

Μυσταγωγία

The Divine Liturgy

-By Bishop Demetrius of Carlisle-

And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God.

For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.

And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling.

And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power:

That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

Howbeit we speak wisdom among them that are perfect: yet not the wisdom of this world, nor of the princes of this world, that come to nought:

But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory:

Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.

But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God.

For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God.

Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God.

Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual.

But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man.

For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? but we have the mind of Christ.

1 Corinthians 2:1-16

St Isaac the Syrian, the great father and true philosopher of our Church, as one who had genuine experience in the spiritual life, and a profound experience of the grace of God clearly tells us: "Silence is a mystery of the age to come, but words are instruments of this world"

(The Ascetical Homilies of St Isaac the Syrian, Holy Transfiguration Monastery 1984, pg 321).

The Divine Liturgy brings us to this mystery of the age to come, by means of participation. It is the central focus of the Orthodox Christian. It is what we call the **[τήν] ἱερὰν μυσταγωγίαν ταύτην.**

Mystagogy (μυσταγωγία) comes from the Greek **μύω** or **καμμύω** which means “to close one's eyes and senses to worldly/carnal care” (**μυστήριον** has its roots in **μύω**), and **ἄγω**, which means “to act/ to do” or “to lead” (the ceremony/service). It refers to the mystical (secret) initiation. An initiation which is only for the elect, not for the profane. An initiation into something which is much deeper than it appears to be. In short, it is a profound mystical experience and unification with the Divine.

To talk about the Divine Liturgy, or rather to give a talk about the Divine Liturgy and its **mystagogy (μυσταγωγία)** is not possible, since "words are instruments of this world" as St Isaac tells us. But we may be able to just scratch the surface by examining certain aspects of the Divine Liturgy based upon our introductory remarks.

First of all, the Orthodox Christian should not be a spectator of the Divine Liturgy, he is a participant. This participation is (for the servant of God) very humbling, because it brings us into contact with God and in extension we start to understand Him and His humility. We conform to the image and likeness of God. When the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was revealed to the Holy Patriarch Abraham, God spoke to the patriarch and the patriarch said "Now I have begun to speak to my Lord, and I am earth and ashes" (Genesis 18:27 and Job 42:5-6). In like manner, those who are truly initiated will have this understanding or rather, revelation, of our unworthiness. And truly, how could it be otherwise since man, who is made of clay, is now made a god by grace? The holy prophet Abraham was in awe and humbled just by being in the presence of God and by conversing with Him. Now, we have gone beyond that and we receive Christ within us. We read in the prayers before Holy Communion "I tremble as I receive the Fire, lest I should be burned as wax and as grass. Oh dread mystery! O divine compassion! How is it that I who am but clay partake of the divine Body and Blood and am made incorruptible?". Thus the secret initiation into the Divine Liturgy is inner. "For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18). It is not just an initiation into a ceremony, but an initiation into the very depths of the heart of the Orthodox Christian wherein we find the temple of the Holy Spirit. During the service, all of our outward senses are sanctified. That which is base is made holy. That which is carnal becomes spiritual "For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6).

St Cyril of Alexandria tells us "Scripture customarily gives the name "night" to the period before the coming of Christ, when...the darkness of ignorance reigned upon earth. But it uses the name "day" for the time of our Saviour's coming, when we were enlightened, for we gave assent to the light of the true divine knowledge in our minds and now see the Sun of righteousness with the eyes of our soul" (On Worship in Spirit and Truth, 3, PG 68.268D). And St Gregory Palamas says that "Knowledge is called light because it is provided, as the great Paul says, by that light (of divine Grace): The God who said '*Let light shine out of darkness*' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God (2

Corinthians 4:6)... Do you see that the light of knowledge is provided by the presence of the light of Grace?" (In Defence of the holy Hesychasts, 1.3.3, Chrestou, I, p. 411).

The outward aspects of our liturgical worship have a deep and lasting effect on the inner man as we progress from glory to glory. "But we all, with open face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Corinthians 3:18)

There is nothing in this world that can compare to that gift. It is the Pearl of great price (Matthew 13:46) which our Saviour tells us about.

The last time our Saviour celebrated the Passover during His earthly sojourn, He had a supper with His holy disciples. He told them, "take eat, this is My body...drink ye all of it, this is My blood". This last Passover was the first Divine Liturgy. It was the beginning of our own passover from death unto life. It was the beginning of the "passing away of the shadow of the law, with the coming of Grace" (Dogmatic Theotokion, 2nd tone). St John Chrysostom tells us that in the Liturgy "... that very same Supper at which Christ was present is accomplished. The Eucharistic Supper does not differ from that Supper in any way." "This holy church is the upper room where Christ and the disciples were assembled; it was from here that they went out to the Mount of Olives" (On Matthew, PG 57.78, PG 58.507, 744).

Together with first three Evangelists the Apostle Paul gives us a description of this first Liturgy. "For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, That the Lord Jesus the same night in which He was betrayed took bread: and when He had given thanks, He brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is My body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of Me. After the same manner also He took the cup, when He had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in My blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of Me. For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do proclaim the Lord's death till He come" (1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

The oldest of the Liturgies which is still in use in our days is the liturgy of St James. In it, we chant: "We proclaim Thy death O Lord, and we confess Thy resurrection".

The oldest liturgical prayers can be found in the *Didache* (Teaching of the Twelve Apostles) and the *Apostolic Tradition* of St Hippolytus, Pope of Rome. We find in these early prayers that the celebration of the Eucharist is always communal. We find a dialog between the celebrant and the people. And this is only fitting since the Church is Catholic, and the Liturgy is an expression of this catholicity and unity among the faithful. In essence, we partake of the Body and Blood of Christ and are united not only with Christ, but with one another, through Christ. This is very important because it is an expression of **agape (ἀγάπη)**, love. The "Amen" which is repeated in the services by the faithful is a significant and important theological acknowledgment and consent with the clergy.

The very first supplication which is made after the consecration of the Holy Gifts in the Liturgy of St Basil the Great says "and unite all of us to one another". St John Chrysostom tells us that "Churches came into being, not so that we who come together should be divided, but so that we who are divided should be united. And this is shown by the Eucharistic assembly"

(that takes place in the church) (On 1st Corinthians, 27.3, PG 61.228).

The first fully written texts of the Divine Liturgy take shape somewhere around the 4th century. This includes the liturgy of St Mark the Apostle, St James the Brother of the Lord, St Basil the Great and St John Chrysostom. It appears that before this time, there was a little more freedom in the formulation of the prayers of the Liturgy although prayers were similar. The main thing was that the Church, being charismatic, called upon the Holy Spirit to transform the gifts. This is evident from what St Basil the Great tells us: "Which of the saints has left us in writing the words of the invocation at the displaying of the bread of the Eucharist and the cup of blessing? For we are not, as is well known, content with what the apostle or the Gospel has recorded, but both in preface and conclusion we add other words as being of great importance to the validity of the ministry, and these we derive from unwritten teaching" (On the Holy Spirit PG 32.188).

The Liturgy spread through to the Local Orthodox Churches from Jerusalem. Today, the Liturgy of St James the Brother of the Lord, St Basil the Great and St John Chrysostom are celebrated in the Orthodox Churches. The Liturgy of St James can be celebrated on the days when he is commemorated, the Liturgy of St Basil is celebrated 10 times a year and the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom is celebrated on the remaining days. The Liturgy of St Gregory, Pope of Rome, is a Presanctified Liturgy. It is a Vespers service of Holy Communion which is celebrated on every Wednesday and Friday of Great Lent.

At the time of St John Chrysostom, the beginning of the Liturgy took place with the entrance of the bishop. This would be what we call today *The Small Entrance*. It is an ancient practice to meet the bishop with the Gospel (this ancient custom is still kept by the Orthodox when they meet their bishop as he enters a church or monastery). St John Chrysostom writes "When the bishop enters the church, he does not go up to his throne until he has wished peace to all the faithful" (Against the Jews, 3.6, PG 48.870). The people would reply to the bishop "and with thy spirit". This peace is important. One can not attend the Divine Liturgy in a casual manner, but with a certain preparation, with peace. St John of the Ladder tells us: "If we wish to stand before our King and God and converse with Him, we must not rush into this without preparation, lest, seeing us from afar without weapons and clothing suitable for those who stand before the King, He should order His servants and slaves to seize us and banish us from His presence and tear up our petitions and throw them in our face" (The Ladder of Divine Ascent, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1991). The preparation is simply an understanding and acknowledgment of our unworthiness, and trust and faith that God's grace makes us worthy. It is not by any special preparation as such; the means are not superior to the end.

The real celebrant of the Divine **Mystagogy (Μυσταγωγία)** is Christ. The clergy serve in the position of servants. We have inherited a sacred order which has been handed down to us by our Saviour by means of the holy apostles and their successors. The servant who serves the Liturgy is the bishop. St Ignatius the God-bearer teaches us that when the presbyters are together with their bishop, it is an image of the holy apostles with Christ. As time progressed the number of bishops diminished and the presbyters served the liturgy with permission of their hierarch. If a presbyter served without a blessing from his hierarch, it was called a "**παρασυναγωγή**" or false assembly. This is why the liturgy must be served on an antimimension, consecrated and signed by the ruling hierarch since the Divine Liturgy takes place in his name. Thus, the deacon refers to the priest as "Master" during the Liturgy since he

is standing in the place of the bishop.

The biographer of the life of St John Chrysostom says concerning the saint's instruction that he "laid down the way that they should sing and taught them the divine **mystagogy**" (**μυσταγωγία**) (George of Alexandria, *Life of St John Chrysostom*, 59, Halkin, pg238). The Divine Liturgy is the enactment of our Saviour's economy (dispensation) for us in its totality, in a mystical manner. "The divine economy of our God and Saviour is the raising up of man from his fallen state and his return from the alienation produced by his disobedience to intimacy with God" (St Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, 15.35, PG 32.128C).

The gifts offered at the Liturgy "Thine own of Thine own" are also call the Eucharist (**Θεία Εύχαριστία**) because when we partake we express our thanks to our Saviour for all that He did for us, for His economy. St John Chrysostom tells us "The awesome Mysteries which are performed at every assembly of the faithful and which offer salvation in abundance are called the Eucharist because they consist of the recollection of many benefactions, and reveal to us the culmination of divine providence" (On Matthew, 25.3, PG57.331). As St Theodore the Studite tells us, it is the "recapitulation of the entire divine economy" (Antirrheticus, 1, PG 99.340C). "The rite of the divine service as a whole symbolizes, through the mysteries celebrated in it, the entire dispensation (**οίκονομία**) of the condescension for our salvation of our true God and Saviour Jesus Christ" (Theodore, Bishop of Andida, Protheoria, PG 140.421AB). When we find ourselves at the Canon of the Eucharist, at the heart of the Liturgy, the celebrants calls on the faithful "Let us give thanks unto the Lord" (**εύχαριστήσωμεν τῷ Κυρίῳ**). Our participation in the **Εύχαριστία** (Eucharist) is being realized. Just before the consecration of the Holy Gifts, the priest recounts in the secret prayers "Being mindful therefore of this saving commandment, of the Cross, of the Grave, of the Resurrection on the third day, of the Ascension into the heavens, of the second and glorious coming again...". St Dionysios the Areopagite teaches that "the celebrant stands before the divine Altar" and "praises the sacred and divine works of Jesus Christ... Then he performs the divine Mysteries and brings before our eyes all those things that he has previously extolled" (On the Church Hierarchy, 3.3.12, PG3.441C-444A). We are not speaking of symbols and images anymore; that was spoken of in the Old testament with the offering of the bread and wine by the prophet Melchizedek (Gen 14:18-20).

In short, we witness our Saviour's love, our Saviour's economy, and our Saviour's earthly life because He became man in order to make man a god by grace. The Divine communicates with us, and raises us up on high. This cannot be taught in a seminar, neither can it be taught by attending a Divine Liturgy once or twice. It takes a lot of work, a whole way of life, a certain discipline. As is usually the case, there may be fast learners and slow learners. The central focus of our life however takes place at our reception of the Holy Mysteries, at the service of the Divine **Mystagogy (Μυσταγωγία)**. Let us remember that It is the Pearl of Great Price which our Saviour talks about.

Everything that we do in this life should be centered around this Mystery. Then the Mystery of our Salvation becomes real. We are not only spectators, but participants. We experience God and are initiated into the Divine, and no one can take that away from us.

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