



The Orthodox Understanding of the Eucharist



Presentation by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk at the International Eucharistic Congress (Budapest, September 6, 2021).

The Catholics and the Orthodox are not united in the Eucharist, but they are united in the conviction that in the Eucharistic bread and wine after their consecration we have not just symbolic presence of Christ, but his full and real presence. We believe that the bread and wine of the Eucharist are the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Eucharistic celebration is not only a commemoration of the Last Supper, but also its actualization for each believer who participates in it. And the celebrant does not act in the Eucharist on his own behalf. It is on behalf of Jesus Christ himself that he pronounces the words originally uttered by Christ at his Last Supper. And it is Christ himself who administers the sacrament for his followers, not a priest or a bishop.

All this is most vividly depicted in Orthodox iconography, in particular, in the iconographic type known as the Communion of the Apostles. In it we see Jesus Christ who gives his body and blood to his disciples,

including, notably, St Paul, who was not a participant in the historical Last Supper. His very presence testifies to the symbolic character of the whole composition. It is meant to present not only the Last Supper but the Eucharist, in which the entire body of the Church participates.

The Orthodox Church strongly believes that the Eucharistic celebration—we call it the Divine Liturgy—is an all-embracing service which transcends both space and time. It unites the heavenly realm with the earthly realm, the living with the dead, angels with humans, saints with sinners.

I suppose many of you have had a chance to visit ancient Byzantine churches in whose walls you could see frescoes or mosaics. Very often figures of the saints are arranged in rows, one row below another. You might see prophets in the highest row, below them the apostles, then the martyrs, then the holy bishops and monks. But there are no figures in the bottom row. The idea is, in fact, that this row is reserved for those who are present in the church, that is, for the parishioners. Together with the saints they participate in the heavenly mystery of the holy Eucharist.

And when the priest goes out of the sanctuary with a censor, he first censes the icons of the saints and then the parishioners, and he bows to the parishioners in the same way as he does to the saints. In doing so he shows that the parishioners are of no less importance for him, or for the Church, or for Christ himself, than the saints who already share with Christ his heavenly glory.

They have achieved the goal, while we are on the way. But the way to salvation is unthinkable without the Eucharist. There is no salvation without the Church: this is the conviction that we all share, both the Catholics and the Orthodox, even though we think of the Church in a somewhat different way. But the Church is inconceivable without the Eucharist. Therefore, the very notions of the Church, and of the Eucharist, and of salvation are linked inseparably in our theology.

When the Greek fathers spoke about salvation, they often used the term *theosis*, literally meaning 'deification'. Being deified means not only being saved from something, be it from the devil, or from sin, or from hell. It rather means being so fully united with God that—as a result of this union—a human being acquires divine qualities.

In Jesus Christ we confess the fullness of the divine and the human natures. He is not half-human and half-divine: he is fully human and fully divine. The Greek fathers, when speaking of this union, used another term, *perichoresis*, literally meaning 'interpenetration'. The idea is that Christ's human nature is fully deified, and his divine nature is, if one may say so, humanized. By taking humanity upon himself, the incarnate God deified it. But his divine nature is in a mysterious way also linked with his humanity. When he rose from the dead and ascended to heaven, he did not leave his body here on earth in the way a snake sheds its old skin. Quite the contrary: in ascending to his heavenly glory, he takes with him

his human body, and together with it, all of humankind. This theological notion is expressed in Orthodox liturgical hymns dedicated to the feast of the Ascension.

Please excuse me for burdening you with this heavy theology and for using difficult Greek words. I will now go straight to the point. For the Orthodox Church, the Eucharist is the most powerful means of achieving this goal of the Christian life which is called deification. In what way? When we receive holy communion, Christ's body penetrates our body, and his blood begins to flow in our veins. And it is not only in our mind and in our heart that we are united with Christ, but also in our body. Like in Christ himself the entire human nature—body, soul, and spirit—was united with God, so also our entire humanity participates in the process of deification.

It is perhaps in this that we may perceive the most striking difference between Christianity and other monotheistic religions. They all claim to open up to people the way to God—through prayer, through worship, through veneration of God, through following his commandments. But no religion dares to propose such a type of union with God which could suggest that a human being can be fully united with God and acquire divine qualities. Such an idea may even sound blasphemous to some non-Christian worshippers of the one God.

For us Christians, however, it is the very core of our theology. We might differ in terminology, some would rather use Latin terms instead of the Greek ones, but we all, I would argue, share this deep belief in the possibility of such union.

Now, is this union achieved by some kind of automatic or magical means? Is it enough just to receive holy communion in order to reach a state of deification? Obviously not. If this were the case, all the partakers of the body and blood of Christ would have become saints. The paradox is that while Christ is fully united with us when his body and blood enter our body and blood, we are not always able to be united with him. He is inside us, but we are often outside him.

Why is this? Either because in our daily life we do not follow his commandments, or because while our body is standing in the church our mind and heart are elsewhere, or because our sins stand as an impenetrable wall between us and God, or for all sorts of other reasons.

In the Orthodox tradition services are usually quite long, and the Divine Liturgy may last for two or three hours. There is a lot of singing and reciting, many "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" (Col 3,16) are sung. All of this is not intended to make our life more difficult and our presence in the church boring. It is because we need time to leave the human realm and to enter the divine kingdom, and we need inspiration to be transported there in our mind and heart.

“We who mystically represent the Cherubim and sing the thrice-holy hymn to the life-creating Trinity, let us lay aside all earthly cares.” These words from a liturgical hymn which is sung at every Liturgy vividly depict the state of mind and heart which we are called to attain during the celebration of the Eucharist.

But there is a huge distance between who we are and who we are called to be. And, indeed, few people who achieve the state of deification. The goal is too sublime, and much spiritual effort is needed to achieve it. We have, however, some striking examples of the saints who achieved this goal and even described their experience in their writings.

St Symeon the New Theologian, who lived in the tenth and the beginning of the eleventh century, was one of them. He was a poet and a mystic, and in his writings he described the many visions of the divine light which he experienced. He strongly believed that it is the Eucharist that unites humans most fully with God and makes them deified. He writes: “Purified by repentance and by floods of tears, partaking of the divinized body as of God himself, I myself become a god by this unspeakable union.”

In the Eucharist, Symeon argues, we are united with Christ in the same way as he is united with his Father. “Through holy communion”, he claims, “we become sons of the heavenly Father and brothers of Christ.” He explains: “The Son of God, who received human flesh from us, gives us instead of it his divinity through the communion of his divinized flesh; by this exchange we become his relatives.”

In one of his poems Symeon describes what happened to him once after holy communion, when he returned to his monastic abode. He had a vision. But it was not a vision of Christ in any visual form. It was a vision of the divine light, and not outside his body, but within it. In fact, each member of his body, he writes, became permeated with the divine light and deified by God’s presence. “We become members of Christ,” he writes, “and Christ becomes our members: my hand is Christ, and my foot is Christ... and I am a hand of Christ and a foot of Christ. I move my hand, and it is the whole Christ who is my hand... I move my foot, and behold, it shines like he himself. Do not say that I am blaspheming, but rather accept this and venerate Christ, who makes you such! For if you want, you will also become a member of him, and so all members of each of us separately will become members of Christ, and Christ will become our members... and we will *together* become gods... and each of our members will be the entire Christ.”

As you can hear, it is not some kind of mystical exaltation that takes place in a special manner with a certain enthused individual. Symeon, in fact, attempts to describe the experience which is deeply rooted in the mystery of the Eucharist and which belongs not to him alone but to the entire Church. “We will together become gods”—this is what he stresses. And he does not even perceive his experience of light and deification as something exceptional. He believes that everyone who wants to achieve it may do so.

The reception of holy communion, he argues, must be conscious. By this he means not only believing in the real presence of Christ in the sacrament, but also contemplating him as light by one's spiritual eyes. "If you... receive the divine mysteries in such a manner," Symeon writes, "your entire life will become a feast; and not only a feast, but the beginning of the unique feast and Easter, a passing and migration from the sensible to the intelligible world... where we will live with Christ and reign with him."

Perhaps I should stop this point. What I have tried to give you was just a glimpse into the Orthodox understanding of the Eucharist as it is expressed in the liturgy, in the visual art, in the liturgical hymns and in the theological writings of the fathers. I do not claim that everybody in the Orthodox Church is deified and becomes a saint. Not at all! We are just unworthy keepers of the rich tradition which has come down to us from Christ himself and from the early fathers of the Church. It is some of these riches which I wanted to share with you, and I am most grateful to the organizers of the congress for giving me this opportunity.

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