the practice of the early Church. The Liturgy appears to embody principles widely at variance with those they have come to regard as fundamental in worship: and yet for many of them it provides an experience which is deeply worshipful. Familiarity with the Liturgy provokes at least two questions for the Western Christian: How did a rite which claims to go back to the early Church come to assume a form so different from what we know of early Christian worship? and, Might the Western Churches have something to learn from the eucharistic worship of Orthodoxy? The rest of this book will be largely occupied with answering the first question, but will also suggest some answers to the second.