

“One Thing Needful”

The Significance of the Divine Liturgy in the Life of the Monastic Brotherhood

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Your Eminences, Your Graces, Very Reverend Fathers and Venerable Monastics!

Introduction

There is a phrase, popular in Greece, used to describe the Holy Mountain of Athos and the spiritual life that takes place there. It is, so the saying goes, a place where *‘the life of Christ becomes the life of man.’* In such a way is the monastic life defined: the participation in Christ’s own life, so that our human existence is transfigured and transformed in His.¹ We are reminded of the words spoken of St Athanasius the Great — that great lover of holy monasticism — many centuries ago, when on his death the people of Alexandria mourned that *‘it was as if Christ Himself had been present with them on the throne of that city.’* God’s life and man’s are united together, the lesser transformed by the greater.

Within our tradition of Russian Orthodox monasticism, the same vision is also found. The monastic life is meant to be one in which, little by little and through sustained struggle, the life of Christ becomes more visible and more present in the life of the monk. The fruit of ascetical struggle, the attainment of real prayer, comes through the deep, interior communion of the monk and God. In the words of St Anatoly the Elder of Optina, *‘between God and the soul of the one who prays there is nothing and nobody, only God and the soul; the one who prays senses neither heaven nor earth, nor anything else besides God.’* This is an aim echoing the earlier words of St Symeon the New Theologian, who wrote that the

¹ A thought echoed in the writings of the Venerable St Symeon the New Theologian: *‘The monk is one who ... / sees God and is seen by Him, / loves Him and is loved by Him, / and becomes light, enlightened in an ineffable manner’* (Poem 3, as provided in *Hymns of Divine Love*, ed./tr. G.A. Maloney [Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1976], p. 21, with my own slight modifications to the translation). In referring to these texts as the ‘poems’ rather than ‘hymns’, I follow the recent study of St Symeon’s language by Prof. Conomos, *Поэтические творения преп. Симеона Нового Богослова: их литературное и богословское значение* (Moscow, Second International Patristic Conference of the Sts Cyril & Methodius Theological Institute for Post-Graduate Studies, paper presented 12th December 2014; publication forthcoming).

monk *'has become like God, for having received Christ into his breast / [he is become] a Christian according to Christ, since he possesses / Christ within himself'*.²

This communion in Christ is the singular aim of the monastic life. Thus, in the third ode of the canon at the clothing in the Great Schema, we pray: *'May this Divine Image bring transformation of life and transfiguration'*,³ identifying the transfigured Life in Christ as the summit of monastic ascent. It is to this that we all aspire, however far from the goal and spiritually weak we may individually be. We are cast down in the mud of our sins, like the Prodigal Son who cries out *'I have wasted my life'*⁴ and *'all to no purpose have I left my true home'*⁵; yet Christ calls us towards a life of repentance and communion with Himself — what the Divine Services of the Sunday of the Prodigal Son call again and again the 'embrace' (ὠβᾶτῖα, объятія) of the creature by the Father.⁶ This is precisely the same imagery that is placed into our hearts at the beginning of the tonsure into the Little Schema, when we hear our brother-monks sing on our behalf: *'Make haste to open Thy fatherly arms unto me, for I have spent my life as the Prodigal...'*⁷ That which we desire is the loving embrace of the Saviour, which transforms that which is barren into that which receives eternal Life.

But one of the most fundamental principles of Orthodox monasticism, and indeed Orthodox spirituality as a whole, is that we cannot possess what we have not *received*. We cannot possess the True Faith, unless this faith is given to us and received in the heart (it cannot be intellectually 'discovered' or created). We cannot live an authentic monastic life if it is a life we invent ourselves, rather than a life we receive from those who live it genuinely and piously, who transmit it to us in faithfulness. And we cannot attain that highest goal, the very essence of monasticism — the Life of Christ — unless it, too, is first given unto us. We must receive it, and be drawn into it.

It is in this way that I would like to frame my reflection on 'the significance of the Divine Liturgy in the life of the monastic brotherhood': not chiefly as the centrepiece of the daily or

² Poem 13 (Maloney, *ibid*, p. 45).

³ «Преложѣніе животѣ и претворѣніе, о́бразъ бже́ственный сѣй подѣждь...» Great Trebnik (Kiev-Pechersky Lavra, 1902), Service of the Angelic (i.e. Great) Schema. Found in English in *The Great Book of Needs*, vol. 1 (South Canaan, PA: St Tikhon's Monastery Press, 2000), p. 353 — though I have modified the rather poor translation found there.

⁴ «Иждѣхъ моѣ житіѣ» Sessional Hymn (съдаленъ), Tone 1, Matins of the Prodigal Son; Lenten Triodion.

⁵ «О́ ка́нный ѿше́дъ, непотрѣбнъ злѣ иждѣхъ, сп̄се, бл̄днѣ поживѣ...» Exapostilarion (свѣтиленъ) of Matins of the Prodigal Son; Lenten Triodion.

⁶ E.g. *'receive me now in Thine embrace'* / ѿ менѣ ѿбимѣ нынѣ (Ode 3); *'open unto me Thy fatherly embrace'* / ѿбᾶтῖа о́ч'а ѿвѣрсти мѣ потщѣса (Sessional Hymn); *'open Thy holy embrace to me'* / простираа мѣ честиаа твоа ѿбᾶтῖа (Ode 9).

⁷ « ѿбᾶтῖа о́ч'а ѿвѣрсти мѣ потщѣса, бл̄днѣ моѣ иждѣхъ житіѣ...» Troparion on the entry of the candidate for tonsure into the temple; Rite of the Little Schema (*The Great Book of Needs*, vol. 1, p. 330).

weekly liturgical cycle, nor as the principal expression of ecclesial activity; but above all as the 'one thing needful' for the brotherhood which struggles to attain Christ's life — the Mystery through which the Lord draws the monk to Himself and offers him the fulness of the life he seeks.

The Divine Liturgy and the entrance into the monastic life

It goes without saying that the celebration of the Divine Liturgy is the essential liturgical heart of any Orthodox brotherhood, whether it follows the contemporary practice of a daily Liturgy, or older practices of a less-frequent celebration. In either case, the Divine Liturgy constitutes the liturgical 'heart' that pumps blood into all the other Divine Services, which are the framework for the day-to-day life of the monastic community.

This is of course equally true in the context of a parish or cathedral: the Divine Liturgy is always the 'King of Services', in the radiant light of which all others are illumined. In the meeting of God and man, all other grace and power that the faithful person receives has its source.

But with respect to monasticism in particular, the Holy Fathers guide us towards seeing, in a special way, how the Divine Liturgy becomes 'the one thing needful' for authentic brotherhood. It is in the Liturgy that the monk finds the substance of his life realised; that he receives that for which he longs; and that he is enabled to enter into authentic 'brotherhood' that is something more than merely a creation of like-minded Christian disciples or pious faithful. At his tonsure to the Little Schema, the monk is catechised by the Abbot that hereafter the Lord will be for him *'a source of consolation, a giver of strength, an inspirer of boldness, a fellow combatant in courage, present with you when you lie down and when you get up'*⁸ — that is to say, the monk is drawn into a life of *co-struggling* with Christ. Christ is ever with Him, and he dedicates himself ever to be with Christ. The very substance of the monk's life, and the life of the community to which he now belongs, is defined by bearing in his soul and body the Life of the Saviour. He hears later, after being clothed in his new monastic garments, that the Lord is *'the Shepherd and Visitor of our souls'*⁹ — One present not only externally, as a guide, but also internally as 'visitor' in the heart, an inhabitant of that sacred space. And then, at the conclusion of the tonsure (and significantly, at the conclusion of the Divine Liturgy if this rite is, as in ancient times, performed in concert with the Service), he hears the stichera in tone one:

⁸ «оутѣшенїа вина, крѣпости податель, благодѣшїа снисканїе, мѣжества сподвижникъ, совозлегалъ ѿ совостваа съ тобою» *ibid*, p. 335.

⁹ «пастырь, ѿ посѣтитель дѣшъ нашихъ» *ibid.*, p. 343.

Brethren, let us understand the power of the Mystery, for when the Prodigal Son makes haste from sin to the Father's house, the Most-Good Father, going forth to meet him, kisses him, and again gives him the tokens of His glory...¹⁰

Today it is frequent that monastic tonsure takes place apart from the celebration of the Divine Liturgy, and this has certainly become a standard part of our tradition. But the original placement of the service (as specified in the Trebnik¹¹) *within the context of the Liturgy*, sheds light on all these actions and prayers. The entrance into monastic brotherhood is fundamentally a Eucharistic act: whether or not it actually takes place within the celebration of the Divine Liturgy, it is always defined by the Liturgy. Spiritually, if not practically, the new monk always begins in the Narthex and awaits the Little Entrance, so that he may follow Christ into the Temple; and there he is cast down before the world, buried to it, and raised up before the Royal Gates, beyond which Christ is making Himself known and present in the gifts that lay upon the Holy Table.

The meaning of the centrality of the Divine Liturgy

In this manner, the sacred rite by which a man enters into monastic obedience, teaches him the very nature of what will ever after be the definition of his life. The monk is one who receives the Life of Christ into the whole of his being — and there is no more essential grounding for this than the Mystery of his receiving the Body and Blood of the Saviour. If the monastic life is, as I have said, a life that is *received* (rather than invented), it is in receiving the Holy Gifts that the monk inherits this life most directly. The One whom he seeks to follow, comes to him. The One whom he hopes to embrace, embraces him. The fire that he prays may one day burn within his heart — the fire of genuine love, of purification from the passions and death — comes into his very *'members, and joints, and reins, and heart'*.¹²

The Divine Liturgy becomes, therefore, the defining reality of monastic existence. Without it, there is simply no monasticism. One cannot seek to be joined to Christ, without receiving Christ as He joins Himself to man.

¹⁰ «Позна́имъ бра́тїе, та́инства силѣ, ѿ грѣха́ бо ко́ дѣтескомѣ́ до́мѣ востѣ́кшаго блѣ́днаго сы́на, преблѣ́гїи ѡ́цѣ́ предѣ́срѣ́ть лобыза́еть: ѿ па́ки своеѣ́ сла́вы да́рѣть познѣ́нїе» *ibid*, pp. 343-4.

¹¹ Which specifies that the one desiring tonsure is brought into the temple before the beginning of the Divine Liturgy, during the reading of the Hours, to prostrate himself before the Royal Doors, the brethren and the Abbot, after which he returns to the Narthex and removes his old garments, being clothed in the *vlasyanitsa* only, remaining 'ungirded, barefooted and bareheaded' (нешпо́санъ, нешбѣ́вѣнь, ꙗ́ ѿкровѣнь) as the Divine Liturgy begins. Thus he stands in the Narthex, facing towards the Royal Doors until the Little Entrance and the singing of the kondak of the day, which is then followed by the threefold singing of the special tropar ('Make haste to open Thy Fatherly arms unto me...', quoted above), at which point he is brought into the temple by the brethren with three further prostrations, and is raised up before the Royal Doors for the rite of the tonsure. See *Great Book of Needs*, vol. 1, pp. 329-30.

¹² «во оу́ды [моѡ́], во всѣ́ составы́, во оу́тробѣ́, въ се́рдце» From the post-Communion prayer of St Symeon Metaphrastes.

This is clear within the prayers of the Liturgy itself. Following the consecration of the Holy Gifts, before the litany and singing of 'Our Father', the priest begs God aloud, '*Grant that with one mouth and one heart we may glorify and praise Thine all-honoured and majestic name...*'.¹³ It is only in the participation of Christ's Body and Blood that the many who are present become 'one heart'; it is only as ones joined to His life that they can cry out to God as 'our Father'. How much more is this exclamation relevant to the life of the monastic brotherhood! For what is such a brotherhood if not the Apostolic community of those who take by angelic grace not only Christ's heart, but His words, His commandments, His Cross — His very life?

The Divine Liturgy is central to the life of the monastic brotherhood, then, in a fundamentally mystical, rather than practical, way. While it is of course the ideal for the Liturgy to be a practical centre of life as a daily service wherever this can be done, it is simply not possible for all brotherhoods to celebrate a daily Liturgy (and it is certainly not possible in all sisterhoods). We have also the long evidence of history, in the Russias, in Byzantium, on Athos, in the Deserts of Egypt and Palestine, of vigorous monastic life where a daily celebration of the Divine Liturgy was either not possible or not the norm. Yet *whether or not* the Liturgy is *practically* the centre of the monastic brotherhood's cycle of daily services, it *must* be the mystical centre of life — not just of the brotherhood, but of the life of each monk. It is the Mystery by which the timeless, super-substantial self-offering of God becomes immediately present; it is there that the monk receives that to which he is pledged: what St Nicholas Cabasilas calls '*the inheritance of the Kingdom of Heaven*'.¹⁴ The monk seeks to 'take up Christ's Cross' (cf. Matthew 16.24); it is in the Divine Liturgy that he participates in Christ's offering at Golgotha and stands with Him at that Cross. The monastic brotherhood desires to live like angels in the service of God; in the Divine Liturgy it is joined with the angels before the heavenly throne. The monk longs to know Christ in the innermost depths of his heart, to go beyond merely academic knowledge or language about Him, to meet Him truly; in the Divine Liturgy the Saviour comes to him not as a teacher saying 'Study and learn,' but as — in a fearful, wonderful mystery — a Friend, saying 'take and eat, this is my Body...'

What does it mean, then, for the Divine Liturgy to be 'mystically' the centre of the life of the brotherhood, and of each monk? Perhaps our greatest example here comes from our Venerable Mother Mary of Egypt. According to her *Life*, the great ascetic partook of the Holy Mysteries only twice — so there can be no talk of the Divine Service being a *practical* centrepiece to her angelic monasticism. Yet so powerfully was she transformed by the transfiguring grace of the Eucharist that the whole of her contest — the forty-eight long years

¹³ «и даждь намъ едиными оусты, и единымъ сердцемъ, спавити и воспввати пречѣтное и великолѣное и҃ма твоє» Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom, exclamation after the anaphora.

¹⁴ St Nicholas Cabasilas, *Commentary on the Divine Liturgy*, 1 (tr. J.M. Hussey & P. A. McNulty, London: SPCK, 1960, p. 25).

of wandering in solitude in the desert — itself became eucharistic. What can we say of her miracles (her walking on the water, her taming the wild beasts, her foreknowledge and gift of clear sight), if not that they were the fruit of a life wholly shaped by the mystery of the Liturgy? Christ came into her members, and by retaining that communion and longing for nothing else above it, His life and His love became manifest in hers.¹⁵ An angel walked the earth in the flesh and bones of one fed by the Lord's Body and Blood.

In the same way, the monastic brotherhood strives to be shaped by the mystery of Eucharistic life. In its life are many 'needs': the chief virtues of faith, hope and love; the monastic vows of obedience, chastity and poverty; the treasury of Christ's commandments; the Law of God and the ecclesial life of the Church. Yet it is possible to follow all these but not attain a true life in Christ. For this, the 'one thing needful' is that Christ first give His life to the monk, and the monk receive it from Christ. In the Divine Liturgy, the monastic brotherhood finds its heart and its breath. Christ makes the monk His own, fills him with His holiness, so that He can authentically say, through the words of His priest in the offering of the same Divine Liturgy: *The holy things are for the holy* (СТѢ́А СТѢ́ИМЪ).

May we, in our unworthiness, be renewed in our attentiveness to the power and centrality of the Divine Liturgy to the monastic brotherhood, and by God's mercy attain to this holiness!

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¹⁵ This is reflected in the words of Metropolitan Anastassy (Gribanovsky): 'To the degree that the monk in his life comes to resemble Christ, his heart is truly expanded and his very love becomes all-embracing like the Divine love. [...] His humble heart dissolves in co-suffering for all who suffer in the world' (*A Defence of Monasticism*, Jordanville: Holy Trinity Monastery Press, 2000; p. 50).